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Woven Incantations

Jasleen Dhamija

Esoteric and complex philosophical thought have been expressed by using textile terminology in India. The concept of time for instance is conveyed in the Rig-Veda, the oldest philosophical text, as the weaving of the warp and weft and thus the creation of days and nights. Tantra comes from the word tant, warp, and signifies that which stretches beyond. It is in this context that I present my paper, “Woven Incantations”. The act of weaving in itself is a powerful act. The loin loom used by women throughout the world is strapped to the waist and the tension created by the body is linked with the inner rhythm. As the weaver inhales the tension is built and the weft is beaten into the warp and as she exhales she lifts the reed creating a shed for throwing the warp thread. One of the oldest looms used in Southern Laos uses the human body as the loom. The weaver sits on the floor with her legs stretched in front of her. The outer warp beam is stretched by pushing it out with the feet while the weaving end is strapped to the body. It is an extraordinary skilled operation, which uses the human body as a living yantra, the ancient word for the loom. The very act is like a form of yoga, which controls the bio-rhythm through controlled breathing and disciplined movement of the body, which goes into a state of “dhayana”, meditation brought about by the rhythm of weaving echoing that of the body. The woven patterns emerge as a manifestation of introspective concentration. It is no wonder that the act of weaving is very closely linked with their rites of passage.

This tradition of the sacredness of the act of weaving is continued even when cloths were later woven by professionals. Most professional groups of weavers have their own legends of the origin. The Padmasalis, weavers of Southern India, have an extraordinary origin legend. Their progenitor, Bhavana Rishi appears from the ashes of a great sacrifice holding a ball of thread made from the stem of the lotus emerging from Vishnu’s navel, on whom Brahma, the God of Creation, rested. It was from this thread that the first cloth was woven and thus they called Padmasalis, the lotus born. They believe that they are linked to the umbilical cord of the God of Preservation, Lord Vishnu and only the very best can be created by them. The Ansaris, weavers of the famed Banaras Brocade and specially the designers, who created the human jacquard “naksha”, trace their origins to the Pir of the Sufi Sect of the Nakshabandis of Bokhara. The initial act of creation is a secret, which is shared by the women of the household. The first reeling of the yarn is carried out by the female head of the household in the nuptial chamber in the squatting position, normally used at childbirth. This is called giving birth to the cloth. It is the context that we have to look at the woven cloths depending upon who weaves and for whom they are woven, and for what particular occasion is it to be used.

Jasleen Dhamija has been involved with the Study of History of Textiles and Development for the last 40 years. She has lectured and worked in India, Central Asia, Iran, Africa, South East Asia, Australia, Europe and USA. She was awarded the Hill Professorship at University of Minnesota, USA and has been Resident Fellow at three universities in Australia. She has published over a dozen publications on Textiles & Living Cultural Traditions and is Chairperson of UNESCO’s Jury for Asian Award for Creativity.