# Weavings and Interweavings

**Cloth and Human Experience**. ANNETTE B. WEINER and JANE SCHNEIDER, Eds. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1989. xvi, 431 pp., illus. $39.95. Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry. Based on a conference, Troutbeck, NY, 1983.

The subject of "cloth and human experience" is well suited to display the schism between idealist and materialist views within anthropology. Cloth, which is inanimate yet composed of formerly living substances, is reanimated through its symbolic attributes—yet cloth is also the product of labor and economic relationships connecting individuals, groups, and societies to one another. In this book anthropologists Jane Schneider, best known for her interest in political and economic questions, and Annette B. Weiner, whose research is solidly concerned with symbolic issues, have joined forces in a nonpolemical attempt to bring together these competing approaches to the study of culture. Such an effort deserves a careful look.

I must confess to certain reservations regarding its success. All cultures do indeed invest cloth with symbolic values. The cloth one wears is a symbolic presentation of self: sex, age, marital status, class, political affiliation. Anthropologists who bemoan the numbers of tweed jackets and suits at conferences, compared to a recalled late 1960s sartorial ethnic anarchism, are less concerned with what is on their colleagues' backs than with what is in their minds. Textiles may have supernatural properties: the shroud of Turin, cloaks of darkness, and in India's Ram Lila, Sita's sari that unwinds vast lengths of fabric to protect her from a lustful demon. Textile production may be used as a metaphor for life: the three Fates spin; Penelope rips out her weaving nightly in order to arrest the flow of time; the pricking of a finger on a spindle puts Sleeping Beauty into suspended animation. Textiles are imbued with the characteristics of their wearers or impart special qualities to them: witness auctions of Elvis Presley's clothing or that 1980s notion "power dressing."

One can, no doubt, link each of these symbolic values to the institutional arrangements and fundamental cultural properties of each society. In the present volume, for instance, the circulation of banana leaf bundles and pandanus fiber mats between kin groups in the Trobriand Islands and Samoa is depicted by Weiner as a solution to the existential puzzle of "giving while keeping" (groups united through marriage maintain these connections, as well as to members who have married out). The "blueness" involved in Sumbanese ikat warp dyeing, examined by Hoskins, symbolizes the life-cycle changes through which a woman passes and the reproductive power of women. Other symbolic connections, linking cloth, society, and funerary ritual, are outlined by Feeley-Harnik, writing on an ancestral cult in Madagascar, and by Darish, who studied Kuba raffia textiles in Zaire. One gets a good sense that humans are wonderfully inventive with respect to symbolic codes.

These symbolic analyses, however, rarely touch on the most important processes affecting cloth during the past three centuries. The advent of mercantilism and industrial capitalism transforms ecological, economic, and political relationships in a community as labor and land become involved in commodity production. The overlapping relationships of kin, social, and ritual identities associated with production for use in the community disappear. Producers are workers, not neighbors or kin. The meaning of cloth is transformed as production becomes divorced from consumption and new economic and political pressures arise. One might reasonably wonder what the impact of being able to buy one's banana leaf bundles is on the elaborate exchange system described by Weiner, or whether, given that men often assume control of "women's work" when it becomes economically important, the ideology of blueness, interpreted by Hoskins as a culturally female attribute, might reflect conflicts and changes in the role of men and women with the expansion of ikat textile production for export.

A commonality in the symbolic analyses in this volume is their focus on societal integration and stability. This may stem from the authors' substantive interest in the use of cloth in mortuary rites. Funeral rituals, as is known, are frequently preoccupied with reaffirming the enduring nature and solidarity of the social unit. Yet the symbols associated with cloth need not passively mirror societal integration. Cloth may provide a focus for the expression of conflict or reflect commentary on current affairs. The "Age of Napoleon" exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art last winter resoundingly demonstrates the symbolic connection of protest, politics, and fashion. Women's scarves were wrapped over the shoulders, with the ends wrapped around the torso and tied in back—a reference to the bound hands of victims en route to the guillotine, perhaps only slightly less macabre than jewelry fashioned in the shape of that implement, complete with dangling crowned heads, a symbolism that is inexplicable without reference to the French Revolution.

In two papers in the volume Cohn and Bean explore the symbolic and political associations of cloth in British India. Gandhi's call for his countrywomen and men to reject British cloth in favor of locally produced hand-loomed fabrics equates handmade, indigenous cloth with India and imported manufactured cloth with the Raj. Yet Gandhi's use of cloth as a metaphor for independence goes beyond a simple dualism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Indian fabrics were made to specification for export markets that stretched from Southeast Asia to Africa, northern Europe, and North and South America. So competitive was Indian cloth that European nations instituted protectionist measures against it. In Britain, the Industrial Revolution gave a technological edge, aided in good part by trade policies that helped to choke off India's textile industry. India became a producer of raw materials bound for British mills and a consumer of imported goods, in a process known today as the development of underdevelopment.

These considerations lead to the core issue for the book, which is the processes that affect the production of cloth and its symbolic investiture with meaning: that is, the ecological, economic, political, and technological infrastructure that generates changes and its transformation within the culture's symbolic code. In a provocative essay, Schneider argues that traditional European "spirit helpers" came to be represented as malignant about the time of the Industrial Revolution, as exemplified in the tale "Rumpelstiltskin." Using ecological and economic data on flax production, Schneider links environmental deterioriation that occurred as the consequence of increased flax production to the development of changed attitudes toward the spirit

world—in essence, a metaphoric presentation of the new situation. Stone-Ferrer's paper on depictions of spinning and weaving in Dutch painting shows how a traditional symbol of feminine virtue, with its own traditional opposite (male incompetence at the work and licentiousness in the mixed-sex spinning room), was transferred into a new subgenre celebrating the industry of male and female workers in the technologically advanced and profitable "large-loom" weaving workshop.

An important consideration here, not really addressed by materialist approaches, is voice and viewpoint: who is writing (or painting) what, for whom? In considering the malignancy of the spirit helpers it is important to recognize that work such as that of the Grimms has a literate, bourgeois authorship, audience, and—as recent scholarship shows—sources. It is difficult to determine to what extent the depiction of the spirit helpers represents a response to destruction of the natural realm or a bourgeois appropriation and didactic rendition for a specific audience. Compelling as is Schneider's hypothesis, especially in view of the continuing popularity of this theme (as in Tolkien's work), one would like to see some consideration—especially where authorship is identifiable—of such reinterpretations within their specific context. Similarly, one wonders if the paintings documented by Stone-Ferrer represent a public relations effort, since innovations that increased productivity frequently met with resistance from workers (as in England's Luddite movement). Factory owners might have an interest in attaching the new technology to well-known symbols of virtue. In this case, there is none better than the spinner whose artistic analogue is the spinning Virgin Mary.

In perhaps the most telling paper in the volume, Waterbury links international demand for "traditional" embroidered Mexican wedding dresses with the collapse of the indigenous production, traditional use, and symbolism of these items and the development of a "putting out" system and piecework wage labor as local entrepreneurs attempted to meet demand for them. I might add that I have also seen India- and Pakistan-made copies of Mexican dresses, indicating the global nature of relationships linking producers and consumers. The sad thing is that demand for "traditional apparel" can be met only by destroying the original community in which such apparel is produced—by transforming the embroiderers and seamstresses into wage laborers.

In essence, the papers in this volume suggest that industrial and protoindustrial forms of manufacturing and distribution powerfully affect local producers. As Murra's paper on cloth in the Inka state demonstrates, claims of reciprocity and mutuality are incompatible with large-scale production and distribution—and such claims may say more about those making the assertion than about the productive system itself. Power, politics, economics, and symbols are among the factors that collide when the subject is cloth, and it appears that "small-scale" and "large-scale" societies are not so fundamentally diffferent after all. Those interested in the intersection between ideas and material factors will find a great deal to consider in this volume.

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"This children's dance group [in Madagascar, 1971], honoring a visiting government official, is led by a man who dresses as a woman and is also known as a spirit medium." Saklava peoples in Madagascar "like clothing with writing on it, expressing their views on such subjects as love, wealth, children, and royal service." Political rallies preceding the revolution of 1972, however, "evoked comments that people also dress to mislead. . . . Politically appropriate clothing may belie stated intentions. So many people felt that they had to wear [cloth imprinted with the face of then-President Tsirinana's face] that merchants selling [it] were accused privately of profiteering." [From G. Feeley-Harnik's paper in *Cloth and Human Experience*]

## Domestic Arrangements

**The Household Economy**. Reconsidering the Domestic Mode of Production. RICHARD R. WILK, Ed. Westview, Boulder, CO, 1989. viii, 266 pp. Paper, $36.95.

What, exactly, is a household? Differing in membership, functions, sentiments, and history, households are much easier to recognize than they are to define. Indeed, what makes them interesting to anthropologists is that there seems to be an infinite number of ways of making them. Among the definitions of "household" used by anthropologists have been (i) all those people sharing a common kitchen; (ii) those sleeping under a common roof; (iii) those forming the basic productive unit of a society; (iv) those forming task-oriented residence groups; and (v) those who pass through a common ritual—marriage—and their resulting offspring.

Cross-cultural research on households has changed considerably in recent years. Early studies concentrated on developing formal models setting forth what households should look like given cultural norms and generative rules about marriage, descent, and residence. Through evolutionary reconstructions, whether based on Freudian assumptions about primeval hordes and the growth of sexual regulation or on more materialistic approaches tracing household