

Susi Dunsmore, *Nepalese Textiles*, London, British Museum Press, 204 p. 100 colour pl., 80 b&w illus.

Review by Ann Hecht

Susi Dunsmore is no stranger to Nepal. Readers may already be familiar with her two previously published titles, *Weaving in Nepal* and *The Nettle in Nepal*, two small books with the directness and intimacy which comes from reproducing handwritten script. But now she has joined the big league, adding another title to the excellent series on textiles published by British Museum Press.

Susi Dunsmore's knowledge is built on practical experience in the field, gained on her frequent visits to Nepal, often while accompanying her husband who was involved with the Land Resources Development Centre's programme in east Nepal. She worked with the weavers and the spinners, especially in the Kosi Hill area, the centre for dhaka cloth, and further north, Sankhuwasabha, where the giant nettle (*allo*) grows. Her personal involvement in these crafts enables her to write in depth and with clarity about all the details that are so important to people in the field of textiles: how the fibres are prepared, how the posts are arranged for warping, how the heddles are made, the loom put together and so on - and not only once but for every regional variation. This is not to say that the history and legends have been neglected; only to point out that the focus in books on textiles vary.

No textiles from ancient times exist in Nepal, therefore the author has to embark on detective work, studying sculptures, wall paintings and manuscripts to glean what is possible about the textiles in antiquity. Susi Dunsmore identifies designs on the folds of clothing, for example, from stone reliefs or sculptures dating between the third and sixth century AD. And, miraculously, she locates the figures of a spinner and weaver amongst the hundreds in the large topographical scene of the Pilgrimage to Gosainthan in the early nineteenth century, visual evidence of cotton cloth weaving.

The chapter on raw material is particularly interesting because of the inclusion of more unusual fibres: the yak, both the inner and outer hair; the central Asian species of mountain goat (*Capra hircus*) from which the renowned cashmere shawls are made; and the Himalayan giant nettle *allo* (*Girardinia diversifolia*) which is proving to be a most versatile fibre used for anything from a sack to a lacy hand-knitted fashion garment sold in London.

"A new type of *allo* cloth began to be developed in the 1980s, when some weavers of Sankhuwasabha asked if KHARDEP, a rural development programme operating in the area, could assist them with improved processing and marketing of the traditional *allo* products for which the returns were very low." Experiments were started in which an *allo* warp was combined with a wool weft in traditional twills and diamond patterns. The resultant tweed became a popular alternative to the previously imported cloth used for men's jackets.

Similar experiments were made with the cotton dhaka cloth used in making men's topis and women's blouses. Traditionally woven wove the standard width and length necessary for the topi using the inlay technique with red, orange and black supplementary wefts on a white ground. Again, KHARDEP was asked to help find additional sources of income for the scattered weavers and it was decided to adapt the traditional techniques to a new market. The size was increased to scarf, and later shawl, widths and lengths. At the same time, and this was a revolutionary decision, it was decided to substitute a black from white ground, and introduce all the colours of the rainbow into the endlessly inventive supplementary weft designs. The results were amazing, delighting the weavers, and the scarves and shawls found a ready market. This was a great success story and Susi Dunsmore should be proud of her part in it.

The relevant chapter and the longest, under the title 'Middle Mountains', concludes with the weaving of the woollen *raris*. This is followed by chapters on two more regions: 'Himalayan North' on the Sherpa and Dolpo-pa (information for the latter gratefully acknowledged as coming from Dr. Corneille Jest of the CNRS); and the 'Subtropical south', the home of the jute, where biodegradable jute

is being put to new issues in large mats of netting laid on bare roadside slopes to prevent surface erosion.

Unfortunately in a short review one cannot do justice to the contents. However, what stands out above all else in *Nepalese textiles* is the feeling that the text is about the present and the future rather than the past. The weavers and spinners are prepared to experiment and are taking responsibility for their own future.

