

The Grace of Four Moons: Dress, Adornment, and the Art of the Body in Modern India.* Pravina Shukla. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 528 pp.

Reviewed by Karen Tranberg Hansen

In this lavishly produced book, folklorist Pravina Shukla examines the rich world of body adornment in Banaras, India, by focusing on a small number of middle-class Hindu women and some of the producers and retailers of their body art: weavers, jewelers, merchants of saris, and *salwar suits* (tunic, trousers, scarf), among many others. Highlighting the creativity women invest in assembling their dressed presentations, she explores how producers, retailers, and consumers collaborate in decision making processes within rules of tradition that have been shaped regionally by history and religious and social norms. The result is a deeply detailed study, demonstrating the salience of a material culture approach to the study of adornment and indeed how and why, paraphrasing a quote “in a place like this, clothing is a serious thing” (p. 15). With the resources available to them, women make strategic choices, combining articles of dress, jewelry, make-up, and hairstyles. Depending on stage of the life cycle, occasion, and venue, they assemble their presentation in order to stand out or be inconspicuous. They dress for themselves, for the members of their often extended households, and for the gaze of others for approval, praise, envy, or reprimand.

The book is divided into five parts. Following the introduction are parts on Production and Commerce, Personal Adornment, Body Art in the Lifecycle, and a Conclusion. From my point of view as a cultural anthropologist, the author is at her best in the discussion about production and commerce. Here, readers are treated to rich ethnographies about experiences and practices of shopping, the weaving of saris, the making and selling of jewelry, and the purchase of lesser valued objects such as bangles, henna, hair products, *bindis* (colored dots for the forehead), and *sindur* (colored powder for the hair). The discussions of the production and selling practices of saris and jewelry are particularly rich. The chapters about personal adornment feature three middle-aged, middle-class women whom Shukla called on for continuous visits and interviews about what they wore growing up and the decisions they make today concerning their embodied expression of the self. Nina, the wife of one of the merchants she interviewed, began her married life wearing saris. Today she prefers wearing *salwar suits* because she prefers their simplicity and her mother-in law, with whom her family lives, sees no problem in her choice; Nina wears saris, of which she owns many, only for special occasions. Neelam, an art teacher of Punjabi background, blends Punjabi and Banaras styles, dressing with dignity in saris for school but relaxing at home and when traveling. When “out of station” (p. 259), she likes to wear jeans, tops, and costume jewelry. Finally, there is Muktha, to whom Shukla was directed because she was known to have a great sense of personal style. In order to look good, Muktha wants to be different. Each item that she wears and uses should highlight and complement the beauty of the others so that the entire ensemble serves to beautify her.

Appearing beautiful and well-ornamented reflects happiness and comfort in marriage. The wedding is the epitome of body arts and the occasion is iconic of the richness of the decorated

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body. The chapters about body art in the life cycle revolve around marriage by examining how young girls dress and how widows dress and describing, in detail, the preparations that go into making a bride beautiful. This part of the book is somewhat repetitive as many of the details concerning dress and body arts over the course of the life cycle have been mentioned in other parts of the book, such as in women's accounts of changing dress practices from childhood and on. Instead of a conventional conclusion, the author elaborates on the explanatory framework that she presented briefly in the introduction. Her approach combines an examination of production and commerce; documentation of adornments and their form and functions; life histories and individual repertoires; and assessment by wearers and viewers. She situates this approach within a paradigm of performance. When doing so, she presents her readers with an encyclopedia-like overview of scholarly observations that reads like the kind of bibliographic essay historians often add as appendix to their studies. This discussion might have worked to better effect in condensed form in the introduction. As a scholarly summary it detracts attention from the power of Shulka's richly documented observations about the play of a distinct visual aesthetic, religious concerns, and the everyday world.

There are some risks connected with Shukla's presentation at least from the point of view of a cultural anthropologist. I would have preferred a broader coverage than the limited focus on three adult middle-class women and a handful of merchants. Some of these risks may be the result of Shukla's methodology, as she worked initially through family connections and only later broadened out her study. I would have liked a deeper historical grounding both about the sari and the *salwar suit*. There are troubling generalizations about women in India, "as in many countries in the world," working in the domestic sphere while men work in commerce and other jobs (p. 221). Aside from being contradicted by the account of Neelam, the art teacher, the statement needs qualifications along many lines in addition to the regional rationale the author offers: more women work away from home in Delhi and Bombay than they do in Banares. In Africa where I conduct research, lots of women are prominent in commerce and have been so for a long time, for example in West Africa. What is more, I would have liked some discussion of the effects of global fashions and Western styles on the dress universe the author introduces. Some young women wear jeans and tops, we learn, and mature women may travel in such garments. Today, India, the West, and the global fashion circuit are part of a shared history when it comes to dress, but this is given only scant attention. Finally, I have quibbles about the use of terminology that is jarring or outdated to a contemporary reader outside folklore and museum studies. We are introduced to ill-chosen term such as young ladies (young women), maidens (virgins?), and salesmen. Attire and adornment sound like museum terms and are ill-fitting for a study that at heart is about dress as embodied practice. India is an extraordinarily rich setting for such a study because of its "lively and complex tradition of contemporary body art" (p. 427) and, above all, the tactile nature of the unstitched garment of the sari and the ways women use it, jewelry, and body decoration to achieve specific effects.

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