

The antiquity of the Sacred Thread

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The wearing of the **Sacred Thread, the Kushti** is a very ancient custom dating back to the Early Bronze Age (ca. 4000 -18000 BCE) the time the Vedic and Indic peoples were one, adherent to the Aryan way of life. Following the schism which occurred around 2000 BCE both groups continued to wear it but in different ways.

Spinning a yarn: The *Kushti* is now made of lamb's wool although in days of yore it was also made with goat's hair or camel's hair. Silk, being prepared by a noxious creature is not used. The wool is at first combed and then **spun into a fine single yarn on a spindle (chatri).**

Weaving the Kushti: Two such threads, prepared on two spindles, are then twisted into one thread. The thread thus twisted or doubled is woven into a knot on a *hand loom (jantar)*. Seventy-two threads go to make up the *Kushti* (the strands represent the 72 Chapters of the Holy Book - the Avesta). The seventy-two threads are at first separated or divided into six parts or strands, each of twelve threads. It is considered to be the privilege of the women of the priestly class to weave the *Kushti* and it is the privilege of priests to finally consecrate it before its ends are woven and finished. In the end, the *Kushti*, which is hollow, is turned inside out by means of a needle, and then the remaining unwoven part of the threads are knit together. Three *laris* or string-ends in the form of tassels, each of 24 threads (again making the count 72), are formed at each end of the woven thread. Thus, at both the ends there are, in all, six *laris*. The sacred thread, after being prepared, is cut and consecrated by the priest with the recital of the smaller *Sraōś Bāj* and a particular *nirang*. The length of the Sacred Thread varies since it has to be **long enough to go around the waist 3 times**. There are 4 knots - 2 in front at the end of the 2nd encircling and 2 knot at the back at the end of the 3rd encircling (see the explanation of the 4 knots and the photos below).

Shāyast Nā-shāyast (meaning 'Proper, Improper') 10.1 advises on the length of the *Kushti*.

'The rule is this, that a sacred thread-girdle (kushti) be three finger-breadths loose transversely (pavan targun), as is said in every teaching (chastak), and when it is less it is not proper.'



Left photo above: Rock bas-relief ca. 2700 BCE of an Elamite lady spinning a woolen yarn, holding a fluff of combed wool in the left hand and the spinning the spindle with the right hand. Note her seated posture, which is adopted during spinning a yarn to this very day. In spite of the time-consuming and laborious undertaking **Zoroastrian ladies, both among the priestly as well as non-priestly families consider it a privilege to spin the yarn and the ladies of priestly families to weave the Kushti.**

Right photo above: Iranian lady, watched by an elder, weaving the **Kushti** using a hand loom.

Indo-Iranian tradition

The Sacred girdle, by encircling our torso has been considered as imparting a ‘*protective enclosure to the body*’ (both physically and morally) against evil aspersions of others and the adversities of life. More importantly, it acts to remind the wearer, a Mazdāyasni to remain obliged to respect the principles of his Faith. Also during Zoroastrian wedding ceremonies on the Subcontinent the seated couple, during a part of the ceremony, is surrounded by a continuous length of thread running 7 times round to form an enclosure indicating they are now protected in the oneness of their union.

Thus - **the Avestan word, *Aiwi-āōngha-aha* for the sacred thread**

| | | |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Aiwy / Aiwi / Aivi</i> | <i>āōngha</i> | <i>aha</i> |
| Surrounding (girdle, closely protective) | (while staying on) the body | (of) the person |

- **the Vedic word, *Avy-anga* for the sacred thread.**

| | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| <i>Avy</i> | <i>anga</i> |
| Surrounding (girdle, closely protective) | (while staying on) the body |

Whereas the Vedic Sacred thread girdle is worn on bare skin from shoulder to waist the Iranian way is to wear the *Kushti* girdle over a garment, a Sacred shirt of fine muslin cloth called ***Sudrēh (Guj: Sadrō)*** underneath. The detailed symbolism of the Sacred Shirt is outside the scope of this topic, as also details of the Thread Ceremony itself, except a brief comparison of the Vedic and Zoroastrian rites (below).



The **1st photo** shows the commencing of the girdling of the *Kushti* in the first encircling. The second encircling ends in 2 knots in front. The **2nd photo** shows the 2 knots in front and the third encircling ending in tying 2 knots being tied at the back. The **3rd photo** shows the Vedic girdle from shoulder to waist. It is worn in 3 ways during different activities: as ***Upavīta*** - the Sacred Thread over the left shoulder and under the right arm; as ***Nivīta*** - it is worn around the neck and over the chest & as ***Prachīnavīta*** - it is worn above the right shoulder and under the left arm.

References to the Kushti:

Aiwy-āōnghaha / Aiwy-āōnghahana – *the Sacred Thread.*

Hāvan Gāh, verse 9:

*‘Reverence be to this Holy Baresman, which, (together with the Libation and *the Sacred Thread*), is spread with holy devotion.*

Hormazd Yasht, 1.17:

*‘Whoever recites audibly these 1001 names (of Ahura Mazda, that is) whether rising or retiring, retiring or rising, while *girdling or un-girdling the Sacred Thread*, whether leaving his abode, or his village, or the country and arriving at some other country ..unto that person...at whatever time, no harm will befall from the evil Druj, nor from piercing weapons, slings and arrows, or from swords, clubs, stones.....’*

Aiwi-āōnghañm / Aiwy-āōnghañm: *girdle of the Sacred Thread.*

The act of untying and tying of the Kushti / ungirdling and regirdling of the Kushti. The ceremony of performing the *Kushti* consists of three processes: (a) ablution: washing with water the uncovered portions of the body such as face, hands and feet (b) ungirdling the sacred thread from the waist after the recital of the prayer - ‘*Kām nā Mazda*’ and then (c) putting it on again with the *Kushti* prayer recital followed by ‘*Jasa mē avanghē Mazda*’ & ‘*Māzdayasnō ahmi*’ prayers. It is essential to perform the Kushti before prayer before meals, and after answering the calls of nature.

Sad-dār: 10.9 - 13: *Tying of the four knots while girdling the Sacred Thread* (photos below).

‘.....those 4 knots, with which they tie it on, are on this account, 2 in front at the end of the second encircling and 2 at the end of the final third encircling – that it may give four attestations. 10. The first knot is that which preserves constancy (qarar), and gives attestation as to the existence, unity, purity, and matchlessness of the sacred being, the good and propitious. 11. The second knot is that which gives attestation that it is the good religion of the Mazda-worshippers, which is the word of the sacred being. 12. The third knot is that which gives attestation as to the apostleship and mission (rasuli) in the just (haqq) Zartosht, the Spitamān. 13. The fourth knot is that which adduces more pleasantly, gives assurance (iqrar), and openly accepts that I should think of good, speak of good, and do good. 14. And from the whole I become established; and the pure, good religion is this, that I persist in those views.’

Vənd 18.8 & 9:

Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda: ‘O Maker of the material world, thou Holy One! What is it that brings in the unseen power of death?’

Ahura Mazda answered: ‘It is the man who teaches a wrong Religion; it is the man who continues for three springs without wearing the Sacred Girdle, without chanting the Gathas, without worshipping the Good Waters.’

Vənd 18.18 & 19:

‘On the first part of the night, Ātar, the son of Ahura Mazda, calls the master of the house for help, saying: ‘Up! Arise, thou master of the house! Put on thy girdle (kushti) on thy clothes, wash thy hands, take wood, bring it unto me, and let me burn bright with the clean wood, carried by thy well-washed hands. Here comes Azi, made by the Daevas, who consumes me and wants to put me out of the world.’

Zaranyō-aiwyāōnghana: The verse below seems to indicate the Avestans possessed the knowledge of Earth's atmosphere (Yazata Vāyu) and that it protects and sustains the environment and life on Earth.

Hormazd Yasht 1.17 emphasises the sacredness of Earth's environment.

Yazata Vāyu of the golden girdle in Ram Yasht 15.57: *'Reverence is extended to Yazata Vayu, the righteous and energetic atmosphere of Earth's environment, which surrounds, protects and sustains life on Earth (like the Kushti surround and protects a person wearing it) – the very ideal of Earth's life-sustaining existence. Yazata Vāyu is further praised as the most powerful and exalted, adorned with a golden helmet, a golden crown, a golden necklace, while moving in a golden chariot with golden wheels & wearing a golden garment, golden shoes (Zaranyō-aōthrəm) and a protective girdle of a golden Sacred Thread (Zaranyō-aiwyāōnghana). In addition, it possesses another golden weapon to shield the Earth.'*
(The modern term for the latter could well be the 'ozone layer')

Dinkard (Acts of Religion), Book 3.225:

'The professors of the good religion are said to be of the religion of those that put on [lit. fasten] the kushti; and the follower of that religion has the sacred girdle (the kushti) upon him.'

The '**cammarband**' (Guj/Hindi/English loan-word: cloth waistband), not unlike the one worn by Zarathushtra, was by no means the Sacred Thread itself, as is sometimes believed. The '**cammarband**' and the **turban** are still worn in some societies in India, particularly in the rural areas as depicting the stature of the wearer in some societies in India, particularly in the rural areas among the Hindus. They were also worn on the Subcontinent by Zarathushtris until the late 1800s early 1900s.

The style of wearing both and the richness of the cloth too are still taken as very important factors in the status of the person in society. They are also worn by the groom during the wedding ceremony among the Vedic Hindus.

The Sacred Thread Ceremony - a brief comparison

The Zoroastrian rite on the Subcontinent is called **Navjote** (New Birth) and in Iran, **Sudreh Pushi** investiture. Zoroastrian children, both boys and girls, receive religious initiation ideally after they have attained the age of from six years and three months up to the age of puberty, indicates that both, the **Sudreh Pushi** and the Vēdic **Upanayana** initiation rites child originated in the period when both the Indic and the Iranians Indo-Aryans were living together. Initially there appears to have been no gender discrimination among the Vēdic people. According to an appendix of the **Manusmṛiti**, girls were allowed to study the Vēdas in the previous Creation. Orthodox Hindus, however, do not accept this reference, because no Hindu canonical text allows this ceremony for a girl in the present Creation.

Vāndidad 18.54 states *'after the fifteenth year the person likely to be initiated has already fallen into 'worldly affairs'.*

Traditionally, therefore, the initiation is performed before the fifteenth year (the accepted age of puberty during the Avestan era)'.

The Vedic Sacred Thread, **Yajño-pavīta** is made up of 3 strands of cotton fibre and is worn from the Left shoulder to the waist. The strands represent purity in *thought, word* and *deed* expected from the wearer. The strands represent 3 divinities – **Gāyatri** of thought, **Saraswati** of word and **Sāvtri** of deed. 3 more strands for the bride are added at the time of the wedding and then one for each child born. The one who wears the Sacred Thread assumes purity in thought, word and deed.

Upanayana is the Vēdic Sacred Thread ceremony by which initiates are invested with a sacred thread, to symbolize ‘*the transference of spiritual knowledge*’. Literally, it means ‘*leading closer*’ to the Brāhma) where the concept of Brāhman is introduced to a young boy. Traditionally, the ceremony was performed to mark the point at which boys began their formal education. The ceremony is performed when the boy is seven years among the **Brāhmīns**, at least 13 years among the **Kshatriyas** and 12 years among the **Vaisyas**. The young initiate during the ceremony is taught the secret of life through *Brāhmōpadēsam* (revealing the nature of Brāhman, the Ultimate Reality or the *Gāyatri Mantra*). The child then becomes qualified for life as a student or *Brahmachāri*, as prescribed in the *Manusmṛiti*. It reminds the Brahmachāri to lead a regulated life with purity in his thought, word and deed and also represent the debt that is owed to the guru, parents and society.

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