

Threads of Continuity - The Zoroastrian Craft of Kusti Weaving

reviewed by ardeshir marker

I must confess that on first hearing the title of this book, I was a bit perplexed, even somewhat intimidated ... a whole book on *kusti*-weaving! How could one possibly write an entire book on such a topic ... how much information could there possibly be? The answer is, that when the information is as beautifully illustrated and as well presented as in "Threads of Continuity" all our misconceptions are laid to rest ...

"Threads of Continuity – the Zoroastrian Craft of *Kusti* Weaving" is not only about the threads of the *kusti*, but is a fascinating and in-depth analysis of the various threads and strands that make up and define our identity as a community. Lavishly illustrated with detailed photographs that complement and enhance the text perfectly, the book is divided into sections such as "Rites of Passage" which includes chapters on Pregnancy, Birth, the *Navjote*, Marriage and Death. Our daily practices and customs, and the rituals that govern (or are supposed to govern) our everyday lives, and that make up a traditional Parsi household are covered in this book in a detailed yet light-hearted tone. But the aim and purpose of this book is also to record and to explain the reasons and the rationale behind our numerous and elaborate rituals and customs, and this it does very well.

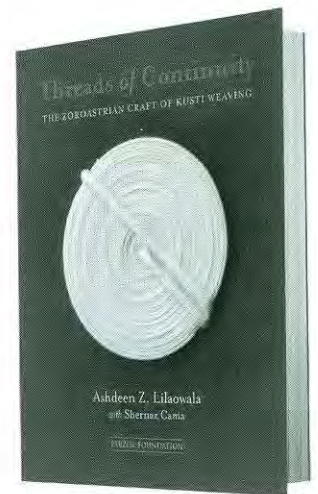
Based on a study on *kusti* weaving by the Parzor Foundation, which took over ten years, and focused mainly on the Gujarat and Navsari region, the book argues that "*The rites of passage described are those followed by traditional Parsis in the Navsari and Surat regions of Gujarat. These are the families who have kept alive traditions and crafts, kusti and toran weaving, music and songs, which highlight the Parsi ethos.*"

It is difficult to disagree with this, since Navsari and the Gujarat region are where, as the book goes on to elaborate, traditional *kusti* weaving and *sudrah* and *toran* making are still seen

as worthwhile and relatively profitable pursuits for Parsi families. More controversially, however, the book also argues that the community in the diaspora (Australia, New Zealand, UK, USA) has "lost" many of these traditions, especially by the second or third generation and that they are therefore "*best seen in interior Gujarat where several social customs were created and have been preserved and are the threads that all contribute to a tightly knit social and community life.*"

There is a chapter on *Sudrah* making, and even a chapter on "*Toran-making*". We learn that *toran*-making does not generate as much income as *kusti*-weaving. The book therefore successfully highlights the economic dimensions and the dynamics of *toran* making versus *kusti* weaving, and the dilemmas and challenges involved in trying to keep traditional customs and crafts alive by making them economically viable and profitable.

The longest and most detailed chapter in the book is of course, on the *Kusti* – the sacred cord. Often as we tie and untie our *kusti*, we forget the painstaking and intricate detail and efforts that are undertaken whilst weaving a *kusti*. The book makes clear that this is often seen as an act of love and devotion. The chapter covers in detail the origins of the *kusti*, and says that "*later Pahlavi texts show that Zarathustra initiated the rite as it currently exists, adapting an existing Indo-Iranian custom, in which men put on a woven cord during an initiation, as a sign of their membership into the religious community.*" We also learn that King Jamshed of the Peshdadian dynasty is believed to have used the *kusti* as a symbol to "*remind his people of moderation.*" The symbolism, and the various steps in making a *kusti* are discussed in clear and concise language. The different types of spinning tools (the *Chaatri* or *Tikli*), the

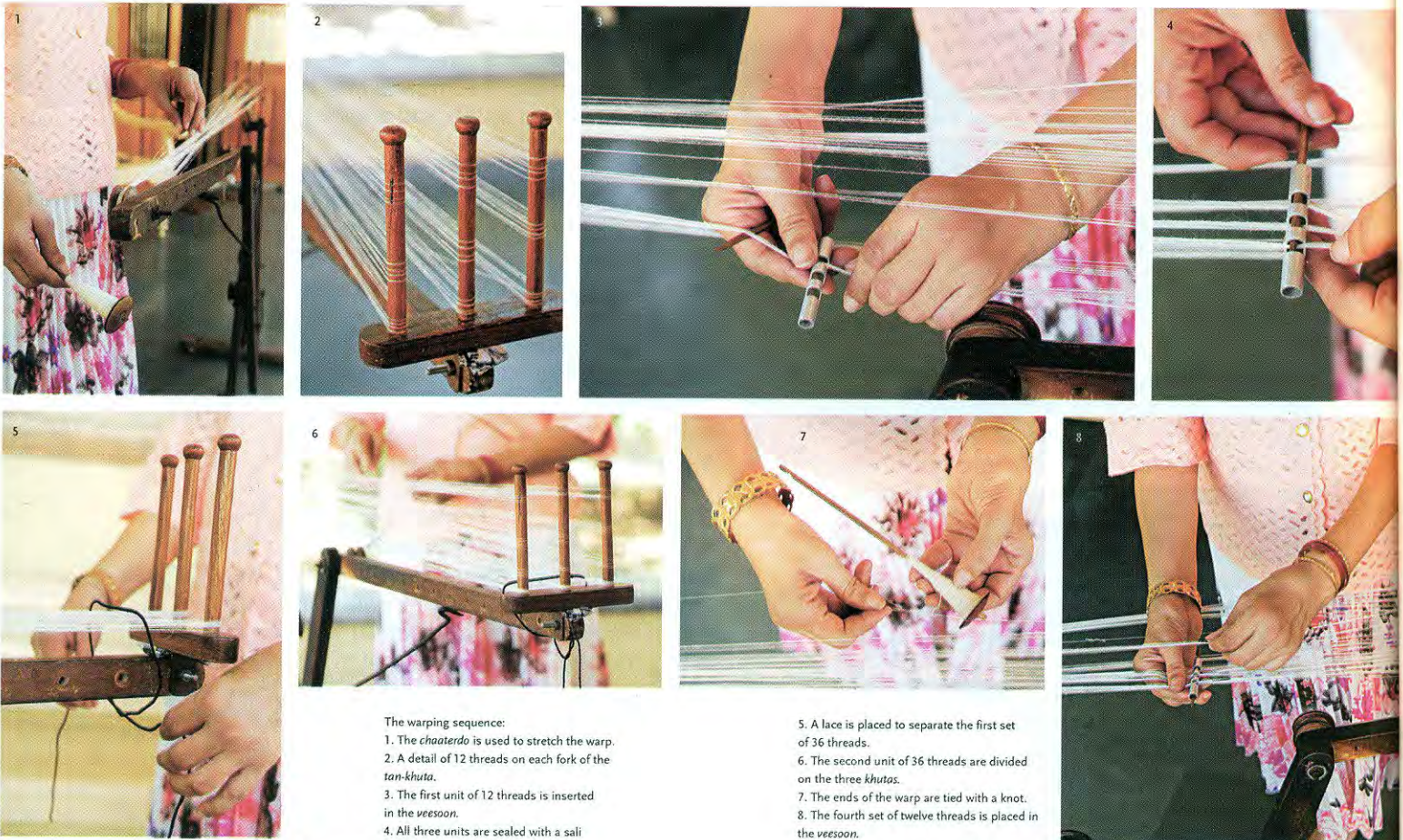


Threads Of Continuity -
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Kusti Weaving
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or available at the
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Spindles, the differences between the normal loom (*Jantar*) which is regularly used today to make *kustis* and the old loom (the *Janu Jantar*), which was used in the old households of Navsari and was much larger in size, all these details highlight the complexities and efforts involved in weaving a *kusti*.

The book ends on a positive note and points out that there is a resurgence of pride in the ability to weave a *kusti* and that it is a skill that is increasingly being recognized and valued, in India at least, so much so that *Kusti* weavers have travelled from Navsari to Mumbai and Delhi to participate in international programmes and to display their craft.

This book itself is a testament and an ideal record of the threads of continuity that continue to bind our community and its traditions and values together.



The warping sequence:
1. The *chaaterdo* is used to stretch the warp.
2. A detail of 12 threads on each fork of the *tan-khuta*.
3. The first unit of 12 threads is inserted in the *vesoon*.
4. All three units are sealed with a *sali*

5. A lace is placed to separate the first set of 36 threads.
6. The second unit of 36 threads are divided on the three *khutas*.
7. The ends of the warp are tied with a knot.
8. The fourth set of twelve threads is placed in the *vesoon*.

Pages 112 & 113. Courtesy Ashdeen Lilaowala, from his book

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