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Decoding the Divine: Kathi Embroideries of Saurashtra

Professor Victoria Z. Rivers

This paper focuses on nineteenth and early twentieth century textiles produced by the Kathi people of Saurashtra in northwest India, and motifs similar to the Kathi's repertoire. The purpose is to stimulate new thinking about archaic embroidered images and how they relate to the larger world of ancient solar/astral worship and the regenerative principles of nature. To understand this complex construct, let's start with the Kathi background, a brief history of the region, an analysis of some ancient motifs, and geographical heritage.

Visually, Kathi textiles contrast bright against dark. The silky untwisted floss called *heer*, also adds luster through elongated darning stitches called *adiya-fatiya*, some chain stitch and *bavaliya* or thorn stitch, long herringbone stitches, and some surface satin stitches.

(1) Touches of yellow, white and green, along with small mirror rounds accent the predominantly red stitches worked into deep indigo cotton grounds. Most Kathi embroidery motifs emanate from a central focal point thereby expanding the motifs' powers, and the most archaic of them are filled with symbols of solar character.

The Kathi household in Saurashtra, its contents and various contexts for textile displays is enticingly described in *Folk Art and Culture of Gujarat*. (2) Kathi people produced personal, household, dowry and festive textiles like other communities throughout northwest India and Pakistan. These included *chakla*, or ceremonial squares, which throughout Saurashtra were associated with dowries and weddings since bridal garments were commonly wrapped and transported in them. (3) Auspicious doorway hangings, *toran* were suspended at main entrances. Textiles that were more particular to the Kathi included *bhitiya*, large wall hangings consisting of three or four generous sized *chakla* connected with diamond shapes of assorted cloths and suspended from long, narrow friezes of cloth called *pacchitpati*. The Kathi also made rectangular, triangular topped cloths for sun worship called *suraj-stapan*. (4)

From the 19th century, some Kathi textiles made by Mochi professional embroiderers introduced figurative elements, (5) but this paper focuses on the geometric motifs. The Kathi stopped embroidering in their distinctive *Kathipa* style, sometime in the early twentieth century, (6) but their color schemes, embroidery styles, and images were widely adapted, even expanded, by members of Mahajan and Vaniya merchants castes, the Kanebi farming communities throughout Saurashtra and by the Patanvadi Rabaris. (7) Nanavati says that Saurashtran famines in 1900, 1922, and 1940 forced large numbers of Kathi to sell their embroideries and beaded textiles, thereby their creditors and village merchants purchased the old Kathi works, and were greatly influenced by the Kathis' distinctive iconographic and visual qualities, as well as the upper caste associations with them and their material culture. (8)

By the early twentieth century oral traditions explaining the meanings of the old motifs were lost. It is now very difficult to reconstruct their beliefs and intentions, as frequently, what was once a belief becomes a tradition, and the meanings attached to the beliefs become lost in custom. Additional fieldwork is needed, as well. But I believe there is

evidence that the archaic motifs are indeed connected to solar /fire worship and nature cults reflected in textiles from at one time shared regions of Southwest / Central Asia.

Some background about Saurashtra, the large central to southern peninsula of Gujarat State is helpful in understanding the complexities of the region, its' numerous groups and how the Kathi fit into this larger sphere. In the recent past, Saurashtra was called Kathiawar or Kathiawad after the Kathi people, but Saurashtra was one of the region's ancient names. From as early as 3,500 years ago, the people of the ancient Saurashtran archeological sites of Lothal, Dhandhukha, and Rozdi, traded with Mohenjodaro and other Indus Valley settlers. (9) In around 1,500 BC Saurashtra and the adjoining region of present-day Kutch, were settled by Aryans, and then the entire area was known as Anarta. (10) A great influx of cultures and religions continued, as many peoples were assimilated and adapted into the area over thousands of years. Numerous people from eastern Iran and Central Asia entered present-day Gujarat through Baluchistan and Pakistan, or through northern Pakistan's mountain passes from Central Asia. Fertile open valleys in the western part of north India, through Kashmir, Kulu and Dehra Dun were passageways, while invaders from the north or northwest came down the Indus or Kabul rivers. (11) The north frontier of Pakistan is the historical site of routes between Central Asia and the Indian Plains including the Khyber and Kurram passes to Kabul and less-known Tochi and Gomul passes into southern Afghanistan. (12) Saurashtra's geographical position on the Arabian Sea and its long-standing importance as a trade center further led to many immigrations. Intermarriages with invading groups and long-settled units led to great complexity of racial types.

Trade in textiles has been known since at least the 7th century BC when the Chinese writer Hiuen Tsang told of already famous cottons and silks woven in Southern Gujarat, (13) and from 751-1800 AD, when the seaports of Gujarat and Saurashtra were lively silk and cotton trade centers. This trade has been described in *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, written in 1518, and *Travels of Ibn Batutah*. (14) Saurashtra also figures prominently in the great Hindu epics, when Lord Krishna roamed throughout the land. The early Greeks called Saurashtra Lar-des, after the Lar or Larica tribe. (15) It was also known as Ariaca, (16) and to the Romans, Saurashtra was called Saurastrene, which one scholar translated as "Good Country". (17) But the Sanskrit translation of the name Saurashtra, reveals that besides trade, the region was famous since ancient times, as the chief center for the worship of the sun in India. (18) Probably the Sanskrit-speaking, sun worshipping Aryan people first gave Saurashtra its name, for *saura* means sun, and *rastra* means worship. (19) Saurashtra was in "constant intercourse with Egypt and western Asia" where many revered the sun, (20) and from the Hindu texts called *Puranas*, it is known that as far back as several centuries BC, Saurashtra was ruled by "a king of the Solar Race". (21)

It is also well documented that solar and fire worshipping priests called the Magas were Maga Brahmins were brought to Saurashtra by the ruler Samba. The Magi were priests of the Persians, Bactrians, Charismians, Aryans, and Sakas. (22) Their roles were to install, ritually empower images of the sun god, and tend the altars in Saurashtran temples. The *Puranas* frequently state that the Maga or Zoroastrian Brahmins were brought from Sakadvipa, an area between the Caspian Sea, eastern Iran and southwestern Afghanistan.

(23) Sun god temples were spread throughout Saurashtra, present-day Gujarat and Rajasthan states, Sind and Punjab in present-day Pakistan. Many Zoroastrians were driven into India by Arab/Muslim invasions of the seventh century, and many Zoroastrian priests from eastern Iran were settled in Punjab, Sind, and Rajasthan. (24) In the ninth century AD Arabs conquered Sind, then established themselves in Kutch, then Saurashtra, which they called "Sorath" for sun worship. (25) Because of the region's harsh climate, the Muslims consolidated their power in Ahmedabad, and left the countryside/rural areas to the semi-nomadic herders and cultivators. Sometime after the fifteenth century, the Kathi established themselves in Saurashtra, acquired lands, and then the region became known as Kathiawad or Kathiawar. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Kathiawar was ruled by 188 separate states. (26)

By looking into the Kathi's historical roots, we can more clearly connect the archaic solar elements in their embroideries with Seistan. Scholars do not agree on the Kathi's early history, but the earliest mention that connects the Kathi to Seistan states that they were driven out of Seistan by an Assyrian king in 1130 BC. (27) Some historians suggest that the Kathi were of Saka/Scythian origin. But many writers have confused the Saka and Scythian by massing these related groups into one. To sort out if the Kathi were Saka or Scythian is almost impossible, but the Kathi do not call themselves Saka. The correlation of the Kathi with the ancient nomadic Saka probably comes through the Kathi's historical connections with a land called Sakadwipa, also called Sakatai, or Chaghtai. While the ancient Greeks and Romans used the indefinite term Sakae to describe groups of nomadic tribes ranging from north of the Black and Caspian Seas eastwards to Mongolia, (28) other sources specifically state that Sakadwipa was located in Seistan. The Hindu *Puranas*, written from the sixth to sixteenth centuries AD mention Sakadwipa as a place where the inhabitants worshipped the sun. (29) Further records of no specific date indicate that the Takshak, the Gete (or Jat who are descended from the Scythians), the Kamari, the Kathi, and the Hun migrated from Sakadwipa (Seistan), into northern Sind. (30) We know that the Kathi people once lived between the Ravi and Beas rivers in Punjab. Their capital was Sangala, in northeast Punjab near the India border of Himachal Pradesh. (31) Around 325 BC, when Alexander passed through present-day Pakistan, the Kathis were already widely settled northeast of Multan, the ancient center of sun worship. The Kathi were overthrown in a great battle near Multan around 526 or 544 AD. (32) They left Multan and by 1196 had settled near the Araveli Mountains stretching from northern Saurashtra to and south-central Rajasthan, also called Mewar. Here, they intermingled with the Gehlot, an ancient branch of Rajputs who were partly Aryan, partly Scythian, partly indigenous and worshipped the sun. (33)

By the nineteenth century, Kathi/Gehlot/Rajput descendants claimed ancestry from the Bala or Bali people who occupied Balhara in the Araveli Mountains; perhaps this refers to the where the Kathi settled seven hundred years earlier. (34) According to Col. Tod, the Bala claimed ancestry from the Induvansa, who were originally a "Scythic" race of sun worshippers from Multan. (35) Sometime in the late sixteenth century, the Kathi became prosperous landowners, and by the nineteenth century, the Rajputanized Kathi peoples became Hindus devoted to Shiva. Interestingly, in the early stages of Vedic Hinduism, Shiva was the god of the setting sun. So, while the Kathi may have forgotten

their oldest origins, their history shows a long line of sun worship, which is perhaps not unlike the pre-Islamic, solar/fertility/regeneration-based beliefs of some other Southwest and Central Asian peoples.

The notion of solar /astral/ fire worship and cultic reverence for natural forces seems remote to us in our industrialized, high technology-supported lives. We don't think too much about our relationship with the sun, except perhaps to avoid a sun burn or to decide what to wear. However, reverence for the powers of nature is ancient and widespread. The sun, moon, stars, water, earth, fire and other elements figured prominently among many ancient people, and was intertwined with agriculture, migratory herding of animals, the changing seasons, fertility and regeneration. Because the sun promotes plant growth, restores light to darkness and returns anew every morning, it has been a powerful metaphor for renewal, perpetuation and the promotion of fertility for numerous millennia.

In Kathi textiles, the symbols and images were purposeful. Textiles are frequently filled with sacred or protective powers and imbued with the maker's soul force. Embroidery was such an important aspect of daily and ritual life among agricultural and pastoral people, that textiles like the ones made by Kathi people were deeply connected to all important rites of passage, religious and social aspects of life. The forces of nature were called upon to provide life sustaining, fertility protecting powers for important rites of passage like births, marriages, and funerals.

Archeological evidence of sun and nature cults are found in the Americas, Egypt, Iran, Southern Europe, the Indus Valley, and China. South and southwest Asia's history is rich, as well, with ancient sun worshipping cultures. The deified sun has had many names- Ra or Aton in Egypt, Ashur and Shamasha in Babylonia, Marduk in Assyria, Helios to the Greeks and Apollo to the Romans, Mithra among post- Zoroastrians, the same as the Vedic sun god Mitra.(36) Many early solar deities worshipped in the Mesopotamian kingdoms of Elam, Babylonia and Assyria were clothed with appliquéd sheet gold cut-outs of rosettes, stars, squares, rings and stepped crosses. This practice began as early as the 14th century BC. (37)

The archaic repertoire of Kathi embroideries synthesized influences from Zoroastrianism, Mesopotamia, trade with the Egyptians, and dispersions through the Greeks and other peoples of the Mediterranean world. Many images and symbols from these cultures are echoed in the textiles of not only the Kathi, but among other people who shared ties to eastern Iran. Solar and astral symbols are still seen throughout the farming regions of Central Asia and parts of Kutch, as people adorn their dwellings and material culture with fertility-based solar images.

The Kathi were probably the oldest embroiderers in Saurashtra, (38) and their motifs were echoed in sun temple carvings. Kathi sun disks are often depicted with alternate blocks of *koliphul*, ancient eight-pointed stars associated with solar worship. Other archaic images included concentric suns, variations of lotus flowers, circular centers with eight radiating lines, quadrant-divided circles and squares, diamonds, checker patterns, and stepped crosses. These motifs have been seen throughout the material culture of some

people from Seistan, Bactria and Khorezm, the area to the north. A closer look at these images and some meanings follows.

Solar images: The sun is the only visible god, which is manifested through light, luster, rays of light, and shadow. (39) Sunlight is often believed to be the source of life, knowledge and spiritual wisdom. The sun establishes time, the rhythm of life through day and night. And through fire, golden sun-like light illuminates darkness. Light and primal fire exist in pure time, and were believed by many to be the source of all. Light and darkness, fire and water are great polarities which symbolize the universe. (40) Suns are represented by circles, and while many are solar representations, not all are. Rosettes, crosses inside circles, sun heads with stick-like human figures, wheels, chariots, horses and horse-drawn chariots evolved to represent notions of sun, time, and regeneration. In Zoroastrianism, Asha who is sometimes called Lady Sun, the great light or the eternal truth has always been depicted and made visible by a circle. (41) In India, the lotus/water lily flower, which opens and closes with the rising and setting sun is an ancient solar symbol In India. The eight-petaled lotus or circle, called *sunya-murti* was prominent in the *Rigveda* writings from over 3,000 years ago. (42) The worship of the Sun God through an eight-petalled lotus flower drawn on the ground was proscribed in the most ancient Sanskrit literature. (43) Even today, many solar rosettes contain eight petals or rays. During the Kushan empire which spread from Afghanistan to the Indus between 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., Buddhist motifs entered regional design vocabularies. Circular lotus and mandala motifs mingled with the more ancient solar/lunar/ floral medallions, and appeared alongside other images associated with ancient cults of natural forces. Over time, solar symbols and images became progressively complex to represent the solar deity in human form. Anthropomorphic representations of the sun and all its associations also came into India through the Indo-Greeks and Kushans. (44) Later, the twelve-petalled lotus became associated with Surya, the emerging Hindu sun god. Henceforth, the number twelve became important as it related to the twelve Adityas or deities associated with Surya, which were further correlated with the months of the year. (45) In time, many of the Vedic sun gods lost their solar nature and became independent gods of the Aryan pantheon.

Quadrants: Swastikas are extensions of the circular sun image and convey time, space and the reproductive force. Swastikas are ancient and Indus Valley seals with them have been found dating to around 2500-1750 BC. (46) The right-hand swastika, made from two lines intersecting at right angles, rotates east to west or counter-clockwise. It is the symbol of light and day, and its four points indicate the sun at North for midnight and human regeneration; East for sun-rise and the beginning of life; South for noon and the prime of life; and West for sunset or death. The swastika visually and iconographically relates to quadrant-divided circles and squares. Perpendicular and horizontal intersecting lines symbolize the cardinal directions or the life cycle; diagonally intersecting lines indicate the two equinox and two solstice, therefore representing the four seasons; and both sets of intersecting diagonals symbolize the four seasons and cardinal points, or the unity of time and space. Essentially, these symbols represent cyclical thinking oriented toward the east/west or sun rise/sun as a regenerative principle. (47)

Organization and Numbers: Simple units divided into four or eight equal parts can represent complex principles. Often, solar / regenerative symbols are represented with eight equal, radial or symmetrical parts like the eight-petalled lotus and the eight-pointed star. The main field of Kathi textiles are often divided into either four, nine or twelve parts. The nine compartment composition is called *nava-khanda*, (48) and the number nine is highly symbolic in India of the sun god. In India, there are nine planets, and the sun is always centered and surrounded by the eight planets. Archaic Kathi embroideries are strikingly geometric, which reflects a distinct philosophical sense of order. Perhaps this order was inspired by Zoroastrian thought, where geometric shapes created an earthly order that refers to the higher manifestation of the Divine order. (49)

Stepped Crosses and Crenellations: Associated with protection, these symbols represent the purifying powers of sun/fire light through association with fertility deities who at one time were solar/astral deities, and through stylized depictions of light rays. A sacred seal with crenellated-edged, eight-pointed stars was discovered in the archeological site of Togolok in the Kara Kum desert dating to the second millennium BC. Some say this place was the origin of Zoroastrianism. (50) Other finds there included ceremonial heavy metal disks with crenellated cut-out diamonds, triangles, stair-stepped crosses and sun shapes. These objects are considered to convey early Zoroastrian principles, (51) and are seen in the Kathi's archaic design repertoire. Stepped-crosses and zig-zag edged shapes are depicted in Assyrian bas reliefs on the clothing of solar deities, soldiers wearing loin cloths, and on military equipment like siege engines, battering rams and chariot boxes. Crenellated and stair stepped designs were well known in Mesopotamian iconography for their apotropaic functions, (52) as Ashur, the old solar god of Assyria, evolved as the protector of armies and soldiers. (53) In India, stepped crosses are sometimes painted around windows and above doors of homes to bring luck and to honor Vishnu, who was at one time a solar deity associated with the setting sun. (54) Stepped-crosses are frequently depicted with other solar/regenerative and protective images, and often merge into checker patterns, which we will return to..

Eight-pointed Stars: The eight-pointed star is sometimes known as the star of the Magi. As a solar motif of great antiquity, it is also known as the eight-horned sun image. Some examples date to 4300 BC. (55) The Kathis introduced the *koliphul*, or eight-pointed star into Saurashtra. The koliphul is defined as a geometric pattern consisting of a square divided into nine smaller squares, which are further subdivided into triangles. (56) As we have seen, the number nine has solar connotations. In Mesopotamian cultures, the motif was believed to have originated in Sumer, (57) where it was associated with the Babylonian /Assyrian fertility goddess Ishtar, wife of Ashur, the sun god. Ishtar was also associated with Venus, which was viewed as both an evening star and a morning star - a duality that parallels Ishtar's associations with both summer fertility and winter barrenness. (58) Old Babylonian motifs known for their protective functions included the eight-pointed star, the six-petaled rosette, and crenellated patterns, all connected to "the cult of the foremost goddess of the Mesopotamian pantheon." (59) Garments decorated with gold-leaf appliqué star and rosette metal platelets were reserved for Assyrian gods and kings only. The images imbued the garments with sacredness and later appeared in Sasanian (226-641 AD) pattern woven textiles. From Iran these motifs reached

Byzantium, and were then diffused into Europe, while another route carried the motif from Mesopotamia through Syria and Egypt into the Mediterranean world. (60) From Buddhist pictorial art and Indian influences of the fifth to sixth centuries AD the Buddha was depicted inside circles and hexagons. "Gradually these circles and hexagons became symbols of the heavenly Buddha, and ..."many developed into rosettes and eight-pointed stars - motifs that were retained in the tenth and eleventh centuries by the Turkic Islamic Seljuks, who carried them to Persia and Asia Minor." (61)

Checker Designs: Check patterns are widely seen in Kathi, Kutch, Sind embroideries, and others. Many check designs have straightforward solar connotations, while others are subtly related as floral/fertility motifs. Among the Rabaris of Kutch and Saurashtra, alternating dark/light checks, sometimes with a diamond in the center, are called *baporiya*, meaning sun. (62) Commonly color changing blocks or checks create diamond and stepped-cross shapes. One of the most interesting observations of a checkered design with solar worship was made by Sir George Robertson in *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush*, written in 1896. (63) Indo-Iranian, *Avesta* and *Vedic*-based Iranian priests built and oversaw the main temple for Nuristan, which was a type of solar observatory. The temple was dedicated to the supreme Creator god Imra and Disni, the fertility goddess. Robertson noted a square cloth with checkered patterns placed on the west wall above the square fire altar, and similar designs painted on the south. The god Irma, located in the northeast corner, was touched by a sunbeam at sunrise on the shortest day of the year, and the goddess Disni, was struck by a sunbeam from an opening in the east wall at the summer solstice. Years later, a model of the temple and astronomical and computer calculations showed that the patterns in the checkered cloth which Robertson saw on the western wall "conformed to patterns of sunbeams made at the spring and fall equinox." (64)

Diamonds and Triangles: Diamond shapes are formed from color arrangements in checker patterns, and when two triangles are placed one next to the other. Smooth and stepped- diamond patterns are found in Kathi embroideries, as well as in Central Asian felts, carpets, embroideries and wall paintings. Snasarev tells of a ritual food in Khorezm that is formed into diamond shapes called *bogursak*. The food is made from the white grains of the first harvest, which is associated with fertility. The white color is important for its associations with light, stars and ancestors. This ritual food accompanies rituals associated with the cult of dead, of ancestors, and new crops. (65) Both diamond and triangle shapes have strong regenerative properties and associations with the feminine principle. Single and multiple triangle points are equally ancient motifs. Mesopotamian saw-toothed rows (crenellations) are documented for their associations with solar deities and rays of solar light. *Tumar*, *moska*, or *doga* triangular shaped amulets used by the Turkoman and Uzbeks of Central Asia to protect fertility in particular. Kathi textiles are usually enclosed within protective borders of triangles called *ganas*, (66) or *kangari*. (67) In Sanskrit, the word *gana*, meaning troop or flock brings up several connotations: the military association from Mesopotamia and the other meaning of the word, which is "a small group of deities". (68) Among the recognized *ganas* are the Twelve *Adityas*, twelve solar deities or twelve months, which clearly show the solar connections of this word.

The Moon and Stars: Although not a prominent motif in Kathi textiles, the moon is been extremely important in the belief systems and material culture of many people. The moon is often viewed as the consort of the sun, widely equated with fertility goddesses, and symbolically important for its waxing and waning phases symbolizing polarities like death and resurrection. Moon and star light emanate light from the sun. To extend this thinking, whiteness or lightness has been very important in protecting fertility. Like the moon, stars illuminate night and were considered portals of light through which souls descended to earth. In this regard, they were strongly associated with ancestors, because when people died, it was believed that their divine sparks or souls returned back to the sun. (69) Twinkling stars give hope, and with their white light have been regarded in Zoroastrian and other pre-Islamic beliefs to be soldiers that protect the earth and beings from evil. (70)

Polarities: Astral light (goodness, purity) set against the dark of night (evil, impurity) is the great cosmic polarity and dominant theme found throughout the world. In Central, Southwest, South Asia, this duality of nature stems from the ancient Iranian/Mesopotamian religions. (71) Heavenly solar/astral lights in the form of brightness, whiteness, and warmth alleviated the "terrors of primal darkness" associated with the cave, womb, death, coldness, winter. (72) In Kathi embroideries, light-reflective surfaces contrasted to dark backgrounds. Perhaps the choices of silky materials, directional stitches, colors and small mirrors at one time served similar purposes. There are interesting relationships between mirrors, light, darkness and concepts of protection and resurrection. With their abilities to dazzle and reflect light into dark, evil influences were dispelled or at least mediated. In ancient times, mirrors brought metaphoric light into the darkness of the tomb, thereby promoting renewal, like the sun rising in the east after its night journey towards renewal. (73)

Red: Zoroastrians and Achaemenian Persians used the color red and rosettes to symbolize the sun. The round shape, radiating petals, and color of the red rose suggested the heat and rays of the sun. (74) Red is also associated with the Hindu sun god, Surya. In ancient times, his skin and garment color was called "pusparaga", for bright red. (75) In Khorezm, Central Asia there is a festival associated with the red rose and red tulips. The flowers are the embodiment of nature reborn and of spring planting. (76) In Kathi embroideries, red is the predominant color. The color by itself, is an aniconic reference to the sun.

To conclude, by the nineteenth century, archaic solar/fertility motifs began to disappear. While we might never know exactly what some of these motifs meant to Kathi embroiderers, there are interesting parallels with other solar/astral motifs and associations. We know the Kathi worshipped the sun; we have evidence of the Kathi's migrations and probable origins in Seistan, near the birthplace of Zoroastrianism and more ancient solar religions. Most eloquently, through the old Kathi embroideries we can more fully appreciate what's on the surface, as well as the deeper meanings that come shining through.

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