

# The ancient art of spinning a yarn<sup>[i]</sup>

By Dr. Sam Kerr

Through the ages, in the ancient 'Classical World', the exquisite work of hand spinning of animal fur fiber was excelled in, with finesse, principally by women. A delicate art process, the single or double ply yarn was produced by a fine twisting together of the fibers employing deft finger movements.<sup>[ii]</sup>

The hand spinning of yarn from wool fleece (both in Iran and on the Subcontinent) has been continued for millennia by Zarathushtis, mainly for the weaving of their sacred thread, the '*Kusti / Kushti / Koshti*' [The Avestan word '*Aiwi-yaaonghana*' ('aiwi' is around / surrounding; 'yaaonghana' is protection) means '*surrounding protection / girdle of protection*']. Such was the emphasis given to this domestic art that among the basic household talents expected of an Iranian lady it was placed in very high esteem.

As a child I had noted my paternal aunt in Surat always assumed a certain posture when she made preparations for the hand spinning. **Sitting upright at the edge of a couch or bed she would cross her right leg at right angle under her left thigh.**

Watching her carefully I had noticed she would tie the leader and secure the end onto the hook of the spindle. **Being right handed she always held the wool fleece in the right hand.** Leaving the fibers at the end of the leader loose she would let the spindle hang precariously beneath her right hand suspended by the leader. **Swiftly, with the fingers of her left hand, she would then spin the drop-spindle from the shaft in a clockwise direction making the spindle rotate rapidly.** She would repeat this process of spinning the spindle in the same direction until the leader began to take in the twist. The fluff of fiber hanging from the fleece at the end gradually got dragged down, joining on to more fiber as the twist from the spindle worked its way.

When the yarn was long enough to cause the spindle to almost touch the ground, she would unhook the yarn and wrap it around the base of the spindle next to the whorl by turning the spindle. She would leave enough yarn unwound in order to slip it back on the hook and let the twist run into the joined fiber.

Then, adding more twist to the yarn by spinning the spindle she would make the joining of fiber more secure and let the twist move up into the fibers as she continued making a new length. She would gently pull out more fibers from the fleece by pulling back with her left hand, allowing the twist to loosen the end fibers from the fleece. As more and more single ply thread was wound on the spindle it

became heavy and started to wobble on spinning it. When this happened she would transfer the yarn on to a bobbin and restart the whole process with the empty spindle.

At the end of this long drawn-out process I would marvel at the wisdom of traditional experience. If her right lower limb were to have overhung the edge of the couch she would have needed to remain uncomfortably bent forward for hours.

The photograph of a rock bas relief from the ancient city of Susa (Shushiana in Elam; **6th millennium BCE** among the first traces of civilization - one of the oldest civilized areas in world history) is **probably the oldest known portrayal of an Iranian lady involved in the ancient art of 'spinning a yarn'**. Unless the photograph has been printed in the reverse the lady is left handed. Sitted upright on a chair she has, therefore, crossed her left lower limb on the seat and is holding the wad of wool fleece and spindle in her left hand. Having just prepared the leader thread from the wad of wool (between index finger and thumb), which is suspending the spindle in her left hand, she is ready to wind the spindle with her right hand to spin the thread. Note her left hand is raised to the level of her shoulders to create a long drop for the length of the yarn.

Even among the Jews in ancient times it was ensured, in the making of the tabernacle, that all the woolen threads required for the hangings were spun by women.

**Exodus 35: 25** - "And all women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun, both of blue and of purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen."

**35:26** - "And all the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom spun goats' hair."

Records on clay tablets found in the ancient Sumerian city of Ur say that one of the temples employed, at spinning and weaving, 165 women whose output for casual wages was measured by the day and for permanent employees by the month.



Image from a rock bas-relief found in Susa, Iran. Likely, the oldest known image of an Iranian lady involved in the ancient art of 'spinning a yarn'.

[i] The article has been taken courtesy of **Hamazor, the Journal of the World Zoroastrian Organization, Fall 2004**. It was posted on Vohuman.org on Nov. 2, 2004.

[ii] Source: Biblical – The Old Testament of the Holy Bible (Illustrated), The Reader's Digest Inc., Sydney, 1961.