

Some remarks about the Zoroastrian ceremony of cutting a new *kusti* according to two Rivāyat manuscripts and two of the oldest Avestan manuscripts

Hamid Moein, Université de Liège

Abstract: *The Nirang-e Kusti-ye No^w Buridan is the ceremony of weaving and cutting a new kusti from the loom. While this ceremony has currently a standard form, according to several Rivāyat manuscripts, there are different accounts of this ceremony, including different recitations of this prayer and different ritual sequences, without providing many clues. This paper attempts to explore and present these divergences.*

Résumé : *Le Nirang-e Kusti-ye No^w Buridan est la cérémonie de tissage et de coupe d'un nouveau kusti, fabriqué sur un métier à tisser. Bien que cette cérémonie ait aujourd'hui une forme unique, selon quelques manuscrits des Rivāyates, il existait par le passé des récitatifs différents. Ceux-ci présentent des différences dans les récitations et dans les séquences rituelles. Les textes ne fournissent toutefois pas de nombreux indices. Cet article explore leurs divergences, en essayant de les mettre en perspective.*

The *kusti* is the sacred girdle worn by the Zoroastrians.¹ This item has been one of the most essential piece of garment used by them, which they receive in a ceremony of initiation and coming of age known as *Navjōte* (“new birth”)² in India and as *Sudre-puši* (“putting on the sacred undershirt”) in Iran. The *kusti* and the sacred undershirt (*sudre*)³ worn under it, represent the symbol of faithfulness to the Zoroastrian religion. There are two major prayers concerning the *kusti*: 1. the *Nirang-e Kusti Bastan* (= *NKB*, “the prayer of tying the *kusti*”), a prayer recited on daily bases, each time the *kusti* is untied or tied back up;⁴ 2. the *Nirang-e Kusti-ye No^w Buridan* (= *NKNBr*, “the prayer of cutting a new *kusti*”), a lesser-known prayer (including its ceremony) which describes how the *kusti* is cut after being woven and sanctified. The latter will be the focus of the present paper.

The word for the sacred girdle appears in Avestan as *aiβiiānhana-* (in Yasna 9.26 and Yašt 1.17), from a preverbated form that means “to wrap around” (< Av. *aiβi* + *√yāh-*).⁵ Nevertheless, this term does not appear in later Zoroastrian literature with this designation, except for the Avestan loanword in the Pahlavi exegesis <’ywby’ngn’> *ēbyānghan*⁶ (or *aiwayāhan*). Despite of this, the term for the sacred girdle is attested in the earliest Zoroastrian manuscript (K7), the oldest surviving manuscript containing the text of *Nirang-e Kusti-ye No^w Buridan*, with the Pahlavi form <’z’mk’> *zāmak*,⁷ while in later Pahlavi references it is seen as <kwstyk’> *kustīg* (cf. Persian *kušti*,⁸ Gujarati *kustī*).

Modi (1922, 175) describes the weaving of the *kusti* as being done historically by the women of priestly families, even though later on it was also done by laywomen.⁹ Regardless, in both cases the *kusti* had to be blessed and cut by a priest in a ceremony. Modi further describes the *kusti* as

¹ For a recent article about the term *kusti* (with bibliography), see Choksy & Kotwal 2014.

² For another meaning as “new priest” (< Av. *nauua-* *zaōtar-*), see Modi 1922, 169.

³ In the Rivāyat mss. (e.g., MU, K30 and SP46), the *sudre* has also been referred to as *nime*, *nimæk*, or *zir kusti*.

⁴ Choksy 1989, 55-61. References of the manuscripts used in this paper are given in Appendix 1.

⁵ Pirart 2004, 225; Stausberg 2004a, 9-29; Choksy & Kotwal 2014.

⁶ This reading appears in MacKenzie 1971, 30.

⁷ The word *zāmak* is etymologically related to the Persian word *jame*, which means “garment (in general)” and not just “belt”.

⁸ In Persian, it appears also as *košti*, *kosti*, and *kusti*, the latter being the usual term that I have used in the present paper. About its etymology, see Modi 1922, 173-174; Choksy & Kotwal 2014.

⁹ Modi explains that laywomen started weaving the *kusti* in the 1920s in Navsāri and, at first, it caused an uproar in the community but it was later accepted (Modi 1922, 25).

being made of 72 threads, which represent the 72 chapters of the Yasna.¹⁰ During the process of weaving, when the *kusti* reaches about 30cm long it is removed from the loom and given to the priest to be blessed and cut. Once the ceremony is finished, the *kusti* is returned to the weavers and the remaining part of it is knitted. The end-product will have at each end 3 tassels, and each contains 24 threads. According to Modi (1922, 176) and the two consulted Rivāyat manuscripts, these 24 threads represent the 24 chapters of the *Visperad* and the sum of all tassels, which are six, represent the six *Gāhānbārs*. The *NKNBr* is the central prayer for cutting the *kusti* in the ceremony of the same name. During the ceremony of *NKNBr* this prayer can be inserted in between other prayers, such as the *Srōš Bāj*, the *Ahuna Vairiia* and the combination of others (see below Table 3, regarding ritual sequences).

The manuscripts used in this paper belong to two different types of sources: 1. the Avestan manuscripts K7 (a miscellaneous codex)¹¹ and E1 (a *Xorde Avesta* codex)¹²; 2. the manuscripts BU29 and SP46,¹³ which are both compiled (Persian) Rivāyats.¹⁴

Manuscript K7 dates back to the year 637 A.Y., which according to Baar corresponds to 1288 AD.¹⁵ The *NKNBr* appears in fol. 106v of this manuscript without any ritual instruction and, after that, we can find a *Visperad* and other *Nirangs* without any thematic connection with the *NKNBr*.¹⁶ The title of this prayer appears as *Avesta-ye Zame Boridan* in Persian and *Abastāg Zāmag Burīdan* (<’p̄st’k z’mk blytn>) in Pahlavi. Regarding the manuscript E1, it dates back to 1601.¹⁷ It contains the text in fol. 493r after three blank pages and it is followed by *Āfrīn-e Gāhambār bā Paywand*. In this manuscript, the title of the prayer is given in Pāzand as *Nīraṅg Kustī Burīdan*, and there is a line in Persian containing some brief ritual instructions post recitation of the prayer at the end of the text.

In regards to the Rivāyat manuscripts, the *NKNBr* appears in two different forms in BU29 (vol. 1): the first in fol. 119v-120r (see Appendix 2) and the second in fol. 120r (see Appendix 3). In SP46 (also with the two forms), it appears twice: the first ones are in fol. 42r-42v and the second in 153v-154r. In both manuscripts the titles appear in Persian as *Nirang-e Kusti-ye No^w Buridan* and these texts contain some ritual instructions before, in the middle and at the end of the prayers.

As previously mentioned, each of the Avestan manuscripts presents only one instance of this prayer, meaning the text in K7 differs from the one in E1. Meanwhile the two Rivāyat manuscripts each display two different forms of this text consecutively, the first similar to ms. E1 (referred as T1 [text 1] in this paper) and the second similar to K7 (referred as T2). In this paper, first the textual differences between T1 and T2 will be presented, as well as comparing them to the same texts in the manuscripts K7 and E1. Then, the ceremonial variations that surround each of these

¹⁰ Modi 1922, 175; cf. Hodivala 1920, 103.

¹¹ Including, for example, some exegetical Avestan-Pahlavi texts together with other liturgical texts.

¹² About the classification of manuscripts called *Xorde Avesta* “little Avesta”, see recently Andrés-Toledo 2015, 29-30.

¹³ The code BU refers to Mumbai (Bombay) University Library and the code SP does to the collection of *Suppléments Persans* of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris).

¹⁴ The epistolary exchange that took place between the Zoroastrian communities of Iran and India concerning religious practices between the 15th and the 18th century. The collections of these epistles are known as “Rivāyats” (Arabic term that means “narrations”). For a classification of them, see Vitalone 1987.

¹⁵ Baar 1944, XIII. According to him, Westergaard read the date as 627 A.Y. (𐬵𐬀𐬯), i.e. 1268 AD, while in fact it was 637 A.Y. (𐬵𐬀𐬯), hence Baar tries to correct the date and he proposes 1288 AD (!). In any case, there should not be 20 years of difference between these two dates, but the correct date should be 1278.

¹⁶ Baar 1944, XI-XX.

¹⁷ Kotwal & Hintze 2008, 1. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the folios containing the *NKNbr* were written by a different (later) hand than the previous texts.

texts will be taken into consideration as presented in the Rivāyat manuscripts.

The first edition of the text *NKNBr* (cf. T2), was done by Westergaard in 1852-1854 (= FrW 1).¹⁸ In early 20th century Antia (1909, 177) also published an edition of this text in his *Pāzand Texts* that shares common sources with the other variant, here called T1. The table below shows the textual differences as presented in each manuscript in the Avestan prayer:¹⁹

Table 1

<i>NKNBr</i> T1		<i>NKNBr</i> T2	
Ms. E1	Ms. BU29 [≈ SP46]		Ms. K7
<i>vōhū. manayhe. yeštāštō. ašaōcai. yā. vahišti. xšaθrāca. yā. vairiia. frāstuitəm. vacō. yeštama. žirmaiiae. vaca. saruiiā. niari. būasca. nāiri. būasca. ašaōnō. zaraθuštra.</i>	<i>vōhū. manayhe. yeštāštō. ašoca. yā. vahišta. xšaθrāca. yā. vairiia. frāstuitəm. vacō. yeštəm. ažirmaiiae. vaca. saruiiā. niarəbūasca. nairi. būasca. ašaōnō. zaraθuštra.</i>	<i>vōhū. manayha. hacimanō. ašāica. yaṭ. vahištāt. xšaθrāca. yā. vairiia. frāstotəm. vacō. yasnəm. azarəmiia. vaca. maruiiā. nərəbiiasca. nāiribiiasca. ašaōnō. zaraθuštra.</i>	<i>vōhū. manayha. hacimnō. ašāica. yaṭ. vahištāt. xšaθrāca. yā. vairiia. frāištaōtəm. vacō. jesnim. azarəmiia. vaca. mruuiā. nərəbiiasca. nāiribiiasca. ašaōnō. zaraθuštra.</i>
<i>maroṭ. vacō. zaraθuštra. ahmākəm. tsnāica. vahmāica. yaṭ. aməšnəm. spəntanəm. aθā. tē. aṅhan. yaθā. āpō. yaštā. uruuarā. yaštā. ašaōnəm. fruuašiiō. yasara. mainiiūm. yazata. aiiaṅhe. həθaiiā. varəšta. vaṅhuzdā. ašaōnō.</i>	<i>maroṭ. vacō. zaraθuštra. ahmākəm. tsnāica. vahmāica. yaṭ. aməšnəm. spəntanəm. aθā. tē. aṅhan. yaθā. āpō. yaštā. uruuarā. yaštā. ašaōnəm. fruuašiiō. yasara. mainiiūm. yazata. aiiaṅhe. hiθiā. varəšta. vaṅhuzdā. ašaōnō.</i>	<i>mruiti. vacō. zaraθuštra. ahmākəm. yasnāica. vahmāica. yaṭ. aməšnəm. spəntanəm. yaθtē. aṅhən. yaštā. āpō. yaštā. uruuarā. yaštā. ašaōnəm. fruuašiiō. yaštā. mainiiuuaca. yazata. gaēθiia. fraθbaršta. vaṅhuzdā. ašaouanō.</i>	<i>mruidi. vacō. zaraθuštra. ahmākəm. yasnāica. vahmāica. yaṭ. aməšanəm. spəntanəm. yaθa. te. aṅhən. yaštā. āpō. yaštā. uruuarā. yaštā. ašaōnəm. fruuašaiiō. yaštā. mainiiuuaca. yazata. yaca. gaēiθiia. fraθbaršta. vaṅhuzdā. ašaouanō.</i>

As it can be observed, there are clear differences between the two Avestan texts (T1 and T2) of the *NKNBr*, which also appear in the Rivāyat manuscripts. While T1 shares common sources with the version provided in ms. E1, T2 shares them with the text in ms. K7. Texts sharing common sources with both T1 and T2 have been used for the modern editions. Westergaard inclines towards manuscripts of the T2 type while Antia's edition is done with those of T1 type. For a comparison, the table below (Table 2) displays the final-product of each aforementioned editor:

Table 2

<i>NKNBr</i> . by Westergaard, cf. T2	<i>NKNBr</i> . by Antia, cf. T1
<i>vohū. manayha. hacimnō. ašāca. yā. vahišta. xšaθrāca. yā. vairiia. frā. staōtəm. vacō. yesnim. azarəmiia. vaca. mruuiā. nərəbiiasca. nāiribiiasca. ašaōnō. zaraθuštrahe.</i>	<i>vohū. manayhe. yestāštō. ašoca. yā. vaṅhišti. xšaθrāca. yā. vairiia. frastuitəm. vacō. yeštəm. ažirmaiiae. vaca. saruiiā. niarəbūasca. nairibūasca. ašaōnō. zaraθuštra.</i>
<i>mruidi. vacō. zaraθuštra. ahmākəm. yasnāica. vahmāica. yaṭ. aməšanəm. spəntanəm. yaθa. te. aṅhən. yaštā. āpō. yaštā. uruuarā. yaštā. ašaōnəm. fruuašaiiō. yaštā. mainiiuuaca. yazata. yaēca. gaēiθiia. fraθbaršta. vaṅhuzdā. ašaouanō</i>	<i>maroṭ. vacō. zaraθuštra. ahmākəm. tsnāica. vahmāica. yaṭ. aməšnəm. spəntanəm. aθā. tē. aṅhan. yaštā. āpō. yaštā. uruuarā. yaštā. ašaōnəm. fruuašiiō. yasara. mainiiūm. yazata. aiiaṅhe. həθaiiā. varəšta. vaṅhuzdā. ašanō.</i>

¹⁸ Westergaard 1852-1854, 331.

¹⁹ The Avestan texts are the same as in ms. BU29 with minor orthographical differences, while the ritual instructions are identical in both manuscripts.

Together with the Avestan textual divergences, there are clear differences in the ritual instructions that surround T1 and T2. All three testimonies from the manuscripts BU29 (1 [2x versions]) and SP46 (2 [2x versions]) show that there is a specific set of ritual sequence to each text. In the table below (see Table 3), these divergences could be observed. As it was mentioned previously, the text from ms. E1 contains a brief Persian ritual instruction at the end,²⁰ therefore it has also been included in this table for comparison.

Table 3

<i>NKNBr T2</i>		<i>NKNBr T1</i>	
Ms. BU29		Ms. E1	
1-	<i>Srōš Bāj</i>	1-	-----
2-	<i>NKNBr</i>	2-	<i>NKNBr</i>
3-	<i>Ašəm Vohū</i> (1x)	3-	<i>Ašəm Vohū</i> (1x)
4-	<i>Ahuna Vairiia</i> until <i>šiiāōθananqm</i>	4-	<i>Ahuna Vairiia</i> until <i>šiiāōθananqm</i>
5-	The <i>kusti</i> is cut	5-	The <i>kusti</i> is cut
6-	The rest of <i>Ahuna Vairiia</i>	6-	The rest of <i>Ahuna Vairiia</i> .
7-	<i>Ahuna Vairiia</i> (2x)	7-	-----
8-	The repetition of the final portion of <i>Srōš Bāj</i> ²¹	8-	-----
9-	<i>Ašəm Vohū</i> (1x)	9-	<i>Ašəm Vohū</i> (1x)
10-	<i>ahmāi raēšca</i>	10-	<i>ahmāi raēšca</i>
11-	[<i>kərba. mažd</i>]	11-	[<i>kərba. mažd</i>]

As it could be seen, the ritual corresponding to T2 is much longer. It starts with *Srōš Bāj*, and later a portion of this prayer is repeated again. In addition, T2 has three *Ahuna Vairiias* while T1 has only one. On the other hand, by comparing T1 to the ritual instructions from E1, it is seen that, except by the final *Ašəm Vohū*, the rest is almost the same. It is remarkable that at the end of the text from E1, it is specifically instructed to conclude the ritual with the Pāzand formula starting with *kərba mažd*, while in the two Rivāyat manuscripts, this instruction is not given but it should be assumed. In fact, it is well known that in most ceremonies the concluding formula of *ahmāi raēšca* (Y68.11) is ended with this Pāzand formula.

One thing that these ritual instructions have all in common is the moment where the *kusti* is cut. They all mention the recitation of the *Ahuna Vairiia* until the word *šiiāōθananqm*, and then the *kusti* is cut with a sharp knife, then the rest of the *Ahuna Vairiia* is recited. As expected, the word *šiiāōθana-* “action” indicates the climax, the moment for the most important action, in most Zoroastrian ceremonies, for example at the moment of pressing the *haōma* or while tying the second and third knots of the *kusti* in the ritual of *NKB*.²²

As it has been shown, there were two texts for the same ceremony, which are attested in two of the oldest Avestan manuscripts and both appearing in the Rivāyat manuscripts as well. Currently, only one of them is used (the Avestan text of T2) to perform the ceremony of *NKNBr*. Concerning the Avestan text, there are some differences hardly easy to explain between T1 and T2, neither

²⁰ The translation of the final line of manuscript in Persian reads as “One *Ašəm Vohū*, *Ahuna Vairiia* until *šiiāōθananqm*, cut the *Kusti*, the rest of *Ahuna Vairiia*, *ahmāi raēšca*, *kərba. mažd*”.

²¹ *yasnəmca. vahməmca. aōjisca. zauuarəca. āfrīnāmi. sraōšəhe. ašiiəhe. taxmahe. tanumqθrahe. darši.draōš. āhūiriiehe.*

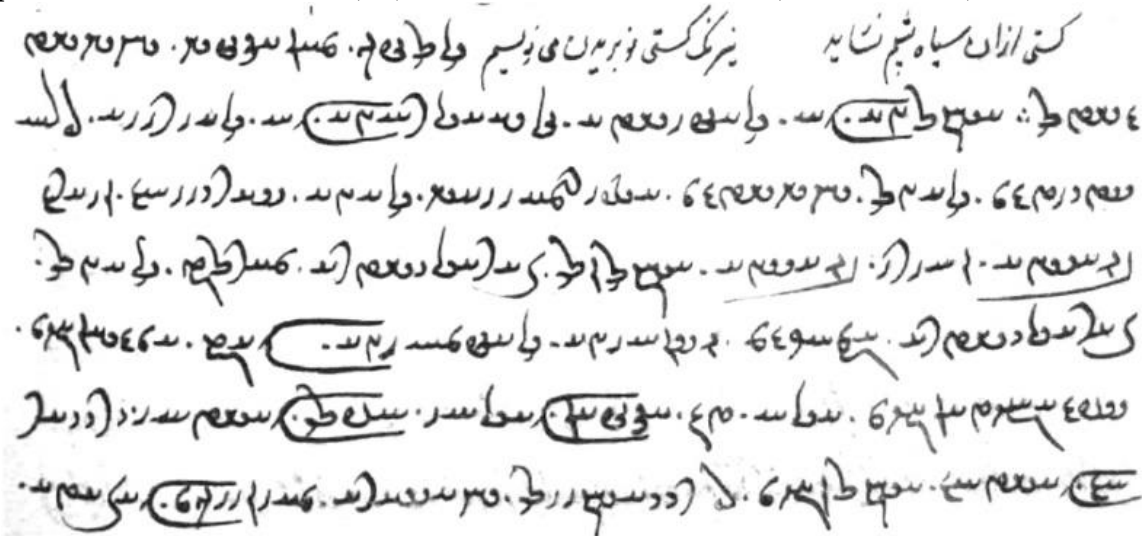
²² This may be the case even when striking the deadly blow during supposed animal sacrifices in the Avestan long liturgy (see Cantera 2014, 28).

orthographically nor palaeographically, e.g. *yeštāštō* vs. *hacimnō*, *yeštām* vs. *yasnām*, *mraōt* vs. *mruīdi*, etc. Furthermore, the epistolary exchange regarding the ritual questions between Indian and Iranian Zoroastrian communities, i.e., the Rivāyat manuscripts, testifies not only the existence of these two texts, but also it suggests a different set of ritual sequences for each of them, one longer and more complex (T2) and the other much shorter (T1). Finally, it should be further investigated whether other Avestan texts and ceremonies present a similar problem, why the Rivāyats show these different texts and, specially, whether these texts (and its ceremony) had one, two or more possible variants depending on the geographical location and/or their contexts. This question has to be related with the problem of the “correct” (let us say linguistically) interpretation of the texts: how is it possible to derive a version hardly grammatically understood (see T1) from the text which shows a more “(acceptable, grammatically) correct” one and which is presently used for this ceremony (see T2)? Was there just a corrupted simplified version (with a minor ritual [T1]) of T2 or were there two different versions since ancient times? The study of the Rivāyat manuscripts has been until today mostly neglected in Avestan studies. This paper has attempted to present one of the problems that appears in these texts in order to better understand certain ancient Avestan rituals.

Appendix 1: Manuscripts used in the present paper

- BU29: Rivāyat manuscript of the *Bombay University Library* in Mumbai. Unpublished digitalized images in the *Avestan Digital Archive* (ADA).
- E1: *Xorde Avesta* of the *First Dastur Meherji-rana Library* in Navsāri (= F4 in Dhabhar 1923, 2-3). Facsimile edition in: Kotwal & Hintze 2008. Unpublished digitalized images in ADA.
- K7: *Xorde Avesta* of *Det Kongelige Bibliotek* in Copenhagen. Unpublished digitalized images in ADA.
- K30: Rivāyat manuscript of the *Det Kongelige Bibliotek* in Copenhagen. Digitalized images available online at: <http://www.kb.dk/manus/ortsam/2009/okt/orientalia/object65997/da/>.
- MU: Rivāyat manuscript of the collection of Ervad Manockji Rustomji Unvala. Facsimile edition in Unvala 1922.
- SP46: Rivāyat manuscript of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in Paris. Microfilmed version.

Appendix 2: The first version (T1) of the *NKNBr* in ms. BU29 (fol. 119v-120r)



Bibliography:

- ANDRÉS-TOLEDO, M.Á., « Ceremonies in the Xorde Avesta Manuscripts: the Drōn Frawardīn Yašt », in CANTERA, A. & FERRER-LOSILLA, J.J. (éds.), *Estudios Iranios y Turanios 2. aṭciṭ bā nəmō haōmāi. Homenaje a Éric Pirart en su 65° aniversario*, Girona, (2015), p. 29-42.
- ANTIA, E.K., *Pâzand Texts, Collected and Collated*, Mumbai, (1909).
- BAAR, K., *Selections from codices K7 and K5*, Copenhagen, (1944).
- CANTERA, A., « Repetitions of the Ahuna Vairiia and animal sacrifice in the Zoroastrian long liturgy », *Estudios Iranios y Turanios*, 1 (2014), p. 25-29.
- CHOKSY, J.K. & KOTWAL, F.M., « Kustīg », *Encyclopædia Iranica*, (2014). [Online edition, 2014, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kustig>]
- CHOKSY, J.K., *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph over Evil*, Texas, (1989).
- HODIVALA, S.H., *Studies in Parsi History*, Mumbai, (1920).
- KOTWAL, F.M. & HINTZE, A., *The Khorda Avesta and Yašt Codex E1: Facsimile Edition*, Wiesbaden, (2008).
- MACKENZIE, D.N., *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, London, (1971).
- MODI, J.J., *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsis*, Mumbai, (1922).
- PIRART, É., *L'éloge mazdéen de l'ivresse. Édition, traduction et commentaire du Hōm Stōd*, Paris, (2004).
- STAUSBERG, M., « The Significance of the *kusti*. A History of its Zoroastrian Interpretations », *East and West*, 54 1/4 (2004a), p. 9-29.
- STAUSBERG, M., « Patterns of Ritual Change among Parsi-Zoroastrians in Recent Times », in KREINATH, J. & HARTUNG, C. & DESCHNER, A. (éds.), *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals. The Transformation of Religious Rituals within Their Social and Cultural Context*, New York (Toronto Studies in Religion 29), (2004b), p. 233-242.
- VITALONE, M., *The Persian Revayats: a Bibliographic Reconnaissance*, Naples, (1987).
- WESTERGAARD, N.L., *Zendavesta or The Religious Books of the Zoroastrians. Volume 1: The Zend Texts*, Copenhagen, (1852-1854).