

'Kasuti and Blackwork': Twin sisters or just duplicates?

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Abstract

This paper explores the similarities between *kasuti* of Karnataka and the blackwork embroidery of Spain. *Kasuti* is counted thread embroidery of Karnataka, which was done with silk thread, on *cholis* to be worn with *ilkal* sarees, whereas blackwork was embroidery, which was popular in Europe in the 16th century and probably originated in Spain. It was counted thread embroidery and used black silk thread for execution. The motifs are geometric in both cases, and even if they are curvilinear, the way to embroider usually uses similar techniques. This paper tries to trace the origin, materials, techniques and motifs of *kausti* and compare them the origin, material, techniques and motifs of black-work embroidery of Spain. It is not the intention of the author to claim that there is any influence of black-work on *kasuti* or vice-versa, as there is no proof yet about that. The aim is only to see how textiles existing in two different parts of the world, use similar materials and stitches, and similar inspirations.

Introduction

Kasuti, a word used for embroidery in Karnataka¹ has come to associated with a particular type of embroidery. The etymology of this word has three different stories, one very popular is breaking *kasuti* into two words – *kai* + *suti*, where *kai* (means hand in Kannada) and *suti* (means cotton)² but *kasuti* used to be done with silk as well as cotton threads, on silk or cotton base. The other reason for the embroidery to be called *kasuti*, is that probably the word 'kashida' meaning embroidery in Persian language was locally pronounced as 'kasuti.' The word 'kashida' is the word for embroidery in Kashmir and many other parts of India. Since India had its trade with Persia, thus it is believed that the word *kashida*, was colloquially spoken as *Kasuti*.³ Another reason that comes forward is that that *kasuti* gets its name from a town in Mysore state.⁴

Origin

The origin of *kasuti* is unknown, but some authors ascribe it to sixteenth and seventeenth, where as some others say that it is the oldest, Shahney has written that women in Karnataka told her that it dated back to Biblical times. Jamila Brijbhushan in her book on Indian Embroidery says that the best pieces of *kasuti* were embroidered made in the areas of Chalukya empire and the Vijayanagar empire.⁵

'Blackwork originated in Morocco, which was the home of Moors, who settled in southern Spain beginning in 711 AD. The Moors developed an embroidery style of geometric motifs, outlined in black, on white...'.⁶The base cloth would mostly be linen. (Fig.1)Blackwork was at its peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries too, when Henry the VIII married the Spanish Princess Catherine of Argon in 1509 AD, who popularized it in England.⁷ Although there are sources that mention that blackwork did exist in England before the arrival of Catherine, but the exemplary work done belongs to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It is interesting to note that in both the countries, Britain and India, this embroidery was present and flourishing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.



Fig. 1 Seventeenth Century Blackwork, Source: Wikimedia Common, Photo Courtesy: Author



Fig. 2Nineteenth Century choli, with kasuti embroidery, Source:Wikimedia Commons Photo Courtesy: Author

Material

Kasuti was done on the material that was woven for *cholis*, in Karnataka called *khan*. (Fig.2) The *khan* was usually cotton, but the thread used for embroidery was the silk yarn. This silk yarn came from the extra yarn used in *Ilkal* sarees. This yarn was used for embroidering the *cholis*. Initially the embroidery was not done on sarees, but on dress material or other household items. Dr. Anamika Pathak in her book on Ramayana, has shown a *kalamkari* from Met Museum in USA where a woman is shown doing *kasuti* embroidery.⁸

The base of blackwork was usually linen as written in almost all the books that deal with it, it was done on articles of clothing like chemises, on areas that were clearly visible. Other than linen it could be done on fine cambric, and lawn. Like *kasuti* it was also done on linen used as hangings or for other household items. There are recipes of dyeing silk black, and then to use this on white fabric. But blackwork used only black silk, whereas *kasuti* used any colour of silk, usually on a black background.

Today *kasuti* is done on sarees, as well as dress materials and bed linen. The base fabric can range from silk to cotton or manmade fabrics. *Kasuti* has been given a GI (Geographical Indicator) in 2006 with the help of Karnataka State handicraft development corporation (KSHDC). This embroidery is now done commercially and is no more done by women of high society for their personal use. Like many other Indian embroideries, much impetus was given for its revival, and it is now very much in demand, however like most other Indian embroideries it has become commercial. Which means, that most of the Indian embroideries that were done by women for their own household, or as gifts to near and dear ones, are now rarely done for personal use, but they are now a source of livelihood for many.

There are many changes in blackwork too in the recent times. This is still done as a hobby by women in Europe, but there is a change in the motifs and material as well. Most of the embroidery is now done on matte type of material where it is easier to count thread, unlike the densely woven linen or fine lawn or cambric of the earlier centuries.

Techniques, Stitches used and Motifs

Kasuti is a counted thread embroidery and is executed beautifully without any knots, the same is true of blackwork. As noted by the GI journal number 11, there are four types of stitches of *kasuti*, *neyge* (also written as *negi*), *menthaye* (or *menthi*), *gavanthi* (or *gavanti*) and *muragi*. According to the book 'Asian Embroidery', edited by Jasleen Dhamija, the chapter on *kasuti* says that it resembles the embroidery of Austria and Hungary and interestingly it mentions about the Spanish stitch. The Spanish stitch is so called because of Catherine of Argon.⁹ A look at the stitches reveals that the Spanish stitch, also referred to as Holbein stitch is the double running stitch.¹⁰ In this stitch, one line of running stitch is made with gaps in between, and then the needle is reversed so that the yarn fills in the gaps between the running stitch.¹¹ This it was known as true stitch because it looked identical whether one saw it from the front or back. The Holbein stitch is similar to the *gavanti* and *murgai* stitches of *kasuti*. The swans in figure 3, are made of *gavanti* and *murgai* stitches.



Fig. 3 - Detail of the swan motif from a saree,
Source: Personal Collection, Photo Courtesy: Author

Naik¹² as well as Lalitha and Vinayan also note that there are over 700 designs, which include elephant, lion, lotus, peacock and many more.¹³ The beauty of these designs lies in their symmetry and the way of execution. The motifs, due to the nature of embroidery are more geometric, and seem to have inspiration from the Islamic tiles. There are no human representations and most of the motifs are animals, birds and buildings. The inspiration is believed to be from architecture.

Shelly Cox in her book on black-work, writes about geometric pattern tessellations and the Islamic influence on the type of motifs which were used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries¹⁴. Due to certain limitations, the author will not be able to produce pictures for clarity, but they can freely be accessed online for an avid reader today.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show similarities between *kasuti* and black-work. It is interesting to note, that the motifs are picked up from architecture and are executed with geometric precision. The motifs in case of Black-work are from nature and yet are geometric in their style of execution. There are similarities in technique, execution and the styles of motif development in both *kasuti* and black-work, and both of them are embroideries that are delicate, outline kind of embroideries, they can be filled by cross-stitches, create ladder style stitches, and add much grace. The similarities in the style of stitches, which are running stitch (*Gavanti*), zig-zag stitch (*murgai*), cross stitch (*menthi*), and a weave like stitch (*negi*), and the layout of motifs, are very striking. It explores options to further research on any common history between the two.

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