

RALLI QUILTS

Traditional Textiles from Pakistan and India



With Value Guide

Patricia Ormsby Stoddard



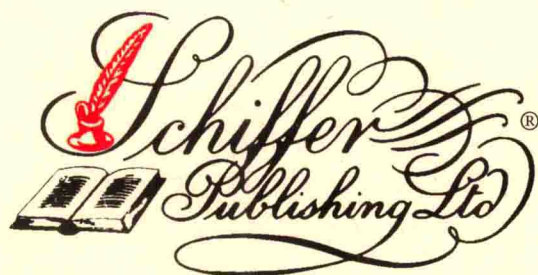
A Schiffer Book for Designers and Collectors

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Patricia Ormsby Stoddard



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Title page caption:

This quilt block is from a ralli made in Badin District, lower Sindh.

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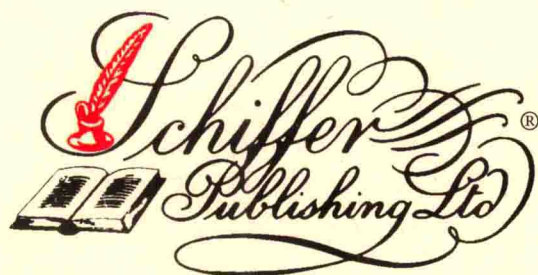
A village girl is walking along the bank of the Indus River north of Multan.

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This quilt block is from a ralli made in Badin District, lower Sindh.

Dedication

To my wonderful husband and children.



Hindu children from Mirpur Khas, middle Sindh, are sitting on a patchwork ralli on their wooden sleeping cot.

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of the efforts of many people. I want to first thank some people who may not even be aware of this book. Thanks go to the wonderful women of the ralli region who have spent countless days of their lives producing beautiful textiles. Thanks also go to the many archaeologists and scholars who have devoted their lives to uncovering artifacts and learning more about the ancient peoples of the Indus region. They may be surprised to find their research proved to be so important in a book about quilts.

I sincerely thank all those people who helped, and supported me in writing this book. Many, many people kindly answered my questions and gave me clues as to what to pursue next. Others went searching for quilts for me. Others gave me quilts. Others helped in countless ways. I would like to thank (in alphabetical order) Doug and Clair Archard, Nasreen Askari, Mehnaz Akber Aziz, Colette Bryant, Razia Salim Bugti, Robert Dyson, Mary Ann Fitzgerald, Kathy Gannon, Joss Graham, Asif Farrukh, Yasmine Jamin and others at the Sindh Museum, Khalid Javaid and others at the Lok Virsa Museum, Jotindra Jain, Mark Kenoyer, Ashok and Oam Kumar and family, Gotham Kumar and family, Ann Lewis, Aftab Nazimani, Uzma Rizvi, Dan Rolfe, Clare Rose, Dr. Pardeep and Mrs. Ranjana Sharda and family, Mark Smith, and Ann Wilcox. Special thanks to those who gave me great direction with the book: Ruth Brasher, Judy Frater, Rehana Kazmi, Susan Rugh, and Brian Spooner.

I would like to especially thank the quilters who answered my questions and showed me their work at the Lok Virsa

Museum, in Hyderabad, Mirpur Khas, Umarkot, Thatta, and Kutch. My great gratitude goes to my friends who joined me in my travels and were always supportive: Peggy Simons and Kathleen Tanham. I particularly want to thank the government officials and others who arranged meetings with quilters on my first trip to Sindh – a wonderful eye-opening experience. Special thanks to Anika Jehangir for her help in many ways. I would like to thank those who showed me their own rallis and answered my unending questions: Anita Gulam Ali, Dr. Nabi Baloch, Noorjehan Bilgrami, and Dr. Harchand Rai.

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Personally, I thank my family and friends, who patiently supported me as this project grew larger and longer. My parents and siblings always offered moral support. My children exhibited great patience and interest in the book. My greatest thanks goes to my husband, Herb, who supports me in every way and learned to love rallis too.

Finally, I apologize for any mistakes or shortcomings in this book. I hope that research on this wonderful and beautiful tradition of rallis will continue and more information will arise over the years.



This is a border detail from a ralli used as a cover for a pile of quilts.

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A village girl is walking along the bank of the Indus River north of Multan.

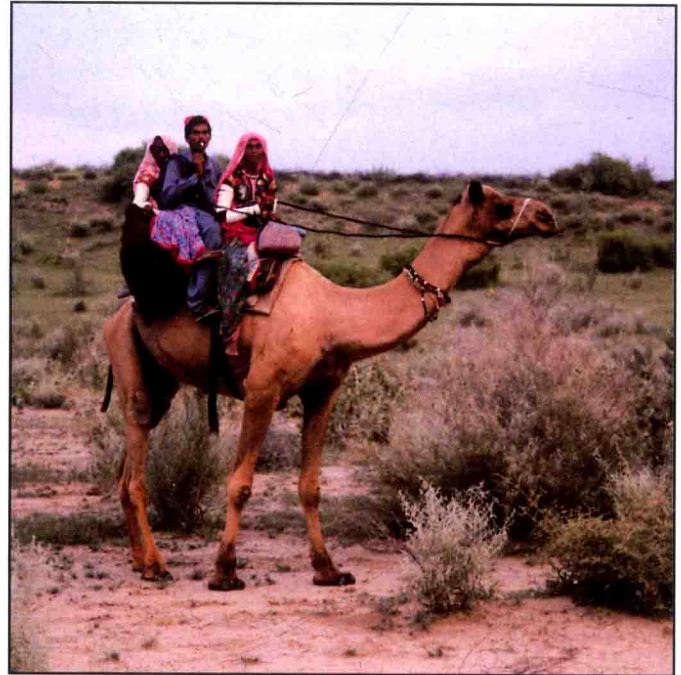
Preface

This book is designed to be both a tribute and an adventure. The tribute is to the women of the nomadic tribes, small villages, and towns of the Indus region who carry on the traditions of their mothers, other women, and their cultures. These women, despite the seeming hardship of their lives, have a wonderful love of life and great creativity. They create beautiful textiles through their skill in embroidery, quilting, and other needlework. The adventure of this book is to enter a wonderful realm of color, pattern, and form found in the quilts of Pakistan and India. It is a world of rich culture, tradition, and humanity.

As long as I could remember, I have been drawn to textiles. I studied Home Economics Education including textiles and sewing in college. In my doctoral studies, I expanded into International Development using the skills found in the home as a way of improving quality of life in developing areas of the world. With this background, I traveled to many poor areas of the world for research or development projects. As I worked around the world, I saw many interesting textile traditions. I loved exploring the fabric markets in Mali and the shops in the back alleys of Hong Kong. I returned home with textiles including hand woven and embroidered pieces from the mountains of Guatemala, embroidery from Mexico and the Philippines, old woolen blankets from Bolivia, appliqué from Thailand and Egypt, and wonderful old embroidery from China. As I saw various cultures, I found wonderful textile craftsmanship, colors, and methods of manufacture.

I was not expecting to find the amazingly rich heritage of textiles that I saw when I moved to Islamabad, Pakistan, in 1996 accompanying my husband on a military assignment. There were patterned carpets, pillows, tablecloths, and tents not to mention the wonderful variety of colors, pattern, and textures in women's clothing and shawls. Shortly after I arrived in Pakistan, I encountered my first ralli. At the very bottom of a stack of textiles at a local handicrafts store was an intriguing quilt made of boldly colored square blocks with a simple tag "Ralli quilt, Matli, Badin." It reminded me of traditional American Amish quilts with bold geometric patterns and bold color. After enjoying it for a week, my curiosity grew and I returned to the nearby store and asked if there were more "rallis." After some searching, a second one was found. It was different from the first, and aroused my interest. I returned the following week and found a third, appliquéd and totally different from the first two quilts. Now I was totally intrigued. I started asking questions, reading, and asking for more rallis at the local handicraft stores selling new and old textiles. At one of the largest stores, the owner commented that they would have to go to the villages and ask for rallis. They did not keep them in the store. He said there was one man very interested in quilts in the 1970s and I was the next one!

Over the next few years, I developed an undying enthusiasm for rallis. I sought them out at every opportunity and probably saw thousands of them. I was always somewhat partial to the ones that were obviously worn, perhaps smelling of camels or cooking fires. I would imagine them in their natu-



Two women and a man head to a celebration of the anniversary of a Saint in the Thar desert. Courtesy of Margaret Q. Simons

ral setting. Anyone I met who came from a ralli producing area I asked about the quilts. I found it was very much a feature of the rural, poor, traditional people. Most well-to-do urban women were familiar with the quilts but considered them quaint and not sophisticated. Many had received them as wedding gifts but never used them. I was perhaps perceived as unusual in having such an interest in them. I explained that America also had a wonderful quilting tradition. The urban women were pleased with the similarity, as was I.

I took several trips to areas where the rallis are made. On various trips, I went to Sindh including Hyderabad, Mirpur Khas, Umarnot, Mithi, and Thatta. I went to Gujarat and visited Bhuj, Banni, Dhamadka in Kutch, and Ahmedabad. I also took a trip in a traditional boat down the Indus and found rallis there. These trips were fascinating in every way but are not for a timid traveler. In fact, tourist travel in lower Sindh has been discouraged for several years due to the possibility of personal harm. I traveled with a friend from the Embassy, Peggy Simons, also a textile enthusiast. We were accompanied by Pakistani friends and a police escort. I'm sure our arrival was quite an occasion in some of the small villages where we stopped. In one place, a woman asked, through a translator, where we were from. I answered "America," and she asked "What's that?" Later, I thought maybe I should have said Islamabad or just a city north of here. With little transportation or knowledge of the outside, her world was only the limited area she knew. As night fell and the road ended, we happened upon a celebration of the anniversary of a saint at a shrine in the desert. We joined the people from the area arriving on their camels. On a later trip

to Bhuj and Kutch in Gujarat, India, we were grateful to be guided by Judy Frater, an American expert in the textiles of the area. With her assistance we met more wonderful women quilters in their villages.

As I traveled throughout the ralli region, I, a stranger, was greeted warmly by the women. Their willingness to share their quilting tradition and handiwork was obvious. Their smiles came quickly. Their flair for color is obvious in their work. They painstakingly continue the textile crafts that have been handed down for generations. They carefully form patterns and symbols from cloth, some simple and some complex. The women making these quilts rely on their own memories and the memories of their mothers and older women to teach them the patterns. They do not use paper or any tools to make their patterns. I remember on one occasion giving a woman a pencil so she could draw a picture of a pattern she was trying to explain. She apparently had never used a pencil and just made a big circle on the paper. The ralli compositions are in the women's minds and memories and they execute them with great skill in needlework.

Over time, I developed a collection of quilts. Some I got from the handicrafts stores, coming from a variety of areas. Some I was able to collect from quilters themselves. I was especially happy to meet the women who created these wonderful quilts. Some of the rallis were gifts from people who knew of my great appreciation for them. I have presented many of these rallis in this book. I have tried to show examples of some of the simplest, and most humble of the rallis. Often times these were truly made of patches of different fabrics. It was obvious with a close examination of the front and the back of the quilt. On the other hand, I have tried to show examples of some of the finest rallis also. The craftsmanship on these is amazing. I labeled the rallis according to my certainty of their origin. If I knew the area where they were made, I labeled them "from" an area. If I was fairly certain, I said "attributed to" or "probably from" an area. If I only knew generally then I would only include the name of a region, such as lower Sindh. Some regions have particular patterns where one could say with a degree of certainty that a ralli is from a certain area. However, one thing I learned on my travels is that there could be a great variety of patterns and styles of rallis even in a small village or community. The women have a large "mental portfolio" of quilt patterns they have made, known or have seen. They often describe them historically as "old patterns" or "new patterns." The age of a ralli is also hard to determine. With daily wear, a quilt could show signs of wear in just a few years. However, if the ralli was kept in the family stack for use by guests, it could last many years. The majority of rallis presented in this book are all cotton with no synthetic fabrics. Synthetic fabrics have become very popular in the last decade. Cotton fabric could indicate that a ralli was made before that time.

My training in family life helped me to think about the ecology of the ralli tradition. In what context are the quilts made, what resources are used, what interactions take place, and what significance do they have? The original objectives of this book were two fold. The first was to document the lives of the women who make the quilts. The creative spirit is obvious in their work. I wanted to present other aspects of their lives. The second objective was to document the quilts themselves



Women from Mithi, lower Sindh, are participating in a women's meeting.
Courtesy of Mehnaz Akber Aziz.

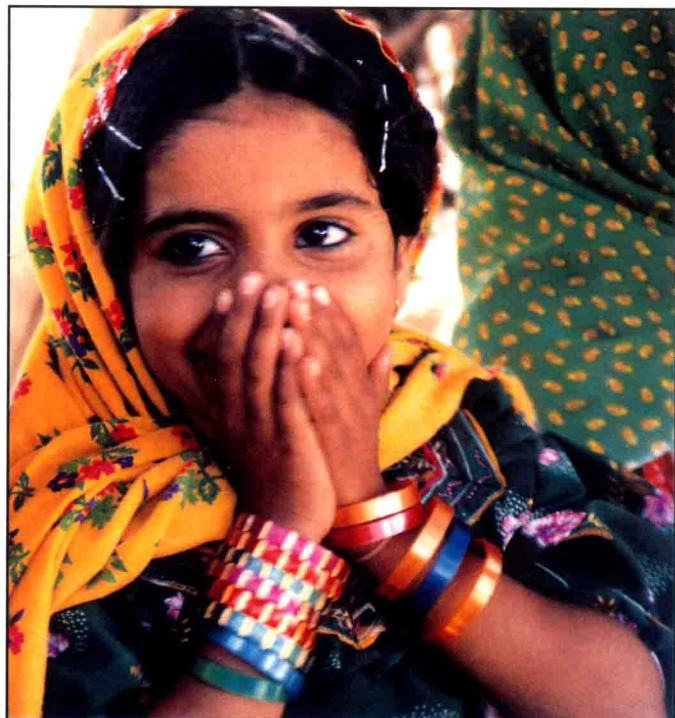
including how they are made, their uses, and the variety of patterns found in the ralli quilts. There are many traditional patterns that are repeated in different colors with various borders. Each is unique within the parameters of the set design. I tried to represent in this book the range of patterns, from simple geometric designs to highly complicated appliqué. The complex appliqué patterns are the ones most likely to be found in museum collections due to their beauty and the intricacy of the work but the simpler quilts, used daily on the sleeping cots of the people, also have a story to tell.

A third objective evolved as I tried to understand the patterns of the quilts. I entered a world of historical documents and remains of ancient civilizations as I traced the motifs found on the rallis to their earliest appearance. I discovered a real-life "quest" incorporating a lifelong interest in ancient civilizations and archaeology. I felt like a detective as I searched through reports of ancient artifacts from the civilizations that flourished in the same region of the ralli quilts over six thousand years ago. I was thrilled as I found first one and two and then dozens of motifs that are similar on both the ancient artifacts and the rallis of today. Many of the similar motifs are the geometric patterns on the simpler rallis, made in the same designs, year after year.

I hope the tradition of ralli making will never disappear. With the conditions of today, however, it is difficult to predict what may happen. Over twenty years ago, Bunting wrote that the traditional methods of decorating textiles were disappearing. She noticed the increased use of machines in production and the waning of family apprenticeships teaching the production of crafts. In textiles, the traditional appliqué zigzag snake design was being replaced by rickrack braid and sewing mirrors on fabric with holding stitches and blanket stitches was being replaced by plastic mirrors in plastic cases that can be easily sewn on. Tribal intermarriages and settlement into an urban environment were also causing changes in handmade textiles. (Bunting, 1980, 64-65) I have noticed that natural disasters such as drought and earthquakes have caused some in the ralli area to migrate and find new homes and jobs. Political unrest has caused changes in some areas. Perhaps more change will result from technology. I tried to find quilts made from traditional cotton to include in this book. However, many of the clothes of the women are now made of synthetic fabrics. Interestingly, in the region where cotton is produced and families work in the cotton industry, it is less expensive for them to buy synthetic fabric compared to cotton. Some women prefer the vivid colors and patterns of the synthetic fabric. They now make their quilts from scraps of these fabrics. Bright floral prints replace the hand dyed traditional colors of the past.

There is much about ralli quilts that is waiting to be discovered. Often as I found the answer to one question, two more questions arise waiting for answers. There are many rural quilters with wonderful stories and memories yet unrecorded. In this little studied part of the world, there are many creative processes unknown to the outside. The rallis, as part of the diverse material culture from this corner of the world, have great value. I sincerely hope that this book will open the door to a greater appreciation of the rallis and the wonderful talents and creative spirits of the women of the Indus region.

Saida from Haji Kheeda Bukah Khaskheli, middle Sindh, sits with her ralli.
Courtesy of Margaret Q. Simons.



This young girl is from the Thar Desert. *Courtesy of Mehnaz Akber Aziz.*



Introduction

Every ralli quilt tells a story. It tells of the natural creativity and love of color and design of the women who create them. Every ralli tells the story of the strength of tradition. The basic designs and motifs of rallis have been passed from mother to daughter and woman-to-woman for maybe thousands of years. Continued migrations of new cultural groups into the area have not erased the love for or the creation of these compelling designs.

Examining a ralli closer can give clues to the life of the woman who made it. Was the back made with an old shawl that perhaps indicates she was from a farming group? Did she use the favorite colors of her community on the front pattern thus helping to preserve her community identity? Did she make a small ralli for a child from scraps of other rallis because she knew her child would be outgrowing it in a few years? Did she use sequins, beads, and tassels to make a special ralli for an important person or event such as a wedding? Each ralli illustrates part of the story of the woman who made it.

The ralli is a humble craft, made of worn out clothing and other discarded fabric. It is not usually bought or sold but made by women for use in their family. Rallis have never had much attention other than by the people who used and needed a quilt to make life more comfortable and colorful. Yet to those people the ralli is extremely important as a way to stay warm at night and make their string cot more comfortable, and also as a symbol of their culture and community identity.

For those not of the community of ralli makers, rallis can be windows to help us understand a little more of their lives, thoughts, and creativity. Besides creating amazing designs with color and shapes and movement, they have developed a craft with universal appeal, touching the senses of those beyond their community and culture.



A Meghwar Hindu woman from Thatta takes a break from making her patchwork ralli.

Chapter 1:

The People of the Ralli

Women from the region of the southern portion of the Indus River in the Indian subcontinent make colorful indigenous quilts. They are commonly called ralli but are also called rilli or gindi or other names. In Pakistan, rallis are made extensively in the provinces of Sindh, in Baluchistan close to the Indus River, and in the desert area of Cholistan in the southern Punjab. Rallis are also made in the Indian states of Rajasthan, and Gujarat that border Sindh and western Punjab. This chapter will introduce some of the people of the ralli region, including their history, cultures, and lifestyles.

The Ralli Region

Sindh, the central geographical area where the quilts are made, can be considered the “heart” of the ralli producing region. Sindh, located in the southeastern part of Pakistan, has a long and colorful history, going back many thousand years BC. The province is named after the Indus River, locally called Sindhu, that runs the length of Sindh. Presently Sindh is mostly a rural, agricultural area with the exception of the major city of Karachi and a few other urban areas. Sindh is populated with hundreds of different tribes and ethnic groups. Many of these groups have related tribes in Baluchistan, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. The characteristics and traditions of the tribes differ greatly. The groups are known by their occupation such as farmers, herders, merchants, landlords, entertainers, leatherworkers, or craftsmen. They are also distinguished by religion; most are Muslim or Hindu. Examples of the Muslim groups are the Chauhan carters located in Badin, the Jat cattle breeders, and the Sayyed religious leaders. The Hindu groups include the Jogis who are known as snake collectors, the Meghwar who are leather workers, and the Rabari who are pastoralists and farmers in Sindh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. The Bhil, who are farmers in Sindh, Cholistan, and Rajasthan, are considered both Hindu and tribal. Many different local languages are spoken in the various communities. Some of the tribes have their own special styles and characteristics of quilts; others share styles with other communities.¹

A first impression of the people of the ralli region may be their love of color. Some think color is a balance to the lack of variety in their environment. The color of the desert areas is generally drab, broken by the green plants that appear with the monsoon rains, the colors of the sunsets and the blue and purple of the hills. In contrast, their clothing, embroidery, and quilts as well as wooden objects, pottery, and tiles are stunning in bright red, yellow, orange, green, blue, pink, and purple. Designs for many crafts are taken from objects in the environment such as flowers, clouds, trees, butterflies, and birds. Decorative motifs are also derived from fruits such as almonds, dates, and the lotus seedpod. Daily objects such as a milk churning stick, a child’s rattle, a game board or a cat are seen on textiles, pottery, lacquer work, tiles, leather, boats, and tombstones. The basic art of Sindh and the surrounding areas

has survived since ancient times, and in spite of continued migration into the area, has retained its originality and identity. Instead of creating works of grandeur, the art of the region is focused on decorating everyday objects that are used by the common people. Geometric patterns and floral designs are the basis of the art of the region.²

A Hindu woman from Umarkot holds her baby. The white bangles on her arms are a tradition continuing from before the time of the Indus Valley Civilization.



There are many arts and crafts produced in Sindh and surrounding regions today. The craftsmen follow traditions set by their community, the force of conservatism, and habit.³ The craftsmen still use primitive tools and in many cases use the same techniques found in the Indus Valley Civilization thousands of years ago. They use traditional patterns, color combinations, and motifs, none of which is easy to alter. They are usually patient and painstaking in their craft following what has been done for generations and only produce a limited number of objects.⁴ Likewise, women follow centuries old traditions in creating their rallis, textiles, and embroideries.

The ralli region is famous for great variety in its textile arts and traditions. Starting at the east, Baluchistan is the most sparsely populated area with a combination of mountains and arid plains but is rich in ancient history. Textiles from Baluchistan are famous for mirror work and precise tiny patterns in geometric embroidery. Punjab in the north of the ralli region is densely populated and is known for woven fabrics, block printing and embroidery. Sindh is famous for textile arts and traditions in all areas. The northern area (Siro Sindh) bordering Punjab is a plains region known for gold thread embroidery. The middle area (Vicholo Sindh) is irrigated for farming and also has fishing. In textiles it is known for dyeing, weaving, and printing. The southern or lower area (Lar Sindh) is in the lowlands bordering the Arabian Sea. The ancient capital of Thatta, the large metropolis of Karachi, as well as deserts and small towns are located in Lar. The area has been famous for centuries for the production of fine textiles for trading as well as a wide variety of folk embroidery. In addition to the three major latitudinal divisions in Sindh are some smaller physically distinct areas. The area to the west of the Indus bordering the Lakhi and Kirthar mountains in Baluchistan is called the Katcho Plains. Kohistan is in the Kirthar Mountains

The love of color and decoration is evident on the wall of a rural home in Banni Kutch, Gujarat. These designs are also used on the ralli quilts.



on Sindh's northwestern border. The textiles here include intricate embroidery and mirror work. The eastern third of Sindh is the great Thar Desert. The desert is a significant part of the geography of the area and it extends from southern Punjab, northwest Rajasthan down through Sindh and Kutch in Gujarat. Bordering Kutch is a peninsula called Saurashtra (formerly known as Kathiwar) also known for its textiles and quilts. Cholistan, in the Punjab, known for very fine lined appliqué, is part of the Thar Desert. The people of Thar distinguish themselves from the rest of the region by their language, culture, and geography. The area of Thar Parkar is known for its bold textile design, often inspired by flowers, dunes, and peacocks.⁵ The terrain of western Rajasthan and Gujarat is dry desert, given color only with the monsoon rains. The regions in the Thar Desert are the world's richest source of folk embroidery. They are known for the marriage and dowry clothing, textile decorations for home and animals, and a variety of bags and other objects all enhanced with shells, shiny sequins, buttons, and mirrors.⁶



This colorful desert public transportation, called a kekra or crab, is actually an old military truck. In this truck traveling near Mithi, lower Sindh, women sit in the front. Courtesy of Mehnaz Akber Aziz.

