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## BEDUIN WEAVING IN SAUDI ARABIA

by Joy May Hilden

If I turn my eyes away from the cars and trucks thronging the periphery of this Beduin market, I can imagine the same scene as it probably was 200 years ago or more. Ahead of me are stretched striped lengths of woven cloth for sale, gloriously decorated, their unseen lengths folded in large piles. These are room dividers for Beduin tents. A closer look reveals piles of yarn of all types and colours, and spindles on which the Beduin women spin all their yarn, plying it to a tough double thickness.

I sort through the yarns on display, discussing their merits and my wishes with the veiled women. My familiarity with Arabic and with weaving terms wins me smiles and strong, friendly handclasps. There is wiry goat hair in all natural colours, sheep wool of all textures, thicknesses, and colours—some fluffy, some hard and smooth, some harsher to the touch. Occasionally there is soft camel hair in dark, light, and brown shades. The women who spin these yarns agree firmly on prices among themselves, though they come from distant places, some even from beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia. Women of different tribes and varying dialects bring out more weaving for me to see, appreciating my interest. Saddle bags, storage bags, rugs, halters, and other animal tackle is pulled out from trunks and burlap bags, and from behind partitions. Smaller pieces made for westerners hang in plain view. The design and colours vary according to the area and the tribe of the weaver.

One can become utterly absorbed with the rich patterns in these skillfully designed and executed weavings. Their humble surroundings can fool you into thinking that they must be easy to make. The sturdiness of the weave, the bold, direct colours, the lingering scents of sheep, incense, and perfume—all tell of their nomadic origins in tents and desert villages.

Originally, most useful and decorative items for family use were made by the Beduin women with their own hands. The long, low, black-and-white striped tent—the *beit isha'ar*, or “house of hair”—was woven by the women, with the more decorative inner walls being made by settled or seminomadic Beduin in towns bordering the desert. Besides creating their home and beautifying it with rugs, cushions, and other decorative and useful items, the women tricked out their prized camels and horses with handsome saddlebags, blankets, halters, and other gear. Protective riding litters for women and children were richly ornamented, especially for weddings. Much time-consuming work and knowledge went into each piece, exhibiting a living tradition handed down the centuries.

Saudi Arabia's “oil boom” brought many Beduin to the oil-producing centres and cities to work. Industrialisation and increased communications have reached the Beduin and begun to change their lifestyle; life in the desert is no longer the struggle it used to be. Feeding the family and livestock,

finding water, and combatting the elements have now been cushioned by ever-ready water trucks, government-subsidised food for man and beast, and more accessible housing and commodities in towns and cities. Many Beduin now reside in one or more towns, visiting the desert for weekends and vacations while hired shepherds, often foreigners, tend the herds.

Today there is naturally less incentive than there used to be before the making of all one's own gear. Tent materials are easy to buy, as are the complete white canvas tents in wide-spread use. Plastic mats and machine-made wool and acrylic rugs are inexpensive and available everywhere. Acrylic yarns are a colourful, cheap, and easy-to-use substitute for traditional handspun and dyed yarns, plying them on hand spindles to strengthen the yarn for the arduous weaving process. Five or ten years ago, these women would have worked exclusively in wool. They have also given up the use of dyes made from plant materials, which they formerly gathered or bought in the markets.

In spite of these changes, the art of weaving has certainly not been lost. Women in towns on the fringes of the desert still weave dazzling inner tent walls—*qata*—from, 12-35 feet/3.6- 10.6 m long. One can still buy newly-woven rugs, storage bags, and cushions. Many women also make smaller items of interest to foreigners, such as small rugs, shoulder bags, wall ornaments, and animal trappings in bright acrylic yarns. Some settled Beduin in Al-Jouf make yards of acrylic cloth in the traditional way, on a ground loom, and sew them into cushion covers for their living rooms and auxiliary entertainment areas in tents beside their houses.

Beduin yarns have a strength and integrity completely lacking in manufactured yarns. One can find yarns made of sheep wool in all natural colours as well as in bright reds, oranges, blues, and greens. Goat hair comes in a surprising array of natural colours and degrees of twist. Camel hair is less easy to find as it is a softer, weaker fiber, and harder to spin. It is plucked off the moulting camel, not sheared as with sheep wool. The yarns come thick and thin, single and plied (doubled and twisted), soft and prickly, even and lumpy; they are excellent for weaving non-wearable items.

My search for knowledge about the process of Beduin weaving led me to the home of Layla, where a documentary of Beduin weaving was being made for television. As the weather was pleasant, she was working on the roof, its high sides giving protection and privacy. Spread on the roof floor, a beautiful weaving was taking shape. The warps or lengthwise yarns were stretched between two rods, which were secured by ropes to reinforcing rods embedded in the roof. The rest of her weaving equipment was just as simple and portable. A cross rod kept the "figure-eight" lie of the warps in place. Near to it was a heddle rod, a stick holding loops of string (the heddles) which secured the alternate warps. The whole loom or *natu* was about 9.8

feet/3 m long by 1.6 feet 150 cm wide: a comfortable width for her arm to work in and out.

Layla showed me how she pushed up one set of warps past the heddles, taking them a few at a time since they tend to stick to each other. The wool was elastic and scratchy and the warp felt bouncy to the touch, with warps so close together that you couldn't see the weft or crosswise yarn after it had passed through. To pass the weft, Layla pushed in a flat, pointed stick called a "sword-beater" (*madrah*) and twisted it to make an opening.

Then she pushed through a stick shuttle around which her weft yarn had been wound. She beat the weft in with the *madrah*, withdrew it, then pushed down the warps to raise the alternate set, forcing them down a few at a time. Before pushing in the new weft yarn, she plucked groups of yarns with a gazelle horn, at the point where the sword-beater lifted the yarns away from the woven cloth. This plucking pushed the weft in even more firmly, producing a hard, tough cloth.

Next Layla showed us how to spin, inviting us to a comfortable corner of the roof where a commercially-made rug was stretched and tea was waiting. There was a pile of white fleece, sheep wool which, she said, had been washed in commercial washing powder, then teased with her fingers to fluff it and remove some of the plant material. (Her desert sisters often spin it directly off the sheep or goat.) Layla's spindle or *mighzil* varied a little from the ones I'd seen in the market, having been made by herself. She had also made a distaff to hold the teased and twisted fleece: a small split palm branch. This she tucked under her left arm, or placed it in the hole of a concrete block.

Layla's spinning was done with the spindle in her right hand, the shaft on a diagonal and the head of the spindle to her left. She deftly fed the fleece into the twisting yarn with her left hand, while at the same time turning the spindle *away* from her body with the right, the shaft resting in her open palm. This spinning position enabled her to sit comfortably, unlike users of drop spindles, who must stand.

In another corner of her rooftop workplace, Layla uncovered dyeing equipment: a propane burner, a metal cooking pot, and some commercial dyes. We fingered the iridescent crystals of the blue-green dye, and watched as she dissolved a red powder called Kermes—crimson—in the boiling water. I remembered reading that Kermes is the name of a beetle used to produce the same colour before commercial dyes were available. She immersed a large skein of spun and piled white yarn in the dye bath until it filled the pot to over-flowing.

After five minutes of boiling she removed this skein and replaced it with a grey skein, showing us how it would make a darker shade of red. I asked her if she used a mordant to fix the dye, and she said that she had

already put in alum (*shabba*). She gave the yarn a perfunctory rinse and draped it over the wall to dry.

As the light began to fade Layla loosened the ropes holding down the small loom and rolled it up, the rods carefully held inside the weaving and unwoven warps. Women of the desert stake their weavings directly into the ground, with wooden or metal pegs firmly holding the end rods and the warps stretched tightly. But that is the only difference between the desert and the urban weaver; both share the advantage of simple and portable equipment.

I took some time to learn how these skilful weavers achieve their varied and spectacular decorative techniques. There are a number of ways to make designs, usually involving specific warping techniques. With two yarns wound onto the rods together and placed in the same heddle, the weaver can choose between them in each row of weaving to achieve a dark and light pattern. You can tell when this has been done because the reverse side of the weaving has “floats”: a longer, rougher version of the weaving on the reverse side, with the colours reversed.

Apart from patterns in the warp, the weaver can use weft twining to weave across the warp. This is often done in bands, allowing the plain warp weave to show between the bands. This kind of work is often mistaken for embroidery, but it is, in fact, firmly twisted in figure-eights between clumps of warps. Weft twining, called *Shinoof* is also used to weave whole rugs or main parts of tent walls. At the other end of the scale are narrow bands for animal trappings, and swinging tassels for saddlebags. A wide range of colours and designs is possible with this technique, which resembles tapestry weaving.

Some of the most distinctive elements of Beduin weaving are the finishing techniques: tassels, ropes, and braids, and methods of fastening seams. There is a myriad stitches, tassel-making techniques, and finger-weaving patterns in the weaver’s repertoire. She uses them with dashes of surprising colour combinations and a joyous recklessness or style. The net effect is one expressive of the woman’s skill, inventiveness, and ingenuity.

This skill has evolved over many centuries of hardship, necessity, and tradition. Objects were made to meet the needs of the culture, and the materials and techniques available were skilfully adapted to the lifestyle of the users. Now, with the ever-changing lifestyle, one wonders what will happen. Will Beduin weaving, and the knowledge of how it is made, gradually fade away? Hopefully not, for in its drive to modernisation Saudi Arabia has remained proudly aware of its heritage. There are organisations, both private and governmental, which take an interest in traditional crafts in general and weaving in particular. The Department of Antiquities has archaeological and, more recently, ethnographic exhibits, displaying artifacts of daily use. In the main museum in Riyadh and the Kingdom’s smaller regional museums, one can find many fine examples of weaving. King Saud University in Riyadh has

an Ethnographic Museum, as does the Al Sudairy Foundation in Al-Jouf. The cultural centre of Dar Al-Jouf is funded by Emir Abdul Rahman Al Sudairy, who has long promoted weaving; the centre has examples of local pile weavings, unique to the area. The National Guard also conducts crafts demonstrations as part of its annual exhibition and camel races at Janadariyyah, north of Riyadh.

I visited a government programme in Doumat Al-Jandall, near Al-Jouf and the Jordanian border. Here women are trained—many Beduin women among them—in the craft of pile weaving using a vertical loom. (Traditional Beduin pile weaving is done on ground looms, using the weaver's own designs.) The government programme provides patterns and arranges for the sale of the carpets.

One would hope that the Saudi people, with their noted love of camping and the outdoors, will retain some of their affinity for tents and trappings of the hand-woven sort, not to mention woven cushions, carpets, and other items they can use in their ever-improving lifestyle.

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Picture 1: A woven saddlebag ornamented with weft twining.



Picture 2: Detail of the woven wall of a tent (*beit issha'ar*).





Picture 3: Finishing touches. “There is a myriad of stitches, tassel-making techniques, and finger-weaving patterns in the weaver’s repertoire.”



Picture 4: The simple, portable *natu* or loom here set up on a rooftop. The lengthwise warps are being stretched round one of the bracing rods which are firmly secured to the roof.





Picture 5: Spinning with the spindle or *mighzil* twirled in the right hand while the left hand feeds the yarn.



Picture 6: Detail of the detailed finework decorating a saddlebag.



Picture 7: The shuttle and the pointed gazelle horn used to pluck the yarns at the edge of the woven cloth, enabling the weft to be beaten more firmly into place.





Picture 8: Detail of a storage bag—”dashes of surprising colour combinations and a joyous recklessness of style”





Picture 9: A tent wall woven in acrylic yarns.



Picture 10: A camel ornament of wool and goat hair, in finger weaving and weft twining.



Picture 11: Striking colours adorn a storage bag.

