

## THE COLORFUL OASIS

by Joy May Hilden

### PART 1

#### Introduction

Upon arriving in Saudi Arabia five years ago, I was afraid that I would find Beduin weaving a lost art. Happily, I was wrong. Though the Bedu (plural of Beduin) have a less rigorous lifestyle than they once did and more opportunities for work and enticements to settle down, they still practice the art of weaving. The ancient lifestyle of the Bedu in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula included a nomadic existence centered on their herds of sheep, goats, and camels. These comprised their wealth and also provided transport, meat, milk, leather goods, and wool and hair for weaving. The house they lived in, their tent, *beit issha'ar*, or house of hair, was made by their women, along with rugs, cushions, blankets, saddle bags, and animal toppings.

Traditionally, Beduin women spun and dyed their own yarn, using their own sheep and goats or buying from other Bedu. They wove their tents, including the decorative *Saha*, or *Qata*, the tent wall that divides the men's and women's sections. The prized riding camels were decorated with saddle blankets; saddle bags; tasseled head ornaments; and sturdy, finger-woven halters and leads. Huge, heavy tassels were made to swing with the camel's loping gait. Guests sat on long, bright, striped and ornamented flatweave rugs and leaned on cushions woven by the women of the family. In the women's quarters, food, clothes, and other household goods were stored in large bags called '*idle*, which could be hoisted onto the camel and attached to the saddle by loops on the corners. In the vast expanse of pastel-colored landscape, the home was a colorful oasis.

With industrialization, it's no longer necessary for the Bedu to weave. They can buy white canvas tents as well as prewoven panels of goat and sheep wool. They can buy cheap rugs, cushions, and other household goods manufactured in the Arab world or the Orient. One sees lots of plastic in use.

Nevertheless, much of the weaving tradition remains. My search for information about weaving has so far been conducted mainly in the Eastern Province (along the Arabian Gulf) and in the al Jouf region in the north near the Jordanian border. I've seen beautiful examples of old and new Beduin weaving on sale at a large Beduin market in east-central Arabia and in my visits with weavers in both areas.

In the al Jouf region, I've been assisted in my quest by the Al Sudairy Foundation. The Director, Ali Al Rashed, helped to arrange visits with the prominent Jurayid family, settled Bedu of the Sharrarat tribe. He and the Emir's daughter, Princess Mashial, want to involve the women of the area in a revival of spinning, dyeing, and weaving with wool, skills that are disappearing because acrylics are cheap and easy to use.

Most Beduin weavings have a charmingly careless, informal style. Yarns stick out here and there, and designs on adjacent pieces don't always match. There's a gaiety and fun loving aspect to the weavings and the way they're finished. However, they're always made very sturdy to withstand hard wear. Most of this weaving is warp faced, except for the weft twining (facing page), and all of it is done on a ground loom, including some pile weaving.

### **Weaving on the Ground Loom**

The ground loom is beautifully designed for the tightly plied yarn that's used, the tools that are available, and the weaver's lifestyle. The loom, called natu, or marathon, can be rolled up easily and transported in case the family must move on before the piece is finished or wants it removed. It consists of forward and back beams, made of sticks or metal rods, which are fastened into the ground with sticks, tent pegs, or reinforcing rods. The warp is stretched between the beams along the ground. A heddle rod, made of a stick or dowel, rests on gallon cans, rocks, or bricks, and a shed rod holds the cross behind the heddles (see "Beduin weaving techniques"). The other tools used are a heavy wooden sword beater, pointed at both ends; a stick shuttle; and a hook beater. The hook beater may be a gazelle horn, a tool with a metal hook and a wood handle, or a converted tent pin with a handle made of cloth.

It usually takes two or three women several hours to warp the ground loom. One woman sits at each end, and a woman or girl runs back and forth, holding a ball of yarn by its inner loops to facilitate unwinding. The warping is done in a figure eight, into which the shed rod is inserted to hold the warps in order when warping is complete. The method of warping and the color sequence in the warps determine design possibilities in the warp-faced weaving.

The weaver places the heddle rod on gallon cans on each side of the warp near it. To make the heddles, she loops yarn over the heddle rod and under the top row of warps. Then the heddles are locked together. The warps must be as close together as possible, and the heddles mustn't slip and change in size.

Although the equipment is simple and portable, weaving on the ground loom is an arduous job that takes skill and strength. Since warps are close together and sticky, changing sheds is a tedious and difficult process. To raise

the non-heddled yarns, the weaver lifts them by hand a few at a time from behind the heddles, inching the sword beater into the new shed that she's forming as she slides the warps off her forearm onto it. One hand kneads down the warps that were on top, while the other plucks them from below. Some weavers use a flat stick that's at least 2 in. wide for the shed rod so they can turn it on edge and push it up right behind the heddles to help with this process. Before changing the shed, the weaver whacks the beater down firmly, then pulls it out. When she wants the non-heddled yarns down, she punches them with her fist right behind the heddles.

As soon as the new shed is clear, and the weaver has checked it for mistakes, she whacks down the sword beater again to even the shed. Then she turns it on its side to open the shed to its maximum width and twangs the warps between its edge and the fell of the cloth a few at a time with the hook beater to secure the weft even more tightly. Finally, she inserts the stick shuttle, and the process is repeated.

### Visits with Beduin Weavers

Most of the families I've met in al Jouf live in concrete houses, walled villas with open courtyards. Outside, each family has a large *beit issha'ar* for lounging and entertaining. There's usually a large dividing curtain, beautifully ornamented with rows of weft twining; and cushions, sometimes covered with hand-woven cloth, are lined up for guests to lean on. The work I've seen in the al Jouf area is excellent and is mostly made for use in the weavers' homes and for gifts, though some is occasionally sold. These weavers now work exclusively in acrylic, plying commercial yarns with hand spindles until they're very tight and elastic. The younger women aren't learning to spin wool. Admittedly, the acrylic weavings are handsome and practical, being washable and sometimes involving complex patterns.

In the ancient oasis of Hofuf, or Hasa (in the East, near the Arabian Gulf), there are still wonderful old-style markets. One is the women's market, where Beduin women sell yarns, hand-woven camel-weaving straps, and sometimes their weavings, as well as jewelry and other personal items. There are also shops that sell carpets and antiques, where one can find handsome old Beduin weavings. I was taken to Rageyga, an outlying area of Hofuf, where Bedu have settled and built homes. In a vacant lot next to their house, two women worked on a long tent roof piece called a *hijab*.

On a trip to the desert near Nuayriyyah (about 150 miles northwest of Dhahran), I met my first nomadic Beduin. Accompanied by a friend, I slowly approached a small tent in a larger encampment. It was Friday (a holy day), and all was quiet. Soon we were met and beckoned in by a little woman, somewhere around 60 years old. She offered coffee, tea, and dates in the

traditional form of desert hospitality. She entertained us and invited our husbands to join. Children and young mothers arrived, and all helped with the effort to communicate. I explained my interest in weaving and spinning, and the woman showed me some of her work. It was fine and precise. Her most remarkable piece was an acrylic kelim. I'd never seen kelims made by Bedu, but since then I've seen several. This weaver is from the Murrah tribe and migrates to Qatar, where she got the yarn that she showed me.

She also spun for me, using a spindle and distaff that she had made. The spindle had a wide metal plate at the top of the shaft, and the distaff was a thick, round piece of wood, split halfway down. She used camel hair directly from the herd outside her tent and made S-spun, Z-ply yarn. Holding the spindle with the palm up or down determines whether the twist will be S or Z. Sometimes spinners wash the fleece first, sometimes not; and sometimes they just hold the hair, spinning without a distaff. Occasionally, they twirl the spindle against a thigh. Beduin yarn is very elastic and strong because it is spun and plied very tightly.

The woman's niece sold me a colorful door decoration, a band of weft twining with long ropes and tassels on the sides (photo, p. 48). Weft twining, which is similar to tapestry, is used a lot in Beduin weaving. Sometimes only two or four rows are used at the end of a piece to accent and strengthen it, and sometimes a whole rug is made with it. It can be used to create checks, flowing lines, positive/negative shapes, and medallion patterns. To make braids, the weaver uses her big toe to pull against.

Muneera was the first Jurayid woman I met in the al Jouf region. She showed me a weaving rolled up with its beams and heddle rod and explained the techniques involved and the names for each of the patterns, which can be very intricate if the weaver is using a pickup technique.

When the warp is wound onto the loom for a pickup pattern, two different color strands are treated as one and are hedded (or not) together. When she's hedding, the weaver must be careful to keep the pairs together. In weaving, she picks the desired color of the pair with her fingers and holds the chosen warps on her forearm or in her hand until she's ready to insert the sword beater. The discarded yarn falls to the lower shed. The versatile pickup technique using a dark and a light yarn, called *saha* or *shajrah* (tree) is the hardest, most time-consuming, and least common.

Muneera then took me back and introduced me to the hareem (women of the family) in their shadowy tents, dim in the night and glowing with small fires. One woman was weaving, and women and girls were plying yarn. Children played. The next day I met more of the women.

Tarfa showed me how she weaves on her ground loom with the acrylic warps and explained the use of *burnoog*, a toadstool that's soaked in camel urine and used as a dye and mordant. The dark colors that the northerners used in the recent past were dyed with it. Mordanting with alum, or *shabbah*,

available by the kilo in large crystals, is common in both the al Jouf region and the Eastern Province, and synthetic dyes are used almost exclusively. Tarfa set up a dye session for me, cooking the dye over a wood fire in her yard. The demonstration was extremely casual. Tarfa used a small amount of water, a large amount of yarn, and plenty of dye and spent only five minutes cooking; rinsing was negligible. Everyone uses Tide to wash fleece and yarn.

Pile weaving is on the rise, both among the settled Bedu in the al Jouf region and in government-sponsored programs. I visited two community development centers, where the weavers work on vertical looms, using acrylic yarns and *Giordes* knots.

The Bedu make pilewoven carpets on ground looms the same way they do warp-faced weavings. Sabha, another of the Jurayid women that I met, showed me one she was weaving on a warp of handspun sheep wool with acrylic *Sehna* knots. She had no design drawn beforehand but worked spontaneously, alternating two rows of weft twining after each row of knots.

We visited Tabarjal, a small town near the Jordanian border. Built ten years ago, it is inhabited solely by members of the Sharrarat tribe. In their community development center, we met Zahayyah, the teacher of the pileweaving program. An excellent weaver, she privately works in the Beduin style, with very fine pickup and weft twining designs. .

On one of my visits to the Jurayid compound, I was unable to find Tarfa and Sabha, the women I know best. One of the nephews, home from college, took us to them. They were engaged with the other women of the clan in a tent-assembling bee. The women were whipstitching together woven strips of goats hair, about 2 ft. wide and 40 to 50 ft. long, using 5 in. needles and yarn made from goats hair. They attached hardware for ropes to the narrow bands that connected the pieces crosswise to give the tent support at the corners. They also sewed pieces of wood onto the part of the ceiling where the tent poles would be attached. I wished I could have been there for the tent raising. With so many of the dyeing and spinning skills in decline, I was happy to see that the fundamental skills and purposes of Beduin weaving haven't been lost.

## PART 2

### Beduin Weaving Techniques

You can make a Beduin-style weaving on almost any loom. A ground loom is traditional. It can be any length, but the width should not exceed 2 ft., since you must be able to reach across comfortably. For smaller, more portable weaving, you can use a sturdy frame to approximate the techniques of

ground-loom weaving. You can make narrow bands on an inkle loom warping and weaving as you would normally. If you use a pickup pattern, however, thread the two yarns of the pattern as one, and heddle them together. Whatever loom you use, sketch or draft your planned warping sequences and the desired appearance.

You'll need at least two colors of plied yarn similar in size, twist, and texture. Beduin yarn is highly twisted and very elastic, somewhat coarse, and fine to medium weight. The tools you'll need include a sturdy stick or sword beater a shuttle; a hook beater (a bent ice pick would work well); and one or two pickup sticks. For a ground or frame loom, you'll need a heddle bar, a shed rod, and wooden blocks, bricks, or gallon cans the ground loom also requires sturdy forward and back beams and four stakes.

### Warping Frame or Ground Looms

This type of weaving puts a lot of tension on the loom, so use a strong frame. Tape rulers or flat sticks at each end of the frame so you can take them out w the tension gets too tight. For the ground loom use two strong sticks, dowels, or pipes at least 1 in. wider than the desired weaving width as front and back beams. place them on the ground parallel to each other and as far apart as the length of your warp. Then, to hold them firmly, drive stakes into the ground at each end of each stick on the insides.

The order of the warp depends on the patterns you've selected (drawings, facing page). To begin warping, tie the first yarn onto the top or back beam. Always use a square knot for tying. Tie on each new color at the front or back as the draft indicates, connecting each yarn to the preceding yarn. If you're using a pickup technique, tie the two colors you'll choose from Treat them as one during warping and heddling, but don't let them twist around each other. Wrap the warp around the front and back beams in a figure eight (top drawing at left), not too tight on the frame loom and evenly tensioned on any loom. The figure eight keeps the yarns in order, forms two sheds and is necessary for making the heddles. Raise the front and back beams on their stakes enough to pass the ball of yarn under them.

When the warp is tied on with the last end attached to the front beam, insert the shed rod between the layers at the back, and push it toward the front of the loom to define the cross. Insert another stick from the. front, and push it toward the shed rod to help with heddling (center drawing). Rest the heddle bar over the loom near the front, in front of the cross on blocks about 3 in. high for the frame loom. For the ground loom, you'll need cinder blocks or gallon cans, The distance between the heddle bar and the bottom of the warp defines the potential width of the shed, so, choose tall enough supports. The heddle bar will be moved back as the weaving progresses.

Make heddles by tying an end of strong twine or yarn onto one end of the heddle bar. Lift the warps on the top shed in front of the cross, one at a time (unless you're doing pickup and the warps are in pairs), and loop the twine under each and over the heddle bar (bottom drawing). Keep the loops the same size, raising the yarns just a little from their ,at-rest position, and be sure to heddle them in order. Check the underside of the loom for stray yarns that might have missed getting into the figure eight. When the upper shed of yarns has been heddled, tie the twine around the heddle bar.

Lock the heddles in place by looping the same heddle twine through the tip of two heddles. Pass it along the bar, over and through the next two (bottom drawing). The yarn will lie flat, and the heddles will twist around it. Continue across, spacing the heddles closely and tightly. The horizontal twine will appear as a ridge along the top of the bar. Knot the twine around the bar and cut it off.

### **Weaving on a Ground or Frame Loom**

- Choose a strong, fine, plied yarn for the weft. The weft is visible on each selvage only, since the warps are close together.
- Put the sword beater in the existing shed, and insert your first weft with a tail of a few inches hanging out.
- Remove the sword beater, and make your second shed by lifting the warps on top of the shed rod with your hand.
- Pull them up, while pushing the warps down that were up on the first pick.
- Insert the sword and beat hard. Even the shed by beating with the hook beater.
- Lift the warps a few at a time, twanging them sharply. This opens the shed wider to allow a tighter weave; you'll see the weft pack in more firmly.
- Insert the weft and pull it tight enough for the warps to be snug.
- Insert the tail into the second shed overlapping the weft.
- Pull out the sword beater and change sheds.
- Working between the shed rod and the heddles, knead down the warps not in the heddles with your fist, a few at a time.
- Inch the sword beater in, and after beating, turn it on edge to hold the shed open.
- During the first few picks, you must watch the tension of the weft and tighten it to make sure it doesn't show. If you're doing pickup, start with at least three rows of plain weave; when you start the pickup, hold the weft tightly, and push the woven warps close together.

Continue the cycle. If you're using a pickup pattern (last three drafts at right), keep the shed open with a stick while you choose the colors for your pattern; keep them on pickup sticks. Since each warp consists of a pair of contrasting colors, you can form different images, depending on the color you choose in each pick. Then slide the sword beater into the new shed, letting the discarded warps drop into the yarns of the lower shed.

As your weaving progresses, you'll need to move the heddle bar back on its blocks or bricks. With the ground loom, you sit on the finished weaving as you progress. In the case of a frame loom, you'll find the space getting too short and tight toward the top or back bar at this point, you'll have to end the weaving or perhaps do some weft twining.

### **Designing your Weaving**

A typical Beduin weaving combines several patterns, such as 'Weirjan and Saha, both of which employ pickup techniques, on a ground of vertical stripes. On some rugs, you'll see all the patterns shown in the drawing at right. Plan your design according to your weaving expertise. If you're a beginner, try the simpler patterns first, such as vertical or horizontal stripes and their variants. Design possibilities are greater with the pickup techniques.

A good intermediate pattern involves one row of plain weave and one row of pickup, as found in the Molar pattern, Druse, shown framing the central pattern of the cushion in the photo at the top of p. 51. 'Weirjan, the most common pickup pattern, is based on zigzags, usually combining white and another color. A single warp yarn, usually black or a dark color, remains the same on both sheds and alternates between the groups of pickups. Narrower versions are often used as borders; larger ones form design bands.

The Saha or Shajrah, pattern is the most complex pickup pattern, as it requires the most design decisions. Every warp is one of a pair, from which you must choose one. Sometimes long floats will form on the back if one color from a pair is chosen for a long stretch, but the design possibilities are endless. Beduin women use it to display their artistic ability-producing calligraphy and portraying people, cars, planes, animals, household tools, and geometric and abstract linear designs.

If you're interested in doing Beduin weaving, I recommend Martha Stanley's article, "The Saha Weave and its Double Cloth Cousin" (from *In Celebration of the Curious Mind*, Nora Rogers and Martha Stanley, eds.; Interweave Press, 1983).

## Finishes

Often the warp ends on rugs and ornaments are left as is. The weft stays in securely because the warps are highly twisted. A longish fringe sometimes looks like a mop of curly hair. Plied warp ends are the most common finishes on rugs and tent walls. Two groups of yarns are twisted together. Also, ends are sometimes braided, and tassels appear frequently.

### Source of Article:

Joy May Hilden. "The Colorful Oasis," *Threads Magazine*. February 1989.

Picture 1: Title Page: A door ornament—a dramatic example of weft twining, round braiding, warp-faced weaving, and tassels, from her hostess's neice, a nomadic Beduin of the Murrah tribe. [Return to P.2](#) [Return to P.4](#)



Picture 2: Partially woven, the warp stretches out across the roof with the back and forward beams staked rigidly on reinforcing rods that allow the weaver to adjust the tension. The weaver will sit on the completed web to do her weaving. The heddle rod rests on cinder blocks, with the shed rod close behind the web and the sword beater in the shed in front of it. The stick shuttle rests on the web. Patterns include plain weave, horizontal and vertical stripes, 'Weirjan, and Druse.



Picture 3: The woman pictured here, a member of the Murrah tribe, demonstrates spinning for Hilden with a spindle and distaff that she made. here she spins camel hair from the herd outside her tent, while the children watch.



Picture 4: To begin an elaborate braid, the weaver folds the yarns in half around her big toe, which tensions the braid.



Picture 5: A storage bag woven in a region that includes Saudi Arabia's northern Najd and parts of Syria and Jordan. A fringe of warp ends and decorative stitchery at the selvages adorns the edges of this cushion. The borders of 'Weirjan and mirror-image vertical stripes contrast dramatically with the elaborate central design in *Saha* with *Molar* edges.

*Return to text*



Picture 6: Zahayyah's acrylic cushions and flat-weave panels are woven with fine yarns in *Saha*. They contain philosophical and Koranic sayings, plus the date of her work and the name of her first son.



Picture 8: Tarfa's *Saha* is a *moguss*, or scissors, pattern.

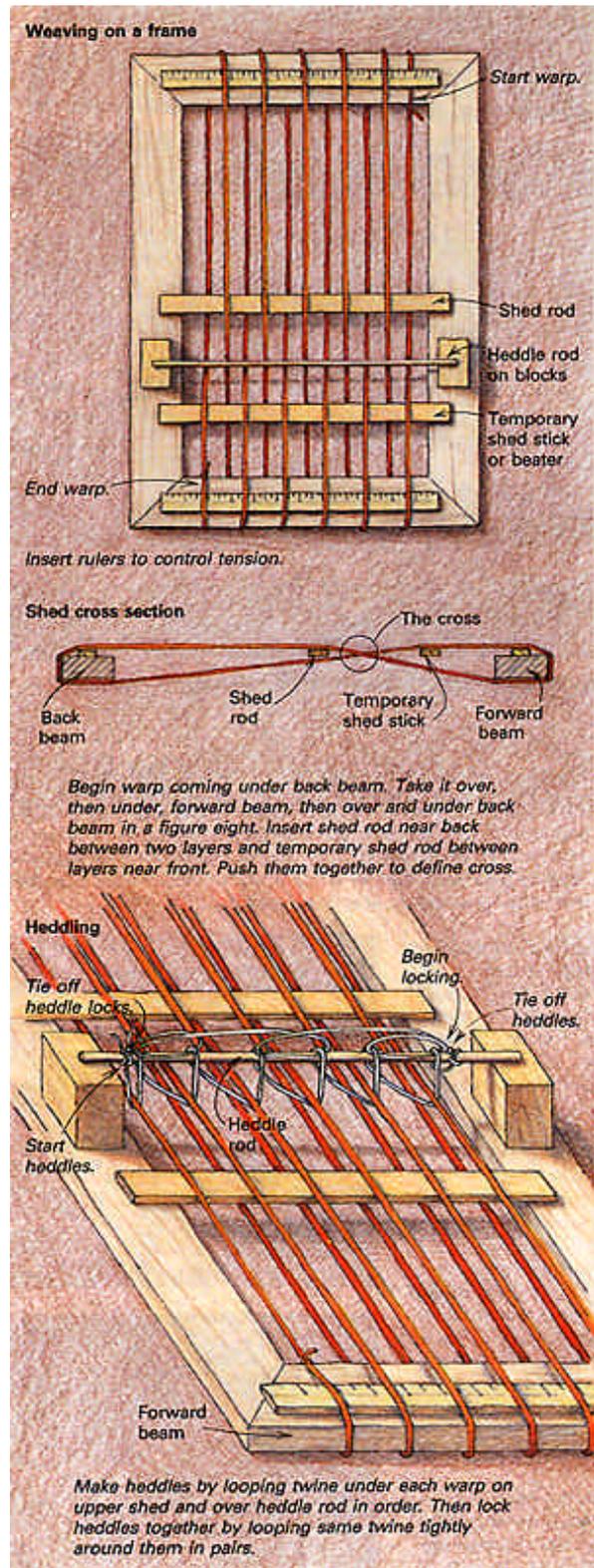


Picture 9: Large Diagram #1—Weaving on a Frame, Shed cross section, and Heddling.

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Picture 10: Large Diagram #2—Pattern drafts and designs; simple, intermediate, and expert. Return to P.6

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**Pattern drafts and designs**  
(Read left to right.)

**Draft**

**Simple patterns**

**Vertical stripes**

A	A	B	B	C	C	C	Shed 1
A	A	B	B	C	C	C	Shed 2

Alternate warp colors, several warps each.

**Horizontal stripes**

A	A	A	A	A	A	A	Shed 1
B	B	B	B	B	B	B	

Alternate two warp colors, one color on each shed.

**Horizontal variant**

A	A	A	B	B	A	A	A	Shed 1
B	B	A	A	A	B	B	A	

**Vertical-and-horizontal variant**

A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	Shed 1
A	A	B	B	B	B	B	B	

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**Pickup patterns**

**Intermediate**

A	A	A	A	A	B	B	B	B	Shed 1
A	$\frac{1}{2}$	B							

One shed is plain weave; the other has some pickup.

**Weirjan zigzags**

B	B	B	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	B	B	B	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	Shed 1
$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	B	B	B	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	B	B	B	

Use three colors. Pickup selects from two and alternates in sheds to allow almost infinite zigzag possibilities.

**Weirjan possibilities**

**Expert**

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	Shed 1
B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	

Use odd number of pairs.

**Design**

**Kheit**

**Huwaymee**

**Numails (little ants)**

**Sneen (teeth)**

**Druse/Molar**

**Weirjan**

**Saha, or Shajrah (tree)**