

Changes in Nomadic Arab Weaving Due to Outside and Internal Influences

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I will show examples of nomadic weaving in Arab countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, and discuss changes that have occurred in the lifestyles of the Bedouin and in their weavings and techniques used to make them. I will describe some of the influences which caused these changes, over time and in recent years. (*Illustrations are placed at end*).

Centuries of tradition in the weaving of the Bedouin, using sheepswool and goat hair, has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Traditional nomadic lifestyles existed until recently in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine/Israel and Egypt and North Africa. These are all Arab countries with large desert areas. Lifestyles among and influences on the *bedu* vary by region, but the decline of nomadism is common to all.

Saudi Arabia, which is the largest and has resisted change the longest, has retained its nomadic traditions longer than most of the other countries. It has been touched less by war and by occupation by foreign powers. The decline of nomadism in the Arabian Peninsula is due directly and indirectly to the discovery of oil in the 1930s. This created jobs, incomes and a strong government. Nomads were settled and put to work in the oil industry, as well as being encouraged to take up agriculture. Before oil, and the ascendancy of King Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, the Arabian Peninsula was controlled by warring tribes, separated by huge deserts. The general population was poor and there was no national treasury. Now education and medical care are free, food subsidies are the norm, and home loans are available to all. Most of the population is well-cared-for. Much of its consumer products are imported.

As a result of these changes in the society, weaving techniques and products have fallen to disuse or have been transformed with new materials and put to new uses. Synthetic yarns now predominate, because they are pre-spun, clean and not attractive to moths and other pests. They are also easier to use and do not require dyeing, which is messy. Women in remote areas with lower incomes who are not as connected to trade still use more traditional methods and materials. They improvise with what is available.

With the decline in the use of wool, the art of spinning is also disappearing. Formerly nomadic families are becoming more sedentary, have greater disposable income, and are able to buy the synthetic yarns. Previously, their wool was taken from the sheep of their flocks or from others nearby and spun and plied tightly. Synthetic yarns are plied on traditional spindles. Weaving with synthetic yarn is more difficult in one respect; it has little elasticity. Ground looms are used in Bedouin weaving, and the patterns and shed changes are manipulated with one's fingers, hands and fists. Stretchiness in the wool, goat hair and camel hair make it easier to manipulate. An advantage of synthetic yarns is that they are smoother and slip by each other more easily in the tight warp-faced weave of Bedouin weaving.

Bedouin weaving was formerly used for tents, rugs and animal gear. Now, long rugs the size and shape of long tents have been replaced by short rugs for use in small rooms. Saddlebags are seen less and shoulder bags more. Many Bedouin women embroider on

plastic scrim with synthetic yarns, reproducing designs from Bedouin weavings. Some vendors order from China or India synthetic fabrics with Bedouin design imitations to be used for tent cushions

Desert tents are often used now to entertain urban dwellers in their courtyards, a social statement one sees in a number of countries. Large wool tent dividers are sometimes used this way, but are often replaced by synthetic versions which are used as wall decorations, often in miniature. These tent dividers formed a wall between the sitting area or men's area and the women's area, also used for sleeping.

The settled Bedouin, in their transformed lifestyle, have developed a variety of short portable looms and other technical innovations. Saudi Arabia's settled and semi-nomadic Bedouin generally engage in minimal commercial weaving, making smaller pieces for foreign workers and the locals who shop at urban and rural markets. Other countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Israel and Oman, have more developed methods of selling, both at home and abroad. Syria, Iraq, Egypt and other North African countries, have had large urban textile industries of all kinds for centuries. With the decline in their industries due to industrialization, nomadic weaving has also suffered a decline. In many of these urban areas, Bedouin tents and other supplies have been woven and sold for use by the nomads.

Trade has facilitated the exchange of ideas in the Middle East for centuries. Strategically located, its trade routes have been fought over far back in history, until today. They include the vast deserts of the Arabian Peninsula and the shores of North Africa, Palestine, Lebanon, the Nile River, the Red Sea, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. There was trade in the coastal cities of Saudi Arabia. The port of Dammam in the Eastern Province traded for centuries with countries on the Arabian (Persian) Gulf. Jeddah on the West coast, by the Red Sea, has been a shipping port for centuries, trading with countries on the Arabian Gulf and the African coast. The holy cities of Makkah and Medina, near Jeddah, attracted many pilgrims from all over Asia and the Arab world. The pilgrims brought with them items to sell in order to help finance their trips. To this day, one can find markets around Jeddah bulging with fascinating items from all over the world.

In addition to coastal commerce, for centuries there was a thriving camel caravan trade, archaeological evidence for which is found in the Arabian Peninsula. One can see influences of trade and nomadism with neighboring countries in the similarities among weaving techniques of Arab and non-Arab nomads. Persian and Indian warp-faced weavings show these influences. Even the language demonstrates influences. A camel or elephant riding litter in India is called *howdah*; in Saudi Arabia, it is called a *hawdag*.

In the Levant, changes were brought about by war, colonization and occupation. World War I dissolved the Ottoman Empire, changing borders and migration patterns. Thriving textile industries declined. World War II and the creation of Israel decimated tribal life. Nomadic populations are to this day being displaced and oppressed along with the indigenous settled people. Warp-faced weaving on ground looms has been practiced by both nomadic and settled women in Palestine since at least the 1930s, as reported by Grace Crowfoot. Since Bedouin tents resemble the ones described in the Bible, the same practices are likely to have existed since before the time of Abraham.

With difficulties of war in the Middle East for at least the last fifty years, there has been displacement and disruption of nomadic lifestyles. A variety of solutions have attempted to help Bedouin women make a living. Charitable organizations in Jordan and Israel have formed to help settled Bedouin women use traditional methods and materials to make and market their products. Some of them have formed cooperatives. Westernized design, color and catalogue marketing methods are used to promote sales in Europe, the United States and the Middle East. One organization called Peace Fleece promotes use of local wools and traditional spinning methods, on sale in the U.S. through a knitting catalogue. They also work with a group in Russia. Attempts are made in Saudi Arabia to encourage Bedouin women to make pile woven rugs. In Al Jouf, the governor holds an annual crafts contest, which includes prizes for pile woven rugs. A government program trained settled Bedouin women to weave pile rugs on vertical looms, and found markets for them. At the time I left Saudi Arabia in 1994, the program seemed defunct.

Conclusion: Arab nomads are resilient and adaptive. Regardless of the direction that history takes them, they will hold their values of tribe and family uppermost. Their weaving will likewise adapt and continue to change.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1. A tent in Syria, near Palmyra, showing traditional construction using tensioning ropes. 1992.



Fig. 2. A small tent in the mountains near the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia, showing traditional construction with tensioning ropes. 1992.



Fig. 3. A traditional tent used as a guest facility in a village on the edge of the desert. Haneedh, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia. 1989.



Fig. 4. Another view of the tent in Haneedh, showing a tent divider extended on a tensioning rope, and a water tower in the village behind. 1989.



Fig. 5. A new tent in the same location in Haneedh. Note the same water tower. Instead of long tensioning ropes, the tent is supported by metal poles inside and posts outside, with short tensioning ropes. 1993.



Fig. 6. Interior of new tent in Haneedh, showing many departures from tradition. Metal poles replace wooden ones; the design of the roof is non-traditional for this area; the locally-made tent divider is hung from a high ceiling, whereas it would formerly have been hung from tent poles, with a low ceiling; cushions, arm rests and rugs are of foreign manufacture. 1993.



Fig. 7. Exterior view of the new Haneedh tent, showing non-traditional way of bringing the tent divider to the outside. 1993.



Fig. 8. Guest tent in a small yard. Because of lack of space, tensioning ropes were substituted with interior metal supports on a concrete base. Oneiza, central Saudi Arabia. 1992.



Fig. 9 (left). A traditional ground loom staked in the sand in an area newly settled by Bedouin. A tent roof of wool is being woven. Hofuf, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia.

Fig. 10 (right). A settled Bedouin woman in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia weaves a panel of a tent divider on a ground loom in her house using synthetic yarns.



Fig. 11. A loom tensioned on reinforcing rods on the roof of a settled Bedouin. Qatif, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia. The weaver makes small rugs and bags of wool and sells them in a local outdoor market.



Fig. 12. A loom created for use by a settled Bedouin in Jordan, who works for Save the Children and makes small wool rugs of standardized patterns.



Fig. 13. A traditional wool tent divider in Jordan. 1992.



Fig. 14. A small tent divider, for decorative use, made of synthetic yarns. Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia. 1987.



Fig. 15 (left). A large camel saddlebag, with two attached pouches and long tassels.

Fig. 16 (right). A small, decorative woman's saddlebag, made of synthetic yarn and embroidered with the weaver's name.

Fig. 17. Bani Hamida weaving project in Jordan. Rugs and other woolen products are made in colors suited to modern décor and room size, with colorfast dyes and quality control. Shown are an administrator and a Japanese designer. Color and design are non-traditional, but weaving techniques and use of wool are traditional.

