
IN SEARCH OF BEDUIN WEAVERS

by Joy May Hilden

After three and a half years in Saudi Arabia, I was finally on my way to visit a Bedouin weaver. I had been admiring, buying, looking at, studying and imitating Bedouin weaving, with its wonderful variety, color and hardness, and trying to find a woman to teach me to weave the Bedouin way. The break came through some television work I was doing: We were to make a short documentary on local weaving, spinning and dyeing.

We drove up the coast of the Arabian Gulf to 'Anak, a village near the ancient seaside town of Qatif. There were no house numbers, but we had spoken with the weaver in the Qatif market and she had given us a description of the place.

A small boy with big brown eyes opened the gate and invited us into the sitting room, its floor covered with carpets and lined with cushions. Our hostess entered, wearing the customary 'abaya cloak and the *burqu* or half veil. She greeted us warmly and served juice and tea, then got down to the business of the day. For later filming, she showed us how spinning is done on a hand spindle, or *mighzal*, the fleece held in the left hand and the spindle rotated swiftly in the right, whorl uppermost and shaft at an angle. She showed us how she plies the yarn twists two strands into one stronger one on the same spindle, and laughed at my efforts to imitate her. I asked about the processes of weaving and the Arabic words for various tools and techniques. Her fleece comes from the *suq*, she said, and she washes it in Tide.

Normally, Bedouins weave on ground looms made of two sturdy lengths of wood staked into the ground. The long warp threads are stretched back and forth between them and the weaver sits at one beam inserting the wefts, or crosswise yarns. But our hostess, Latifa, came from a Bani Khalid tribe that has been settled for over 25 years; she had adapted her loom to her concrete house. One beam, a heavy dowel, spanned an open doorway; the other was held by the stair footing at one end and by a concrete block at the other. Latifa adjusted the tension in the warp with a sword beater, a heavy, flat stick pointed at both ends, 75 centimeters (30 inches) long by 75 millimeters (3 inches) wide. She slid the stick under the warps and then tightened them by turning the flat side vertical.

The weaving in process was a narrow five centimeter (two-inch) band, a decorative strip that would hang from a saddle bag. These bands are called *hatwa* and the technique used is weft twining: The weft, usually hidden in the weave by the closely spaced warps, is here used on the surface in a bright, jewel-like tapestry pattern. Eagerly I watched Latifa work—so fast! and then accepted her offer to try my hand at it, too.

Later we went upstairs to the walled roof, where Latifa and her sister had their spacious, sunny, perfectly equipped workshop. A beautiful long weaving,

about 60 centimeters by 4.5 meters (two feet by 15 feet), was stretched between groups of reinforcing rods that protruded from the roof floor. Bright nylon ropes acted as tensioners between the rebar and the warp beams. Latifa stretched a loom remnant for us to practice weaving on, just as she would for a child learning the skill. The two sisters demonstrated spinning and plying, this time using a distaff, called a *ghazallah*, that they had made from a split palm branch.

The dyeing came next. Pots of dye were already cooking on propane burners. Iridescent crystals of maroon dye went into one pot; though the dye was synthetic, Latifa called the color *qirmiz*—in English, kermes—the name of a parasitic scale insect whose females have been used since ancient times to create a deep red dye. When the crystals dissolved, she started throwing into the 30-centimeter (12-inch) pot one skein after another of heavy, plied wool yarn. I couldn't believe how much yarn was crammed into that pot—something a Western dyer would be warned against. I asked Latifa whether she knew of a way to fix dyes to prevent bleeding when wet. The colors never fade and are very bright, she said, but “if anyone tells you they can fix the dyes, they're lying!” Dyes are exported to Saudi Arabia from India, Kuwait, and other Arab countries; Latifa buys hers in the local suq. I asked about natural dyes, but the sisters didn't know of any. Indeed, in all my inquiries so far, I haven't found any women who still use them. Formerly the leaves, roots, stalks and petals of indigenous plants were used in Arabia to make dyes, and other natural dye materials—kermes, indigo, madder and cochineal—were imported. One can still find such things as dried pomegranate skins, lichens, and henna in the markets, but they are all used for other purposes than wool dyeing today

Before we left, I begged Latifa to show me how she makes her heddles, a technique that had mystified me for years. Heddles are loops of string that are wound around a wooden rod across the warp; each loop hangs down to hold alternate warp threads fast. The weaver pushes the free set of warps down past the heddles, or pulls them up, creating the opening or shed into which the weft yarns are pushed with a stick shuttle. Latifa demonstrated the looping of an extra horizontal yarn to hold the loops firm along the heddle rod—a process I needed to learn. I also discovered, to my delight, a warping pattern I hadn't noticed before, for a design created by a pickup technique.

Pickup techniques make it possible to create more intricate patterns than the usual vertical or horizontal stripes. The horizontal stripes can be made to create checks or *numayla* which means “little ants”; a pattern called *sinun* or “teeth” can be created the same way. But Latifa's weaving had a small strip of a pickup weave called *drusu*, or “molars,” and a strip of a pebbly pickup pattern called *'al-wayrjan* usually done in three colors and quite common in Beduin weaving. Pickup weaves take a lot more work and time than stripes, and hence aren't as common. The sections of pickup weave are warped with

a dark and a light yarn together in each heddle, acting as one. In the weaving, only one of them is chosen to create the desired pattern, the rejected one left to “float” at the back of the cloth.

On another trip, we found weavers at work in Ragayga, on the outskirts of the oasis city of Hofuf. Two women worked interchangeably on a hijub or tent ceiling, a long, narrow, brown sheep’s wool piece about nine meters (30 feet) long and 75 centimeters (30 inches) wide. The weaving was staked into the sand with metal rods in a large empty space between buildings; the weaver sat on the finished weaving, the warp stretching out far in front of her in the sand. The fabric was fairly loose and felt elastic as I bounced my hand on its surface, but the warps, as always in this type of weaving, were made of tightly plied yarn, strong enough to withstand the punishment of the weaving process as well as wear and tear on the finished product.

The weaver let me weave one pass of weft, but when I attempted to change the shed, she became impatient. Changing sheds is the most difficult part of the weaving, and takes skill and muscle. A new opening must be made after each pass by forcing the free set of warps up above the fixed or hedded warps, punching and pulling apart the resistant, sticky yarns.

After the opening is made, the sword beater is placed into it vertically to widen it; the upper warps are then twanged upward with a hook beater to open them further. The weft is passed through and the sword beater is turned horizontally and beaten hard against the new weft yarn to secure it. The next shed is created by pushing the loose warps down past the hedded ones. This weaver used a hook beater she called a *qarin*, or horn, because gazelle horns were used for this purpose in the past. Hers was made from an eight or 10-centimeter-long (3 to 4-inch) piece of heavy wire, hooked at one end and pushed into a wooden handle at the other.

Later that year, I convinced my husband to use his two-week semester break to continue our search for Beduin weavers on the other side of the Arabian Peninsula. We decided to camp our way to the region of al Jawf, in the north of the country near the Jordanian border. I had heard that there was a new museum there, and an amir interested in preserving the area’s crafts. In his book *Traditional Crafts of Saudi Arabia* (See *Aramco World*, September-October 1987), John Topham mentions the pile weaving distinctive to al-Jawf and the weaving contest sponsored by the amir. I was eager to see for myself.

The road to al Jawf turned southwest off the Tapline road, and immediately the countryside changed from drab to dramatic. Violet gray peaks and rolling hills appeared as we dipped into a lovely valley, with roadside villages and some agriculture. The air was crisp and clear.

Our host in the town took us to Dar al Jawf lil’ ‘Ulum, the al Jawf Sciences Center, newly built by the Abdul Rahman al Sudairy Foundation. Over coffee and tea, the director explained the foundation’s goals and

projects to us, and confirmed that the amir sponsors a craft competition; some of the winning entries are placed in the local libraries and museum. He also informed us that the foundation plans to open a spinning and dyeing industry using local fleece. As we toured the elegant men's and women's libraries and the ethnographic museum, I asked if the local weavers used natural dyes; our guide enthusiastically described a springtime desert toadstool called *burnooq* which was used as a mordant and a dye, producing a variety of colors. He offered to take us to visit a woman who could answer all my questions about weaving.

Muneera is the matriarch of a large clan of settled Bedouins who live in a compound of large houses. After we drank tea flavored with thyme in the *majlis*, or living room, she brought me a weaving in progress, which she unrolled and explained. Its warp beams and heddle bar were still attached, as well as another transverse stick behind the heddle bar which keeps the warps in order. Then we were led through a shadowy courtyard and into an area between the buildings, where a group of tents loomed. Lanterns cast a soft yellow light on bright cushions and rugs, and on the hand printed patterns on the lining of the canvas tent. Women lounged, spun or worked over small fires. Children played and an old man and woman sat nearby. Muneera's sister, Sabha, was knotting a pile rug with acrylic yarn on a ground loom. She proudly showed me how she did it and answered my questions, and other women showed us how they plied acrylic yarn on hand spindles to make it strong enough to be woven on such a loom, Bedouin style. Plying is a constant activity among the women and girls in the compound. information as my hostesses could provide.

The following day I arranged another visit and was taken from house-to-house, tent to tent, happily consuming as much I was impressed by the skill of the weavers and by the beauty of their work including the acrylic pieces I'd seen sewn into cushions, a practical modern adaptation of Bedouin weaving. Though acrylic yarns are not handspun—only handplied—they can be washed, which contemporary locally dyed wool can't. In the old days, there was so little water available to the Bedouin that washability of their weavings wasn't a concern; for settled groups today, however, there's plenty of water, and acrylic has an advantage.

As we watched that last day, Tarfa, Muneera's daughter, worked on a long runner on a ground loom in a gravel covered yard. The warps were tied in bunches to keep them in order, and Tarfa worked some pickup designs as she went along. Instead of a gazelle horn, she used a metal hook for a beater that she called a shisu, and she showed me how to make one from a 15 centimeter (six-inch) iron tent pin. The sharp end of the pin is heated over the coals of a fire and bent, and the other end, looped into an eye, is padded with rags and yarn to make a handle. She also showed me a beautiful fragment of weaving, this one too with its heddles and heddle rod still in place. The bright

acrylic yarns contrasted beautifully with the black background, and when I asked if I could buy it, she gave it to me. Bedouin generosity is never-ending—and it continued throughout our stay in al Jawf. From a modern villa some of whose residents had been educated in the United States, we were taken to visit a *bayt al-sha'ar*—a “house of hair;” as the black Bedouin tents are known—whose owners were making the change from a nomadic to a settled life. We bought from them some beautifully woven camel trappings whose worn metal fittings spoke of real use, possibly by the groaning and snorting animals we could hear in the dark outside.

We left al Jawf exhilarated by the hospitality there, by the antiquities and other sights we had seen, and by the gifts and purchases of Bedouin weavings. We are determined to return some day, for we’ve learned enough about Bedouin weaving in Saudi Arabia to know that there is much more to learn, and many more weavers to search for.

Source of Article:

Joy May Hilden. *In Search of Bedouin Weavers*. *Aramco World* May-June, 1988.

Picture 1: A two-piece weft-twined rug probably woven in the 1950's.



Picture 2: An acrylic-yarn rug in progress at al-Jawf.



Picture 3: A loom established on an 'Anak rooftop.



Picture 4: A weaver selects her colors in a section of pickup weave.



Picture 5: A storage bag woven in a region that includes Saudi Arabia's northern Najd and parts of Syria and Jordan.

