
BEDUIN TEXTILES OF SAUDI ARABIA

by Joy May Hilden

Introduction

This paper discusses a type of weaving not seen often in the western marketplace, a type which is rare not because it is antique, but because it is not known in the west. These textiles were made primarily for the use of an individual or family in a part of the world traditionally inhospitable to travelers and unaccustomed to exportable crafts trade.¹ Few very old pieces exist because of the perishable quality of the weavings and the fact that when worn and torn, they are discarded in the desert. If the weaving is still usable, it may be sold in a Beduin market, antique store, or junk shop. Antique stores are a relatively new phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. Foreign workers have brought some weavings back with them, but since there is no tourism, sales to foreigners are minimal.

Since *Bedu* (pl. of Beduin) travel across borders of neighboring countries and their history, lifestyles and textiles intermingle, I make references to non-Saudi *Bedu* and to other authors who have researched and written on the subject. Of primary concern is the need for preservation of the weavings and techniques used to make them. The weaving tradition, along with other crafts, is deteriorating rapidly as more nomads settle and have fewer needs for items they associate with the nomadic lifestyle. More bright synthetic yarns are being used, resulting in less spinning by the women and girls. Plastic and synthetic materials are rapidly replacing palm materials, wool and cotton that were used until recently. Gigi Crocker notes "Once a man has given up a camel for a Toyota in the name of progress it is unrealistic to think that he will willingly revert to a camel. This relates to all types of progress: people will not go backwards."²

There are still storage bags, rugs and tent dividing curtains to be bought in scattered areas in the country, frequented mostly by Beds. Settled Beds in elegant homes erect tents in their walled gardens so that they may still enjoy the beauty of a woven structure and relax with friends and family in the fresh air. However, they tend to dismiss old-style weavings as a relic of the past and not as a living art. Government support or private enterprise could help by encouraging production and sales within and outside the Kingdom.

What is Beduin Weaving?

It is necessary first to define Beduin weaving. One cannot use the general term of "rug" or "carpet" to describe Beduin weaving, since traditionally

many diverse items were woven. Their tent or “house of hair”, *beit issha’ar*, was woven by the women in long strips of black, brown and white wool or goat hair and sewn together to form ceiling, side and back panels. Splendid interior dividing curtains in many colors and patterns were also made in strips, sewn together, and used to divide the men’s and women’s sections of the tent. Rugs, cushions, and tent bands were made for the tent. Storage and saddle bags were woven for use on the animals and in the tent. Animal trappings are some of the more interesting pieces. They include festive decorations to be hung from the saddle and ornaments for the riding litters used for bridal parties and for transporting women and the infirm on long marches. Many of these pieces are no longer being made, since camels were totally replaced by trucks.

Most of the weaving made by the *Bedu* of Saudi Arabia is warp-faced plain weave using very tightly spun and plied yarns,³ produced on hand-held wooden spindles. Sheep’s’ wool is the most common fiber used and comes in many natural colors. Goat hair is the strongest and is best for tents and is occasionally used in other pieces. Camel hair is seldom used because it lacks the strength of other fibers, though when very tightly spun, it can be quite strong. Often a weaver will include it for its color. White cotton is spun and plied on hand-spindles and used because of its sparkling whiteness. Sometimes women bypass the spinning process and simply ply white cotton twine. The bottom strip of a dividing curtain is frequently made of heavy white cotton and woven the same way as the other strips in the piece.

Following are some of the qualities which characterize Beduin weaving. The most common weave is warp-faced plain weave, using vertical stripes, horizontal stripes, and checks in a variety of combinations. This is the fastest and simplest to make and forms the base of tent panels, storage bags, saddlebags and rugs. In addition, complementary warp patterning,⁴ also called warp faced plain weave with warp substitution⁵ are used alone or in a variety of combinations.

Weft twining is common, used sometimes as a border to strengthen the ends, used frequently as a major decorative element in the piece, or less commonly as the basis for the whole piece.⁶ The twining is twisted around groups of warps on both sides of the weave at once, creating a surface and patterns resembling tapestry. Twining often punctuates an otherwise exclusively warp-faced fabric with bands of weft that relieve the monotony of color and directionality.

Three complementary warp weaves give the weaver opportunities to display skill and diversity in pattern. A pebbly effect is created in the *’weirjan* and *mithkar* patterns, which use a combination of doubled warps with single warps.⁷ They are used to create triangle and diamond pattern variations. This technique is common because it allows pattern variations to be woven easily and quickly, since there are fewer pickup choices necessary. A simpler, less

common technique is called the molar pattern, *druse* or horse's teeth, *druse il khail*. It doesn't allow for any design variation. The three-step design is created by alternating the weaving of one shed in plain weave and the next in pickup weave.

The most difficult and versatile complimentary warp weave technique that a good Beduin weaver can master is the *shajarah* (tree) or *saha*. (wall) pattern.⁸ For this, yarns are warped in pairs of dark and light. Sometimes three yarns are used. Linear or solid geometric patterns are created, and simple representational images are possible. The smoothest and most even designs are woven on a diagonal, since that is the natural structure of the weave.⁹ The patterns are usually in blocks, no doubt partly to avoid long floats on the back of the weave, where the rejected yarns from each pair lie. A weaver can express herself here by writing names, dates, quotes from the Qur'an, as well as her tribe and subtribe's camel brand or wasm. She can use traditional patterns and invent some of her own, using subject matter from everyday life.

Finishing techniques further contribute strength and beauty to the weavings, giving them verve, movement and dazzle. There are many kinds of finger-woven ropes, hobbles, leads, and tassel stems, all used in myriad functional and decorative ways. Flat braids are used for warp ends. Tassels, both large and small, are used on storage bags, saddlebags, animal and litter ornaments. They can be small or large, built on a core to give them body, or simply made by tying two groups of yarn ends around a braid, with a wrapping around the top to hold them together. Color and yarn organization are often haphazard and deliberately random, to give the pieces variety, and I suspect sometimes to use up yarn scraps.

Joining and edging stitches follow standard patterns and contribute to the strength and ornamentation of the pieces. Two pieces joined edge to edge are usually whip-stitched, as in dividing curtains, and sometimes in saddlebags, storage bags, and rugs. More decorative, sturdy and time-consuming to make are faggotted (figure-eight-stitched) blocks of colors for the same type of join. Where two thicknesses are joined, as in the edge of a saddlebag or cushion, they are often embroidered to create a V-pattern, stitched across and down repeatedly in an X direction; this also in blocks of different colors. The warp ends on the top of a storage bag, saddlebag, or other edge are embroidered in a complex stitch called *thras* which is similar to a blanket stitch, two colors to a block. Sometimes the ends are bound with cloth or leather.

In former times, the combination of colors, patterns, and techniques used in the weavings made them easily identifiable by tribe. Now much of that is slipping away, along with the nomadic lifestyle of which they were a vital, integral part.

The Weavers

Weaving is mainly done by women, but there are a some exceptions. The men of the Wargash tribe in Najran, goat and sheep herders, weave on ground looms, sometimes helped by the women. They will not spin, however, leaving it to the women. The area is in the southwest corner of Saudi Arabia near the Yemeni border, and is ethnically Yemeni. There are male weavers in Yemen who produce a variety of cloths, and male herders in Oman who weave.¹⁰

Wargash men's weaving is similar to that made by Beduin women in other parts of the country, except that it is less ornamented and is often rougher and wider. The decorative complimentary warp weaves require one's hands to work inside the shed and must therefore be narrower. Because the men work in pairs, one on each side of the warp, and do no pickup weaves, they are able to make wider pieces.

In northern Arabia, Jordan and Syria there are urban men who make plain weave rug and tent fabrics on vertical, continuous warp looms.¹¹ The finished pieces are structured and look much the same as pieces woven on a ground loom and have the same qualities of denseness and strength. But the tools and techniques used are quite different. For instance, instead of using a wooden sword beater and a metal or horn hook beater, they use a heavy five-pound metal comb-like beater.

Beduin women weavers are typically settled or seminomadic, particularly those who produce more complex pieces. Nomadic women have less time to weave, and when they do, tend to make simpler pieces. The colors, designs, and techniques as well as the terminology used to describe them vary in the culturally and geographically diverse country.¹²

Women weave primarily for their own needs; occasionally they produce for sale. There is no effort at mass production or sale to areas outside the Kingdom. Some organized efforts have been made by government agencies, but they have had little impact or long-term success.¹³

Techniques of Weaving, Spinning and Dyeing

Until recently there has been a large variety of yarn available in the Beduin markets of Saudi Arabia. Now it is gradually being replaced by synthetics. One can still buy fleece in a variety of natural colors, mixed and solid natural colors, in bags by the whole fleece. Yarns can be bought as singles, wound onto balls ready for plying, or tightly plied and ready to use as warps. Sheep's wool in white, black and a few colors is available in medium to thick gauge. Powdered commercial dyes, primarily from India, can be bought in red, orange, yellow, blue and green, and occasionally other colors. Previously

one could buy goat hair in a variety of colors and thickness, and sheep's wool of finer spin and more subtle colors, but they are not often seen now.

It would be difficult in Saudi Arabia to determine where a piece comes from by the direction of spin of its yarns. Beduins are an independent people in their spinning as in other aspects of their lifestyle. All but a very few of them spin in a sitting position, spindle held in their palm. To create S-spun, Z-plied yarn, the spindle is held palm up; for Z-spun, S-plied, it is held palm down. Most hold it palm up, but those holding it palm down are spread far apart geographically.

Preparation of fibers also varies a good deal, from no preparation at all until the fleece or hair is teased at the spindle, to elaborate cleaning and creation of bundles of roving. It may be washed as fleece or as yarn, or not washed at all. Some women use carders, some use a distaff. Distaffs are always handmade by or for the spinner, and are usually tucked under the left armpit and supported by the left arm during spinning.

Spindles are available in the markets if a woman chooses not to make her own. They are generally 12"- 18" long, the commercial ones having a whorl of two thick cross pieces with a bent nail at the top. Handmade spindles are improvised from anything at hand, including wooden coat hangers, pieces of plastic, and metal plate for the head. Generally the handmade ones have one whorl. The same spindle is used for plying as for spinning. To ply, two balls of yarn are wound together, and plied by turning the shaft of the spindle on the thigh with the palm, the free hand directing the two yarns from the ball.

Dyeing is done in relatively small quantities, usually a whole fleece at a time. There are no dyeing and spinning industries for Beduin yarns. Some women dye yarns for their own use, and some dye to sell. There are still a few natural dyes in use: turmeric, *kurkum*, *dried lime*, *loumi*, *henna*, madder, *fuwa*, and pomegranate skins, *gursh romman*. Alum is used as a mordant, and is available in bulk. Within the memory of middle-aged weavers a toadstool called *burnoog* or *'urjoon* was used as a dye and mordant in the north-central areas. It darkened both commercial and natural colors.

Gigi Crocker speaks about the use of the murex shell in Oman to give deep reds and purples in years past. In western Saudi Arabia these colors are common and may have been made with murex.¹⁴ Indigo in its natural form is not used or known now.¹⁵ Dye quality in modern pieces is poor, since dyers use a lot of powdered dye and a small amount of water and are not in the habit of rinsing it. This is no doubt due to scarcity of water in earlier times. Colors hold up well in the harsh sunlight to which they are subjected, but fare badly if the pieces get wet. Many lovely pieces are ruined when rain leaks into the tent or storage trunk and the colors run.

The ground loom is very simple and easy to assemble and dismantle, ideal for nomad or non-nomad alike. It consists of two rods of wood or metal,

used as front and back beams, and a rod for the heddles, which rests on bricks, cans, rocks, or forked wooden stakes. The beams are tensioned against four stakes in the ground and the warp stretched tightly between them. A cross is created during the warping and held in place by a cross rod, a string “necklace,” or both. This keeps the warps in sequential order and the sheds separated.

The heddle rod and the string heddles, which loop around it to hold one set of warps, stay in place as the weaving proceeds, and are moved forward as the progress of the weaving requires it. It is not lifted during weaving. The weaver sits on the finished cloth, changing sheds manually by alternately lifting and pushing down the warps on top of the cross rod behind the heddle rod. It is strenuous work, as is the beating down of the weft with a wooden sword beater, pointed at both ends.

It is at this point that the weaver chooses the warps that she wants from each pair heddled together in the patterned section of the weave. The unwanted warps are pushed under the sword beater and appear on the reverse side of the weave as floats. The weft is inserted with a long, narrow stick shuttle into the opening created by the sword beater, which is then removed and the shed changed.

The sword beater is used again as it rests on its side in the open shed. It tensions the warps which are beaten, a few at a time, with a hook beater made of gazelle horn or steel, to open up the shed to its maximum, and separate the sticky warps. One can understand why the yarn needs to be so tightly spun and plied when one sees the beating it takes.

When necessary, the weaver rolls up her loom and stores it until she is ready to weave again. As more weavers settle, they adapt the ground loom to their increasingly indoor life, and are thus able to weave in all seasons and weather.¹⁶

Since there are few very old Beduin weavings in existence, it is difficult to discuss the origins of the patterns in present-day weavings. The weavers themselves have no knowledge of weaving techniques or traditions older than present generations. Designs are given names which vary from tribe to tribe, region to region. Women copy patterns from their teachers and textiles with which they come in contact. Certainly some patterns, such as triangles, are seen everywhere in Middle Eastern art of the present and in antiquity, as crenelations in architecture, as borders on paintings, as design elements in jewelry, and in embroidery, to name a few.

Extensive discussion about the meanings of patterns would extend this paper beyond its limits, but a few points can be made. As mentioned earlier, patterns can be created in the bands of pickup weave and in the weft twining portions of a piece. The latter tend to be limited to triangles, diamonds, and rectangular or square shapes, with little or no representational material.

Extensive weft twining is more typically done in northern Saudi Arabia in the Jordanian style and to a lesser degree in the west. Generally designs are nonrepresentational because the medium makes realism difficult, and also because Islam discourages it.¹⁷ However, there are exceptions where human and animal forms are woven into the *shajarah* or *sahu* pattern. This pattern lends itself to more graphic versatility than the other techniques. Some common designs are: “comb”, *mishf*, “scissors”, *muguss*, “stars” or “constellations”, *thruyu*, “horns”, *grain*, “seeds”, *haab*, “tower”, *borg*. Weavers invent their own designs, some of them fresh and startling, and name them. One long, asymmetrical series of parallel zig-zags was called “cobra”, *huyyah*, while a series of irregular overlapping triangles was named “rabbit steps”. Designs are presented in series of panels, which allows for color changes and for the warp floats on the back to be secured periodically.

They are an ancient symbolic system used to identify camels, primarily but also sheep, as to tribe, subtribe, and family member. (They were also used on wells to indicate ownership.)¹⁸ A given camel may have three wasm on it, each allocated to a specific body part. Therefore the symbol alone is insufficient to indicate tribal origin; one must also know on which part of its anatomy that symbol is used by a given tribe.

Identification of a weaving exclusively by wasm woven into it would be risky.¹⁹ Some weavers take pride in weaving writing and numbers in English and Arabic. They may include their name, the date, or Qur'anic sayings. One woman in the Eastern Province produces pieces called *manthar* which list patrilineal genealogies. A lot of skill is required to accomplish this.

Conclusion

Beduin weaving in Saudi Arabia is seen and known by few people in the textile arts field in the West. It is becoming more rare as the Bedu settle and their lifestyle changes. The weavings, which were used in the everyday life of the people who made them, represent a vanishing lifestyle. More needs to be done to preserve the knowledge of this craft, process and product.

In spite of the wealth of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there are many people there who would benefit from the income that weaving could bring if it were practiced on a larger scale. There are individuals who are interested in commercial production and in the preservation of their heritage. Let us hope that in the next few years, they are able to influence the course of events by encouraging weavers.

As it is now, many young women are being educated, and feel that weaving is beneath them. With recognition from the international community, and possibly a commercial market, interest might be kindled in teaching the

young women and girls to adapt their mothers' skills to contemporary lifestyles.

Several programs are thriving in Jordan now, in which Beduin women spin and weave for Western markets. Saudi Arabians could benefit from a similar approach.

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Notes

1. Aisha Alman, Economic Development and its Impact on the Status of Women in Saudi Arabia, Ph.D Thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1981, p. 195 'The women are involved in animal husbandry as well as in crafts, for they collect camel and sheep wool and spin it into yarn, using it in making mats, tents, tent dividers and sacks (khrooge) to carry their belongings. Occasionally they sell some of their finished products or spinned yam for cash to obtain their material needs, but these products are produced primarily for family use. Sales of these craft items account for only a small portion of their income. The money for most of their purchases comes from selling their animals.'

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2. Gigi Crocker, "Omani Weaving Since the Production of Oil," *The Weavers Journal*, No. 126, 1983, London, p.18.

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3. Degree of spin is generally from 28-32 degrees as measured by the scale of Mabel Ross, from her book, *The Essentials of Yarn Design for Handspinners*, Kinross, KY13 7UU, Scotland

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4. Ann Pollard Rowe, "After Emery: Further Considerations of Fabric Classification and Terminology." *The Textile Museum Journal*, 1984, Vol. 23, p. 59.

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5. John T. Wertime, "Flat-Woven Structures Found in Nomadic Village Weavings from the Near East and Central Asia." *The Textile Museum Journal*, Vol. 18,1979, p. 46.

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6. Whole pieces are twined in the manner of a tapestry, with continually changing color and design segments. Gigi Crocker describes the twining of whole striped rugs in Oman in "Traditional Crafts: Products and Techniques." *The Journal of Oman Studies Special Report No. 3*, 1988, pp. 501-522.

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7. Anthony Landreau gives other examples of designs in John Topham's book, *Traditional Crafts of Saudi Arabia*, Stacey International, London, 1981, p. 25.

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8. The term saha is used in northern Arabia and Jordan; in the rest of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait the word *shajarah* is used.

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Notes, continued

9. See Photo 6 and Figure 8 in Martha Stanley's, "The Bedouin Saha Weave and its Double Cloth Cousin." in *Celebration of the Curious Mind*, Interweave Press, 1983, p. 77. She gives a fine description of the structure and process of Beduin weaving. *back to text*
10. Shelagh Weir, "Some Observations on Pottery and Weaving in the Yemen Arab Republic." *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Vol.5, 1975. Gigi Crocker, op. cit. p. 20. *back to text*
11. Shelagh Weir describes them in *The Bedouin*, British Museum Publications, 1990, The World of Islam Publishing Co. Ltd. 1976, pp. 58 and 60. I met a weaver of this type in Jerash, Jordan, in the spring of 1992, and saw his then-inactive loom and spinning machine. I am told there are male weavers of this type today in northern Saudi Arabia. *back to text*
12. Weaving in the northern areas is similar to Jordanian and Syrian work. Kuwaiti weaving resembles Saudi Arabian Eastern Province styles. Tribes of southeastern Arabia and Qatar, U.A.E., and Oman's Empty Quarter intermingle and have similarities of technique and style. Design and handcraft techniques on the Arabian Red Sea coast strongly reflect Africa to the west and Najran to the south. Landreau, says, "The general layout of these fabric designs shows more affinity to Africa than to the Middle East," op. cit. p.23. *back to text*
13. Dr. Aisha Almana (op. cit.), during her employment with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, organized a weaving instruction and production program in the Eastern Province for Beduin women. Unfortunately, Dr. Almana's program declined when she left her position. She discusses women's role in the textile field, pp.195 and 235. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has a training and production program in scattered areas of the country. Here, Beduin women are taught to make pile weave and flat weave carpets on vertical looms using synthetic yarns and foreign patterns. Foreigners are brought in to teach and supervise, and they are not allowed to use their own patterns.
Nabila Al Bassam of Alkhobar exercises quality control of local Beduin weavings commissioned for and sold in her shop. This has had a positive effect on commercial output of rugs in the Eastern Province, but is so far a lone effort. *back to text*
14. Gigi Crocker, op. cit. p. 514. *back to text*

Notes, continued

15. For more information on indigo in the Arab world, see Jenny Balfour-Paul, "Indigo and South Arabia." *The Journal for weavers, Spinner and Dyers*, #139, 1986. Also Balfour-Paul's "Indigo-an Arab Curiosity and its Omani Variations," *Oman: Economic, Social and Strategic Developments*, London, 1987. Cornelia Montgomery discusses indigo in depth in "The Significance of Indigo Blue in Near Eastern Carpets and Textiles." *Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies*, Vol. 3, #2, pp. 226-34.
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16. In her introduction to *Al Sudu, the Techniques of Bedouin Weaving*, by Ann-Rhona Crichton, Kuwait, 1989, pp. 12-13. Altaf Al Sabah discusses designs and decorative patterns.
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17. In her introduction to *Al Sudu, the Techniques of Bedouin Weaving*, by Ann-Rhona Crichton, Kuwait, 1989, pp. 12-13. Altaf Al Sabah discusses designs and decorative patterns.
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18. Henry Field, "Camel Brands and Graffiti from Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Iran and Arabia." Supplement to *The Journal of American Oriental Study*, No. 15, October-December 1952.
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19. A tribal leader with whom I discussed wasm in weavings claims that this is a new phenomenon, an indication of a woman's pride in her tribe, and nostalgia for the old days of migration. For more on wasm in weavings, see Joy May Hilden, "The Use of Wasm (Animal Brands) in Beduin weavings." *Al-Mu'thurat Al-Sha'biyyah*, The Arab Gulf States Folklore Center, Doha, Qatar. No. 14, 1989.
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Figure 1: Tent, Haneedh. Al Ajami tribe.



Figure 2: Man with falcon in front of tent dividing curtain, qata' or ruag, Haneedh.



Figure 3: Dividing curtain, detail. Tent, Haneedh. Weft twining in vertical pattern.



Figure 4: Tent of Shammar tribe, Juba.



Figure 5: Dividing curtain, detail. Horizontal bands are weft twining, shinoof.



Figure 6: Tent band, detail. Wool with cotton weft. black and white 'weirjan pattern.

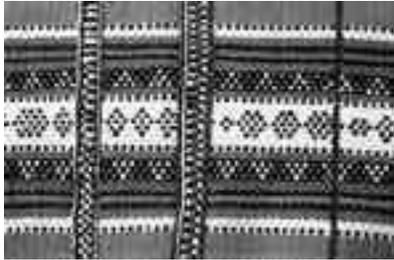


Figure 7: Storage bag, khurj. Weft twining in horizontal bands in northern style.



Figure 8: Cushion made of synthetic yarns. Sayings from the Qur'an, woman's face veil, son's name woven in. Shararat tribe, Tabarjal.



Figure 9: Cushion, wool. Mithkar pattern. Shararat tribe, Tabarjal.



Figure 10: Detail of dividing curtain or rug showing shajarah pattern, camels, car.

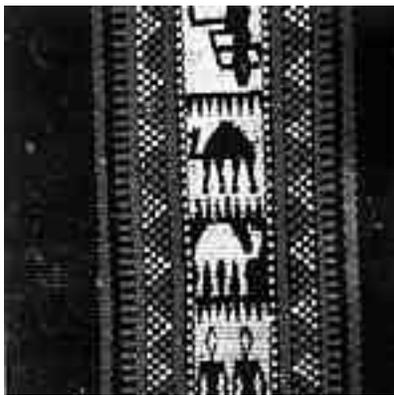


Figure 11: Camel ornament, malabba. Hangs across chest and flank.



Figure 12: Rug (mafrash) or dividing curtain. Wool. Qahatan/Hajir tribe.



Figure 13: Najrani men weavers of Wargash tribe at work.



Figure 14: Moody spinning with distaff.



Figure 15: Woman from Al Murrah tribe spinning.



Figure 16: Close-up of woman from Shararat tribe in Al Jouf weaving on ground loom with synthetic yarns, in pickup pattern.



Figure 17: Damtha at ground loom indoors. Al Ajami tribe, Judah. Weaving pattern visible.



Figure 18: Damtha's manthar, geneology.



Figure 19: Damtha's manthar in English.



Figure 20: Wasm of Prince Mit'ib bin Abdul Asis al-Saud on camel.



Figure 21: Woman making an embroidered edging, thras, on a bag. Shararat tribe, Al Jouf.

