

Ibjad

Ornate Tent Dividers and Weavings of the Kuwait Desert



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In great memory of



H. H. The Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah
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Al Sadu, Kuwait

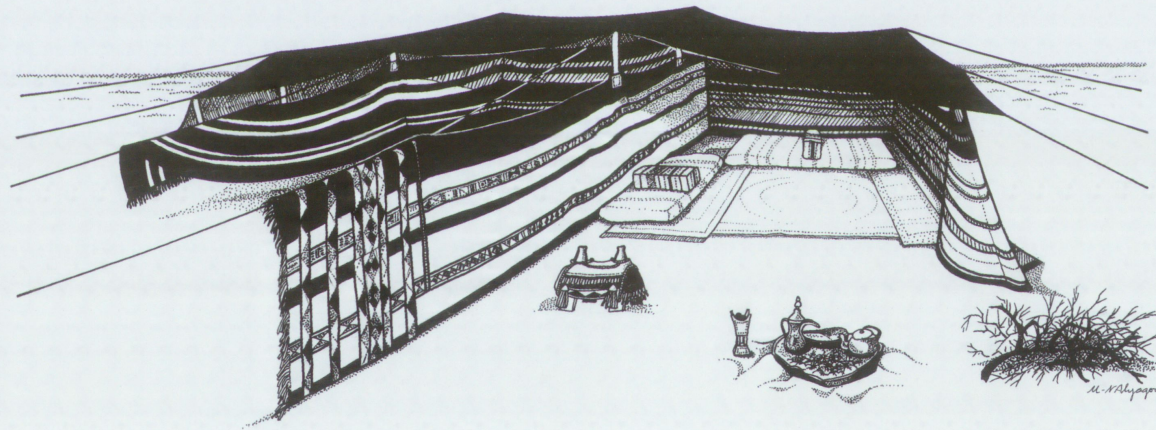
Woven Textiles

THE BLACK TENT

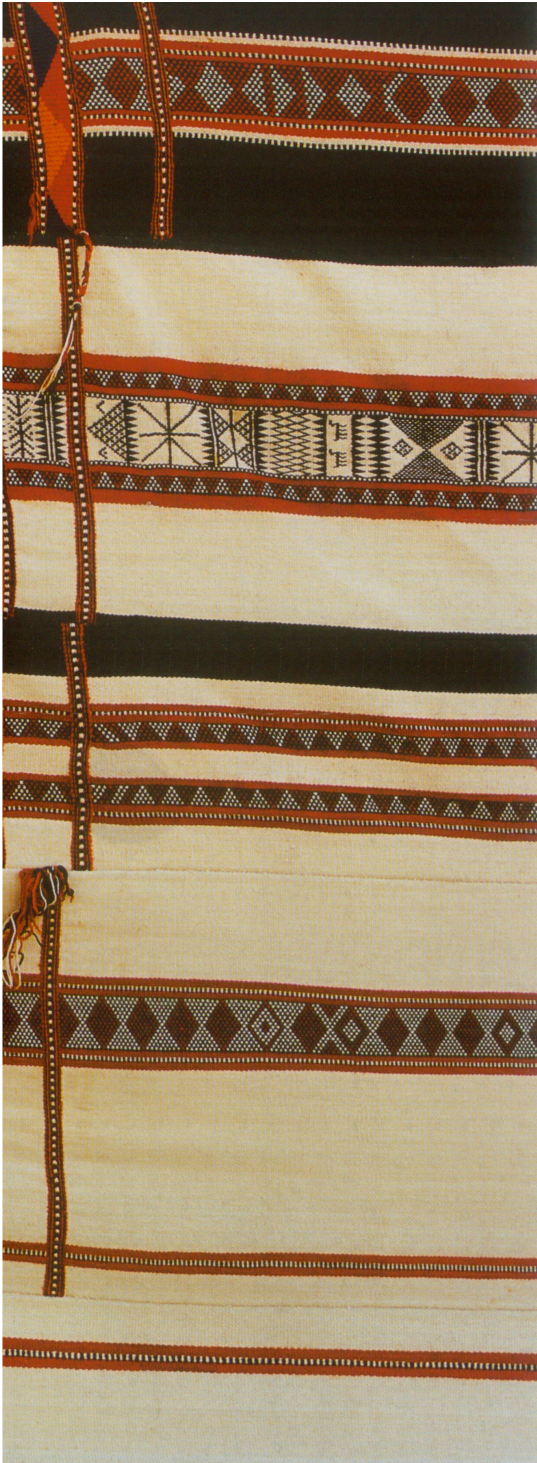
Bait Al-Shaar, or House of Hair, the traditional black-haired tent, was the home and shelter of the Bedouin. It was made primarily from a mixture of goat's hair and sheep's wool. The tent itself was made of long strips, *filjan*, which were sewn together to form the roof and outside walls. The tent was divided by curtains, or *gata'*. The separation of private and public life, and the separation of men and women, was an important aspect in Muslim societies. In the Bedouin tent and abode this privacy was achieved by means of the dividing curtains. The men's side was where male visitors were received, while the women's side was used for cooking, sleeping and family activities.

The tent was simple and easy to erect and dismantle, befitting the nomadic life. It was comprised of the following:

- the roof cloth made of six *filjans* of coarse goat's hair sewn together;
- tent poles, *amdan*, on which the tent was raised, carved in hard wood. The front poles were called *mijdim*;
- tent pegs, *minsab*, made of round bar iron;
- back wall and side cloth, *ruwag*, made of three seamed strip-lengths of goat and sheep's wool;
- the tent ropes, *atnab* (singular, *tanb*);
- the partition curtain, *gata'* or tent divider.



OPPOSITE: "A Bedouin tent and family in the Kuwait Dibdibba desert," 1930's. H. R. P. Dickson, *Kuwait and Her Neighbours*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.



THE TENT DIVIDER

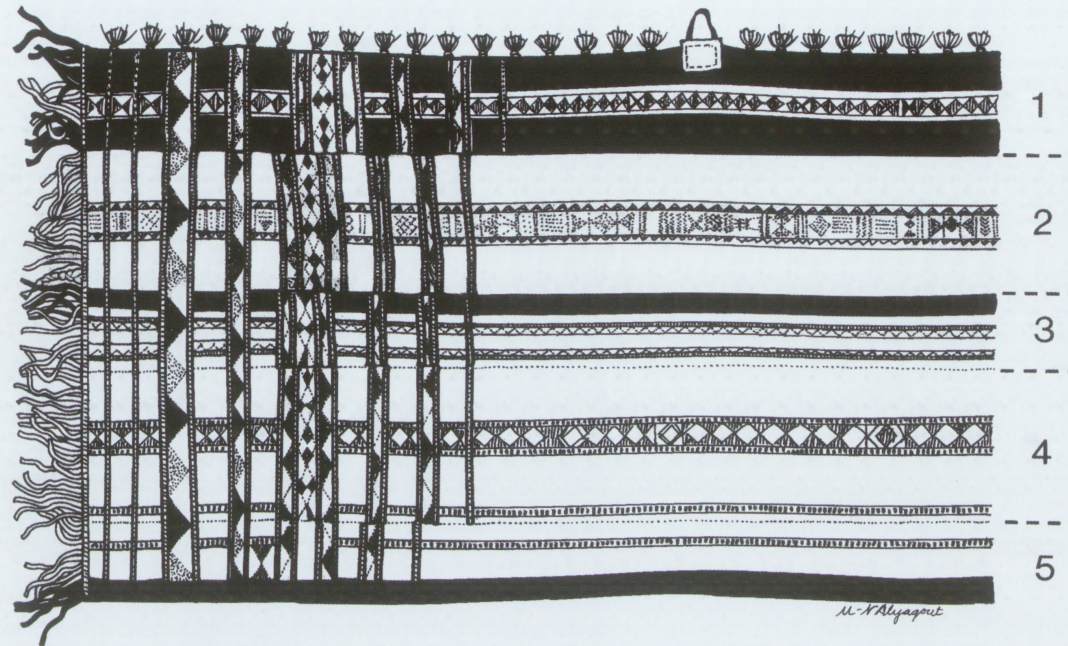
The patterned tent-dividing curtain was the most treasured and prized textile of the family. "It was valued as gold," says Umm-Abdallah, a prolific weaver from the **Ajman** tribe. Along with the storage bags and *shaf*, a light-weight plain cloth woven by men and used as a shade, and *dharah*, used for privacy or to cover the beddings and camel litters, tent dividers were regarded as an important part of the woman's possessions and accompanied her to her marriage.

The dividing curtain was typically the most impressive of the woven work. The highly decorative end of the divider was always hung outwards facing the men's section. Different tribes used different terms: The **Awazim** called it *gata'*, *lowh* and *mehjar*; the **Mutair** and the **Rashaida** referred to it as *ibjad*; the **Ajman** called it *ruwag*, *hijab* or *dharah*. Among the tribes of Northern Arabia, in Syria and Jordan, tent dividers were known as *saha* or *mashnouf*. These curtains could be distinguished by their darker burgundy colors and style of warp patterns. However, there is general agreement that *ibjad* was the term used to refer to the grand, highly ornate and patterned dividing curtain woven for special occasions, given as gifts for tribal shaikhs or as bridal dowries.

The Bedouin tribes that lived in the vicinity of the Kuwaiti desert – the **Mutair**, **Ajman**, **Awazim**, **Harb**, **Shammar** and **Rashaida** – shared a common design repertoire and language. They preferred bright reds and oranges and were inclined to use the decorative *shanf* and *hanbaliyah* patterns in the front and visible end of their curtains. As one **Ajman** weaver told me, "We were very boastful and prolific and wanted all to know of our skill in weaving."

The tent divider was usually made of four strips of woven cloth "to a height of a man," as the women would say. Some women divided the third strip into two parts, producing curtains with five strip parts rather than four.

On the facing page, beginning at the top, the four main strip parts that were sewn together are identified. (Different tribes gave different names to strips and measurements differ slightly from one divider to the other.)



- 1- **Al saif** (or *shifa*) was all black with a central design pattern. About 30 cm (11.75") in width, it was the part that attached to the roof of the tent. Tied on this section were the iron hooks, or *ritba*, sometimes adored with leather ornamentation.
- 2- **Al ghadir** (or *afra*) was white cotton with a pattern. This piece was typically about 50 cm (19.75") in width in the center of the *fija* or panel.
- 3 & 4- **Al ba'a'ij** (or *abed*) was black wool in the upper half and white cotton in the bottom half, with a pattern in the middle. This strip was sometimes done in two strips to make the pieces lighter in weight and was approximately 80 cm total (31.5") in width.
- 5- **Al mutaba** (or *sifla*, meaning lower or *sawda*), the lowest section of the divide, was closest to the ground. The upper half was white and the lower was dark brown or black. This piece was typically about 30 cm (11.8") in width.