kuwait traditions

Creative Expressions of a Culture

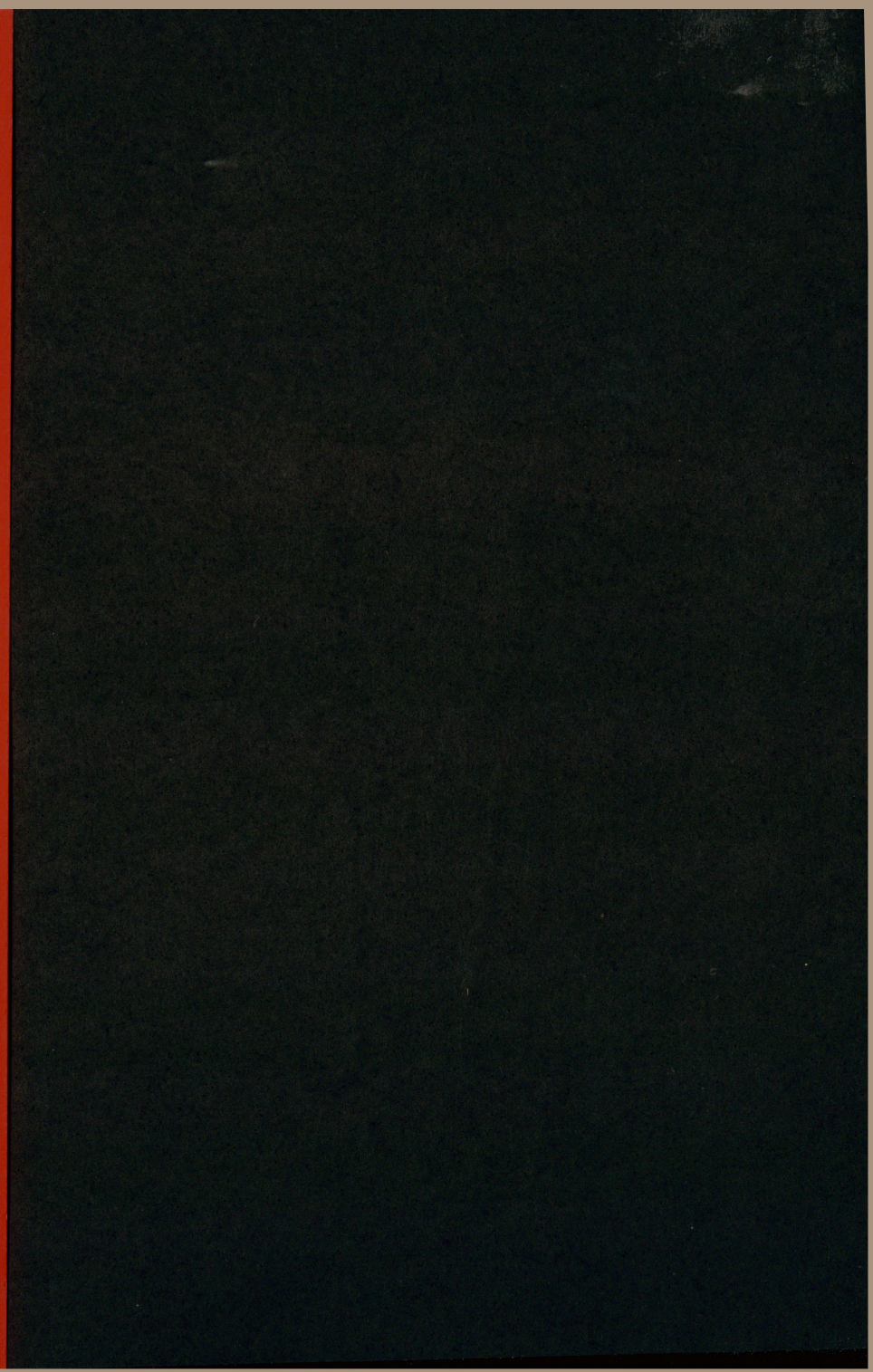
Altaf Salem Al Ali Al Sabah

Kuwait Traditions is a collection of essays and articles which describe different aspects of Kuwait's traditional past and significant features of its material culture.

A traditional society less than half a century ago, Kuwait today is a thriving modern state. The rapid transformation of this once small community of seafaring men, pearl divers, tradesmen and nomads and its flexible adaptation into modernity poses interesting questions relating to its basic socio-cultural reality. Facing both the desert and the sea, Kuwait was significantly influenced by a duality of interest that has shaped its culture and formed its distinctive character.

The author, Shaikha Altaf Salem A. al Sabah, a social anthropologist by training, draws from her extensive work in the field of the traditional and popular arts in Kuwait to present a meaningful picture of the cultural and artistic traditions of Kuwait as embodied in vibrant Bedouin sadu weavings, traditional dhow building, fine bisht weaving and the rich embroidery of women.

The book helps to provide a colorful introduction to the culture and folk traditions of Kuwait, to the creative expression and talent of its men and women. It also reflects the author's genuine interest in cultural traditions, as well as the concern for their documentation.



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Altaf Salem Al Ali Al Sabah

Kuwait
2001

To the memory of my grandmother and aunt..
To my husband and children..
To Kuwait..
with love and gratitude.

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Bedouin sadu runner with the shajarah pattern. Woven by Umm Nasser al Azmy. Kuwait, 1994.

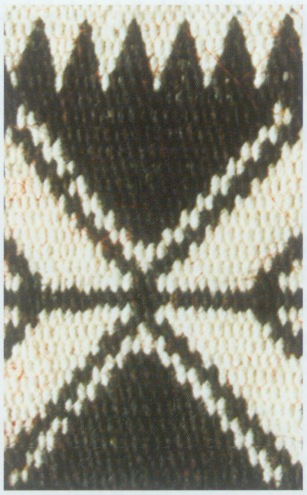
hands, whereas the latter had to be constantly on the move, wandering deep into the desert. Dame Violet Dickson pointed out to me, back in the late 1970's, that women of shepherd tribes living near the market towns spent much of their day weaving since they had a ready and profitable market for their weaves. A similar remark was made to me by an old woman from the *Awazim* tribe who said that in the past, during the summer while camping near towns, some weavers would take commissions from camel breeders to produce a dozen or more tassels, camel trappings and elaborate saddlebags.

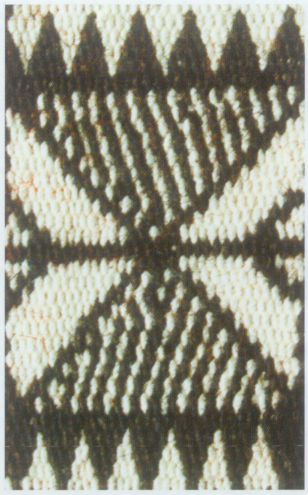
In essence, Bedouin weavings were made for local consumption. They were not articles for trade, although some would sell their work, but were made by women within the family *bayt*, or tribe, for their own use. In certain instances, weavings were part of a bride's gift to her husband, especially in the case of some saddle and camel bags. Richly patterned tent dividers, *ibjad*, were often used to showcase the manual dexterity and skill of the women of the tribe.

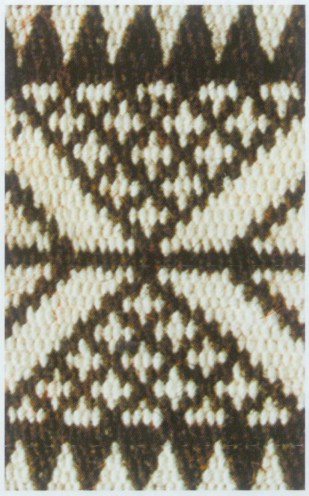
The Contemporary Context of Weaving

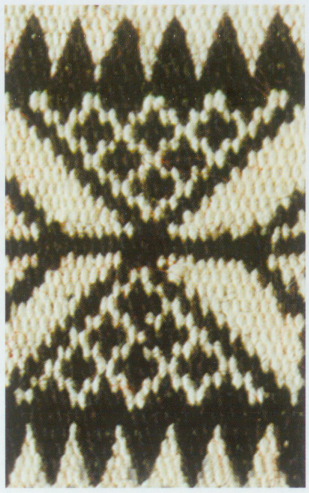
Today, Bedouin women have different interests and concerns. The rapid transformation of the past forty years has had a profound effect on many aspects of their traditional ways. For one, they no longer attend to the strenuous chores of the past but live in the comfort of new homes where easy access to new machine-made goods and modern services has altered their living patterns.

Fortunately, however, some women of Bedouin origin have continued their traditional craft of weaving. The main aim of weaving in the past was to provide for shelter, primarily in the form of the tent. Nowadays, women rarely weave this portable structure. Nor do they weave the long and rich tent dividers. They weave today both for the home and for selling outside in the markets, adapting their products to new demands. Many concentrate now on smaller items such as cushions, small handbags, saddlebags and rugs. Other popular items now are cushion covers or *misanid* (singular - *misnad*), used in the men's receiving area or *diwaniya*, as well as wall hangings. Some weavers take commissions to produce rugs in specific colors, designs and sizes. On average, a skilled weaver can weave three pieces every month, working around five hours a day, producing in three days one *fija* (a piece of weave one square meter in size). The kind of pattern, be it simple or intricate, determines the time spent on each *fija*. Each *fija* requires about three kilograms of wool.









The shajarah pattern is an old traditional weaving structure popular among the Bedouin of Kuwait. However, because of its complexity and the fact that it is time consuming, few weavers are skilled in it and it appears mostly on cherished woven pieces such the 'Ibjad', tent dividers, and some 'udul', camel bags.

For this pattern the weaver would use two contrasting colors in the wrapping, usually black and white; white for the background and black for the design.

From her memory, the weaver selects or picks up the warp threads that she needs for her design or motif and lets fall to the reverse of the fabric the warp threads she does not want, thus resulting in floating yarn on the reverse of the weave.

Most of the motifs found in the shajarah are geometric designs reflecting everyday objects from the weaver's surroundings, usually passed on from generation to generation, from mother to daughter, with new modifications creeping in.

The earring design or motif is a popular and frequently seen design in shajarah. For Umm Nasser, it is a special and significant feature in all her beautifully executed pieces. We see here a sample of earring designs as found in some of Umm Nasser's recent sadu weavings. Kuwait, 1998.

Detail of calligraphy or lettering.

A scissor motif.

A Bedouin rug in camel and sheep's wool with an intricate shajarah pattern. Kuwait, 1999.

The horizontal ground loom is still used in *sadu* weaving, stretched out permanently in the courtyards of houses or inside rooms on special iron beams.

Nowadays, weaving is usually done in the morning when children are out at school and in the late afternoon. Many women today are encouraging their young daughters to learn weaving. This trend has been due to the growing awareness and interest in traditional weavings, mainly through the *alSadu* project. When the *alSadu* project started in 1978 there were eight weavers interested in working with us. By the early and mid-1980's this number had increased to 150 registered weavers and by 1988 there were almost 300 weavers.

Initially, *sadu* weaving was a domestic craft; however, in the present context it is rapidly becoming commercialized, if one can use the term. Through the *alSadu* project, and other market outlets, women sell their weavings for economic gain. In a survey taken in 1989 (Haddad and AbdulRaouf, 1990, in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs) to study the present and future prospects of the craft, we found that of 214 women weavers 74% practiced weaving for economic profit, mostly for sale outside their homes. The majority of the women, 93%, had learned the craft from within the family or tribe. Only 6% had learned from outside the family. Although the younger generation of women of tribal backgrounds do not practice weaving, 90% of the older weavers said that they would love their daughters to learn weaving despite the different social situation, thus reflecting a deep pride in their artistic heritage.

However, since the Gulf War, the women weavers have shown less enthusiasm. The weaving cooperative now has only 60 registered members. Twenty members are highly prolific weavers, 25 members weave occasionally, 12 members work in government jobs, and three members are still students.

The highest age group of the cooperative members are those in their 50's and 60's. Most members are married, with children, and the majority of the weavers do not read or write. Interestingly, six of the ladies in their 50's joined literacy classes after they joined the cooperative, to learn to read and write. When I commented positively on this development, one lady told me, "We were told by officials at the Ministry of Social Affairs that to be able to run for the elections of the board, we have to know how to read and write. We want to run for elections and win."

Women today have a choice between staying home or going out to work. Although most of the women weavers I know do not work outside the home, they continue the traditional tasks of housework, cooking and taking care of

Like language, art is a form of expression.

Franz Boas

young children, all of which are now made easier by the availability of domestic help and modern conveniences such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners and freezers. Although most unmarried daughters or sisters work primarily as teachers or in the civil service, the majority of the married women stay at home in the traditional role of housewives. Having more leisure time to themselves, one would expect them to be weaving more, but, on the contrary, they complain that time passes too quickly nowadays and weaving is too strenuous. However, the majority of those who still weave regard it as a substantial source of income and treat it more seriously.

Women today continue to use the traditional weaving techniques and patterns. However, some new designs have been added, such as the use of Arabic calligraphy and other motifs like incense burners, airplanes and Kuwait's water towers. Whereas in the past women had no problem incorporating human and animal figures in their weavings, today they shy away from any representations of living matter. They restrict themselves to non-living items such as combs, scissors, airplanes or earrings. The reason for this is religious, as many weavers were told by the *mullas* that it is *haram*, or forbidden, to represent living matter in their weavings.

Although many women continue to do their own spinning and dyeing, a growing trend has been the use of synthetic, commercially-spun and pre-dyed yarn or thread, comprised mainly of bright fluorescent colors which many women admire for their vibrant and fast colors. This trend is even more popular in the Gulf countries of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. During a visit to the United Arab Emirates in 1989, I remarked on this point which seemed detrimental, in my opinion, to the traditional aesthetics of the craft. The response was that it was due to the general scarcity of natural wool yarn. But I believe that it also shortens the laborious process of wool preparation.

Change and Continuity

It is evident that the cultural and social environment of weaving has changed in Kuwait and most of the Gulf region. As previously noted, women today no longer weave the long cloth parts of the tent or the rich ornate tent dividers of the past. Fortunately they have kept many of the traditional patterns and designs. In Kuwait, a growing awareness of the cultural significance and the visual beauty of these traditional arts during the last twenty years has helped to revive the craft and has strengthened the interest of many of the weavers to

continue their art, for economic benefit as well as personal achievement. In 1996, Abab Farhan al Azmy, a prolific weaver and member of the *alSadu* Society, won an international prize from the Women's World Summit Foundation in Geneva for her excellence in weaving. This event touched all the hearts in Kuwait and made us very happy and proud.

However, there are some negative signs that threaten the future prospects of this craft. One is the low number of young weavers ready to continue weaving. The majority of the present members of the cooperative are in their fifties and sixties; this is an alarming sign that threatens its continuity. In response we have encouraged the setting up of special summer classes, using new looms, and prizes for young girls, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the Public Endowment Authority, in the hope of providing incentives for the young to at least learn the craft and appreciate it. Another concern is the limited market for crafts in general, and weaving in particular, especially in the face of fierce competition from cheaper, machine-made goods.

Thus, to ensure a brighter future for the craft of weaving in Kuwait we need to implement the following: a working strategy to reinvigorate the craft and encourage the younger generation to appreciate, participate and qualify as future artisans; to develop and improve the related working tools[1]; to provide good quality raw materials such as well dyed and treated wool at reasonable prices; to give sound technical and artistic assistance to upgrade and enhance quality and creativity; and, finally, to create a national plan to market and promote these textiles.

It is sheer romanticism to suppose that traditional crafts could be preserved unchanged in a changing world.

Alison Hodge

(1) In 1996, we began planning seriously to develop the Bedouin loom and make it more comfortable to work with. Dr. Ali al Najadah, Design and Weaving lecturer at the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, cooperated with us and designed a new, functional loom that serves well the craft and the weaver. Dr. Ali is now the weaving consultant for Bayt alSadu.