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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.

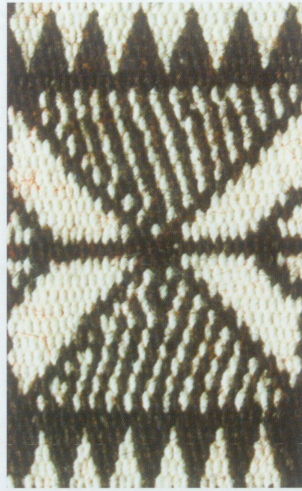
hands, whereas the latter had to be constantly on the move, wandering deep into the desert. Dame Violet Dickson pointed out to me, back in the late 1970's, that women of shepherd tribes living near the market towns spent much of their day weaving since they had a ready and profitable market for their 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 'lbad', 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.