The association between Bedouin Al-Sadu weaving and the camel

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Abstract:

Al-Sadu is an ancient, Bedouin tribal weaving craft that conveys the Arabian nomadic peoples' rich cultural heritage and instinctive expression of natural beauty. Woven geometric and figurative patterns and symbols, as visual narratives, message the traditional tribal lifestyle, the desert environment and the weavers' creative self-expression. The textiles and weaving practice can be linked to the extension of the weaver's hand, and the graceful moving pace of the camel. Bedouins lived in large, hand woven tents called *Beit Al-Sha'ar* or 'house of hair', that were crafted by the women weavers, and made from goat hair. Other traditional decorative textiles, such as camel trappings, and utilitarian tent furnishings and containers were made from camel hair and sheep's wool. Nomadic Bedouin tribes depended strongly upon camels for survival, and women weavers and their textiles for shelter and aesthetics appreciation. Camels were used for transportation and food, but also for textile production, with the provision of hair for yarn making, urine for processing dyes, and creative inspiration for figurative symbolism being of prime importance. The inclusion of camel symbols and tribal animal brandings *(wasms)* created a complex visual code depicted in highly-prized woven Sadu textiles to represent tribal honour and ownership.

With the demise of tribal existence and the decline of associated weaving skills and memories, the demands for tribal camel textiles have virtually ceased. Al-Sadu weaving and nomadic animal husbandry, once crucial and vital, is in danger of being lost forever.

This paper examines a nine-month field study in Kuwait, Middle East. The focus is on the important aspects of the camel upon traditional and contemporary Bedouin al-Sadu weaving practices, and the variety of creative camel symbolism within the decorated textile panels *(sharjarah)*. A recent project with Bedouin master-weavers, informed and developed new woven camel symbols, and created contemporary woven camel trappings for exhibition, which messaged the weavers' contemporary respect for the camel, plus their aesthetic observations of this remarkable creature.

Introduction

It is known that weaving is one of the oldest craft forms in the Middle East,[1] but nomadic lifestyles and cultural interactions of the past, disregard political borders and political agreements, making it very difficult to accurately attribute material culture to specific tribes and places of origin. Long before Islam, these migratory cultures from the vast region of the Arabian Gulf had been influencing one another, sharing weaving techniques and common functions, creative ideas and terminologies.[2]

Historical weaving traditions of the Arabian Gulf are a vibrant and essential element of traditional Bedouin material culture, with vital nomadic lifestyles associated with the camel, and expressed through camel trapping symbolism and decorative textiles.[3] Al-Sadu weaving is an ancient Bedouin tribal craft that conveys the Arabian nomadic people's rich cultural heritage and instinctive expressions of natural beauty.[4] This ancient weaving craft is, by its practical and technical nature, rhythmically linked to the changing seasons of the desert, the traditional weaving practice itself, the extension of the hand, and the graceful moving pace of a camel.[5]

Generally governed by the religious principles of Islam, Bedouin women weavers wove textiles on simple ground looms using hand spun yarns of camel and goat hair, sheep fleece and commercially sourced cotton.[6] Woven textiles were typically constructed from simple warp-faced weave techniques and complex complimentary warp techniques, with additional weft-twining methods. Traditional woven patterns and designs message the nomadic lifestyle, the desert environment, and the emphasis of symmetry and balance due to the weaving process, providing an expressive visual 'voice' to the women weavers.[7]

Bedouin Al-Sadu textiles of Kuwait: visual narratives

This paper examines the findings of a collaborative field study in the Middle East, between Cardiff Metropolitan University and the Public Authority of Applied Education and Training in Kuwait, with Al-Sadu Weaving Co-operative Society, Sadu House, Kuwait. Funded by Cardiff Metropolitan University, the Welsh Assembly UK and Public Authority of Applied Education and Training, the research focussed on Kuwait's al-Sadu textiles from the Sadu House and Kuwait National Museum Permanent collections, and considered the Bedouin decorative camel textiles and the narratives messaged within them.[8]

The study concentrates on the complex complimentary warp or 'finger picked' weave technique, called the *shajarah*, where narrow bands of patterns, symbols and motifs message a design language and vernacular of the women weavers' expression. Due to widespread illiteracy of Bedouin nomadic tribespeople, all weaving techniques, and names of motifs, patterns and associated symbolism were traditionally memorised and passed from generation to generation, by word of mouth and example.[9] This enabled the weavers to transmit, via a series of simple woven dots, stripes and triangles, their own identity and expression of aesthetic ideals. Representations of the desert environment and the Bedouins' essential and functional possessions, including the camel, were of prime importance. Jewellery in the form of earrings, belts and necklaces expressed tribal wealth and beauty.

The oral knowledge and history of nine Bedouin master-weavers, and members of the Al-Sadu Weaving Co-operative Society in Kuwait was video-recorded and their transcripts documented. A number of al-Sadu camel textiles were selected and each weaver was interviewed and asked the same questions concerning the patterns, symbols and motifs, and were recorded separately. The aim was to identify the interpretation of the semiotic codes within the al-Sadu *shajarah* textile sections, and preserve the declining memory, to prevent further loss. Of the few remaining Bedouin master weavers dwelling in Kuwait, most were in their later years of life. Prior to this study very little of their memories, tribal knowledge or practical skills had previously been documented or recorded. Recording the weavers' oral interpretation of the woven patterns, symbols and motifs within the *sharjarah* or decorative panel, established a wealth of meaning and communication.[10] The importance of the *shajarahi* was emphasised in discussions with contemporary master weavers, who explained the contrast of black and white colouring to represent a drawn line to 'message a narrative'.[11]

Quoted from recorded interviews of contemporary master weavers, the knowledge of camel motifs and the names and meaning of single motifs or components of motifs, or whether names and definitions were personal testimony only to the weaver or tribe who created them, or if the language of al-Sadu has been lost in modern-day Kuwait, and appreciated only for its traditional aesthetic values, was identified.[12]

Camel symbols and tribal animal branding

Women wove narrow bands of textiles, which were stitched together to form larger textiles for the traditional Bedouin tent or *beit al Sha'ar*. The master-weavers wove the decorated side wall panels and furnishings within the tent, including camel bags, storage bags, rugs, cushions and tent dividers or curtains. The tent itself was woven in plain weave using coarse goat hair, while the interior textiles were decorated with repeating patterns and symbols for aesthetic appreciation, and were woven from sheep fleece, camel hair and cotton.

The tent divider or curtain *(gata)*, was the most impressive and magnificence achievement of the weavers. These large patterned textiles protruded out from the traditional Bedouin tent, to segregate the men and the women's quarters.[13] The tent divider was recognised by the tribe as highly important and was the most decorated textile; loaded with symbolic cultural meaning, including camel and camel trapping symbols within the decorative *shajarah* section.

The nomadic Bedouin tribes survived in harsh desert conditions and were extremely resourceful. They depended upon camels for survival. Traditionally Bedouins required camels for food and transportation during times of migration, when large decorative woven camel bags *(khurj)*, and camel trappings (*hawdaj)* were used to carry their possessions, and were adorned with *shajarah* patterns, and tassels *(danadish)* of varying sizes and colours.

Camels also provided quality hair for yarn making, which was highly prized, due to its soft handle and natural colours. The hair was spun on spindles *(mighzal)*, which demanded high levels of dexterity and patience by the women and young girls. Yarns made from sheep fleece or goat hair were traditionally dyed with natural colours sourced from the desert, although the range of beige and dark natural camel hair was generally used undyed. Camel urine acted as a mordant[14] during the colour dyeing process, and aided the dyeing of bright reds and oranges that predominated, with accent colours of green and blue, to reflect the desert environment.

At times of war, camels were adorned with large wooden frames or litters, made from pomegranate or tamarind wood and highly decorated with narrow patterned strips of al-Sadu textiles and tassels. During migration, personal possessions and bedding would be stored in large saddlebags, and the heavy tent textiles were rolled and placed within the wooden frames. Smaller wooden frames *(maksar)* were strapped to the camel's back and covered in patterned textile strips, or woollen shawls and decorated imaginatively with tassels and cowrie shells, where women with young babies or the elderly would sit with their possession during migration to shelter from the heat of the sun.

Camel branding or *wasm* represent different nomadic tribes and were used to denote tribal ownership of camels and other animals. Bedouin master weavers would regularly include a *wasm* symbol into their weavings, possibly indicating tribal identity or ownership, but also as a form of signature of the weaver.

Patterns, symbols and motifs

Today, few of the younger generation are interested in the traditional weaving techniques of the past, in favour for more contemporary digital creative applications. Little is known about the meanings or names of patterns, symbols or motifs depicted in the *shajarah* al-Sadu weavings.[15] Most of the Bedouin master weavers who participated in the study were elderly and many had forgotten or were disinterested in preserving their memories. Other master weavers were keen to share their knowledge and preserve their tribal heritage, valuing the researcher's interest and documentation. Valuable relationships were built and as trained weavers, the researchers were able to

create good levels of communications based on practical technical knowledge and the expressed design narrative.

The decoration of al-Sadu textiles for camel bags and trapping decorations were influenced by the extensive desert landscape, and aesthetic beauty. Patterns and symbols extend in long rows of repeating geometric shapes, without borders or end patterns, with central panels of the *shajarah* technique depicting more figurative symbols and motifs. Symmetry and rhythm are important principles in the design composition and link to the rhythm of poetry, the desert cycle, and the rhythmical pace of the camel. Rows of repeating dots and stripes represent undulations in the sand or body parts, such as ribs, and repeating rows of triangles or *uweirjan* pattern, in red and white colours, are reported to represents loftiness or sublimity, but may also represent sand dunes, piles of dates or birds wings.[16]

Concentric diamond motifs were reported by all the contemporary master weavers during the study to represent water ponds, and due to the significance of water, and how a water pool quickly evaporates in the heat of the desert or sinks into the sand, the decreasing concentric shapes suddenly have more meaning and design resonance. A simple zig-zag pattern denotes a snakes-path impression in the sand, and figurative forms of humans, camels, camel litter parts, coffee pots, jewellery and possibly a transistor radio are seen.

The translation of the contemporary master weaver's knowledge is vital, if unknown symbols and motifs are not to be missed as abstract shapes, although it is important to remember that the interpretations of motifs and symbols, can only be known and attributed to the actual weaver herself at the time of weaving construction, and anything else can only be based on informed knowledge and personal experience.

Commission: new designs

During the study in Kuwait, the Kuwait Naval Force approached the team to design a collection of new motifs and *shajarah* symbols as a gift from Kuwait to the Defence Academy in London. The request was to design a textile to include the word 'Kuwait', the British flag, the Defence Academy emblem and the camel. I started by sketching and formulating design ideas and a design mix of old and new symbols with traditional patterns in a range of colours was created, including camels, scissors, earrings and coffee pots. The designs were then transposed by Bedouin master weaver Mateira Theferee into woven textiles and while some of the images were familiar, Mateira found transposing the new designs from 2D drawn images on paper into the woven textiles, very difficult. Normally Bedouin weavers rely upon motifs and symbols that are learned from observation, earlier in her life, or by using their own creativity and ingenuity. After many trials and refining, particularly of the camel symbol and complex emblem shape, the final textile was completed and was gifted to the Defence Academy in London. Information gleaned from the exercise was invaluable to understand the lack of interest in the design process and the creation of new designs for contemporary weavers, relying instead upon cultural traditions and tribal identities. The camel symbol was carefully considered as it represents a living animal form, which in strict Islamic terms should not be used.

Additional interpretations of decorated camel textiles, inspired by camel trappings *(maksar)* and finely woven decorative strips with cowrie shell adornments, from the Sadu House Permanent Collection in Kuwait resulted in a public exhibition of contemporary camel textiles.[17]

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to understand current weaving practices and cultural association of the camel to identify the interpretation of the semiotic codes within sections of the al-Sadu textiles. Contemporary knowledge and understanding of traditional patterns and symbols, and the unwritten lexicon that unlocks the weaver's interpretation of her cultural and social history, was documented to prevent further loss. These textiles portray important messages. They speak a silent, yet eloquent language of patterns, symbols and motifs that is in danger of being lost forever. Today, due to rapid regional cultural and economic changes in the Arabian Gulf, the demise of Bedouin tribal existence and the decline of associated weaving skills and memories associated with the camel have virtually ceased. Al-Sadu weaving and animal husbandry, once crucial and vital, is in danger of being lost forever. Where glimpses of past traditions, such as hand made tassels attached to commercially purchased camel head-collars are faint reminders of the past, it is obvious that many of the regional traditions are fast disappearing in the face of mechanisation and modernism.

Bedouin weaving has lost its importance as a utilitarian and vital cultural craft form due in part to the settlement of the Bedouin people and rapid economic developments. The requirement of Bedouin traditions has diminished, and the number of weavers has declined considerably; in fact many of those who remain are in their autumn years of life, leaving only a few women who retain a close association with the camel, and relevant knowledge and weaving skills.

The patron and founder of the Al-Sadu Weaving Co-operative Society, Sheikha Altaf Salem al-Ali al-Sabah commented "While ancient traditions remain artistically unchallenged, contemporary arts and crafts face new demands from today's modern lifestyle, and specific cultural and crafted aspects associated with the traditions are fading in relevance. Those concerned with material culture and traditional crafts, need to blend the traditional and the contemporary, to encourage the mix of hand craft and digital application to ensure a future for these textile traditions. A commitment to inspire the next generation and to create new designs and applications is required if we are to sustain something of this beautiful and majestic Arabian tradition for the future."[18]

Important information: It is important to note that much of the material and terminology described above has been conveyed to the researchers, orally from master weavers and scholars, over many years. While every effort has been made to conform to a system of transliteration, in line with other scholars and publications, it is difficult to establish a system of consistency and accuracy. The researchers have attempted to represent the Bedouin terms as pronounced, although there is great regional variation and multiple terms are frequently used for the same object or practice.

NOTES

1. Lunde, P. and Sabini, J.A. 1980. *Aramco and Its World*. p.5.

2. Crichton, A-R. 1989. *Al Sadu. The Techniques of Bedouin Weaving*. p.11.

3. Al Sabah, A. 2001. *Kuwait Traditions. Creative Expressions of a Culture.* p.37;

Crichton, Anne-Rhona. 1989. *Al Sadu. The Techniques of Bedouin Weaving*. p.11;

Dickson, H.R.P. 1983.*The Arab of the Desert.* 3rd edition, rev. & abridged; Keohane, Alan. 1994. *Bedouin. Nomads of the Desert.* p.124.

4. Al Sabah, A. 2006. *Ibjad: Ornate Tent Dividers and Weavings of the Kuwait Desert*.

5. Al Sabah, A. 2001. *Kuwait Traditions. Creative Expressions of a Culture*. p.37.

6. Hilden, Joy May. 2010. *Bedouin Weaving of Saudi Arabia & Its Neighbours*. pp.128-130.

7. Canavan & Alnajadah Al Sadu Research Project 2009 – recorded interviews at Sadu House, Kuwait, with Bedouin master weavers and members of the al-Sadu Weaving Co-operative Society, founded in 1991: Muteira Thafeeree; Umm Abdullah; Umm Turki; Umm Bergash; Umm Saleh; Umm Talal; Umm Mahamood Seeta.

8. Canavan-Alnajadah Al-Sadu Textile Research Project – founded in 2009 and sponsored by Cardiff Metropolitan University; Welsh Assembly Government; Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait; and Al-Sadu Weaving Co-operative Society, Kuwait, with kind permission from Sheikha Altaf Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah (Honorary President and patron of Beit Sadu, Kuwait).

9. Dickson, Violet. 1978. *Forty Years in Kuwait.* p.91; Thesiger, Wilfred. 1960. *Arabian Sands.*

10. Canavan & Alnajadah Al Sadu Research Project 2009 – as Note 7.

11. Canavan, K. Qatar National Museum. Discussions with Umm Mohammad. 2010.

12. Canavan & Alnajadah Al Sadu Research Project 2009 – as Note 7.

13. Hilden, Joy May. 2010. *Bedouin Weaving of Saudi Arabia & Its Neighbours*. p.312.

14. Camel urine used as a mordant to fix dyes to the yarn fibres during colouration.

15. Alnajadah student survey with three generations of women – student, mother's generation and grandmother's generation. Public Authority of Applied Education and Training. 2010.

16. Canavan & Alnajadah Al Sadu Research Project 2009 – as Note 7.

17. Canavan, K. 'Material Matters' Howard Gardens Gallery, Cardiff Metropolitan University. October 2011.

18. Sheikha Altaf Salem al-Ali al-Sabah in dialogue with Canavan & Alnajadah Al-Sadu Textile Research Project.

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