

Book Review by Angela Sutton-Vane

JOURNAL OF ARABIAN STUDIES

Arabia, the Gulf, and the Red Sea

Vol. 1, Issue 1, June 2011

Joy Totah Hilden, *Bedouin Weaving of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours* (London, Arabian Publishing Ltd, 2010), 283 pages, 297 illustrations, 3 maps, 60 pounds hardback.

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Written during a period of huge and continuing social change in the Middle East – with the first oil boom waning and many nomads settling to take jobs in the oil industry – *Bedouin Weaving* records the textile crafts of a disappearing culture.

Transportability was always the main, and crucial, design criteria for Bedouin possessions, and cloth epitomized this. It was lightweight, flexible, compactable, and made with wool from the makers' herds of camel, sheep, and goats. Woven products played a key role in every part of Bedouin life, and the two were inextricably linked. Through the process of weaving, this book touches on all aspects of Bedouin culture, including the disappearance of the nomadic way of life. Bearing in mind that pre-modern Bedouins depended on raiding for economic survival, and that plunder and war were considered noble activities, and given also the need for vast areas of land without boundaries across which to roam, nomadism in Arabia was inevitably doomed by the emergence of the nation-state: the beginning of the end came in 1932, when the new Kingdom of Saudi Arabia outlawed inter-tribal warfare. Sedentarisation was not only a consequence of coercion, however: as with all members of society, nomads cannot be frozen in time, and have a right to seek education and good health care, only truly achievable through more settled life-styles. As a result, the weavings of the Bedouin have become largely defunct because of their utilitarian nature, since woven camel harnesses and tent dividers are no longer required. Moreover, culturally the Bedouin attach little store to their possessions: of much more importance to them are family ties, the continuity of generations, hospitality, and generosity.

In addition to major social changes, the author also links the introduction of synthetic, pre-spun, and dyed yarns to the demise of Bedouin weaving. Tribes celebrated the women who produced the most imaginative, accurate, fine, and strong weaving; whether synthetic yarns and dyes were used was not an issue for them as it is for collectors and connoisseurs. In fact, many Bedouin enjoy the colours and stability of synthetic dyes – and these have, ultimately, been their choice. Weaving is, at the end of the day, a mechanized, manufacturing process that, as the author illustrates, borrows and evolves constantly. Looms are a machine, whether powered by people or engines, and Bedouin weaving continues to endure in isolated pockets, despite all adversity – floors-loom have been moved from sand to fitted carpets, tensioned by door jams rather than tent poles; and weavers now produce for sale rather than personal use.

Totah Hilden's book is as much about the remarkable Bedouin women who weave the textiles as the fabrics themselves, and the author has recorded in detail many individual weavers' stories and techniques. There are surprising contradictions between the lifestyles and relative freedoms of the women still living a Bedouin existence compared to their settled counter-parts. As nomads, Bedouin women are allowed to drive cars and sell their weaving in markets. They are hugely depended upon for the majority of tasks – tent-making and building, owning and tending to the sheep and goats, cooking, and child-care.

In contrast, although released from many of these arduous tasks, their settled counterparts have become increasingly confined and restricted.

It is a pity that the author's research for *Bedouin Weaving* was actually carried out between 1982 and 1994, and that the book is analyzing material collected up to twenty-eight years ago. Although, at times it is clear that statistics have been updated at the point of publication – when discussing the decline of nomadic populations, for example – this is not always the case, and the reader is left to rely on the epilogue to bring the research up to date.

Bedouin Weaving is aimed at an extremely wide readership, and though concentrating on Saudi Arabian Bedouins, it also covers other Bedouin groups across the Middle East. As such, it cannot please everyone, and some readers will undoubtedly find it too general. In the foreword, Saad A. Sawayan describes it as a work of reference and a coffee table book. There are some beautiful images (for example, camels on page 22 and the Bedouin woman on page 56), but a number of photographs lack clarity and technical finesse – compare them, for instance, to the photographs in Alan Keohane's *Bedouin* (1994). From a completely practical point of view, this is a physically weighty volume, and I would have preferred footnotes rather than end-notes to save thumbing backwards and forwards. Similarly, the guide on constructing a simple floor-loom and weaving textiles would sit better in an appendix, for ease of access and reference.

The book's conclusion is that the ultimate demise of Bedouin weaving is not due to the introduction of synthetic yarns and dyes, nor of new techniques – indeed diversification has often helped extend its life – but to the fact that nomadism has become a phenomenon of the past. Bedouin weaving, which is an intrinsic part of this life-style, has ceased to be functional, and now survives only as a decorative art form, not least through the self-conscious efforts of governments. Few books, apart from Anne-Rhona Crichton's 1989 volume *Al Sadu: The Techniques of Bedouin Weaving*, have been devoted purely to Bedouin weaving. Richly illustrated with photographs, diagrams, and technical appendices, all by the author, Totah Hilden's book contributes an invaluable record of the physicality of Bedouin weaving and their material culture, setting down dye recipes, descriptions of individual techniques, patterns, and life-styles before they pass into history.

The author's list of acknowledgements, as well as the map on page 7, are testament to her wide-ranging research and tenacity in undertaking it in a country where women are strongly discouraged from traveling alone, and it is illegal for them to drive. And yet, at the same time this has worked to Totah Hilden's advantage, allowing her close contact with the makers of these stunning textiles, the women of the Bedouin.

<http://beduinweaving.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/book-review-by-angela-sutton-vane.html>