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Twist on tradition

By reinterpreting textile patterns with modern interiors in mind, Bedouin weavers in the UAE and Kuwait are keeping their heritage alive – and finding new marketing potential, says **Manisha G Harkins**

Since time immemorial the Bedu have decorated their homes with intricately woven and brightly coloured textiles. The work is painstakingly executed by Bedu women on simple, horizontal floor looms, from which the distinctive craft takes its name: sadu (or sadou, according to the dialect).

Although questions loom over the craft's survival, a modern approach is hinting at renewal. Notwithstanding the significant cultural implications, the design world's current trend for the craft-led means that a sadu revival is timely. Even if you're not searching for a supersized tent divider, beautifully woven pillows, floor cushions and laptop bags will all do nicely.

Whether in their original state or as updated designs, sadu textiles can look striking in a contemporary home: it's the way in which you display and integrate them with other furnishings. Even in the most traditional of examples, "the straight lines, simplicity, vibrancy, beautiful colours and proportions of the textiles lend themselves to modern interpretation", says Dr Keireine Canavan, a programme director of textiles at Cardiff School of Art & Design, University of Wales Institute (UWIC), who recently completed a nine-month sabbatical in Kuwait. In her modern Kuwait City apartment, she hangs sadu pieces horizontally, keeping the look contemporary but echoing the cloths' traditional Bedouin use.

Tanya Gyani, a Dubai-based interior designer, adds: "Sadu weaving today is appreciated almost solely for its traditional aesthetic as a souvenir. However, the weaving techniques, along with colour combinations, geometric patterns and motifs can be used as a base to design and create beautiful accessories for modern homes. The woven material can be used as a whole or as an accent or trim in combination with another material."

Gyani cites Pottery Barn, Crate and Barrel and Indigo Living as good examples of high-end home furnishing stores that use various handcraft concepts, redesigning and developing them into decorative products that are not souvenirs but great looking accent pieces.

Why shouldn't traditional Bedu weaving be equally adaptable?

From souqs across the Gulf, textiles in the trademark reds, blacks, oranges and creams, with slight regional variations, have long been available, but it's hard to be sure of their quality or provenance, let alone any tasteful updating of style. For the indelibly authentic, you need to know where to look.

At present, the revival is centred on two countries – the UAE and Kuwait – and, although production capacity is limited, you can buy directly from the source, thus being assured of a top quality sadu product.

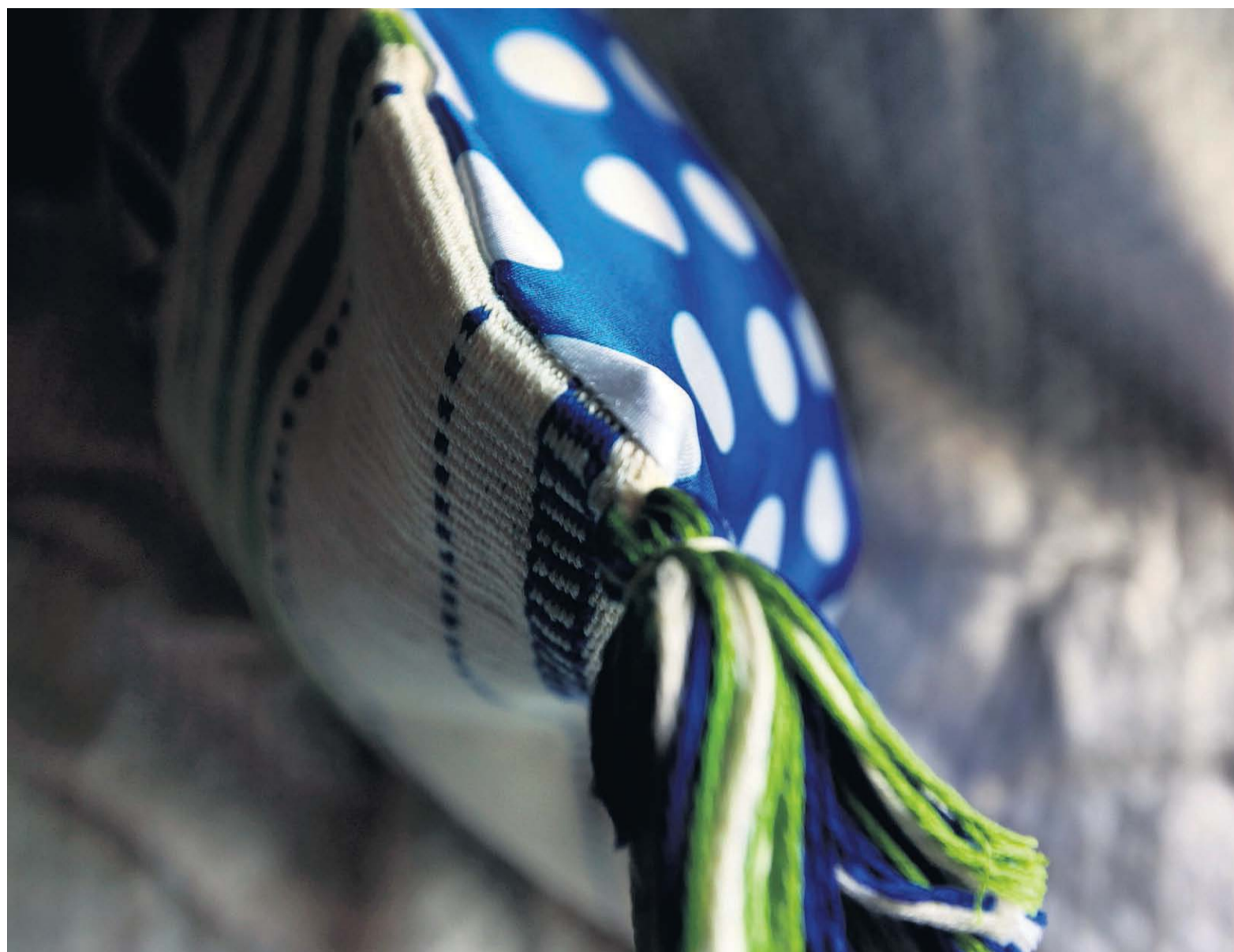
When the designs are interpreted and woven by one of the limited number of talented weavers still active, their allure is unassailable: artisanal treasures to be hung or displayed thoughtfully in the home.

In Abu Dhabi, Leila Ben-Gacem of the Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development has spearheaded the Sougha project in the emirate's Al Gharbia region, "an initiative aimed at preserving the local heritage through artisan development and product adaptation".

Her weavers' work was a hit among visitors to Liwa Date Festival, which ended this week, with many visitors buying pieces in new and unexpected colours and patterns.

As Canavan points out, sadu "conveys the Bedouin's rich heritage and instinctive awareness of natural beauty, with patterns and designs messaging the nomadic lifestyle, the desert environment and the emphasis of symmetry and balance due to the making process".

In Kuwait, there are two types of weaving – the complex sharjarah, or "free" patterns, done by a small number of master weavers, and the much simpler midkha or "repeat" patterns. In Al Gharbia, you'll find the equivalent: the revered shira (or shiara – a contraction of the word shajarah) and simpler weaves. Ben-



Above, some weavers in Al Gharbia who had previously given up their work have taken it up again and are mixing modern colours with traditional patterns, such as with this cushion. On the cover, Bedouin weavers in Sila and Ghayathi still make items using traditional looms. Delores Johnson / The National



Delores Johnson / The National



Delores Johnson / The National



Courtesy Keireine Canavan and Dr Ali al Najadah by permission of Sheikha Altaf Salem Al Ali Al Sabah, patron of Sadu House

Above, clockwise from top left: echoes of traditional patterns can be seen in a striped basket with camel leather handles; the sila pattern is given a monochrome look; in an image from the permanent collection at Sadu House, Keireine Canavan works with the master weaver Muteira; the Sadu floor weave emphasises symmetry and balance.

Gacem says that, among Emirati weavers, there are three prevalent repeat patterns: mthilia (ribs), throuss al kheil (horse teeth) or ain al ghadeer (eye of the water source).

In Al Gharbia, Ben-Gacem went from Sila to Ghayathi finding the best weavers and convincing them to resurrect their work, which some of them had given up. Initially incredulous about altering designs and colours, the women soon realised the market potential. "We really had to be selective, choosing only the most talented to re-train," says Ben-Gacem.

The results are significant. Geometry is already inherent in the weaving but, says Ben-Gacem,

"Their work is more digital, graphic. The colours are different and they are using coloured cotton as well as wool yarns." Some of the new products include a traditionally patterned but fetching monochrome shira rug, an exciting cushion cover woven in olive and indigo stripes, and a singular strip of motifs on a cream background, with tassels of mixed yarns. The back of the cushion is ablaze with blue and white polka dots – thoroughly modern, yet for the Bedouin, pleasingly familiar. Polka dots or "boutilla" are typically found on their jalabiya, as in the popular Emirati cartoon *Freej*.

In Kuwait, it's a different story, but the collaboration of Sheikha Altaf

Salem Al Ali Al Sabah, the patron of Sadu House museum, Dr Ali al Najadah and Canavan could also augur new paths for a fragile art form that's on what Canavan calls a "delicate timeline".

A trained weaver and former retailer of her own knitwear line, Canavan's passion for ancient weaving practices is juxtaposed by her in-depth knowledge of contemporary design. Recently the Kuwait Naval Force commissioned her to create modern designs for a shajarah panel for London's Royal Defence Academy based on both traditional and new symbols. She worked closely with the master weaver, Muteira al Thafeere, for

where to find it

Sougha products

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Sadu House

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Zeri

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whom some of the designs were totally unfamiliar, suggesting possible new directions for an ancient tribal art form.

Sharing numerous photos of exquisitely woven textiles from the Permanent Collection at Sadu House, Canavan stresses that these too can be interpreted in modern ways. There's an "earring" design with sharjarah, with its triangles, zigzag and crisp black-on-cream elements; the repeating pyramids of the Uweirjan pattern combined with sharjarah, which "has real possibilities for a modern design interpretation into printed or woven textiles in fine cottons or silks, for a completely different feel and

use". Although Canavan's focus in Kuwait is academic – recording and helping to preserve age-old techniques that are fast disappearing – she is also a consultant to Zeri, a young Kuwaiti design company.

According to its founder, Laila al Hamad, "Like zeri – the gold or silver thread that brightens traditional garments, often used in the region – the company is seeking to cast Gulf heritage in a new light by modernising craft design and uses and re-integrating those into the everyday lives of people. Zeri draws inspiration from traditional handicrafts and traditions: Bedouin weaving, incense burning and palm basketry, among others."

Zeri is in the process of launching a collection of high quality, contemporary home wares that will include textile-based items and other accessories. Excitingly, Canavan and al Hamad are also combining a project with UWIC final-year students to create modern design ideas based upon traditional Sadu motifs and patterns.

Back in Al Gharbia, rethinking designs for a sophisticated market wasn't easy initially, since the Bedouin women were accustomed to their own traditions. Often, it was a case of paring down original designs and colours or extracting one or two elements of a pattern to achieve a contemporary look. Ben-Gacem worked with Yaza Hussain, a product development consultant commissioned jointly by the Khalifa Fund and Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage. Hussain was ideal for the project: a former Conran Shop buyer who designed the company's textile collections, she is about to establish her own brand.

"Everyone was at different levels, so we did very visual, hands-on colour training. I also created very simple drawings but worked with each weaver – drawing by their side – showing them paper, fabric, the formation of design – very physical. I saw amazing progress: initially they would use every single colour they could think of, as in original tribal work, but they grew to understand the importance of sometimes using just three. Now there's better finishing and an eagerness to perfect what they've learnt."

She sees this as a great start, with tremendous potential for new designs, colours and products as the project expands.

Elsewhere, there are parallels. Ben-Gacem worked in her native Tunisia to improve the skills of artisans, including weavers, so they could gain access to the international home design market. "I worked with Bedouins in Tunisia, and the patterns, motifs, style are almost the same as in Al Gharbia. As opposed to Berbers, who do not do sadu weaving, the Tunisian Bedouins [many of whom are Arab] are restricted by the types of patterns that can be achieved on the floor loom. There's a great similarity between their motifs and those here in the UAE."

In Yemen, Dhuha Awad runs an independent project called Edat Shams: updating local crafts, including textiles such as futah, kashidah, shabakah and shawls. Although the designs still need a contemporary edge, the seedlings are there.

What of the future for sadu textiles? "I think the concentration on the type of materials, the colours and moving on to simpler forms is essential," says Hussain. "There are endless possibilities and if you want to continue on the contemporary home interior product level, you need to have that foundation and the availability of appropriate materials right from the beginning. It's also about simplifying designs – you don't have to have every single detail in one piece. You take parts of it – as I did with one shira item. It's about extracting those forms and turning them into something else. The skill and eagerness are evident; it's about helping the weavers to do it."

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