

2011

## Traditional Weaving Skills

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Inscribed on UNESCO's List  
of Intangible Cultural Heritage  
in Need of Urgent Safeguarding

# Al-Sadu

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## Introduction

Al-Sadu or Sadu, is one of the traditional crafts and embroideries that Emirati women have been practising since ancient times to fulfil the basic needs of the Bedouin people, nomadic dwellers in the desert, and to provide the raw materials essential for this form of weaving, namely camel fur, goat hair and sheep wool.

Al-Sadu means embroidery, or a traditional form of weaving, which is much like other handicrafts that rely on tools and raw materials in the domestic environment. A traditional practice is the creation of a unique form of housing, known as the Bayt Al-She`r (house of hair), was in the form of a long, low, black tent made of goat haircloth. Furniture is also created in a similar manner, including blankets, carpets, pillows and cushions. They adorn their camels and decorate their saddles and belts, and set them forth in exquisite shapes and colours.

With its diverse designs, decorations, and bright colours, Al-Sadu has created a heritage-based traditional art form in which Emirati creativity is reflected in the most beautiful ways. It is considered one of the handicrafts to have provided the materials needed for the production of soft furnishings and decorative accessories for camels and horses, as well as traditional furnishings.

In addition, it has developed over time to produce traditional products with advanced and innovative techniques and embellishments. Thus the emergence of the significant role played by the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi, in having Al-Sadu, a tradition in need of preservation, inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in November 2011.



## Process

Al-Sadu handicraft has long been renowned in Emirati society, perhaps being as ancient as the nomadic Arab people. It is said to be an ancient tribal weaving craft and one of the most prominent activities of women in economic life, as well as a visible example of adaptation and creativity.

The first stage of the Al-Sadu process commences with shearing wool, cutting goats' hair and collecting fur from camels. The wool is then cleaned, prepared and sorted according to colour and length, before being blown and shaken to rid it of any plants, thorns, dust or soil. It is then combed and cleaned with a special tool. Next follows the second stage, when it is cleaned three or more times with hot or cold water, with the addition of clay, ash, soap or special Al-Sadu powder, as well as other cleaning materials known in olden times, although today more modern detergents are used. Then the wool is spread over ropes, the house of hair, or on mats or rugs for two or more days.

In the third stage, the women begin to spin the wool or hair, weaving it into solid threads. They usually do this in the tents, where each one puts the spun wool under her right arm or on her chest. They then prepare the wool with their left hand, at a distance of one foot, and tie it to the bottom end of the spinning screw, pushing it onto the hook fixed to the upper part of the spindle.

Then each woman lifts her left knee while sitting, positioning the lower end of the spindle on her knee, and then winding the spindle's handle firmly by quickly pushing her hand out. The spindle quickly revolves in the air as she grips it in her right hand with the wool wound on the spindle, with the wool being pulled tightly around the lower part of the spindle head.

In the fourth stage, the yarns are dyed with delightful colours using local plant extracts available in the desert environment, such as henna, turmeric, saffron, cactus and the indigo plant. This phase ends with the stretching of the dyed yarns to dry under the sun.

The fifth and final stage is where the weaving is carried out according to the chosen design and purpose. This process is usually performed by one or two women who exchange the yarn between them. One of them sits with a jack, while the other uses a warp-faced plain weave. This weaving tool is called the Al-Sadu tool. In other countries, it is known as a loom. This traditional loom or textile machine is made of palm or jujube wood, and is used to tighten threads at the beginning of the Al-Sadu process. In fact, a number of looms are normally used to save effort and time in order to produce the required quantity on special occasions, such as weddings.







## Patterns and symbols

The most important feature of traditional Al-Sadu weaving in the United Arab Emirates is the appealing and alluring value of the textiles, replete with decorations, symbols, shapes and inscriptions that reflect the nomadic Bedouin environment. The decorative units of Al-Sadu represent simple geometric shapes, the undulations of grasslands and sand. It may reflect many environmental elements, for instance palm trees and flowers; aspects of religious and social life, such as coffee utensils; and other household tools, Qur'anic verses, images of mosques and some animals that have special status, like camels, sheep, falcons and some desert reptiles. Moreover, the names of some tribes are added to the works of art as, the clans and tribes represent a great source of pride for Arabs.

The artistic weaver creates these decorative patterns through intertwining, overlapping, symmetry and congruence. Although these decorative designs and patterns occasionally vary between tribes and regions, particularly in terms of decorative unit names or types, or the blending of thread colours, they are still analogous in most ways, and in their connotations. They embody trends, attitudes, beliefs and social phenomena. For instance, a chain with overlapping rings symbolises the unity and cohesion between tribe members. In addition, dates may be used to denote specific events. The most frequently-used designs of Al-Sadu are as follows: the masters' design, tree design, Al Owerayan pattern, spotted leather skin, ammunition passer, grains, Asnan Al Khail pattern (the square shape of horse teeth) and scissors. The grains pattern, for example, consists of long strips, often white in colour, containing a set of points resembling crop grains, whereas the background of the leaders' pattern is sable. As for the inscription in the centre, it pivots on differently-coloured triangles stacked together.



