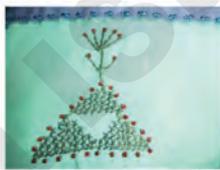


Trapped by *Tatriiz*: Bedouin Handicrafts and Marginalization in South Sinai



Abstract

Recent decades have transformed the significance of hand embroidery and beadwork (*tatriiz*) for Bedouin women. Once a valued skill used to convey cultural meaning, especially marital status, through costume, it has now become a commodity whose benefits are unequally distributed. Marketed by successful projects, it may be a welcome provider of independent funds for women and improved family income. Equally it can lead to demeaning encounters, as women set aside cultural norms to sell goods made with declining skill. Much depends on the quality of support offered to the Bedu by projects purporting to help them, since the remoteness and underdevelopment of their region leaves them at a competitive disadvantage. Ensuring equality for the Bedu has not been a feature of Egyptian development policy, and the emphasis on preserving traditional handicrafts risks cutting Bedu off from mainstream development and confining them to a “traditional” past.

Keywords: South Sinai, Bedouin, development, handicrafts, marginalization, weaving, embroidery

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Introduction

In much of the Middle East, the modernizing projects of authoritarian governments have made it impossible for Bedu to maintain the mobile way of life that formerly helped define them.¹ However, South Sinai Bedu have retained something of their pre-development agropastoral livelihoods. A combination of herding and horticulture formerly provided a family of six to eight people, through home consumption or sales, with around ten months' subsistence per year (Perevolotsky et al. 1989: 163). Women played a vital productive role in animal husbandry, taking to pasture the small livestock that they owned in their own right, and dealing with produce from their flocks and small mountain gardens. Men contributed wages earned by guiding travelers, transporting goods, charcoal burning, and smuggling, as well as food procured by horticulture, hunting, and fishing. The proportion of time allocated to these activities varied with economic, political, and climatic factors (Marx 1980, 2003). However, very little paid work ever existed for women.

Major changes to this pattern were introduced during the Israeli

occupation of Sinai following the 1967 Six Day War, later progressing at dramatic speed under Egyptian rule. Today, widespread sedentarization means that agropastoralism no longer provides a viable livelihood or even a safety net. Typical flock size has shrunk from eighty to six,² and everyone now depends on paid work. Tourism is now the most significant Bedouin livelihood—usually low-paid, casual camel guiding. The well-documented view of Bedu as uneducated and backward means that only culturally and ethnically distinct Egyptian workers are employed in Sinai's glitzy resort hotels. In areas remote from tourist routes, work is completely absent, leading Bedu to pursue the illegal growing or smuggling of narcotics (Hobbs, Grainger, and Bastawisi 1998; ICG 2007). At least half the working population lives on around or below US\$1 per person per day (Gilbert 2011). Women's role is increasingly one of consumption, not production: the influx of outsiders into Sinai means that their menfolk largely confine them indoors, in the cinder block houses in which most now live. Nonetheless, most deeply value their Bedouin identity and go to great lengths to maintain core

aspects of their traditions: many still cultivate gardens, and almost everyone keeps a few animals.

The reliance of men on insecure work means that women's handcraft production has assumed great importance. It is the single biggest provider of skilled work in the St. Katherine Protectorate area, which covers over 1,738 square miles (4,500 km²) in South Sinai's central massif (Gilbert 2011). It allows women to maintain traditional skills, earn their own money, and work at home where they can maintain their modesty as well as their family: an apparently ideal arrangement. But as I shall argue, handcrafts in South Sinai are not always as ideal as they seem.

Local Materials and Crafts: Traditional Uses³

Wool

Wool, arguably, is the most important raw material for artisan production in South Sinai. In the wadis women still card, spin, wind, and weave their own wool using simple handlooms. There is no tradition of making woolen clothes; an apparently odd omission given the freezing winter climate. Laboratory analysis has shown that it has too short a staple and is mostly too coarse to spin into yarn suitable for knitting or weaving as cloth.⁴ However, it has other traditional uses.

Camel wool is spun and woven, along with goat hair, to make tent panels known as *shogga*; the narrow construction of the crude wooden handlooms means the width of each panel is limited, and several may be sewn together to

form a panel deep enough to form a full-sized tent. The panels themselves are not decorated with anything but simple stripes, but colored tassels and woven braids are hung or wrapped around tent poles to provide color for celebrations. Production is now limited to a few older women; and with far fewer people now mobile, and fertilizer bags a readily available substitute, a fully woven *beit shahr* (wool home) is increasingly rare.

The majority of wool produced is sheep's wool, generally used to make light-colored rugs with contrasting stripes in black goat's hair. (More colorful rugs are also made from unraveled yarn recycled from old sweaters.) This type of weaving has a future, since rugs are ubiquitous and essential to protect the ankles of people sitting cross-legged on Sinai's vicious granite gravel. Larger houses generally incorporate an outside courtyard or *mag'ad* to receive guests; while the simpler kind often have no flooring at all. All require rugs, or *mafarish*, to sit on. Most households weave their own rugs, or a competent weaver will provide them for the neighboring houses of her extended family group, or *firik*. The weaving is unsophisticated and the products heavy enough to withstand hard use. They are not frequently sold. Ongoing local use should keep this local weaving current for the foreseeable future.

Skilled weavers occasionally make large, heavy, striped woolen bags (to be carried from the forehead or shoulder) like a smaller version of a camel bag, traditionally used for transporting flour.

However the spectacular multicolored woven camel bags, tassels, and harnesses that adorn South Sinai's camels are no longer locally produced but brought from North Sinai.

The need to transport and store goods and provisions led to the use of cured goatskins (*girba*), treated with different herbs according to their purpose, for carrying water, making butter, and storing dates over the winter (Zalat and Gilbert 2008: 48); and to the weaving of palm baskets, particularly for carrying and storing dates. Both crafts are now in steep decline as modern plastic jerry cans and shopping bags replace traditional goods.

Tatriiz: Embroidery and Beadwork

Embroidery in South Sinai has traditionally been endowed with cultural meaning, color and pattern being used to convey significant information. The prime example is women's dress. Until recently, every older woman wore the hand-embroidered dress, belt, and veils she had worked herself, in designs often particular to her tribe. In the 1970s, Smadar Lavie (1990: 127–33) documented the Mzeini system: young girls wore loose colored dresses with long shawls (*hirga*), which were not embroidered so as not to attract shameful attention. Older girls would veil their faces with a short black *lathma*, sparsely embroidered with patterns, sequins, and white beads. They wore the same dresses as their younger sisters, but covered with full-length black sleeveless tunics, belted at the waist. A white belt

would signify a girl who had reached puberty but was still a virgin. A young married woman would wear a belt embroidered and beaded in red. Her face veil (*nugba/niqab*) would be saffron yellow, covered in metal spangles, and supported by embroidered and beaded braid. Beneath her veil she would wear an embroidered *malab*, or head cover, and over it, especially at holiday seasons, a richly embroidered and sequined *hirga*.

In other tribes, a wedding dress would be embroidered with panels exclusively in shades of red; whereas a widow could be

recognized by her somber dress of black cloth embroidered entirely in dark blue. Dresses were decorated in a variety of styles according to tribe.⁵ Most worked cross-stitch in geometric and floral patterns in cotton on a black ground, although some types (I have seen Tarabiin examples from the north-east highlands) might cover the base cloth, tapestry-style, in colored cottons or wools. Birds, flowers, and hearts were favored motifs everywhere. Jebeliya women from the St. Katherine area still use a quite distinct range of cursive plant-based designs usually worked in chain, satin, or running



Figure 1

Examples of South Sinai Bedouin embroidery, including natural Jebeliya motifs (top) and examples of geometric and leaf motif Tarabiin cross-stitch (below). All these examples predate handicraft projects and the influence of modern marketing. Photos by the author.

stitch (Figure 1). The investment of time and skill involved meant that the dresses would be made to last for years; worn panels were carefully replaced and frayed edges strengthened, often using gaudy offcuts from modern fabrics. Until ten or fifteen years ago, any visit to a family with adult female members would enable a visitor to admire her handworked dress and veils (often holding her hair in place in an arrangement of braids or bands which also signified her marital status⁶). Traditional costume is now rarely found except among elderly women, replaced everywhere by colorful printed *jalabiya* (long, loose tunics worn unbelted indoors, and beneath an *abaya* for outdoor wear).

Aside from personal adornment there appears to have been little scope in the past for decorating the few articles made from finer textiles. The most commonly embroidered items were the sugar bags used to safeguard this valued resource when traveling. It is these

that have become the focus of the handicraft projects I discuss below (Figure 2). Original examples display different patterns and colors according to their provenance; they are becoming increasingly unusual. The constant use of cushions in Bedouin homes might have led covers to be embroidered, but the only examples I have seen have been modern ones made for tourist and expat markets. Quilts (*dilga*) are made from a patchwork of old cotton pieces, but they are usually more functional than decorative.

Handcraft Production Today: Liberation or Commodification?

Bedouin embroidery has changed over two or three decades from a cultural signifier to an economic commodity. The absence of other work opportunities has made this trade-off unavoidable: most women take a pragmatic view of the accommodations required to negotiate modern life. In some cases women judge the exchange

worthwhile, welcoming their restored ability to contribute to the household economy, and often to retain a small independent income themselves. However, such benefits are unequally distributed. In the central massif, donor or other funding has established a number of projects, enabling women to earn a small regular income. But especially at the coast, where there are no projects to ensure quality and organize sales, too many women find themselves plying inferior goods directly to tourists. Sitting ignored on the ground with an array of often unsaleable items, and de facto exposed to outsiders, they inhabit a cultural no man's land: they have lost their skills, the meaning of their former craft, and transgressed formerly inviolable cultural boundaries.

***Tatriiz* in St. Katherine**

There are two principal handicraft projects operating out of St. Katherine. The first is run as a



Figure 2

(Left) Beaded embroidery made for the tourist market by handicraft projects in St. Katherine. (Right) An example of a traditional Jebeliya sugar bag on which the products are based. Photos by the author.

charitable venture by monks from its ancient Greek Orthodox monastery. Advice on style and finish is provided by a local Bedouin project manager to the women, who produce work at home. He provides materials, collects finished work, and pays producers by the piece using revenue from ongoing sales. He gave up a lucrative job with a safari company to run the project, which is less well paid but—he told me—more personally rewarding. Any operational surplus from the project is returned to the community, providing blankets for the elderly in winter and so on. Women from several tribes are employed, and the output varies in style from modern to more traditional. The quality of the work rarely matches that of its major rival; however, the project benefits from being able to sell directly to tourists and pilgrims who visit the monastery all year round, enabling it to provide a regular income for its workers at more generous rates than its competitor.

The second project has a much higher profile. FanSina (“Art of Sinai”) was initially established by the St. Katherine Protectorate during its EU-funded start-up phase (1996–2003), as part of a series of measures designed to compensate the community for the costs that conservation might impose (Hobbs, Grainger, and Bastawisi 1998). Structurally a privately owned business, the organization initially purported to work as a cooperative owned by local stakeholders. FanSina has been run since its inception by a Jebeliya woman, the only one to have achieved a public role in the area. Over a period of

ten years, some 300 women have been employed on a piecework basis, working at home with imported materials supplied by the company. The concept was to use the considerable needlework skills of Bedouin women, adapting traditional designs and colors with the help of an external consultant to create products in tune with the tastes of Western tourists.⁷ Initial efforts focused on traditional sugar bags; the range then expanded to include more saleable designs, transforming traditional items into a range of modern pieces with tastefully color-matched embroidery, which were lined in shiny fabric and finished to a high standard. They are pretty and colorful, and have immediate appeal to visitors on holiday and in the mood to spend. Whilst the company’s publicity stresses the creative freedom of its workers, the products now created meet quality standards much stricter than traditional techniques produced, and have a distinctive and fairly homogeneous style. In 2006 FanSina obtained a second tranche of EU support from the South Sinai Regional Development Program (SSRDP). This further investment, coupled with ongoing practical support from a UK-based charity, enabled it to expand its work, build a sales and training center, and pursue more sophisticated marketing. This has brought it far greater commercial success than any other local concern. FanSina’s prime market is the tourists who visit St. Katherine. Very little of their work is on sale in Sinai’s coastal resorts, but some finds its way into Cairo outlets geared to expats.

Both these projects illustrate how women can use their skills to augment their income if given proper support. However, without that support or with the wrong advice, women can find themselves exploited and demeaned, their hopes and efforts to build a better life for their families wasted. Another EU-funded project was more typical of short-term development ventures in South Sinai. The Sinai Productive Woman in Feiran Valley project, also funded by the SSRDP and led by Bedu, intended to improve the economic climate by training girls in Wadi Feiran—where there are no jobs for men or women—to make handicrafts for tourist markets. Girls were to be recruited for one year, trained, and production established with the intention of selling to tourists. However, production focused on large rugs woven from heavy-duty nylon, and bags and purses crocheted from unappealing nylon thread, fastened with cheap fittings. It was all too clear that without external support, project staff lacked the experience needed to run it sustainably. It closed after a year having brought little more than disappointment to those involved.

Ineffective development projects come and go, in Sinai as elsewhere. What remains constant is the persistence of people's efforts to feed their families. In areas with no externally funded projects, women produce variants on traditional beadwork for sale to tourists. People's arrival at any beach or oasis in South Sinai, however remote, will shortly be followed by a woman bearing her bundle of handwork. She will lay out her goods on a scarf on the sand, and sit—often in silence—

waiting for someone to notice her. Often she is completely ignored. Sometimes her work is well designed and made and attracts attention. Increasingly, however, it is an amalgam of local work and pieces mass-produced in China—it being cheaper and easier to buy finished goods for resale than to make the intricate beadwork pieces herself. Too often the bundle consists of generic items obtainable anywhere in Egypt. Increasingly, success depends less on her needlework skills than her sales patter, requiring a direct approach to unknown people—a shameful departure from former Bedouin norms. These sales pitches may provide opportunities for women to profit from their skills; but too often they are dehumanizing, with women desperate to sell sitting mute on the ground, while tourists glance from on high at their unattractive goods and then turn away.

Handicrafts in their modern incarnation, then, bring mixed blessings to South Sinai's women. At best, they enable skilled women to reassert their centrality to the household economy while maintaining a modesty that remains vital to their family's prestige. At worst, they remove women from the locus of their productive former role as wives and household managers, leading them to hawk in public the unwanted products of a waning and meaningless craft.

Issues and Challenges

I have explored some of the direct impacts, positive and negative, of the commodification of aspects of Bedouin life. However, this

commodification has also produced at least two important instrumental effects.

The first is that handicraft projects tend to reinforce the growing inequality of Bedouin society. While claims for the egalitarian nature of Bedouin society are now controversial, the simplicity of a material culture geared to constant mobility made it hard, prior to development, to tell rich from poor at first sight. That has now changed. Most Bedu live around or below the globally recognized poverty line, but some have done well from commercial development. Almost all of those with state-of-the-art mobiles, good boots, and sound vehicles work in tourism. The presence of tourists is the prerequisite of economic activity; in most of South Sinai, there simply is no other work. To be successful, it follows that handicraft projects must locate themselves where their target market can find them. As a result, while a few women from further afield are recruited by the projects, most live within reach of St. Katherine. The projects consequently tend to supplement the household income of families who already have working breadwinners. Very few men of working age in St. Katherine lack employment opportunities, even if casual and low-paid. By contrast, twice as many people outside the village lack employment, rising to nine times as many men unemployed in remoter wadis (Gilbert 2011: 18). It is these families who most need the additional help of a project; but the distance and difficulty of reaching them means they miss out.

Women in the desert bring out bundles of work stained by dust; work that speaks poignantly of the hope in which it was made, spoiled by years of waiting for a single buyer.

A second pitfall awaits Bedu who hope to sell aspects of Bedouin experience: thoughtlessly optimistic funders generate Bedouin failure as surely as those who predict it from the start. There are great risks attached to external development funding carelessly delivered. Without proper knowledge of the starting position of most Bedu, and long-term management support to develop their skills, funding can sink a Bedouin project. The most successful, FanSina, has flourished with the advice of an external consultant; however, its success has proved double-edged. Technical advice on production has not been matched by management support. Women have long complained about the rates the project pays them. According to its management, women fail to understand the costs that justify the substantial gap between what they are paid and what their work is sold for. These complaints have tarnished the project's local reputation.⁸ The personal success of the project's leader—who should be a role model for other women— attracts mixed reactions from both genders. The project is currently subject to an acrimonious lawsuit by stakeholders in the original cooperative, which more hands-on support could arguably have averted. As far as community relations are concerned, FanSina's success has been bought very dear.⁹

Ongoing external advice is arguably critical to a start-up Bedouin venture. Local people do not lack skills or business acumen, but their remote location, poor-quality (or nonexistent) education, lack of infrastructure, and inexperience of Western norms combine to hamstring their efforts. The PA Consulting Group (200) analyzed the decline of the Al Karm eco-lodge, also set up by the EU-funded St. Katherine Protectorate to promote sustainable development through back-country tourism. The Protectorate initially provided start-up costs, marketing materials, promotion, and training for the Bedouin manager and staff. However, at the end of EU funding the Bedouin partners were left to their own devices. Without language skills, Internet access, transport links, or even a phone line, it was impossible for the business to succeed. "Local populations with limited access to formal training or education" the consultants comment, "cannot be expected to have the management skills to take over and run a commercial business without a period of long-term 'hand-holding'."

The EU-funded Wadi Feiran handicrafts project, like Al Karm, needed long-term support but failed to receive it. The Bedouin project leader was quite unqualified to run it. With no experienced design, marketing, or sales support the project had no hope of succeeding. No market research was done: no one knew that tourist visas did not permit access to their area, and no retail outlets had been established in tourist venues. When I visited the

project a month before its closure and bought items as a goodwill gesture, I was its first and only customer.

Ill-conceived projects like this one hand responsibility to Bedu regardless of their structural capacity to succeed. In this situation Bedu are not competing on the same terms as better-educated Egyptian tour operators or entrepreneurs; it can be argued that—wittingly or otherwise—they are set up to fail. Their inevitable failure reinforces the dominant narrative of Bedu as incapable of effective work, justifying their ongoing exclusion from the job market. The Governor of South Sinai, asked at a recent public meeting to provide jobs for Bedu, retorted: “Jobs for Bedouin? How am I supposed to create jobs for Bedouin? What can *they* do?”¹⁰

Trapped by *Tatriiz*

No official data are collected on Egypt’s Bedouin population, and their needs as a distinct social group are therefore not recognized. This is nowhere more clear than in the Human Development Report (UNDP 2005) setting out Egypt’s strategy for tackling poverty and securing economic development to 2017. The plan tracks progress against Millennium Development Goals using human development indicators that fail entirely to reflect Bedouin experience. The Bedu are mentioned only once in the whole report; not in the main text, but in a caption to a colorful photograph of FanSina’s project leader (2005: 11). The caption hails the success of the Protectorate in providing women with employment in handicrafts, thus improving economic prospects

for the whole community. Many communities in South Sinai still lack every aspect of human development: education, healthcare, safe drinking water, sanitation, and electricity. Maternal and perinatal mortality rates are uncommonly high. Half the working population lives in poverty and a quarter of rural children have no schools (Gilbert 2011).¹¹ But all is not lost—the Protectorate has given these colorful folk a handicraft project. By presenting conservation as a change agent, and leaving the rest to “trickle-down,” the government can argue that “Something is being done.” The Bedu are thus locked into ineffective development; while, in the guise of conserving their culture, their marginalization as primitive, “traditional” people is perpetuated. As long as they maintain their traditions, their development needs can safely be ignored. Real jobs are not needed as long as the women keep stitching.

Conclusion

The handicrafts with which Bedouin women used to display their skill and status have brought them mixed blessings in recent years. Those within reach of St. Katherine’s two successful projects generally welcome the opportunity to be paid for their skills, even while complaining of being underpaid. Moreover, the training and support of the projects keep their skills current and marketable, in contrast with women in the remoter desert, whose unused skills deteriorate and who have no market. These women lose out both ways, losing both the cultural meaning of their work and the

income that makes the sacrifice worthwhile.

It seems clear that the support of a well-run project is an important factor in securing positive outcomes; but creating the conditions for success depends on donors and government recognizing both Bedouin potential and their need for support. Full recognition of the extent of difficulties imposed by conditions in Sinai, its lack of infrastructure and inadequate human development, is rare. Bedu tend either to be overlooked or overestimated: however great someone’s potential, they have to learn to walk before they are expected to run. Prevailing discourse in Egypt reflects a view that since Bedu will never go anywhere, there is no need to teach them to walk. External donors—perhaps not wishing to patronize—assume that all differences of education and background can be brushed aside (requiring Bedu, for example, to download and submit applications to the SSRDP in English). An approach to development that recognizes Bedouin capacity while acknowledging their needs is long overdue.

Finally, while retaining elements of material culture is important to identity, overemphasis on “preserving Bedouin tradition” distorts perceptions of Bedu today. As in any group, some have adapted more readily than others to modernization. Some hark back to a “golden past”—*zaman! zaman!*—while others enjoy the convenience of modern comforts. This does not make them any less Bedouin. A constant emphasis on “tradition,”

equating Bedouin identity with the past, absolves government of its duty to consider the Bedu as contemporary citizens and address their needs today. Development practitioners and policymakers alike must recognize this risk—or Bedouin handcraft projects will continue to perpetuate an unequal status quo.

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Notes

1. In what follows I designate this pre-development way of life as “traditional”—a mobile tribal lifestyle governed by customary law, before Western modernism required constant renegotiation of what it means to be Bedu. The term “Bedu” itself—meaning “people of the desert”—is the preferred name by which South Sinai Bedu describe themselves. I use “Bedouin” as an adjective.
2. Thus diminishing women’s independent assets; formerly women held wealth as “gold and goats” (Zalat and Gilbert 2008: 43).
3. The information in this section has been compiled by the author over twenty years of periodic observation, including five years of research and ongoing residence in St. Katherine since 2007.
4. A pilot project run by the Community Foundation for South Sinai (www.southsinaifoundation.org) demonstrated that it was suitable for felting, a technique previously unknown in South Sinai, and plans are underway for developing products from it.
5. Examples of traditional South Sinai costume can be seen in the Joe Alon Center (a museum of Bedouin culture) in the northeast Negev near Beersheva, Israel; but sadly not in South Sinai itself.
6. Since maintaining the *gossa*—the “horn” of braided hair worn by married women—entails dousing it in camel or goat urine to stiffen it, it’s perhaps unsurprising that the fashion is dying out.
7. The consultant who worked with the project to refine its output handpicked the best workers, who now provide exquisitely made modern items decorated with Jebeliya motifs for his upmarket Cairo shop—a further degree of separation from the work’s origins (Mohammed Amin, personal communication).
8. A researcher working with Tarabiin women told me in 2011 that they wanted a handcraft cooperative, but “would not trust FanSina to run it.” It has been suggested to me that the monastery project escapes similar censure both by paying better rates, and by returning its profits to the community.
9. In 2013 FanSina folded, with serious economic impacts on hundreds of women and families.

10. Meeting with NGOs held at Governorate office, el Tur, November 2011 (M. K. al Jebaali, personal communication).
11. This reflects my own research—the official version shows comprehensive or adequate service provision in each area quoted.

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