



Seminar for Arabian Studies 2016 Paper Abstracts

Special Session: Textiles and Personal Adornment in the Arabian Peninsula. Chair: Aisa Martinez

Introduction

Aisa Martinez

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Aisa Martinez will give a short introduction to the special session and provide an overview of research on dress, textiles and adornment in the Middle East. A major panel or set of papers regarding the subject has not been presented in London since a Conference at SOAS on 'Languages of Dress in the Middle East' (1997) with its accompanying publication. This year's Special Session at the 50th Seminar for Arabian Studies will address three main themes:

- (1) technology and techniques of regional jewellery and textile embellishments;
- (2) regional and national identity through dress in the contemporary Gulf (UAE and Oman); and
- (3) (non-garment) textile production within the context of cultural heritage in the contemporary Gulf (Kuwait and Oman).

We hope that by bringing together established and emerging scholars and practitioners of dress, textiles and personal adornment in the Arabian Peninsula, this special session will re-ignite academic interest in the subject and serve as a basis for similar future gatherings, collaborations and publications.

Making his Mark: Omani Silver Jewellery in the British Museum Collection

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In recent years the British Museum has acquired a substantial collection of silver jewellery and weaponry from across the Sultanate of Oman. A portion of this collection formed the basis of the Museum's 2011 exhibition, 'Adornment and Identity: Jewellery and Costume from Oman'. This assemblage of over 600 handcrafted silver objects of adornment represents a well-established tradition of jewellery making that can be traced back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. This tradition continued into the mid-twentieth century, but has now largely gone out of fashion due to

contemporary tastes for gold jewellery throughout the region. The British Museum's collection attests to a wide variety of silversmithing techniques and a high level of craftsmanship that is not extensively documented and is in danger of vanishing in present-day Oman. Scientific investigation of 1950s Omani jewellery from this collection and of ethnographic artefacts has helped to characterize and better understand the manufacturing techniques and materials used. All the objects appear to have been made from hand-worked sheets and wires of high-purity silver, with the parts assembled using zinc- and copper-rich hard silver solders. Various finishes were created by gilding, chasing and punching, so that each piece of jewellery is the product of complex and skilful craftsmanship.

Keywords:

Embroidery in the Arabian Peninsula

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When talking about embroidery and that from the Arab world in particular, people often think directly of Palestinian embroidery and the use of the cross stitch, but 'Arab embroidery' is a far more complex subject with respect to its history, appearance and technical applications.

The talk will cover two questions. What is embroidery (briefly: a decorative textile technique using a needle)? And secondly: is there such a thing as 'Arab embroidery'? The latter question is simple to answer/ The answer is no because within the Arab world there are over 100 discernible styles of embroidery, so which one should be classed as the Arab form?

In addition, the presentation will present a visual survey of all the main types from the Arabian Peninsula. It will look at these items with respect to technique and stylistic considerations rather than the function of the embroidered items or their social/economic meanings.

Keywords: North Africa; Middle East; Arabian Peninsula; embroidery; decorative needlework

Back to Black? *Abaya* Culture, Identity, and Fashion in the United Arab Emirates

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The *abaya* ('*abāyah*), a modestly covering outer garment associated with Islamic culture and Arab Gulf women, has undergone a radical 'fashionising' process in recent years. This research proposes that fashion change is prevalent with dress perceived as traditional or ethnic, and engages with discourse that positions fashion not solely as a Western-centric phenomenon. Conspicuous consumption was connected with the leisure-class (Veblen 1899), and research on modernization in the region points to rapid accumulation of oil wealth and privilege lifestyle; in the case of the *abaya*, it was women moving into the world of work that accelerated style development. Since 2014, coloured *abayas* have flooded the market, intensifying debates around what is accepted as an *abaya*, and whether the *abaya* should attract attention through fashionable display. This paper

draws on ethnographical interviews with *abaya*-wearing women in the UAE, and examines historiographies of dress identities and attitudes to what Al-Qasimi (N) (2010) describes as ‘the *abaya*-as-fashion’. It evaluates the *abaya*’s current contribution to the UAE fashion system by exploring the effects of the *abaya*’s ‘fashionization’ on aspects of cultural identity, individualism, visibility and resistance. What does the *abaya* mean to those that wear it? Will women cyclically return ‘back to black’?

Keywords: *abaya*; fashion; cultural identity; visibility; United Arab Emirates

References

Al-Qasimi N. 2010. [reference needed]

Veblen 1899 [reference needed]

Wearing National Dress in the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah

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In this presentation, I argue that national dress wearing in the UAE can be seen as fashion. In a widespread scholarly meaning of ‘fashion’, indeed, it is what we do when we wish to be both unique and like others: fashion is the opportunity to be both individual and collective at the same time. By focusing on male Emirati youth in the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, the presentation proceeds in three steps. First, it provides a brief background for why, in the context of an intense immigration into the UAE, Emirati national dress has become an important collective symbol. Second, the presentation shows that collective, national meanings of national dress are likely to be widespread among Emirati male youth in the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah. National dress is seen as a pivotal national symbol. Third, however, and finally: I will show that collective meanings of national dress oscillate with individual presentations of self. Emirati national dress is also a question of everyday issues: matters such as vanity and wellbeing which are highly important but not necessarily of national significance in ordinary life. In conclusion, studying nationhood through fashion highlights the ambivalent character of national identity.

Keywords: national identity; fashion; youth; Ras al-Khaimah; United Arab Emirates

The Silent Language of Omani Dress

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The Centre of Omani Dress was established in 2006 by Julia al-Zadjali who was inspired to collect and conserve identifiable styles of dress in the Sultanate of Oman as it was apparent that these identities were rapidly disappearing across the country. Over the next ten years, working with some 25 volunteers, Julia developed the collection of more than 1,000 pieces which have all been conserved, labelled and are available for research.

This paper will introduce the Centre for Omani Dress, explore three pieces of dress identity – two female and one male and show how the distinct nature of dress is related not only to a geographical area but how each of the styles of dress are unique because of their technical construction, their embellishment and textile usage. The paper will also talk about the future research on the *khanjar*, the *mussar* and traditional cosmetics that will be undertaken by the Centre during the coming year.

The paper will use visual imagery to clarify the differences and similarities of dress identity and conclude by showing how the Centre for Omani Dress has captured, preserved and shared elements of Omani culture for future generations and the world around us.

Keywords: Centre for Omani Dress; *dishdashah*; *sarwal*; Oman; embellishment

Al-Sadu Tribal Weaving in Kuwait: lost meanings and future prospects

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Al-sadu is an ancient weaving craft that conveys elements of traditional Bedouin cultural heritage with tribal women weavers' aesthetic values, their manual dexterity and instinctive creative expressions of beauty. The significance of *al-sadu* weaving as a decorative craft is due not only to its importance as material culture of the Arabian Peninsula, but also because of the coding system embedded into the textiles.

Bedouins lived in large woven dessert tents called *bayt al-sha'ar* (house of hair), that were made from goat hair. Large tent dividing textiles or curtains were highly prized and patterned, and reveal the weaver's personal visual language, with decorative iconography, patterns and a lexicon of symbols messaging her nomadic story.

Drawing upon experience from an ongoing research study in Kuwait and Gulf coastal countries that has been ongoing since 2009, this paper will focus upon the traditional *al-sadu* technique, the tent dividing curtain and the interpretation of its woven symbols, motifs and patterns, to establish a wealth of meaning and communication based on the memories of a dwindling number of contemporary Bedouin weavers in Kuwait.

Keywords: *al-sadu*; weaving; tent dividing curtain; Bedouin; semiotic codes

Bedouin Weaving in Oman: A Story of Survival

Neil Richardson

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Spinning and weaving by Oman's Bedouin communities have proven to be surprisingly resilient. Through until the late 1980s, and following decades of decline in demand for their work, the craft had been forsaken by all but a handful of weavers. However, during the early 1990s, several initiatives gave encouragement and impetus to artisans and led to a resurgence of interest in the craft. There has since been a remarkable turnaround, and now a community of more than 300 skilled

spinners and weavers, mostly women, earn an income from the production of rugs and camel trappings. They are arguably the most skilled spinners and weavers in the Arab Peninsula.

Drawing on the author's first-hand experience, this paper explores the story of this remarkable survival and the factors that contributed to its resurgence. It examines the range of products made, the design elements incorporated, links to weaving communities in other Arab states, and how new materials, technologies and ideas are gradually being introduced and adopted. It considers the impact – positive and negative – of systems introduced to support Bedouin spinners and weavers, and Oman's craft communities in general. And it considers the future for the craft in a dramatically changing society

Keywords: weaving; spinning; Bedouin; camel trappings
