

**Visibility and Invisibility: The dilemmas facing ‘traditional craft’ workers in the contemporary context – Dr Sue Jones (Delivered to the Workshop, The Jordan Museum, Amman 24<sup>th</sup> Mar 2014)**

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**This Reflection** is mainly focused on the Bani Hamida Weaving Project in Jordan but as an example of the dilemmas facing craft workers. It is concerned with four aspects - their ‘traditional’ weaving, changes in their weaving since 1985, a comparison with other textile projects in Oman, Kuwait, Egypt and the Negev and finally reflecting on what this review can tell us about visibility and invisibility of craft workers – the theme of this section of the workshop.



**My personal links with the Jabal Bani Hamida women** and their weaving project in Jordan goes back to 1985 when I first visited Makawir at the start of an Income Generation project. I was working in Jordan on a large urban World Bank project and by chance was invited to see the rugs made when the women were given their first payment. I would visit the project, got to know the women and their families, started to do fieldwork and stayed with them in 1989/90. Eventually (after disruptions from the first Gulf War) I completed PhD research – a 20 year longitudinal study about the women and their weaving.

**Their traditional weaving**

The women – especially the group of younger weavers who have taken on the management of the project - can show and tell you far more than I could and you will have the chance to discuss the project with them on the field visit. This presentation highlights only some key features:



**Ground loom weaving**

This is ground loom weaving, of long lengths sewn together. Traditionally (mainly) women wove everything for their home – the tent itself, the floor covering and cushions. It is warp faced weaving, but could use weft twining as decoration, particularly on the Saha or dividing panel. The material used is mainly goat and sheep’s hair, though camel hair and even cotton can be used. They used any local resources – including the horn to beat down the wool and a simple wooden drop spindle. The loom is very simple, using local branches, stones or even breeze blocks or petrol cans. However a very simple loom means that the weaver requires great skill and strength to keep the tension.

**Since 1985**

By 1985 most of the families in this remote and isolated mountain area overlooking the Dead Sea – Jabal Bani Hamida – had settled. They no longer had large herds of goats and many of the men were employed in the army, travelling away to work. There were only about four older women that had some weaving skills. The area was identified as very poor and Save the Children USA, with support from HM Queen Noor and small funding from USAID, set up a series of initiatives to help – small loans to men for goats, a health programme for mothers and children, sponsoring school children and a weaving project to provide income and empower women. Only the weaving project, now run by the daughters of some of the original weavers, has survived.

Over the years there have been tremendous changes in the weaving project (set out in detail in S.Jones – Impact Assessment: Money in my Pocket)

Various institutions have helped this programme – Save the Children (1985), Jordan Society for Development (1996) and now it is under the umbrella of Jordan River Foundation (1998), the NGO established by HM Queen Rania al Abdullah in 1995. Various donor agency funders have supported it - for example USAID, Canadian aid and Austrian funding.



While the project began (and was supported) as a social empowerment project for women, it has had to become self sufficient and try to develop as a business. The weaving project has searched for a market niche in a changing market, affected by conflicts, inflation, changes in demand, other competitors and reversals in tourism in the Middle East. To do this all sorts of technical and design changes have been tried. These

include:

- Changes in Production – using metal looms, trying upright looms
- Changes in resources– importing cheaper, cleaned, higher quality wool from New Zealand to reduce the huge water costs for cleaning local wool.
- The regularisation of production – from processing the wool by their homes to working at Dyeing and Spinning Centres.



- Changes in design – In the early days of the project they used traditional designs in new combinations and with new colour combinations. They have created a vast range of designs, unrelated to the traditional rugs. At one time even the Bani Hamida weavers themselves were encouraged to produce their own designs.
  - They piloted diverse products - these included cushions, hangings, curtains and seat covers.
  - There has been diversification into candle making and felt making.

### Changes in lives

There have been many changes in their lives with the money from the weaving – although it was never sufficient as a full income. Many reports have been made on this. I was involved in 3 reports.

### As an Anthropologist

My PhD research was concerned with whether and in what ways the project empowered the Bani Hamida women. My conclusion was that it had (and continues to be) a contested arena, in which women try to be seen as skilled workers while business and financial constraints result in their being seen as producers, if not just the labour, for production. This is my focus in this presentation as an aspect of Visibility and Invisibility in Textile Production (Theme 1)



### Examples from other Countries

Before setting out issues for discussion from this case study, a question to ask is if this is a particular example? My recent studies involved further research with practitioners considering other weaving/ craft initiatives. I edited a special Middle East issue of Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture. This involved case studies from Kuwait, Oman, Negev and Egypt, which provided evidence for some general conclusions.

### Drawing some Conclusions – Related to Theme 1: The use of traditional textile craft and design

To recap Theme 1 is concerned with Definitions of Traditional Craft-Practice, particularly some of the dynamics or conflicts – end product of high value, time consuming processes, old fashioned and expensive and conserving the old for its own sake. This presentation is concerned with a reflection of some of these dynamics but from the perspective of those making these products

### For the purposes of discussion at this workshop three questions seem important (discussed in detail in the presentation)

1. What are women's connections with products?
2. How important are historical connections?
3. How much are they seen as craft workers or labour?

A final concluding statement for our discussions – linked to an exhibition I held at the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles at Goldsmiths, University of London – is the end of a poem about the Bani Hamida weaving project:

### Is the invisibility of craft skills inevitable?

	<p><b>Pulled in every direction</b>  <b>The tensions are clearly visible.</b>  <b>Interwoven with their lives</b>  <b>The rugs are a part</b>  <b>of the Bedouin's past and present.</b>  <b>Can they still be part of their future?</b>  <b>Or does craftwork provide a temporary bridge only</b>  <b>To a more commercial market, a more material</b>  <b>world,</b>  <b>A more global demand?</b></p> <p><b>Who will replace the weavers?</b>  <b>What will replace the weaving?</b>  <b>Who will remember when</b>  <b>there is no one left to weave?</b></p> <p><b>I will.</b></p>
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