

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTIONS OF THE
DECORATIVE ELEMENTS: CASE STUDY
THE SEVEN DWELLINGS IN GHADAMES OLD
CITY**

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ABSTRACT

The Old City of Ghadames in Libya, which is today a major tourist attraction, has some old dwellings that contain intricate and meaningful ornamental art. This thesis seeks to investigate these artistic works and decipher their symbolic meanings. This is because, to the modern generation, even of artists and craftsmen, these meanings are lost and these generations-old artefacts are viewed merely as beautiful visual art. This research seeks to solve this problem and the main objectives are (a) to analyse the roots of the selected traditional decorative motifs in the built environment in Ghadames old city of Libya; (b) to uncover the symbolic meanings of these decorative elements found in the architecture in Ghadames old city; and (c) to provide a deeper understanding of the evolution of traditional decorative elements, and symbols found in selected buildings in Ghadames old city in Libya. Towards this end, the researcher investigated a wide range of such art in various countries of the region to determine the history and influence of early colonial presence by various countries that has left this creative artistic legacy in the Old City of Ghadames. Within the framework of the study, the historical background of Ghadames's art motifs in architecture and the decorative units are related to various factors including the natural environment and socio-cultural background. The focus is on seven private dwellings from the 16th through 20th centuries. The ornamental art is analyzed and discussed in the context of their historical time and today's meaning and usage and includes motifs such as the eight-point star, solar motifs, Tree of Life, triangles, jagged lines, rosette or Flower of Life, among many others. The researcher's investigation of such ornamental art in other countries of the region reveals the many similarities in art, culture and history and presents a vast panoramic view of the wealth of historical endeavors that have impacted the lives and lifestyles of Libyans as well as the peoples of the regional countries who have been similarly touched by their past. This study provides a glimpse of the many religious beliefs and cultural superstitions of not only the people of Ghadames but also of much of the Arab world and allows for better understanding of their socio-cultural commonalities.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
AUTHOR’S DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Libya and Its Historical Background	1
1.2 Background of the Ghadames (Old City)	3
1.3 Statement of the Problem	8
1.4 The Aim and Objectives of the Study	10
1.5 Research Questions	10
1.6 The Scope of the Study	11
1.7 Limitations	13
1.8 Significance of the Study	14
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	19
2.1 Arabic vernacular architecture and its decorative elements	20
2.2 Environment of the natural world as symbols in decorative motifs	23
2.2.1 Traditional decorative patterns in buildings in eastern Arab countries.	26
2.2.2 Traditional decorative patterns in buildings in Middle Western North Africa	50
2.2.3 Influences on Ghadames City And It’s Artwork	78

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 LIBYA AND ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Libya has experienced various civilizations in its early history such as the Phoenician, in the 6th century BC, the Roman (146BC-450AD), the Byzantine (6th century AD), the Arab (7th to 16th century, 632-656AD), the Sicilian Norman (1145-1158AD), Spanish (1510AD onwards), and the Turkish (1551AD onwards). Finally, in the 20th century, it was colonized by the Italians. These different civilizations brought their respective religious and cultural influences and traditions which the local people easily accepted and adopted into their lifestyles over time (El Mahmudi, 1997:21).

Libyans see themselves as a part of a larger Arab community. This can be evidenced by the fact that Arabic is the only official language of the state. Under the rule of the former regime, teaching of foreign languages earlier taught in academic institutions was not allowed, and either was the use of the Berber language. As a result, entire generations of Libyans are handicapped by limited comprehension of the English language. Libyan Arabs have a heritage in the traditions of the previously nomadic Bedouin tribes and most Libyans claim association with a particular family name whose origin is based on tribes or conquest, usually, from Ottoman forefathers, heritage.

Figure 1.1 below shows the locations of the various ethnic groups. The native population of Libya is primarily Arab or a mixture of Arab-Berber ethnicities [Figure1.1 (1)], with a small minority of Berber-speaking tribal groups [Figure1.1 (2)] like Tuareg and Toubou tribes can be found in southern Libya, which are nomadic or semi-nomadic. In the west of the country, there are some Tuareg nomads [Figure1.1 (3)], mobile across the Libyan-Algerian border. In the southeast, there are small populations of the Nilo-Saharan Toubou (Tibbu) [Figure1.1 (4)], although they occupy between a quarter and a third of the country.