The western desert of Egypt and its 5 Oases are considered as natural and cultural extension of the desert of eastern Libya. This fact is summarized by Villard as follows: "Eastern Libya is heading always towards Egypt." Geographically, this region is considered to be as one unit since ancient times. Ethnically, it is considered also as one unit, as it contains tribes living across the Egyptian-Libyan borders with no natural barriers. Being distant and isolated from the Nile Valley and its culture, the oases of this peripheral area became less exposed to external effects and cultural changes coming from the valley. The Egyptian-Libyan Sahara is considered an important cultural cradle and a container of many heritage-inspired traits, including habits, traditions, arts, and even language. This study will highlight this uniqueness, and outlines the remains of some Christian symbols which appear in arts, ornaments and even in the habits of the tribes living in this region.

Noting that the tribes of this area are 100% Muslims nowadays and do not have a single Christian native tribe living among them. Surprisingly, these Muslim tribes use many Christian symbols as decorative signs: the most common of which are the signs of the cross and the fish. These Christian signs appear repeatedly in decorations, and even some personal names of the Muslims of these tribes employ conventionally Christian names.
Cultural unity:
The Egyptian-Libyan Sahara is considered, cultural and civilizational wise, as one unit all over the history as follows:

The modern inhabitants of Siwa, the most northern oasis of the western desert of Egypt, are mostly considered as a branch of Zanata tribe which is located in Libya and North Africa, and was mixed with The Bedouins of western Nile⁴. This is mainly because Siwa was an important center and station of trading tribes. The modern inhabitants of Al Baharia Oasis are a mixture of: original inhabitants of the oasis, the Bedouin of western desert who migrated from Libya and the coast, and those from Upper Egypt⁵. There are many Libyan inscriptions found and published by Ahmed Fakhry⁶.

The Egyptian God Amun in Siwa Oasis had a special importance to the ancient Libyans, as they worshiped a triad consisting of Zeus – Amun the father, Apollo the son and goddess Hera (or Hera Amonia).⁷ In the early Roman and Byzantine Christian periods, the region between Egypt and Libya was one unit and was called "the Libyan desert."⁸ The five western cities, i.e. Pentapolis (Cyrenaica or Qourina nowadays), which are located in eastern Libya, followed the church of Alexandria since the approval of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325 AD and the council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.⁹

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⁴ Fakhry, Siwa Oasis, AUC, Cairo, 1973, p. 50
⁹ The Romans used the name "Libya" administratively to describe the region between Alexandria and Barqa.
The intermediary region, i.e. “eastern Libya is going forward always and western desert of Egypt” was once full of Coptic churches, monks, and priests from both countries.\textsuperscript{10} The Christian architecture in Libya was affected by that of the Coptic Church in Egypt.\textsuperscript{11} The famous Christian figures of Egypt, Arius (4\textsuperscript{th} century) and St. Mark (1\textsuperscript{st} century), originated in Libya and started preaching and ordaining priests and monks in both countries: Libya and Egypt.\textsuperscript{12}

This study attempts to trace these Christian symbols which are common among these currently Muslim tribes in the desert region oases between Egypt and Libya, especially in Siwa Oasis and the surroundings for the following reasons:

\textbf{Firstly}, the Siwa region contains today eleven tribes which are: \textit{Al Rawageh} (Awlad Mousa), \textit{Al Zanaey}, \textit{Al Haddadeen}, \textit{Al Hamodat}, \textit{Al Sharameta}, \textit{Al Gawasis} (who trace footsteps), \textit{Al Sarahena}, \textit{Al Shahaim}, \textit{Agormy}, \textit{Al Shohaibat} (Plate 1). These tribes came to Siwa either from Libya or they still have extensions with other tribes in Libya\textsuperscript{14}. So, Siwa tribes are a good example of this mixing and cultural continuity in the Egyptian Libyan Sahara.

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\textsuperscript{13} Personal information got From Sheikh Omar Rageh, Head of tribal sheikhs of Siwa, 2010, to whom I deeply offer my warmest thanks and gratitude. He helped me to meet the inhabitants of siwa and talk to them, and to take many pictures of their hand made arts; see also: عبد العزيز الدميري: سيرة.. الماضي والحاضر، الإسكندرية، 2005، ص 69.

\textsuperscript{14} Fakhry, \textit{Siwa Oasis}, AUC, Cairo, 1973, p. 51.
Secondly, the Siwa region is considered as an important cultural meeting point and an important trade station between Egypt and Libya throughout history.\(^{15}\) It connects the Mediterranean coast in the north of both Egypt and Libya to the Oases and the south of the Nile valley. On the other hand, Siwa connected also, because of its geographical position, the trade caravans coming from Alexandria and the Nile valley to the west towards Libya and North Africa.\(^{16}\)

Thirdly: The artistic decorations used nowadays by these tribes are full of Christian symbols especially with different forms of crosses and fishes in: metal (Plate 2), textile (Plate 3), pottery (plate 4), and other materials (Plate 5). The historical contradiction is clear in this area where it’s the only Oasis in Sahara region, which has faint and pale historical existence of Christianity in spite of the obvious effect of Christianity in Siwan arts as shown above.

Other Decorations and Christian influences:

1. In Egypt: many of the modern Muslims of Kharga Oasis (Plate 6) and Nubia for example are accustomed to putting the sign of the cross on the forehead of any newly born baby to protect him, so that he can walk.\(^{17}\)

2. In Lybia: A tattoo with the sign of the cross can be widely seen on the wrists of Muslim Libyans of different ages and cultural levels.\(^{18}\) This is also widely known among Berber tribes all over North Africa.\(^{19}\) The traveler Father Koller recorded in 1945 the frequent use of cross in Muslim North African tribes, specifically in all of Morocco: on the ceilings of fortresses, citadels and in Berber’s houses and on the gates, women’s hands, wooden and pottery stuff. They also venerated Sunday, on which any work was prohibited.\(^{20}\)

\(^{15}\) عبد العزيز الدميري: سيوة.. الماضي والحاضر، الإسكندرية، 2005، ص 9-10.


\(^{17}\) Personal interviews with local tellers of both regions.

\(^{18}\) Cross signs also are used frequently as decoration element on the Houses of the Libyan city Sabha.

\(^{19}\) H. Barth, Reisen und Entdeckungen in Nord-und Central-Africa, Gotha, 1857, Band I, p. 208.

3. The famous *Tawareq* tribes (in Arabic: طوارق)\(^{21}\), who occupy a huge area in the Sahara of North African Arab countries still decorate their swords and shields with Coptic cross, which they interpret as a protection against the evil eye\(^ {22}\).

4. In Libya, specifically in Beni Ghazy city and other Libyan oases, there are many Christian names carried by Muslims as: Michael, Milad, Ayyad, Solaib, Gergis, and others.\(^ {23}\)

**Interpretation:**

There are two types of explanations for the use of these Christian symbols among Muslim tribes:

An explanation emanating from the people of these tribes themselves or a socio-cultural one. In addition to a historical explanation. The people of Siwa Oasis vehemently deny that they currently use any Christian symbols in their decorations. They use other names by which to call these crosses, such as *warda* (Arabic: وردة), or “flower,” *Arousah* (Arabic: عروسة), or “bride,” *khameesah* (Arabic: خميسة), or “Pentagonal shape”. Concerning the repeatedly use of Fish sign in their art and ornaments, the siwan Inhabitants relates this sign to a mythical story of their beloved Wally (*Sheikh Solaiman*) who received a Fish from a flying crow\(^ {24}\). Similarly, they deny any historical connection between themselves, or their habits, with Christianity.\(^ {25}\)

Concerning El-Baharia oasis, the people have something different. In each village, there is a family which is referred to as being the oldest one. Its members were supposed to be the last

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\(^{21}\) Some scholars believe that this name is derived from the Arabic: *Tawarek*, meaning "who left" Christianity to Islam (or vice versa), C.f. حسن جوهر وآخرون: ليبيا، القاهرة، 3921، ص 31.


\(^{23}\) It Could be seen in the phone directory of Beni Ghazi and Tripoli Cities.

\(^{24}\) Fish is Considered as one of the most important Christian symbols related mainly to the Christ and his apostles; C.f. الأب سامي حلاق اليسوعي: رمز السمكة عند المسيحيين, دار المشرق, بيروت, 2012, ص 12.

\(^{25}\) Through frequent visits to Siwa oasis (between 2008 and 2016) and to Libya (between 2003 & 2009), the author could personally collect data and photographed a lot of field information concerning this study through personal interviews and surveys.
Christians of the oasis who converted to Islam, such as Al Dawăïdah family in al Bawīṭī and the family of Sūbī at Al-Zabw and others.26

Concerning Libya, some explain the repeated use of cross sign as being one of the writing signs derived from Tifinagh calligraphy (Amazigh) which equals the "r" English character27 (Plate 7). But this does not explain why they used this sign in particular rather than other signs.

Others explain the use of cross tattoo by the Libyan Berbers as cultural remnant or survivals of ancient Libyans' worship of the sun28, considering the cross as the sign of its rays spreading in all directions.29

**Historical explanation:**

According to the Coptic Synaxarium, the 1st day of the Egyptian month of Tūt of the Coptic calendar (= 7th of September) is the commemoration of the death of St. Bartholomew one of the 12 apostles of Jesus Christ.30 This saint had reportedly preached the Gospel to the inhabitants of the oases with St. Peter.31 Ultimately, St. Bartholomew was martyred in Bahariyah Oasis.32 When emperor Justinian ascended the throne (6th century A.D.), he ordered the closure of all pagan temples. In the oases, the temples of gods turned into ruins and Christianity started to spread in Sahara even by force.33

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26 Fakhry, Bahariya and Farafra, p. 21.
28 G. Parthey, Das Orakel und die Oase des Ammon, 1862, p. 140.
29 عبد العزيز الدميري: سيوة.. الماضي والحاضر، الإسكندرية، 2012، ص 19؛ عبد اللطيف البرغوثي: التاريخ الليبي القديم، بيروت، 1971، ص 612، والتي تليها
30 Fakhry, Bahariya and Farafra, AUC, 2004, p. 89.
31 Fakhry, Bahariya and Farafra, AUC, 2004, p. 89.
32 B. T. Evetts, Churches and monasteries of Egypt attributed to Abu Salih the Armenian, Oxford, 1895, pp. 215 f.; A. Fakhry, the Necropolis of al-Bagawat in Kharga Oasis, Cairo, 1951, pp.14-17; A. Fakhry, Bahariyah and Farafra, pp. 67 f.
It seems that in some Oases like Siwa, some pagan religions continued to be worshiped alongside Christianity; especially that Christianity in Siwa has no clear remains except two stelae and some mud brick remains of a church in Belad el Room area (Plate 8). Ahmed Fakhry suggests that fanaticism of Siwans resulted in the complete destruction of any remains of Christianity it might have once contained.

Christianity started to disappear gradually from the Oases of Egypt and Libya in very close periods: between the 12th and 14th centuries AD because of many reasons, the most common of which were looting of possessions of the inhabitants who moved to the Nile valley, and because of the intolerance of some Muslim governors. From the 14th century and on, we know of no more bishops who were assigned to that region. So, the spiritual ecclesiastical support of these regions ceased to exist. In medieval times, historians described the inhabitants of the Oasis as being all Muslims. Travellers had to pretend to be Muslims to be accepted by the locals.

**Conclusion:**

In spite of the complete disappearance of Christianity in the Egyptian-Libyan Sahara, some habits, names, inherited symbols continue to live on and to be used nowadays in these Oases among Muslim tribes as mentioned above.

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34 My deepest Gratitude to Mr. Abdel Aziz Eldemery, Director of Siwa Antiquities, for his help and giving me original pictures of these Stelae.
35 عبد العزيز الدميري: سيوة.. الماضي والحاضر، الإسكندرية، 2005، ص 44، شكل 44.
36 Fakhry, Siwa Oasis, p. 121.
39 Fakhry, Siwa Oasis, pp. 131 ff.
In the case of Siwa, its religious heritage contains an artistic mixture of remains of Amun worship (the setting sun Atum?) and remains of Christian dogma\(^{40}\). This is mainly because that oasis was a trade center and an important desert station. It was also a melting pot of cultures and religions, of the Mediterranean coast northwards, of the heart of the desert southwards and that of Libya oases westwards.

Subsequently, the use of Christian symbols and habits of the Muslims of the Egyptian Libyan Sahara tribes can be considered as an eye witness of the unique scene of the cultural continuity and connection across history characterizing this region. This refers to the solidarity of the people of this area and the close adhesion to their heritage even though the ignorance and

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\(^{40}\) G. Parthey, *Das Orakel und die Oase des Ammon*, Berlin, 1862, p. 140
Plate 1: Sheikh Omar Rageh, Head of Siwan tribes' Leaders (Photo by the Author)

Plate 2a: Metal rings with crosses (Photo by the Author)

Plate 2b: Metal necklace with cross (Photo by the Author)

Plate 2c: Metal necklace with cross (Photo by the Author)
Plate 2d: Metal necklace with Fishes (Photo by the Author)

Plate 2e: Metal earrings with Fishes (Photo by the Author)

Plate 2f: Metal earrings with Fishes (Photo by the Author)
Plate 3a: Textile with Fish and cross ornaments (Photo by the Author)

Plate 3b: Textile with Fishes and crosses ornaments (Photo by the Author)

Plate 3c: Textile with Fishes and crosses ornaments (Photo by the Author)

Plate 3d: Textile with shining sun rays, Fishes and crosses ornaments (Photo by the Author)
Plate 3e: Textile with shining sun rays, Fishes and crosses ornaments (Photo by the Author)

Plate 3f: Textile with crosses ornaments (Photo by the Author)

Plate 4a: Pottery with cross ornament (Photo by the Author)

Plate 4b: Pottery with cross ornament (Photo by the Author)
Plate 5a: Hanging wicker plate with cross ornament (Photo by the Author)

Plate 5b: Leather drum with cross ornament (Photo by the Author)

Plate 5c: Textile with cross and Fishes ornaments (Photo by the Author)

Plate 5d: Carpet with cross ornament (Photo by the Author)
Plate 6: Different Shapes of early Christian Crosses of Bagawat Cemetery, Al Kharga Oasis, after: Fakhry, the Necropolis of El-Bagawat, Cairo, 1961, Figs. 24, 25.

Plate 7: Tifiniagh Alphabet with t letter resembling cross symbol, after: https://www.temehu.com/imazighen/tifinagh.htm
Plate 8: The only 2 coptic Stelae which witness the presence of Christianity in Siwa, After:

عبد العزيز الدميري: سيوة. الماضي والحاضر، الإسكندرية، 2005، ص 144-149، شكل 29.