



Khadija Moustafa Wawo

Tibra Spotlight, December 2003
by Magda Fehema* and Nahil Sharkasi

The way of life in Ghadames is built on working with the environment and making the best of what you're given to live in harmony with your surroundings. Living in the harsh desert means endless work for everyone which has led to clearly defined gender roles. Men's and Women's work have always been clearly defined and segregated in Ghadames; for example, men would occupy the street level of the old city while women conducted their work on the rooftops. Surprisingly, this has created a population of women fully aware of their ability to make an impact on their society. Even now that the people of Ghadames live with every modern convenience, they have upheld this tradition of cooperation between men and women.



Ghadames**



Highway on the rooftops**

Khadija points to the door of her childhood home, as we walk through the cool dark streets of the Old City, and recalls how these streets were forbidden for women during daylight while she was growing up. Having lived through drastic changes in women's rights in Ghadames, Khadija is amazed at the progress women have made in her lifetime and proud of her own contribution to that progress.

Khadija was inspired to educate herself at a very young age by her second-grade teacher, Soad Abdulsalam Sleid. Soad, a mother of 11, performed her daily chores, including bringing water from the well, every morning before coming to school to teach Khadija's class. Khadija also recalls her mother's ability to do the household accounting and fix radios and other machinery without ever having gone to school. Khadija's strongest role model is her mother; she says her mother "opened the way" for her to accomplish all she has. By observing such women around her, Khadija became convinced women could overcome all challenges and became aware of women's influence on family and community.



Khadija likes to greet visitors in casual Ghadamsi dress

Khadija began her career as a teacher at 17 after finishing middle school and earning a teaching certificate from the Teacher's Institute (a 2-year program after middle school.) She formed a strong bond with her students and became an icon for the community. Her community's support encouraged her to reach out for higher positions where she could have a stronger impact on her community.

Since childhood, Khadija dreamed of being a pioneer. In 1988, her dream was realized as she was appointed head of a government committee for youth needs. At age 26, Khadija accepted the position, proud to be chosen for her merits over a group of men. That year, she also obtained a second teaching degree and established the first kindergarten in Ghadames. She considers her first class of students to be her own children and has followed their progress through the years. In 1999 she received her bachelor's degree in sociology from The Open University in Ghadames.





*Making crafts at the
Ghadames Women Society*

Though she loves teaching, Khadija has always identified herself as a writer. She has finished writing her first book and is awaiting its publication. In her book, *Woman: a mirror for Society*, she asserts that "the progress of society is measured by the awareness of its women and their participation in planning for the future." She developed her thesis after formal study of sociology, but more importantly from observing women in Ghadames.

"Each society has its own culture which is handed down to children through the mother. The aware woman would reflect the culture onto future generations." Khadija is currently writing her second book: *Religion as Social Interaction*. In this book she explains that the basis of all religions is human interaction, and all religions agree on the importance of how we treat those around us.

Khadija began her writing career with articles for several Libyan and Arabic newspapers and magazines. She wrote articles in *Al-Bayt* and children's stories in *Al-Amal*, in the 1980s and 1990s, under the guidance of Khadija al-Jahmi

(<http://www.libyana.org/feature/jahmi.htm>).

Her articles were also published in the Kuwaiti newspapers *Al Yakatha* and *Al Nahda*. She also lends her talents to local publications in Ghadames: *Al Baydaa* and *Al-Mar'a wa Al-Mujtama'a*.



*Dark alley***



*Ghadamsi man in alley***

In addition to her teaching, writing, and social service career, Khadija is well known in Ghadames for her charity work and her work to promote and preserve the culture of Ghadames. She has worked with UNICEF, Red Crescent, and Al-Hana association for the care of orphans. She is the assistant secretary for girl scouts in Ghadames. She also participates in organizing the annual International Ghadames Festival as well as several other activities dedicated to women's freedom and awareness. For example, she is an active member of the Women Society where she organizes programs to teach traditional crafts. In 2002, she was given the Leadership Award for Women by the Libyan government for her dedication to social issues and cultural awareness, and especially for her work with women.

"Some women think men are an obstacle in the way of their progress; in fact, they can be a source of encouragement and support."

Khadija's feminism is born out of the cooperation required for survival in a place like Ghadames. Furthermore, her views don't conflict with her culture but are inspired by her heritage and the history of strong women in Ghadames. She says, "Some women think men are an obstacle in the way of their progress; in fact, they can be a source of encouragement and support." Men and women share a respectful interdependence in Ghadames and their interaction is quite different from models commonly found in larger Libyan cities. Ghadames can certainly be characterized by the involvement and success of its women; a success made possible by the vision and efforts of women like Khadija Wawo.



*Ghadamsi women chatting***

**Magda Fehema-Sharkasi is a former board member and Cofounder of Tibra Foundation.*

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Ghadames

By Suliman Dregia

Ghadames has been a focal point on the Saharan landscape for thousands of years. It is located at the triple junction of Libya with Tunisia and Algeria. Perhaps the unique character of the city derives from its special position, not only geographically but also culturally. Ghadames is characterized by many intersections and transitions: It is located at the western edge of the Red Plateau (al-Hamada al-Hamra) that forms the transition between the Sahara in the south and the Nefousa mountain and the coastal region in the north.

Historically, Ghadames was a stronghold on the northern edge of the Garamantes territory until the year 19 BC when it fell to the Romans and became a critical garrison on the southern edge of their empire. The Arabs entered Ghadames late in the seventh century, as Islam spread westward across North Africa. The modern population of Ghadames is integrated under the umbrella of Islam, with a variety of cultural and ethnic roots, including northern and southern Amazigh (or Berbers and Touareg), Arabs and sub-Sahara Africans. The same variety is reflected in other aspects of the local culture and traditions, including the dialect, the old Ghadamsi numbers, and of course, the Ghadamsi architecture.



Partial map of Libya

The long history of Ghadames naturally has its share of myths and legends. The most widely circulated legends surround the name Ghadames and the name of its lifeline, Ein al-Faras (or Mare Spring.) In Arabic, the word "Ghada" means lunch and "Ams" means yesterday, and this has led to a fairly common misunderstanding that the

name Ghadames was coined by desert travelers in reference to the location where they had previously stopped for lunch. In another legend,

the name Ein al-Faras is said to refer to the (miraculous) birth of the spring under the pounding hoof of a mare belonging to the tribe of Nemrod, or in another account to Uqba ibn Nafe', the Muslim leader who conquered Ghadames. In reality, Ghadames existed long before the arrival of Arabs and Arabic, and it is difficult to imagine how it could have survived without its spring. The Roman name Cydamus was probably the precursor to the modern name, but Cydamus itself might have been influenced by older names; .e.g, there is an older reference to the Garamante town as Kidamae in ancient Mediterranean history.

On a global scale, Ghadames has had a far reach because of trade. The economy blossomed in the days of caravan trade through the Sahara, which included trading in commodities and slaves, and reached its final climax a couple of centuries ago. Ghadames linked the African interior with partners from the coastal region and beyond. The breadth of trading interests in Ghadames' history is reflected in the variety of currencies in circulation at one time and even in the concurrent units of weight and measure. The skilled traders routinely covered a territory stretching from Kano (Nigeria) in the south, to Timbukto (Mali) in the west, to the Sudan and the Arab peninsula in the east, and every place in between! On rare occasions, private Ghadamsi traders reached as far north as Manchester, England! And the Guadameciles leather crafts of southern Spain represent another imprint of Ghadames on the face of Earth.

Given the beautiful diversity behind Ghadames, we Libyans should consider establishing a new legend about its name. Maybe future generations of Libyans would say the name means bouquet, for the city of Ghadames is a beautiful Libyan bouquet of world cultures.

Fortunately, apart from commerce and legend, the city of Ghadames has also attracted scientific interests. In the following piece, Dr. Intisar Azzouz provides a sharp description of the city from her point of view as a Libyan architect:

Ghadames

Source: Ghadames and Nalute, a study, The Aga Khan Report, 1999, Intisar Azzuz, Ph.D.

Located about 600 KM southwest of Tripoli in the desert, Ghadames is an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement that is a representative of a culture.

Ghadames and its oasis cover an area of 225 hectares, 10 hectares of which are occupied by houses in the old city. The site of the houses was determined by the location of Ein-el-Faras spring, the main water source that provides a refined irrigation system.



*City walls of mud brick**



*Alcove at an intersection of covered streets**

Roughly circular in shape including the farms, the old city is composed of a cluster of houses; those on the outside, with their reinforced external walls, protect the city. This rudimentary enclosure includes gates, sky openings and projecting bastions. About 1115 buildings are included in the old city some of them are mosques and zawiyahs.

The old city has conserved its historical authenticity and includes an almost unique system of covered streets. The ground level streets were most of the time used by males, while women used them early in the morning when men were gone to the fields. Women took garbage out and brought sufficient water for family daily use.

The roofs mostly in the form of connected but secluded terraces, were women domain. They were able to move all through the city using the walls and roof surfaces as pathways, visiting and socializing without need to go down to the main streets. Kitchens and summer sleeping areas are also on those terraces.

The covered streets included formally arranged squares lined up with built in seating areas. The Squares were divided according to age groups. The youth from about 11 to manhood, young men follow to age 40 and then the elderly. The elderly group discussed all daily matters in these squares while allowing the younger to listen and learn process and wisdom.



*Seats built into the wall of the main square**



*Rest area for camels**

The homes in the old city are built on at least two main levels. The ground floor has a lobby with storage for the farming tools. This lobby, which provides privacy, leads through a single door to the family living area. This enclosed central space is topped with a sky window and ornamented with lots of mirrors and brass pots to reflect light into the rooms. The unique and compact design

improved the thermal quality of the home. Guests were entertained in this space as well as family winter living. Bedrooms and storage areas open to this space at different levels.

In the Ghadamsi tradition, young men are to build their own homes with the help of their peers. When the residence is ready, they marry. This situation is unlike tradition in other Libyan cities; e.g. Darnah, Tripoli and Benghazi, where men could marry and live with the bigger family.



Ghadamsi groom shoes (from libyana.org)

The lessening flow of Ein-el-Faras spring was partly to blame for the desertion of the old city in favor of the modern town, which was built entirely between 1975 and 1983, as well as for the decline of trade and agriculture. Most inhabitants have kept their homes in the old city for summer months and the celebration of certain festivals. The old city comes to life during hot summer months, when the air conditioning in modern homes fails to cope with the torrid heat of the Sahara and only the old traditional homes maintain a degree of coolness.



*Small plots of farmland in the palm groves**

The overall population of Ghadames is between 8,000-10,000 persons. Its economy now relies heavily on tourism as well as agriculture.

Ghadames was registered on the World Heritage list in 1986 because of its outstanding value as traditional human settlement.

**Photographs courtesy of Dr. Intisar Azouz*

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