



## ... the e-newsletter of the Ethnic Arts Council

september/october 2009

### Hand, Star, Moon ...

#### North African tribal jewelry: Merger of beauty and meaning

*By Wolfgang Schlink*

**T**ribal jewelry of North Africa embraces a plethora of symbols. The hand, the star, and the crescent moon figure prominently, at times combined within a single piece of adornment or protective amulet. It is too easy to ascribe these symbols' roots - as is often done - to a particular religious faith. Tribal jewelry sellers - when asked for enlightenment - will somewhat indiscriminately throw swift terms at the inquirer like "Hand of Fatima", "Star of David", or "Islamic Crescent". Truth be told, the origins of these symbols go back farther in time than the beginnings of Judaism or Islam. Over the millennia many cultures have left their spiritual imprint on North Africa, among them ancient Egypt, Phoenicia, Greece, Carthage, Rome, the Arabs, Byzantium, and of course indigenous peoples like the Berbers and the Tuareg.



No doubt, the Arab-Muslim impact over the last 1,500 years is critical. When the Arabs in about 500



AD introduced the camel to North Africa, people, ideas, and goods could travel or be traded long distance throughout the region. And, when Mecca after Mohammed's death in 632 AD became the nucleus of the Muslim world, the must-do pilgrimage, the Hajj, gave African believers in Islam another - imperative - reason to go east. This endeavor could become quite an elaborate enterprise. Legend has it that in 1324, Mansa Moussa (image left; detail from the 1375 "Catalan Atlas"), an extremely wealthy and distinguished ruler of an area in today's Mali, took the Hajj accompanied by an entourage of sixty thousand people. He is said to have given away two tons of gold en route to Mecca. As a consequence the value of this precious metal fell in Cairo below the price of silver and did not recover for some twenty years. Talk about a melt-down of a commodities market not caused by greed but by generosity.



The 1683 encyclopedia “Description de l’Univers” by French court engraver Alain Manesson Mallet contains three specific maps (based on lost earlier prototypes) of maritime and land routes from Morocco’s Tetouan and Marrakesh to Mecca (image right; detail). Individual oases on the way are meticulously listed. The attention to detail proves the importance of the historic North African highway.

The caravan routes were critical channels of power, trade, and faith. They served as conduits in the transfer of knowledge, ideas, design, and craftsmanship. They facilitated the Arab invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 711 AD, the establishment of the *el-Andalus* rule in Spain and Portugal, and the lasting Arab influence on Europe at large. No surprise then that symbols may have traveled, changed, or been newly adapted over time along these North African routes of trade and faith.



## Hand

The preeminent symbol in North African tribal jewelry is the hand. Since the beginning of aesthetic expression, the image of the hand is present on the walls of Stone Age caves, often applied as negative space by early graffiti artists who used their pigment and water filled mouths as man’s first spray cans. The Hopis have a *katsina* displaying the hand symbol (images, left). The hand gestures of the Buddha are well defined and have encoded meanings. Hands joined in prayer are omnipresent in many religions: *Namasté* and *Amen*. These are just a few examples.



In North Africa, the hand amulet is now commonly referred to as the “Hand of Fatimah” (Mohamed’s daughter). Further afield, in Israel, it is claimed as the “Hand of Miriam” (Moses’ older sister). Yet there is no tradition in which either woman’s hand plays an identifiable role in specific legend, lore, or scripture. The hand is said to provide protection against evil and to serve as a good luck charm. In the Arab world it is simply addressed as *khamsa* or in its diminutive form *khmesa* (image right; Egyptian amulets), the word for “five”. Tuareg women wear the *chomeissa* (same linguistic root as *khamsa* and *khmesa*), an amulet displaying the “five” symbol and usually made of layered leather embellished with lozenge-shaped pieces of shell, bone or silver (image, top of page 3). It is an all important charm as evidenced by the time-honored tribal adage, “A Tuareg woman would rather go naked than without her *chomeissa*”.







Legend has it that there is a strong connection between the number “five” and Mohamed himself. When, in the formative stage of Islam, the prophet’s followers complained about the abolition of sacred human effigies, Mohamed is said to

have dunked his fingertips in ink and put the imprint on a piece of paper. The prophet showed his disciples a simple, yet powerful and perfect likeness that God had given to man. The resulting five points served as the infallible mark against the evil eye as evidenced by the universal Arab curse “*Khamsa fi ainek!*” loosely translated as “Five in your eye!”, epitomizing the outstretched fingers of a hand as a means to ward off the malevolence of the evil eye.



The number “five” denotes the Islamic pillars of wisdom. The faithful kneel five times a day in prayer turned in the direction of Mecca. “Five” rules in the Muslim world. In Arab calligraphy the word *Mashallah* (“according to God’s will”) suggests the image of the protective hand.

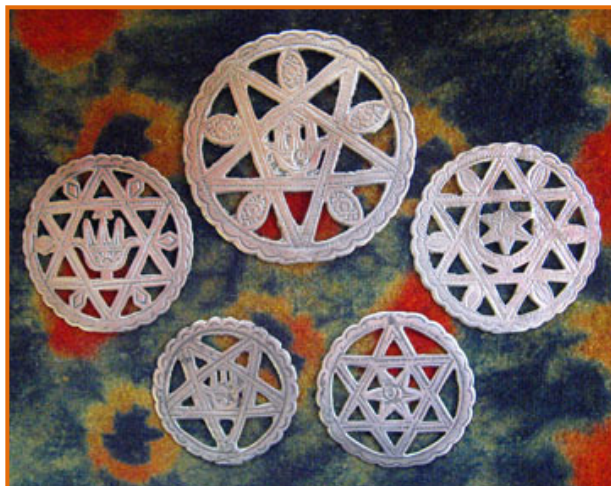


It is an important historic footnote that silversmithing and jewelry making was once a main occupation of Jewish craftsmen within the “Muslim Belt”, from Morocco in the west to Yemen in the east. In Cairo, for instance, Abraham (a Jew from Tunisia) worked alongside the prominent Makkawi clan (from Mecca) of jewelers. That *convivencia* of makers and wearers of jewelry - both of different faiths - in North Africa and the Near East regrettably is a phenomenon of the past.

## Stars

The ubiquitous “five” is found again in the five-pointed star amulet worn either as a hair ornament (*Salha*) sewn into the headband or as a pendant attached to a necklace. Suffice it to say, among its many meanings throughout time and a variety of beliefs, the pentagram symbolizes perfection as it can be drawn in a continuous straight line. It also stands for protection.

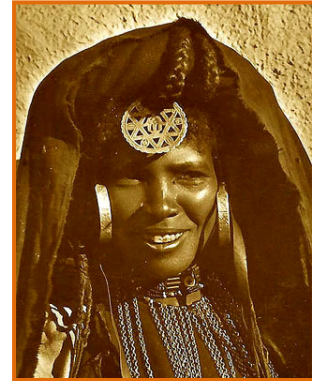
The heptagon, the *Khatem Suleiman* or Solomon’s seal, appears in Bedouin jewelry somewhat inter-changeably with the pentagram. Legend has it that King Solomon used it on his death bed to fight off the capricious *djinn* (genies). While there are





other myths and interpretations, the six-pointed star is generally believed to be a powerful guardian for its owner. Incidentally, as the “Star of David”, i.e. an identifying icon for people of the Jewish faith, the heptagon came only into use in Central Europe during medieval times.

Clearly, for the Bedouins of North Africa more is more when it comes to combining protection with adornment in a single piece of jewelry. The five- and six-pointed stars double up and often frame the *khamsa* as their centerpiece. Moreover, the *khamsa* is frequently fortified with a sharp point topping its middle finger, most probably symbolizing lightning or a thunderbolt (image, bottom page 3; middle row, left amulet).



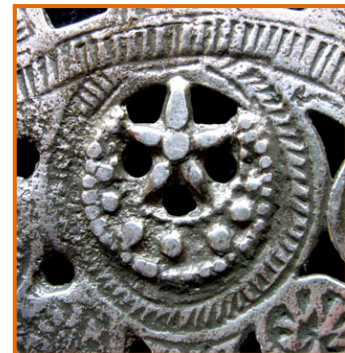
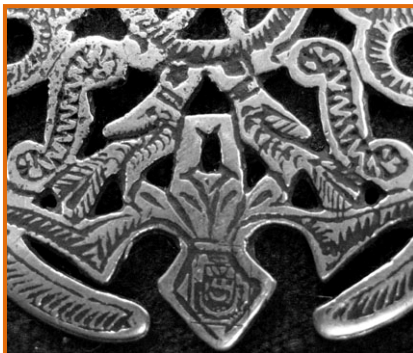
### Crescent Moon and Seven Sisters...

Today, crescent moon and star are the major symbol of Islam and as such incorporated in the flags of numerous Muslim countries. Yet the crescent symbol reaches far back into pre-Islamic times. For instance, in North Africa it has been an attribute to the Phoenician moon goddess Tanit, the protector of the ancient city of Carthage. Tanit is associated with fertility.



One of the more enigmatic amulets in the region is called *hila* (crescent) in Egypt's western desert (left, top center) and *hauafer* (horseshoe) in Libya (middle row and bottom center). It is commonly worn in an assemblage of five or more as a necklace or head ornament (image, bottom page 5). The pendant packs in the magical power of many symbols. The shape in itself can also be interpreted as an arch or doorway, the threshold for the bride into a new (married) life. In detail (images below): Fishes indicate fertility. Birds (doves) stand for marital

loyalty, purity, and love. The symmetrical holes on the pendant's top may symbolize the protection of watchful eyes. Nothing in the composition of the *hauafer* amulet is left to chance or idle décor. Beneath the five-pointed star a crescent moon is fashioned including seven clearly discernable dots, symbolizing - a strong personal guess - the star constellation of the Pleiades, aka the Seven Sisters?







The Pleiades saga is present in the mythology of numerous cultures, from Japan (*Subaru*) to Aboriginal Australia (the *Napaltjarri* sisters) and to the Maoris (*Matariki*), from ancient Greece to the Incas and to the North American Indians. Its most common denominator is the story of seven sisters who literally became stars when higher powers placed them into the night sky to protect them from an immoral stalker. In the Greek version of the tale it was the eternal hunter Orion whose amorous pursuits were stopped. He too was frozen into the firmament to keep him at bay. Yet beyond the aspect of teaching moral law the Pleiades had significant meaning as an agricultural symbol. In Norse paganism, they were looked at as the stellar incorporation of Freya's - the goddess of love and fertility - hens. In Inca mythology the star cluster symbolized the sowing of seeds.



For the Mediterranean region nobody said it better than ancient Greek poet Hesiod. The following admonition is from his oeuvre *Works and Days*:

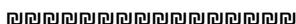
*"And if longing seizes you for sailing the stormy seas,  
When the Pleiades flee mighty Orion  
And plunge into the misty deep  
And all the gusty winds are raging,  
Then do not keep your ship on the wine-dark sea  
But, as I bid you, remember to work the land."*

In the Swahili language of East Africa the Seven Sisters are called *kilimia*, a derivative of a verb meaning "to cultivate". When the Pleiades rose in the night sky, it was time to till the land as the rainy season was about to begin.



Moreover, the Pleiades are prominently featured in one of the spectacular archaeological finds of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sky disc of Nebra, Germany. This Bronze Age (c. 1600 BC) skydisc - so far not fully analyzed and explained - clearly highlights the importance of the Seven Sisters constellation in the company of moon phases and a "sun boat" (image, top of this page). Traditional interpretation of the seven dots cluster - often present on silver cuffs from Egypt's Siwa oasis - as just a stylized floral motif may deserve a second look.

The journey through symbols can be puzzling at times, yet it is always intriguing. Mysteries remain when adornment and protection - like in North Africa's tribal jewelry - converge in a fascinating fusion of beauty and meaning.





## Travelogue

### Oaxaca - Enchanted Mexico

In June, EAC's Jan and Richard Baum and friends defied the caution flags of the H1N1 virus and other warnings. They had - thanks to fearless, expert trip planner Larry Kent - a grand time in and around historic Oaxaca. Here's Jan's report:

*"You could have been there too - to enjoy and be refreshed by this lovely colonial city in southeastern Mexico. We had eight days of fine art, folk art, cathedrals, churches, great food, magical archaeological sites, and experiences with lovely, thoughtful people. We climbed and viewed the magnificent archaeological sites of Mitla, Monte Alban, Yagul and others less well known. Spectacular to say the least, masterful, serene, mystical in this southern environment where the clouds kiss the mountain tops. Even the perfect acoustics could not intrude on our "romance of the stones".*



*One afternoon we went to see the Rufino Tamayo collection of pre-Columbian art at the Tamayo Museum. It was top, top quality, rivaling the best in the LACMA collection, an education in pre-Columbian art from Veracruz to Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima, et al.*

*One of the special treats was a visit to the art filled hacienda of collector Rene Bustamante. Described by some as a curmudgeon, he was everything a thoughtful host could be. He viewed his collection with us with spare but incisive commentary; over 1,000 folk art masks, African art and some contemporary pieces. All of this installed in his magnificent home that he had designed, built and decorated. Can you imagine cooking in a 12'x20' kitchen with walls of stone, gathered from the neighborhood? A technically modern residence with art at every turn, and a mood that tells you, "This is unique, not just Mexican but Oaxacan!" On our last night, Rene joined us for dinner and promised to return the visit in 2010 in Los Angeles.*



*The city's cuisine was appealing and an intriguing mix between Nueva Cocina (not to say nouvelle cuisine) and the pure, traditional Oaxacan cooking with its many typical moles: black, red, yellow, green, etc. This all was served at a magnificent and delectable buffet before a performance of very professional folk dancers. They provided a window into their unique, colorful and magical histories, all in resplendent native costumes. The evening event, held at a historical building - first a convent, then a prison, and now a luxury hotel - is an Oaxacan folkloric tradition, "Guelaguetza"! Part of a larger festival that is happening every July in Oaxaca and environs.*

*We will be back! Hasta la vista!"*

Photography: "Mountains near Monte Alban" and "Oaxaca Church" by Geraldine Lewis



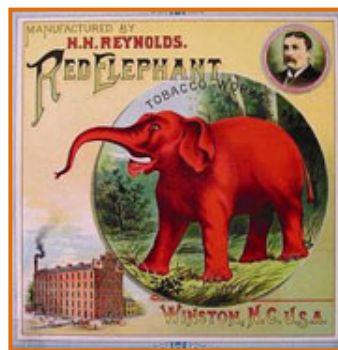
## Members' News - Members in the News

**Doris Haim... Dr. Julia Marciari-Alexander (SDMA)...** A warm WELCOME to EAC's new members!

**Audrey Stein... has an exhibit "Faraway in Focus":** Passionate photography of vanishing cultures at the Rose Café and Gallery in Venice Beach, also the venue of EAC's 2009 Annual Dinner on October 4<sup>th</sup>. Audrey has graciously **agreed to donate 50% of that night's sales to the cultural causes of EAC**. Thank you, Audrey! Show closes October 11<sup>th</sup>. Stein's images on the web: [www.passionate-traveler.com](http://www.passionate-traveler.com)

**Thomas Murray... has published a new catalog "Masks of Fabled Lands"** with a thoughtful introduction on the *Creation of Masks*. Some ninety powerful images, hot off the press just in time for the recent Parours-des-Mondes tribal show in Paris in September. Contact: [tmurray@well.com](mailto:tmurray@well.com)

**Jay T. Last... "The Color Explosion: Nineteenth Century American Lithography from the Jay T. Last Collection" will be on view from Oct. 17 at the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.** The exhibit highlights some 200 objects, including advertising posters, art prints, product labels, and trade cards. The Jay T. Last color lithography collection - about 135,000 objects in all - happens to be the largest in private hands. Jay has previously published the illustrated history of "California Orange Box Labels" (1985). African *artficionados* will fondly remember the 2001/2002 exhibition "Art of the Lega" at the Fowler: Splendid objects, mostly from the Jay T. Last collection; since then gifted to the host museum. More at: [www.huntington.org/huntingtonlibrary\\_exhibitions.aspx?id=112](http://www.huntington.org/huntingtonlibrary_exhibitions.aspx?id=112)



**Ned and Mina Smith's Sana Art Foundation... has merged with the San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA).** The Smith's magnificent *Tino Aitu* sculpture (see EAC e-news march 2009) has safely returned from its summer reunion at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel. The spectacular, bibliophilic catalog of the Beyeler exhibition "Visual Encounters: Africa, Oceania, and Modern Art" is now available in English. Exclusively at: [www.sdmartstore.com/welcome/](http://www.sdmartstore.com/welcome/) and click on "catalogs".

**Dori and Daniel Rootenberg, NYC... are offering a terrific African art selection** from the Marc and Denyse Ginzberg Collection. Web: [www.jacarandatribal.com](http://www.jacarandatribal.com). The book: Marc Ginzberg, *African Forms*, 2000

**Fred Backlar... has joined Bonhams & Butterfields auctioneers as consultant for African, Oceanian, and pre-Columbian art.** Related auctions in San Francisco and in New York are scheduled for 2010. How about a preview in the Bonhams showrooms on Sunset Boulevard? L.A.'s tribal art enthusiasts would love it.

**Julie Heifetz... is riding high in Sri Lanka and making new friends "big time".** She is on assignment for Oxfam International to help organize small village businesses and empower local crafts women. Good work, Julie! But we miss you at EAC.

Editor's afterthought: Julie, you didn't acquire "Big Nona" in that recent Sri Lankan "pachyderms-for-clunkers" program?!







## Calendar - Six Pack

**CAFAM - Opening... *Sueños/Yume: Fifty Years of the Art of Dora De Larios...* Sept. 27 - Jan. 10, 2010**

A retrospective of the internationally acclaimed L.A. ceramist ... Reception: Sept. 26, 6 to 9pm... more info: [www.cafam.org](http://www.cafam.org)... The exhibit is sponsored by a grant of EAC... EAC members: A special program with the artist present is planned for October... Watch for a detailed announcement soon...



**LACMA - The last days of... *Pompeii and the Roman Villa...* closes Oct. 4...**

You may have wandered the streets of the excavated city by Mt. Vesuvius... This exhibition brilliantly brings its art and opulence to life... and just (re-)opened... *The Korean Galleries...* traditional art, mostly from LACMA's permanent collection... Appreciate the spectacular 6<sup>th</sup> century Bodhisattva figure - a national treasure - before it returns to the National Museum of Korea... more info: [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)

**Bowers - Ongoing... *Latitudes: Latin American Masters from the FEMSA Collection...* 20<sup>th</sup> century works of art by Frida Kahlo, Wilfredo Lam, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rufino Tamayo, and others (thru Dec. 13)... also... *The Baroque World of Fernando Botero...* over 100 paintings, works on paper, and sculptures from the Colombian artist's personal collection (thru Dec. 6)... more info: [www.bowers.org](http://www.bowers.org)**

**Getty Center - Now thru Jan. 10, 2010... *Irving Penn: Small Trades...* Masterful representations of skilled tradespeople by one of the most respected photographers of the 20th century. More than 250 images, selected by Penn and on public view for the first time... more info: [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu)**

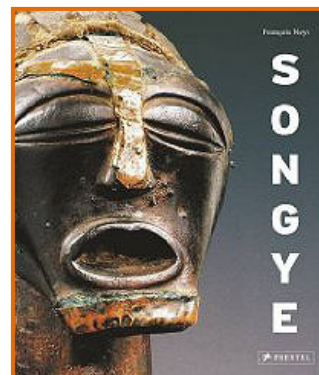
## Books - Two Picks

A familiar story... Two art collectors go into a bar... and sooner than later their conversation will turn to the heated subjects of authenticity, fakes, restitution, and provenance...

***Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art* by Laney Salisbury and Aly Sujo...** Stories of forgers and forgery always make for fascinating reading. But the true life saga of British villain John Drewe and struggling artist John Myatt goes way beyond the regular tale about faking works of art. In a devious move, Drewe caused irreparable damage to 20<sup>th</sup> century art history by changing records in museum libraries, tainting archives, even creating catalogs of exhibitions that never happened. A page turner about a very dark side of the art world... amazon it!

Until very recently available only in its out-of-print French language edition for hundreds of dollars...

***Songye, The Formidable Statuary of Central Africa* by François Neyt...** finally, the affordable 400 page English language tome is here... sculpture of the Songye people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo... the power of form and spirit, brilliantly photographed and researched... a must-have for the African *artficionado*... amazon it!







## ! RSVP · The Ethnic Arts Council Annual Dinner 2009 · RSVP !

Join members, guests, and friends...  
and support the ethnic arts!

**When:** Sunday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, from 5.30 - 9 pm

**Where:** The Rose Café  
220 Rose Ave, Venice, CA 90291  
Free parking in Rose Café lot

**On the menu:**

· 5.30 pm -

Mingle and mix over a glass of **wine and hors d'oeuvres**. A wonderful opportunity to connect with new and old members and to chat with directors and curators of our L.A., O.C., and San Diego museums...

View the **silent auction**: Exciting lots of genuine **tribal art** from Africa, Asia, and Oceania; **Mithila paintings** from India; and so much more... Start your bidding... At the **boutique**, buy attractively priced **couture items**: Hand-felted scarves and jackets; elegant silks embroidered by the women of Hue, Vietnam's ancient capital...

On the walls and for sale: **Audrey Stein's photography** exhibit **Faraway in Focus**. Passionate images of vanishing cultures. Move over NatGeo...

**Proceeds from the auction, boutique, and photography sales support EAC's 2010 Grants Program that benefits projects of our cash-strapped cultural institutions!**

· 7 - 9 pm

On the lovely **garden terrace** (a favorite lunch hangout for Venice artists and architects): Enjoy the **delicious international dinner** prepared by Rose's chef David Wolfe. Wines selected by EAC's own sommelier David Hayen...

**Honorary Acknowledgements**... Followed by a short business agenda, i.e. the **EAC Annual Meeting** including **Board Elections**... Museum directors' presentations on "What's in store for the Southland's ethnic arts scene"...

Then, a last chance to secure your high bids on your favorite auction lots, or to bag that herringbone cashmere scarf you cannot live without for the fall season...

**Finally, drive home - happily and safely - and enjoy your newfound treasures!**

**Tickets:** \$100 per person.

Guests, friends, and potential new members are always welcome.

Unable to attend? We'll miss you, but we appreciate your donation!

**If you have not replied yet, please use the following form for your EARLY RSVP.**

