

Understanding the History and Mystery Behind the Northern Knot and the Agadez Cross.

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Abstract

This short piece is an attempt by an experienced Catholic missionary who has been in the Northern part of the country for well over 50 years and has been able by experience and readings to know the historical origin of certain symbols in the North of Nigeria. One of such symbols that has fascinated this writer is the Northern Knot and the Agadez Cross. This article therefore is a history of the Northern Knot's and the Agadez Cross' origin and use. The article argues that these significant symbols of the Northern Nigeria, that is now predominantly Islamic, is Christian, and it showed that Christianity had been in the North before the arrival of Islam. This article concludes with a call for peaceful coexistence.

1.0 Introduction

When I first arrived in Kano in October 1960, it was the commercial capital of the Northern Region of the newly independent Federation of Nigeria. The Federation comprised three regions – North, East and West – but the North was by far the largest, both in area and in population. It succeeded the former British Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, which was amalgamated with the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria in 1914 to form Nigeria as we know it today. Three years later, in 1917, the new administrative capital of the North, Kaduna, took off; and it fulfilled its role for the next fifty years. In 1967, however, on the eve of the Biafran civil war, the three regions were broken up into twelve States – and six of these emerged from the former Northern Region. Although this marked the end of the Northern Region as a political entity, many people would argue that the 'Northern identity' is still intact and that Kaduna is still its 'spiritual' capital.

2.0 The History of the Northern Knot

The flag of the new nation – green white and green – used in those years in Northern Nigeria [1960 – 1967] had the emblem known as the Northern

Knot superimposed on its central white section. At first glance, it seemed to be a diagonal cross, similar to St Andrew's Cross, a variation of the traditional Christian Cross. The Northern Knot was also widely found as a decoration on the mud buildings in the old city of Kano and in other Hausa towns; as, for example, on the facade of the palace of the Sultan of Zinder (Niger Republic) and that of the Emir of Zaria (Zazzau). It was frequently intertwined with another symbol, known as the Agadez Cross, an image often fashioned in silver and used as a necklace in both Northern Nigeria and, naturally, its home in central Niger Republic. Both of these were attractive, but somewhat mysterious, symbols: they were even more attractive when intertwined.

More is known in Nigeria of the Agadez Cross, which originated among the Tuareg of the Sahara Desert, than the Northern Knot; but their origin and meaning are still a matter of conjecture. Over the past fifty years, I have puzzled over this, and gathered as much information as I could find on both symbols. I did so as a Catholic missionary, who has spent nearly all his time in Nigeria in the former Northern Region and who is intrigued by the few indications we have of a Christian presence in the Sahara-Sahel region before it gave way to the monolithic Muslim cultural identity we find there today. This presence would have been composed of a Christian Berber remnant which retreated south into the desert region during and after the Arab invasion of the fertile coastal provinces of North Africa, the Maghrib (Croegaert Luck, 1999:99-100).

Although documentary evidence for this is sketchy, it is certain that the Northern Knot was used in the pavement mosaics of ancient churches in North Africa and in Palestine. To give a striking example, when visiting the Basilica of St Peter in Coel d'Oro in Pavia (near Milan) in 1977, I noticed an inscription on a pavement tile set in the ground at the rear of the altar where the mortal remains of St Augustine are venerated. An inscription tells us that it was brought there from the ruins of the Basilica of St Augustine in Hippo [Annaba, Algeria] and was placed there as a link with the past. Lo and behold, the Northern Knot forms part of that 5th century tile! Twenty-seven years later, in 1994, I asked a fellow Augustinian priest, Fr Michael Sexton, who was on his way to Pavia, to take a photo of that pavement tile; and the photo is now a treasured possession.

Twelve years later, David Barrett (2005) wrote about the pavement of what he described as "the oldest Christian church in the world" near Tel Aviv; and, lo and behold again, there in the photo of the pavement is the same

Northern Knot! This symbol, therefore, is at least as old as that church in Israel/Palestine, and it had 'travelled' to Hippo in North Africa by the early fifth century. It seems clear, therefore, that it is Christian in origin – and an adapted form of the Cross. Its use as a symbol of Northern Nigerian identity in the twentieth century does not fit into this scenario. In an article in the Daily Trust newspaper, Ibraheem A. Waziri (2014) wrote supporting of the Christian origin of the Northern Knot, saying; “Sir Ahmadu Bello and his comrades chose to adopt the Northern Knot as Northern Nigeria's insignia, but it is originally a Christian cross used by North African Christians”. That adoption of this symbol would have been in 1959, when the Region became self-governing, or at Independence in 1960.

Waziri also writes of his efforts to find the origin and meaning of the Northern Knot:

I went to the Arewa house in Kaduna but no one could tell me anything. I tried the Department of History, ABU Zaria, and they could not explain either. I asked an ethnographer, Prof. Abdallah Uba Adamu but he could not tell also. I asked many others until my cousin, Dr. Abdullahi Ja'afar, found out from the Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto, and on a strong authority, that there was indeed Christianity here before Islam. He told me the story of *Sarkin Gobir Mai Saka'andami* [the King of Gobir who wore a cross] in that light (Waziri, 2014).

Wanting to develop further his thesis on the Christian origin of the Northern Knot, Waziri (2014) also referred to the work of the Dominican priest, the late Joseph Kenny, which gives useful information on Christian traces in the Sahel region, especially among the Tuareg of the Sahara Desert and the Mandara and Kwararafa [Jukun] kingdoms of north-eastern Nigeria. In his work, Kenny (1983:68-70) cites the Mandara Chronicle and the Kisra legend, as well as the works of some early British colonial officers and, much later, Dr. Richard Gray, to substantiate and elucidate on his arguments. But there is really nothing conclusive from these sources. So Kenny's conclusion, based on these indications is reasonable, when he writes: “The Agadez Cross and similar Crosses from other Tuareg towns are possibly of original Christian inspiration, although we have no conclusive proof for this. The 'Northern Knot', in its various styles, also seems to fit into this cross series” (Kenny, 1983: 68).

However, when the evidence from Christian ruins in Algeria and Palestine, as related above, is taken into account, one must conclude that what we know as the 'Northern Knot' is of Christian origin. I have been unable to

ascertain, however, what it was called in those early times. The use of the term 'Northern Knot' in Nigeria may not predate independence in 1960.

3.0 Christian Use of the Northern Knot

Catholic missionaries in Northern Nigeria since the early 1960s have accepted and used the Northern Knot in publications of the Catholic Church. Accordingly, it is found in the Liturgical translations into Hausa of the Roman Missal (Littafin Hadayar Godiya, 1987 [1992]) and the Sunday Lectionary (Littafin Karatu na Jama'ar Katolika, 1987 [1992]). The latter work, Littafin Karatu na Jama'ar Katolika carries an intertwined Northern Knot and Agadez Cross on its Title Page. This is also used on the cover of Eric Patrick Thurman Crampton's (1979) work on Christianity in Northern Nigeria and on the cover of The Government of Northern States of Nigeria; Local Government Yearbook for 1968. The booklet prepared by the Archdiocese of Kaduna for the Mass celebrated by Blessed Pope John Paul II in Kaduna on 14 February in 1982 went further than that, as it superimposed the Papal 'Keys of St Peter' on the intertwined symbols used in the Lectionary on its cover, thus using all three symbols.

4.0 The Silver Agadez Cross

The silver Agadez Cross is the other related symbol treated here. While the available evidence to link it with a Christian remnant in the Sahel region is not as conclusive as for the Northern Knot, it was nevertheless accepted as such by all the missionaries I met here and in neighbouring northern Cameroon when I arrived in 1960, and many of us wore it proudly for that reason. There is a legend among the Tuareg which reads as follows:

In the time of Askia, Sultan of Songhai, a poor camel driver, Ahmed, so displeased his master that he was driven out of the oasis to die in the desert. As he lay near death, a Bedouin came seeking to rob him. Seeing the danger, Ahmed grasped at the thief's throat and broke a neck chain bearing a strangely fashioned silver Cross. Instantly the Bedouin staggered and fell dead. Ahmed placed the Cross around his own throat, whereupon the Bedouin's camel approached, knelt down, and bore him to a cave near Agadez. Here Ahmed discovered jewels, spices, and gold, looted from passing caravans. Ahmed caused a copy of the Cross to be made for each of his descendants, and from that day forward they lived in good health, with riches and good fortune (La Croix d'Agadès).

It is an intriguing legend, used to explain the value of this beautiful Cross. Is it more than that? We know that Askia lived in the early sixteenth century

[1493 – 1528], that he revived Islam in an empire (Songhai) that stretched from Agadez to the Gambia on the Atlantic Ocean, and that it absorbed many cultures and smaller kingdoms. One of these was the Berber kingdom of Timbuktu and the Tuareg region of Air (Hogben, S. J., 1967: 38-42). These are the same Hamitic peoples who, some five hundred years earlier, may have been displaced in the Arab conquest of the Maghreb and, bringing their language and hybrid culture with them, retreated to the Sahara and the Sahel (Joseph Kenny, 1983:68-70).

The Tuareg observance of Islam has always been mingled with elements of this mixed background. Kenny has noted that “the Tamashek [Tuareg] vocabulary still contains Christian terminology”; although he also raises another intriguing question in stating that Christian Nubia to the east “spread its influence to the savanna plains to the west, and that “the Nubian formée cross found its way to Borno” (ibid). G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville (1976) has argued that there were trade routes linking Agadez with Tripoli and Tunis in the north and with Sennar and Meroe in the east (Nubia). So were there, one may ask, Christian remnants in the Sahara/Sahel from both the north (Algeria) and the east (Nubia)? And could it be that the legend related above is based on the inherited belief in the saving power of the Cross? In this context one may recall the words of another legend concerning the saving power of the Cross, supposedly uttered by the Roman Emperor Constantine, *In hoc signo vinces!* [in this sign you conquer].

J.D. Fage (1969:9-10), former Director of the Centre of West African Studies in the University of Birmingham, also broached the subject of a possible Christian 'exodus' from the Nile valley and Nubia and from the Maghrib. As with Kenny (1983:68-70), he cites 'the remarkable Kisra legend about a Persian king whose followers, driven from Egypt and Nubia, supposedly 'established states from which the kingdoms of the Jukun (Kwararafa), Nupe, Idah, Borgu and Bussa' etc were descended. His conclusion is that “although these [legends] must not be taken too literally, they do represent attempts to express essential historical truths”. He also surmises that “the connection with West Africa would be an indirect one, through the agency of the 'Hamitic' and other pastoral nomads of the Sahara, such as the Sanhaja in the west and the Zaghawa in the east, and the ancestors of the present day Tuareg in the centre” (J.D. Fage (1969:9-10).

4.1 Shades and Forms of The Silver Agadez Cross

Like the various Ethiopian Christian crosses, coming mainly from Axum and Lalibela, the Agadez Cross comes in at least eight, and possibly as many

as twenty-one designs. In an article in the Daily Trust newspaper, Tadaferua Ujorha (2014) has observed that originally there were only four such Crosses, coming from Agadez, Tahoua, Zinder and Iferouane, and states that they were a means of identification of the Tuareg clans from these areas. One of his informants, Labaran Sumaila (sic), a trader in artistic works in Zinder, explained this as follows: 'Wherever you find the Cross, it is a symbol of the Tuaregs. Thus, there are Tuaregs of Zinder, and so there is a Cross of Zinder. There are Tuaregs of Ingall, and therefore a Cross of Ingall' (Ujorha, 2014). Ujorha's (2014) article also contains a photo of eight versions of the Agadez Cross, giving in each case the place of its origin: Abalak, Arlit, Tagadama, Bagazem, Tchinta-Baraden, Agadez, Ingall, and Bagazor. I learned from this photo that my own small silver Agadez Cross, purchased in Abuja, belongs to the Tuareg of Bagazor, a village not far from Tahoua in western Niger.

5.0 Conclusion

This study shows that the symbol known in Nigeria as the Northern Knot goes back to the early Christian Church, and was widely diffused in the lands of the Roman Empire. The Agadez Cross, on the other hand, is – as far as we know – confined to the Tuareg region of the Sahara-Sahel belt in Africa: it possibly has a Christian origin, coming from North Africa rather than Nubia, but there is no conclusive evidence of this. Therefore the ongoing religious and ethnic agitations in the North for selfish self-assertion, domination and identity make no meanings. The history of the Northern Knot therefore symbolizes the need for fraternal collaboration in unity for the purpose of attaining coexistence between the two religions in the Region for its good. While Islam today is the dominant religion, the Northern Knot invites Islam in Nigeria to realize that its affiliation with Christianity is of constructive usefulness; and to also realize the role that Christianity plays in its 21st century self-identity in Nigeria by the symbol of the Northern Knot and the Agadez Cross. Thus the two religions must synergize efforts for the revamping of the North for a better and durable socio-economic and political milieu.

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- Taken from an advertisement, entitled *The Legend of La Croix d'Agadès* (in my possession), put out by Leroco Ltd (Dept MW4), 44-46 High Street, Bexley, Kent (UK). It is undated.