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ISLAMIC ART, MATHEMATICS AND ETERNITY: HERITAGE AND TRADITIONS OF SINDH

Abstract

The study first reviews that how Islamic Art is different from other Arts and how it is permeated in Islamic culture and that how Mathematics and Islamic Art are correlated. It also illustrates the use of some very basic geometrical ideas like lines, squares, circles and triangles in Islamic Art. We particularly stress upon circular patterns. Such patterns have particular importance in mystic practices. Then, the aspect of Islamic Art that is related to spirituality is briefly discussed. In due course the associated concept of eternity, a very basic faith in Islam is also discussed. Heritage and traditions of the Sindh province of Pakistan are rich in treasures of Islamic Art. Some associated illustrations are provided to exemplify.

Introduction

Art is the reflection of a culture. Islamic art is deeply connected with religion. It reflects Islamic culture and the spiritual realm of Islam. Reflections of eternity, universe, life, and the relationship of parts to the whole and whole to the part can be found in it. A great deal of Islamic art is based on mathematics, particularly geometry. Without any doubt one can categorize a different branch of art, the art of Islamic geometries. The geometries of Islamic art are based on mathematical principles leading to rhythmic and infinite shapes and patterns. The solidarity of the geometries equates to the solidarity of family, culture and religion allowing for this art to be an ideal representation of the Islamic lifestyle.

Review of the fact that how Islamic Art is different from others and how it is permeated in Islamic culture is presented in section 2. In the same section it is explored that how Mathematics and Islamic Art

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correlate. Illustrations of the use of some very basic geometrical ideas like lines, squares, circles and triangles as applied to Islamic Art are also provided. We particularly stress upon circular patterns. Such patterns have particular importance in mystic practices.

One aspect of Islamic Art is spirituality a brief review of it is provided in section 3. This aspect of Islamic Art also reflects eternity, a very basic faith in Islam. This section reviews eternity also and compares the Islamic view of eternity and some of those who follow other faiths. It is also exhibited that from antiquity circle (s) is (are) in one or the other form used to represent eternity. Some such symbols are now part of Modern Mathematics.

This short study cannot bear explaining more mathematical and philosophical works in this connection such as that of Omar Khayyam, Rumi and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. A detailed study will form a part of our future study. Only a few comments are made on Rumi in this regard. Section 4 concludes the study.

Islamic Art and Mathematics

Islamic art patterns demonstrate a lot of symmetry which includes symmetry of colors and shapes. These shapes involve lines, squares, circles, triangles and conic sections. Transformation geometry of symmetry, rotations, reflections and translation is very prominent in these patterns. These concepts involve a lot of algebra and other branches of mathematics also. Mathematics of nature is also involved a lot in such geometrical patterns (Abas S. J., 2001). Heavenly objects like stars and moon and earthly objects like floral patterns are also utilized in Islamic Art.

Some prominent representatives of Islamic Art belong to Spanish, Turkish, Persian and Mughal eras. The basic difference between Islamic Art and the others is that the use of living objects is avoided. It may be distracting for others but Muslim artists found their way in the realm of art and culture using geometrical patterns. This evolved many areas of mathematics like geometry and algebra. Al-Khwarizmi and Omar Khayyam (E Rogers) may be quoted in this regard. What evolved further is the art of calligraphy that is the artistic

representation of religious scripts on structures, buildings, walls, roofs, paper and other media. It includes calligraphy of religious and non-religious verses as well. All these demonstrate a high level of delicate mathematic. Particularly, geometry that not only got involved in resolving structural problems but also in designing and planning of the structures such as cities, mosques, palaces, ordinary homes, gardens, domes, fountains and resorts. It engulfed pottery, ceramics, carpets, play boards and mazes etc. (Mashayekh H., 2004). Following figure demonstrates the artistic design on pottery using calligraphy.



Fig. 2.1 Pottery, Poetry, Geometry and Calligraphy

One can easily observe the circular patterns, the calligraphy of the Persian verses on the earthen vessel.

Ajrak and Ralli are shawls and quilts used in Sindh province of Pakistan. Ajrak is a traditional Shawl of Sindh, Pakistan with prints, designs and patterns made using block printing by stamps. Though they may be of different colors but blue, red, black, yellow and green are very common (*Ajrak*, website). Ralli is a traditional quilt made by women in the areas of Sindh, Pakistan. These are used as bedcovers and usually are made at home by recycled, hand dyed cotton cloth. These are usually colorful (*Ralli*, website). These designs possess geometrical pattern of various type but circular patterns are abundant.



Fig. 2.2 (a) Ajrak



Fig. 2.2 (b) Ajrak



Fig. 2.2 (c) Ajrak



Fig. 2.3 (a) Ralli



Fig. 2.3 (b) Ralli



Fig. 2.3 (a) Ralli

These are some examples from Sindh, Pakistan but such things are common in the whole Islamic World.

Geometrical shapes and objects (lines, squares, circles, triangles, and conic sections) are abundant in the architectural and artistic heritage of Islamic era because the teachings of Quran always invite people to think over the wisdom lurking in the structure of cosmos and the celestial objects like skies, constellations, stars, sun, moon and the earth itself. Resultantly, knowledge of geometrical shapes and the underlying mathematics excelled in an era that ranges from Umayyads (in Arabia) to Mughals (in India) through Abbasids, Seljuks, Persians and Uthmanis. Scholars in this era enhanced the Euclidian geometry in its foundations and applications. One problem of architectural and artistic importance was the problem of transition of a square into a lines, circle. Squares, circles, triangles and polygons were used to generate various shapes and designs found in architectural and artistic works in medieval (and later) Islamic eras.

It is interesting that Art helps in visualizing Mathematics. Works of art in general and Islamic art in particular are sources of stimulation and visualization of various concepts in mathematics and geometry. A variety of mathematico-artistic works such as geometric patterns in textiles, ceramics, metalwork, architectural elements, and manuscripts

is available and now it is becoming common to use these patterns as a teaching aid. At very early age children can be introduced to identify colors and shapes, similarity, symmetry and differences (Al-Ainati, Maryam J. 2012). At middle levels students can be introduced to geometry and measures and properties of geometrical shapes and objects lines, squares, circles, triangles, conic sections. At college and university levels transformation (symmetry, rotations, reflections and translation) geometry can be introduced.

Some basic characteristics of Islamic Patterns can be found in (Khan K, Zaffar A, Ansari M R K 2013), which are reproduced here briefly.

- *Use of geometric elements such as circles, squares, and straight lines in their simplest form and formation of new patterns by combining, duplicating and interlacing the simple elements.*
- *Use of grids of equilateral triangles, squares and hexagons. In fact these are regular tessellations. These grids can be extended to any required length.*
- *Forming new patterns by overlapping a background pattern with a foreground pattern. Resultantly, a flattening impact without depth appears.*
- *Using self-similarity to form patterns which are independent of any particular frame and can tend to infinity. These patterns demonstrate arrangement of similar patterns or arrangements at different scales.*
- *Combining available patterns and calligraphy mostly following principles of symmetry.*
- *It said earlier that tessellations are a prominent feature of the Islamic patterns. Sometimes such patterns are shaped as puzzle like designs involving different polygonal components fitted together leaving no gaps without requiring any foreground-background combination.*
- *Combining or interlacing or weaving plantlike forms and vegetal patterns. The former set as foreground and the latter as contrasting background. The contrast can be created by varying the shades of the same color or by varying the colors.*

Such patterns are abundant in all sorts of buildings and architectural structures designed for living, working, praying and on tombs, shrines, palaces, libraries, educational institutions etc. But Masajid (mosques) are the structures where one can find such patterns

prominently elaborated. Some examples can be found in (Khan K, Zaffar A, Ansari M R K 2013). A detailed study of an ancient mosque, the Shahjehani Mosque Thatta, Sindh in Pakistan is also presented there. It can be immediately marked that in general, an overall dominance of geometry is prominent in patterns of Islamic Art. Some frequently used Geometrical Patterns in Mosques are patterns with circles, pattern with eight pointed stars, lattice of eight pointed stars and all these patterns can be found on all the prominent parts of a Masjid (mosque) that include minarets, domes, mihrab, ceiling, walls and floor.

The following picture prominently exemplifies the components of a mosque and the typical architectural and artistic designs



Fig. 2.4 Al-Azhar Mosque, Gaza, Egypt

(Observe different geometrical patterns exhibited from the first row to the end)

The following picture illustrates the geometrical pattern on the inside of a dome of Shahjehani mosque Thatta, Sindh, Pakistan.



Fig. 2.5 Pattern inside one of the domes of Shah Jahani mosque Thatta [7], concentric circles are prominent



Fig. 2.6 An outside view of the domes of Shahjehani Mosque Thatta



Fig. 2.7 Pattern inside a dome on one of the tombs in the graveyard of Chaukundi near Karchi, Sindh, Pakistan, (Concentric Circles are prominent)



Fig. 2.8 An outside view of the same dome



Fig. 2.9 Another tomb in the graveyard of Chaukundi with grid of squares and design in a circular pattern in between



Fig. 2.10 A closer view of a similar



Fig. 2.11 Combination of circular patterns with patterns in a necklace

Islamic Art and Spirituality

The basis of Islamic Art is spiritual (Michon J. L. 1985). As is said in Quran the holy book of Muslims

Read: In the Name of thy Lord Who createth, createth man from a clot, Read: And it is Thy Lord the Most Bountiful Who teacheth by the pen, Teacheth man that which he knew not. (Quran 96:1-5)

The command as above through Quran given to prophet Muhammad (SAW) (and to all Muslims) is the basis of inspiration of Islamic Art. The order of reading gave rise to Qirah the recitation of Quran with excellence, is the first artistic exposition of Islam. It is the art that manifests the sound and modulations in Arabic of the verses of the Quran in time. Pen created Kitabah, the calligraphic art, the art which transcribes visually the vocables and fixes them in space. Artists of Islam always have been inspired by these orders. And they got excellence in this area and extended its scope to architecture, music and the industrial and decorative arts all trailed under the above

mentioned divine instruction. In this perspective Islamic Art exhibited as spiritual and made Islamic Art the concern of every Muslim, not only of the Artist alone.

There are many instructions in Quran that invite Muslims to remain involved in devoted worshiping and remembrance of the creator.

In Quran, Allah says
I created man only that he might worship Me (Quran51: 56).
And that
Nothing is greater than the remembrance of Allah (Quran 29: 45).

It follows then that the whole existence of man should be an act of devotion and remembrance of his Maker. The remembrance of Allah is called the dhikr which is fundamental to Islam. Quran is also called dhikr Allah (remembrance of Allah). Sunnah the Prophetic Traditions shows the way to perform it. This remembrance of Allah is not only a factor in individual perfection but it is also a stimulator to social life and artistic development. The remembrance of Allah needs a proper and rather a special environment. It is stressed that the material environment should reflect spirituality. Islamic Artists thus is a translator of the principles of Islam into aesthetic language. Transposing the principles of Islam into forms and shapes to be able to integrate with structures and to be used in the decoration of Mosques, palaces, public houses and domestic utensils founded Islamic Art. The systematic preference of Islamic art has been the impersonal, linear forms with a geometrical or mathematical basis. It is the case with the two forms of art as given by the Revelation, the recitation of the Quran in Arabic and calligraphy. It extends then to other forms of Art (Architecture, music, fabric and ceramic designs).

Artistic creativity in Islam is purposeful. The question that whether art is required for art's sake or it is needed for utilization is meaningless to Muslim Artists. It is all purposeful. Islamic art is always functional satisfying some aesthetic emotion or responding some need. Also, It may be directly of the spiritual order—like the Quraanic verses engraved on the pediment of a mausoleum or embroidered on the veil which covers the Ka'bah at Mecca or whether

it pertains to a chandelier or a bronze basin inlaid with Arabesques or a carpet.

As mentioned earlier the spirituality in Islam is closely related to eternity. Rather, the main objective of spirituality in Islam is eternity so Islamic Art in one or the other way is related to eternity.

Eternity is a metaphysical concept that deals with

- The existence independent of space and time
- The separation of form from mind and matter.

The concept varies from faith to faith and religion to religion. Symbolizing eternity has been a focus of various forms of art from the ancient days. The concept of eternity has been variably symbolized. In the following some such symbols are mentioned.

- In antiquity Ouroboros (or Uroboros) symbolized eternity. It was the image of a snake swallowing its own tail (representing something constantly re-creating itself).
- The endless knot was a symbol adopted by Tibetan Buddhists.
- Borigali, was a symbol used by Georgians in the remote past.
- Ancient Europeans used annulus as a symbol of eternity. In fact circles in many forms are used to represent eternity.
- Concentric circles were common in Muslim architecture of medieval ages. It was supposed to represent the ripples created by a drop of water in an ocean. Drop representing some divine instruction and ocean a clear heart. Ripples were supposed to tend to infinity or the other way round, the circles concentrating to a point.
- Contacting circles also represented eternity. These were also represented by the symbol of infinity.

Some symbolizations of eternity are given in the in the following.

Fig. 3.1 Symbolization of Eternity from Antiquity

The Ouroboros The endless knot

The Borigali



The annulus

Concentric Circles

Contacting Circles



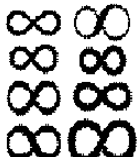

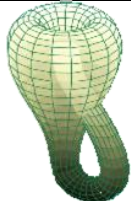

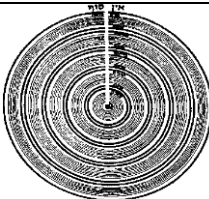

Symbolizing Infinity	Infinity of Time	Klein's Bottle
		
		
<p><i>Fig. 3.2 Borigali the symbol of eternity from antiquity engraved in a stone etching enclosed in a circle (Resource person Larysa Corol)</i></p>	<p><i>Fig. 3.3 (a) Symbolization of Jewish religious teachings</i></p>	<p><i>Fig. 3.3 (b) Symbolization of Jewish religious teachings</i></p>



Fig. 3.3 (c) Symbolization of Jewish religious teachings (Resource Person Larysa Corol)



Fig. 3.4 An Artist's View of Eternity continuing circles (Resource person Julia Telezhkov)



Fig. 3.5 Concentric circles, a representative of eternity on pottery

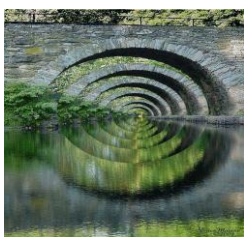


Fig. 3.6 An idealistic view of eternity, non-ending line up of circles (Resource person Larysa Corol)



Fig. 3.7 Concentric circles to represent eternity (A drop of water in an ocean can create waves extending to infinity)

To understand the relationship of spirituality and eternity in Islam the following statement will be helpful.

Spirituality in Islam leads towards the pleasure of Allah, the pleasure of Allah leads towards Jannah (paradise), the displeasure of Allah leads toward Jahannam (hell) and the life in Jannah or Jahannam is eternal.

One aspect of Islamic Art is related to the elaborations of this concept. In Islam resurrection of man after death is the spirit of eternity. According to Islam assurance of the life after death fulfils one of the most important individual and social needs of man. So love for permanence (or love for eternity) can be at a prominent place in all Islamic spiritual doctrines and practices of Islamic Spiritualists. Belief of resurrection and achieving a blessed eternal life makes the worldly lives of humans directed, motivated and purposeful. Resurrection is one of the most important historical, philosophical, scientific and social issues. Faith and belief in resurrection has been the object of deep attention of other divine religions such as Judaism and Christianity. Particularly, Islam considers it an issue of utmost

importance. After mentioning the belief in God the Holy Qur'an always mentions the belief in resurrection and life after death. In view of some of the commentators of Qur'an one third of the Holy Qur'an is directly or indirectly focuses on the issue of resurrection.

Reviewing the concept of eternity in other faiths it is to mention that some religions agree on the concept that merging in the Creator is the finale. The creator and creation are in fact, one. And ultimately everything (creation) merges in Him (Creator). This is only to exemplify, otherwise there are so many. The theme of this study does not allow expanding. To close the discussion it is to mention that Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions unanimously agree on the concept of merging of the creation into the Creator and that the Creator and creation are in fact, one. And ultimately everything (creation) merges in Him (Creator).

Now we discuss some mystic practices and beliefs.

- Journey in Wilderness in Search of God: A large number of mystics consider it important to take up an essential journey to the wilderness in search of God. Most of the faiths in practice claim to possess great books of wisdom inherited from their ancestors so it seems strange that instead of learning from these books, one must need travel to wilderness
- Relationship between the Creator and the Creation: The concept that everything is the Creator (i.e. nothing exists other than God. The Creator and His creation are, in reality, one) and ultimately everything merges in Him (the Creator). They consider this merging as the basic goal of worship.
- Considering Abstinence as the Key to Piety and Wisdom: That piety, wisdom and nearness to God is only possible when one devotes all his time in the wilderness and abandons the civilized world. Believers cause great hardships to themselves by practicing harsh acts of abstinence. They live without food for days to end until their bodies are reduced to just bones. Their devotional exercises include hanging upside down on the branches of

trees for hours and sleeping on bed of nails. They meditate for long periods sitting without any movement in one position and hold their breaths for enormously long time.

- Practicing Meditation, Excessive Chanting and Breath Holding: Excessive chanting and breath-holding exercises are essential rituals of mysticism. This is generally done in solitude and for hours together. It is believed that such rituals enlighten the heart with knowledge and gives them miraculous powers.
- Concept of Eternal Life: Eastern mystics claim to have eternal life. No people would worship a mystic or depend upon him to avert evil, if he had no control over his own existence. The concept of death would imply that they could not avert harm or help the people.

Now it is to discuss in brief that how true Muslim Sufism is different from the other mystic concepts.

The true Muslim Sufism revolves round two key points.

- Taking guidance from the book of Allah (The Quraan) and the teachings of his Prophet (SAW)
- Following the Messenger of Allah (sallallahu alaihi wa-sallam) and his Companions (radhi allahu anhu) who did not live the life of hermits, neither did they abstain from Halaal blessings of Allah. They did not punish themselves, nor did they indulge in the types of innovative and excessive Dhikr that the some mystics prescribe. They knew that guidance is only in following the revelation and not wandering in the wilderness.

In this regard we make mention of Rumi the great Sufi poet and preacher of love (most welcomed in the West). His teachings, as one can find in his poetry revolves round the following key points.

- God is the destination of man and that life is a journey back to God. He says

منزل ما كيريا است

“Our destination is God”.

- His inspiration from Quran. He says "We are from God and unto Him do we return". And "God is the beginning and God is the End.
- He considers God as Eternal and Infinite. "That always has existed and will exist", and infinite is boundless. He takes infinity of God in the ordinary sense. Rumi says
ناگزیر جملگان حیى قدیر
لا یزال و لم یزل فرد و بصیر
"God is indispensable and is alive He will live forever and is from the beginning He is Individual and is omniscient.
- Rumi regards Muhammad (SAW) the prophet of Islam as the most perfect man. He says
بیر این خاتم شد است او که بجود
مثل او نه بود نه خوا هند بود
- "He has become the seal (of the prophets) for this reason that there never was any one like him in munificence nor ever shall be".

Here we quote one his poems.

*O Thou Who art my Soul's comfort in the season of sorrow,
O Thou Who art my spirit's treasure in the bitterness of death!
That which the imagination hath not conceived,
That which the understanding hath not seen,
Visiteth my soul from Thee; hence in worship I turn toward Thee.
By Thy grace I keep fixed on eternity my amorous gaze,
Except O King, the pomps that perish lead me astray,
The favour of Him who brings glad tidings of Thee,
Even without Thy summons, is sweeter in mine ear than songs
If the never-ceasing Bounty should offer kingdoms
If the hidden treasure should set before me all that is,
I would bow down with my soul, I would lay my face in the dust,
I would cry, "Of all these, the love of such an One for me!"*

(from the "Diwan" SP. VI)

One of the other Sufi poet and philosopher (15th century AD) and Sufi philosopher Abd Al-Rehman Jami in a verse said about his Mthnavi says as follows.

هست قران در زبان پهلوی

"Hust Quraan Der Zubane Pehlavi (Rumi's Verses are Meanings of Quran in Persian)".

Conclusion

In section 2, after explaining that how Islamic Art is related to Islamic culture and how mathematics takes part into the evolution of Islamic Art, examples of the links of Islamic Art, Islamic Culture and Mathematics are given. Fig. 2.1 exemplifies the use of decorating earthenware by a combination of concentric circles and calligraphy of poetry. Figs 2.2 (a-c) are three different type of Ajraks. The first utilizes squares and eight pointed stars, the second utilizes circular and floral patterns and the third one is a combination of squares, circles and floral patterns. Figs. 2.3 (a-c) are the patterns on Rallis. The first picture is unique in the sense that it makes use of self similarity. The small image inside is enlarged in each step moving outwards. In fact it is a fractal design. The second exhibits a combination of square and circles. The third picture shows a combination of the variants of floral eight pointed stars engulfed in squares. These are the specific examples from the culture of the Sindh province of Pakistan.

After describing the characteristics of Islamic Art, some examples from the Islamic Architecture are presented. Mosque is a prominent cultural centre in a Muslim Society. After mentioning the necessary elements of a Mosque, Views of Al-Azhar Mosque, Ghaza, Egypt and Shahjehani Mosque, Thatta in the province of Sindh, Pakistan are given to exemplify [9]. A saga of geometrical patterns from the first row to the last can be prominently viewed. Fig. 2.4. Exemplifying from the architecture of Sindh province of Pakistan, Figs. 2.5 and 2.6 are the pictures of the domes of the Shahjehani Mosque in Thatta. The first picture represents concentric circles engraved inside one of the domes whereas the second one is an outside view of a large number of domes for which this mosque is famous. Graveyards and tombs are another prominent feature of a Muslim society. Examples from the famous Chaukundi graveyard near Karachi are given in Figs. 2.7-2.11. Figure 2.7 represents the concentric circles carved on the inside of the dome on a tomb in the graveyard. Fig. 2.8 is the same dome viewed from outside. Fig. 2.9 is the example of the use of a combination of a grid of squares and floral design in a circular pattern in between. Fig. 2.10 gives a closer view of the same design. Fig. 2.11 represents a combination of circular patterns with patterns in a necklace.

In section 3, a discussion of the relationship of Islamic Art and spirituality and the role of eternity in it is made (A Group of Researchers-Institute of Islamic Studies,2000). In this course the ancient symbolization of eternity and its conversion into mathematical symbols is also discussed (Figs. 3.1). The Ouroboros, the endless knot and the Borigali have been the symbols of eternity from antiquity. These symbols in on or the other way related to circles. The annulus, the concentric circles and contacting circles are also used for symbolizing eternity. The modern mathematical symbol of infinity ∞ , the time glass and the Klein's Bottle all the variants of contacting and concentric circles. Fig. 3.2 is the image of an stone work of Borigali the symbol of eternity from antiquity. The symbol is a stone etching enclosed in a circle. Figs. 3.3 (a-c) are the representation of Zohar the symbol of Jewish religious teachings (The five worlds). The role of concentric circles is prominent (*Zohar*website), (*Zohar* ,website). Figs 3.4-3.6 are various representations of eternity using concentric circles. Fig 3.7 represents the faith that as ripples are generated when a single drop of water falls into an ocean, in the same way a pure heart undulates when a divine instruction pricks.

The remaining part of section 3 represents a review of the concepts of eternity in different faiths. A comparison of Muslim Sufism and mysticism in other faith is briefly made. Particular mention has been made of the great Sufi Poet and Mystic Rumi (Sufism, website), (Rumi, website). It is found that the Sufism of Rumi runs parallel to his religious faith and astray as is posed in the Western literature.

Acknowledgement

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It is to acknowledge Rumi lovers, Larysa Korol and Julia Telezhko for their inspiration and for providing images related to concentric circles and eternity.

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Sufism: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sufism>

Rumi: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rumi>