
EXPRESSIONAL QUALITIES OF OTTOMAN PERIOD MOSQUES IN ANATOLIA AS PART OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

A culture's aesthetic understanding in terms of expressional qualities that cannot be expressed visually, namely, the symbols, messages, and icons reflects much about its history, religion, as well as its social and cultural perspective. Anatolia's great mosque architecture is shaped and shows the successful whole of those qualities, combining elements and materials of traditions that clearly mark the region's contact with elsewhere as a part of a continuum of experience. Yet, at the same time it adds its own sense of expression refraining from being a mere synthesis. Hence, this manuscript aims to lighten the aesthetic understanding of the region with regard to mosque architecture in terms of expressional qualities, religious philosophy and the role of the craftsmen with an emphasis on its intangible cultural heritage value. Combining literary analysis, theological inquiry and *in situ* survey, this study uncovers the multisensory aesthetics of Ottoman period mosques in Anatolia revealing that those monuments do speak for themselves appealing to our sense of perception, rather than being mere physical buildings. Furthermore, this study discloses the sensual and religious understanding of builders, craftsmen, users and beholder of the period retrieving how those monuments were perceived subjectively as the artistic production of the time. Even though, there are studies with regard to aesthetics of those buildings, in those studies their relations with intangible cultural heritage as well as with the recent regulations on the subject matter has not been established yet, hence necessitating a thorough analysis, which is one of the aims of this manuscript.

Keywords: Anatolia, mosque, symbolism, expressional qualities, intangible heritage

1. Introduction

Giedion claims that 'before art, man created the symbols' either simple, complex or abstract sometimes standing alone, and often intertwined with each other even in primitive times [1]. He further argues that symbolization is a need to make the imperceptible forms as perceptible wholes [1], which is also a case in Anatolian mosque architecture. Ottoman period mosque architecture is not a

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style emerged suddenly; rather it has been affected from the styles and symbols of previous civilizations such as Seljuk and Principalities and from regions like Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, and even Far East. Yet, it reinterpreted all those styles according to the needs of the time, Imperial understanding and religious philosophy of the period. Iconographical symbols used by many civilizations in the history, sometimes with different meanings continued to be used in Ottoman period as well, with their new meanings. As in all periods and regions, and in Anatolia as well, craftsmen constructed buildings and engraved decorations skilfully. Hence, it is not much possible to think craftsmen independent from the architecture. Customs and faiths of a society affect the craftsmen, and in turn, craftsmen reflect the social structure of a society in his masterpieces [2]. Similarly, Dion suggests that “art is based on the ideas of artists - otherwise ‘art’ is not an art and ‘artists’ are not artists” [3]. Expressional qualities such as symbols, icons, and meanings are reflected mostly in the decorations of craftsmen. In Ottoman period the craftsmen and architects were raised in a craft-apprentice system and with the effect of this system, especially in Classical period the Ottoman craftsmen searched for the beauty and love of Allah and tried to reflect it into his art, by creating a kind of mystic integration with Allah [2, 4-5]. In this period, the craftsmen engraved scripts and verses from Quran on the walls and domes of mosques to catch the aesthetic pleasure [2, 6] and a kind of an abstraction was used instead of pictures from nature or any kind. The aim was to reach to the invisible beyond the visible with his motives and scripts.

Hence, in this manuscript first, some of the expressional meanings associated with Anatolian mosque architecture such as light, geometry, form, and decorations have been introduced and evaluated briefly and then their importance with regard to representing the culture’s and region’s intangible heritage is evaluated.

2. Case studies - expressional qualities in Ottoman period Anatolian mosques

The idea of aesthetic is ancient. Yet, the origin of aesthetic as a separate discipline different from philosophy was set up not earlier than the 18th century with the studies of German thinkers such as A.G. Baumgarten, G.W. Leibniz, and E. Kant [7]. Whereas, as Pentcheva [8] argues “for the most part, the scholarly analysis of architecture regards buildings as static entities” refraining from retrieving their linkage with aesthetics and with imperceptible wholes disguised behind that static existence. Contemporary awareness of the importance of the subject matter is growing. A few eminent scholars such as Jale N. Erzen, Beyhan Karamağaralı, Nakış Karamağaralı, Leyla Baydar, Valerie Gonzales, Beşir Ayyazoğlu, Selçuk Mülâyim, and Orhan Cezmi Tuncer have anticipated some aspects of aesthetics in Islamic architecture, which are among the significant contributions to the development of the idea [5, 6, 9-14]. Yet, this is the first work to investigate the relation of aesthetic aspects and qualities

observed in Ottoman mosque architecture in Anatolia with intangible cultural heritage as integrated whole.

In Anatolian mosque architecture, light, geometry, form, wall paintings, scripts, stone engravings and such qualities are used not only for visual but also for their expressional values. These qualities tell another story in many ways. Among those expressional qualities, in Anatolian mosque architecture, *geometry* and *forms* are used extensively in terms of language of symbols. For instance, Karamağaralı describes the octagonal drum transition of the dome as the representation of the sky; the square and rectangular base as the symbol of the earth; and the stalactites as the symbolization of descending of celestial space towards the earth [9]. The most distinctive feature of Ottoman period mosques is that, it represents the unity/integrity/completeness with the ‘dome’. Here, by collecting the whole interior under a dome, it is aimed to symbolize the ‘Tawhid’ – oneness - of Allah, in other words reaching to Him by praying to Him in His House under His Celestial Sky-dome- and thus catching the integrity and completeness [10]. Erzen interprets the relationship between dome and square forms of the 16th century Ottoman architecture as the “principle of constant change within permanence”. To her, “square or rectangular form symbolizes the directionality and is constantly moves within the permanent universe symbolized by the circle” [5].

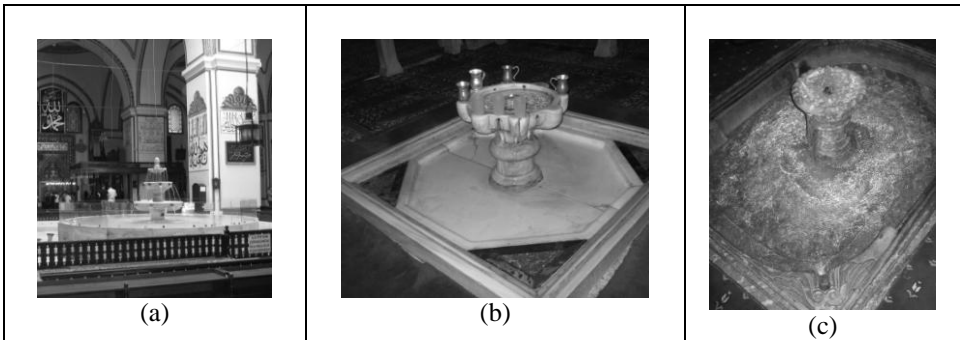


Figure 1. Views from the pool of: (a) Bursa Great Mosque, 14th century; (b) Edirne Selimeye Mosque, 16th century; (c) Kütahya Great Mosque, 15th century.

In Ottoman architecture, the fundamentals brought about by Holy Quran gave rise to the form of the mosque. In Quran and Hadiths ‘Arş’ in other words the ‘Throne’ meaning ‘Divine Sovereignty, Dignity’ is the most important one of these fundamentals [10]. Allah rules the world and Throne is the highest point of the Cosmos. There is a strict relationship between the elements and formation of Islamic mosque and the verses of Quran. For instance, the fountains and pools inside the mosques are highly related with the verse Hud:7 – “and HIS Throne was upon the water”- [15] and the abundant use of polygonal forms in the mosques such as in the drums is also related with the verse Hakka:17 – “And the angels on the sides thereof, and eight shall bear the Throne of the Lord above them on that day” [10; 15, p. 491] (Figure 1).

In addition, there is a relationship between Throne and Mandala, which means circle, a kind of symbolic drawing, in Sanskrit language and used in Hindu and Buddhist rituals in the form of circular diagrams to reach the cosmic and physical energy [10]. Mandala is also used as the representative of cosmos of a sacred area in which the gods dwell. In architecture Mandala is represented by circle and square, one within the other; circle meaning God, Cosmos, eternity, mystical life and world of eternity and square meaning, world, and material life [10] (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Mandala symbol on the entrance of Edirne Selimiye Mosque, 16th century.

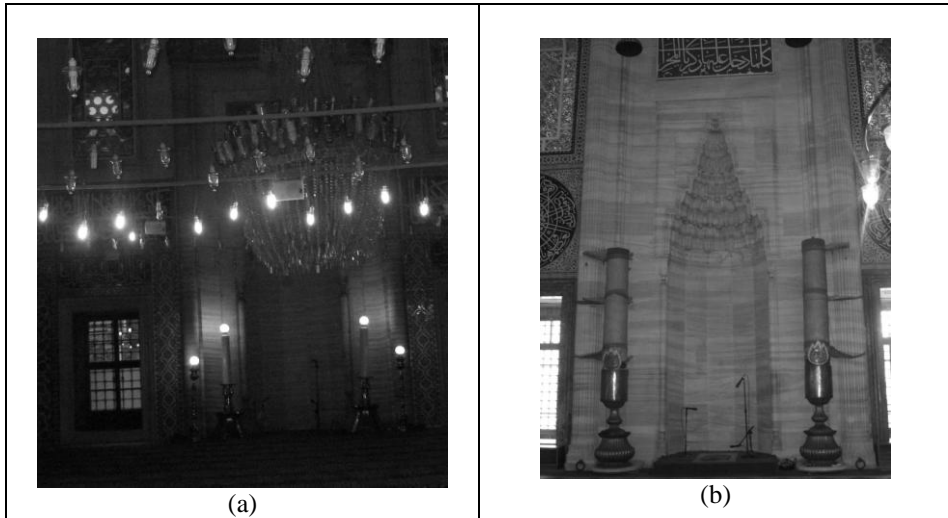


Figure 3. Candle handlers on two sides of the mihrab in: (a) Edirne Selimiye Mosque, 16th century and (b) Istanbul Süleymaniye Mosque, 16th century.

Similarly, *light* is used not only to illuminate the space but also for its symbolic meaning. Karamağaralı argues that the candle handles located on both sides of the mihrab of the mosques symbolize the ‘light’ and ‘luminous’ attributes of ‘Allah’ reflected on the spaces and elements thus sanctifying it [9],

as well as, candle used as the light source in mosques symbolizes the ‘divine light’ [16]. On the 35th Light Verse of Surah an-Nur of Quran it is written that [15, p. 293]: “God is the light of the heavens and the earth! The likeness of HIS light is a niche in which there is a lamp - the lamp is in a glass, the glass as, as it were, a glittering star; it is lit with from a blessed tree, an olive is neither of the east nor of the west; its oil would well-nigh give light although no fire touched it, Light upon light! God guides to HIS light whom HE pleases...”

Thus, this divine light is carried into the mosques with the help of candles and candle handlers (Figure 3). A similar attitude with regard to usage of light with a different symbolic meaning is also observable in European Baroque architecture. Bernini was the great inventor of the illusional decoration and the dramatic light, whereas Borromini and Guarini used architectural form itself to imply the expressional qualities [17]. Manipulation of light to enhance the richness of the interior and to draw attention to the sculptural and painting decorations was an important feature of that period [18]. Bernini’s representation of Saint Teresa in Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria Della Vittoria, Rome, is a good example of illumination of an enframed sculpture and making it fully visible as if inviting the viewer to participate in the vision [19]. Furthermore, in Bernini’s S. Andrea Quirinale, with the opening of an oculus in the vault and use of lantern, a new source of light is provided to focus on the whole iconography [20].

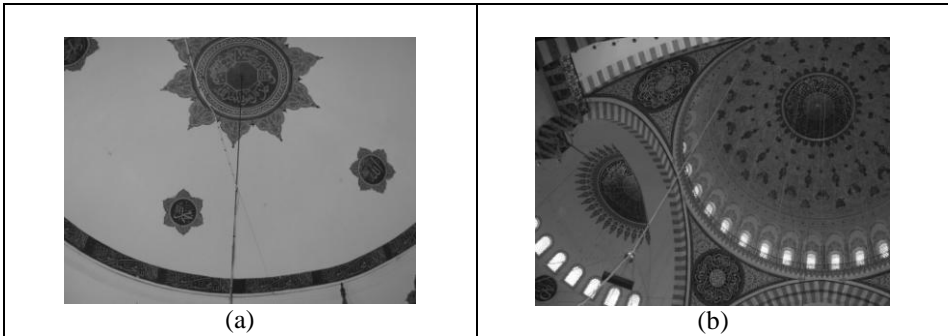


Figure 4. (a) Dome of Afyonkarahisar Başçesme Mosque, 15th century - at the center Surah Ihlas and at the periphery the script of Kalimah at-Tawhîd and (b) a view from the dome of Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul, 16th century.

Wall paintings and *calligraphy* are the other expressional qualities used extensively in Ottoman mosques. In Classical period, calligraphy was an important component in mosques. In this period, in addition to the use of tile as decorative element, there was an increased use of scripts especially on the wide cornices, dome centres and skirts and in the oval medallions hung on the first level windows [21]. The art of calligraphy had a distinguished place in the Ottoman Empire, especially in the capital city of Istanbul. There is a strong relationship with the use of scripts as the decorative element in the mosques and symbolizing the dominance of Islamic beliefs. For instance in many mosques on the walls, cornices, mihrab or domes the verse of Ayet-el Kürsi, Surah Al-Fatır,

the Surah Ihlas, scripts of the names of four Caliphs, Allah and Mohammed, and other scripts are written representing the dominance of Islamic focal of architecture in Ottoman period (Figure 4).

As for the wall paintings, in Classical period geometric decorations and hatai and rumi motives were the most predominant elements. Yet, in Ottoman Baroque period different from Classical period, flower motifs in the vases, motives from nature, Kaba, The City of Medine, mosque, kiosk depictions landscape paintings, ship depictions, flowers in medallions and such kind of wall paintings are observable [22] (Figure 5). Western influence has been accepted and absorbed in the 18th century Ottoman mosques especially in *stone engravings* and *decorations* where scallop, volute and leaf forms are expressed in a manner new to the Ottoman architecture [23]. In Baroque period mosques three-dimensional naturalistic floral ornaments with stylized rumi motifs and scrolls, shells, moulded cornices, concave-convex details were the predominant decorative features [24].

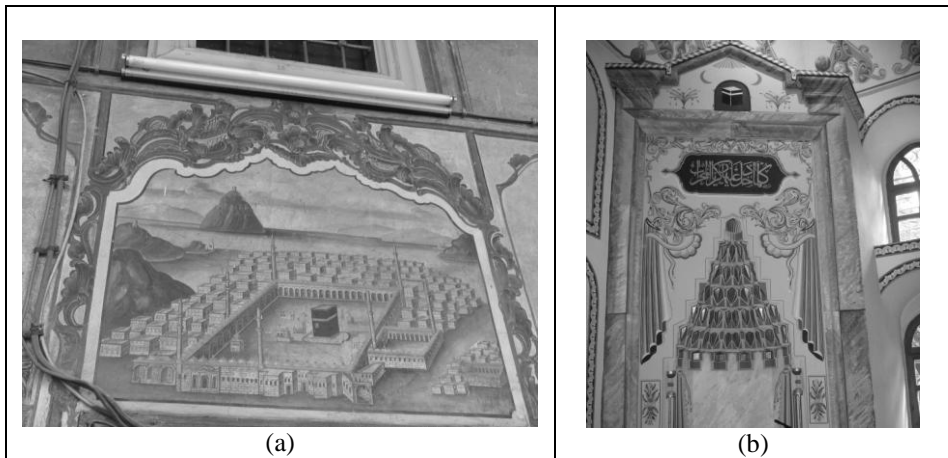


Figure 5. (a) Kaba depiction on the wall surface of Manisa Emir Hacı Hıdır Bey Mosque, 18th century and (b) the upper part of the mihrab niche of Kütahya Great Mosque, 15th century.

Mystical symbolism, which was used extensively in Ottoman culture especially in such fields as architecture, art, even in the clothes and behavior norms of daily life, was in this period a kind of expression between human and his Creator, Allah [25]. As an instance, according to Işın ‘double vav (a character used in Arabic alphabet)’ decoration symbolizes the 99 names of Allah, namely Asma-ul Husna, and acknowledged as the basis of invocation, which might be the intrinsic reason for its widespread usage in Ottoman period mosques (Figure 6). Because, in Arabic alphabet the numeric value of ‘vav (ﻭ)’ character equals to six, and the double vav gives the value of sixty-six, which is the equivalent of the word *Allah* in *ebced* calculation – isopsephy - the practice of adding up the numerical values of the letters in a word to form a single number [25, p. 11].



Figure 6. Calligraphy showing double vav engraving in Kütahya Great Mosque, 15th century.

3. Discussion - evaluation of intangible cultural heritage studies in Turkey

In Turkey what is defined as intangible cultural heritage includes oral expressions and traditions, performing arts, societal practices, rituals and feasts, knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe, and the handicrafts tradition [26]. UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003 was accepted in Turkey in 2006 with the Law No. 5448 on Approval of the Ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [26, 27]. Mevlevi Sema Ceremony and Arts of Meddah, Public Story Tellers were the first masterpieces included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, and up to now, there are in total eleven masterpieces with the latest inclusion, with seven others either being within the category of under process or pending files, waiting for their inclusion sooner [Lists of intangible cultural heritage and Register of best safeguarding practices, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011#tabs>, accessed May 20, 2014].

Before the acceptance of the convention, in legislations of Turkey there was no emphasis on intangible cultural heritage neither in the main preservation Act of 2863 (1983) nor in the Foundation Act of 5737 (2008) and in Foundation Regulations (2008) [Act of 2863, Law on Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property, 1983, <http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/Metin.Asp?MevzuatKod=1.5.2863&MevzuatIliski=0&sourceXmlSearch=>, accessed February 10, 2014; Foundations Act of 5737, February 27, 2008, <http://www.vgm.gov.tr/icerikdetay.aspx?Id=168>, accessed February 10, 2014]. After the acceptance of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention, a responsible body, which is Research and Training General Directorate of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, was established in Turkey for the preservation and promotion of intangible heritage. Today in Turkey there are two inventory studies maintained

by this Department within the context of intangible cultural heritage, which are Intangible Cultural Heritage National Inventory Project and Living People Treasury National Inventory Project. In addition, Intangible Cultural Heritage Administration Branch Directorate, which was established in 2007, and the Gazi University Turkish Folklore Research and Application Center as the scientific body have been implementing duties with regard to intangible cultural heritage studies in the country [26]. Furthermore, Board of Instruction and Education of the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey has placed courses for the sixth to eight grade students in primary schools in the fields of folklore, societal practices, folk arts, oral expressions, music, game, entertainment, and globalization and folk culture, aiming the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and transferring it to future generations [26]. Civil society organizations also arrange some projects and education seminars related to this field. As an instance, since 2008, Foundation for Conservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage (ÇEKÜL) organizes seminars in different cities on intangible cultural heritage to the local municipalities, increasing thus the awareness for neglected values [28].

Deacon et al. argue that “tangible heritage always has intangible significance” [29]. Such an opinion is quite to the point for our Anatolian Ottoman period mosque cases, as well. Yet, despite the increasing awareness of the preservation of those tangible historic monuments mostly conducted by Turkish Republic Directorate General of Foundation, meanings expressed by those monuments and values and meanings attributed to them by people, namely the intangible values and heritage, still has little attention. As an instance, many users of those sacred spaces do not aware of the intrinsic and invisible meaning of the pools located inside the mosques, and the candle holders on two sides of the mihrab. Similarly, few are known about the intangible usage of the Verses from the Quran engraved on the walls and inside the domes of the mosques. Much has been written about the architecture of the monuments, their decorations, materials used, and about their history, but very little about what they mean. As Oğuz points out that Turkey is making efforts to fulfill the requirements of UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, yet it is still far from transferring all intangible heritage related activities in whole awareness to broader audiences [26].

Above mentioned expressional qualities observed in historic mosques are also parts of this intangible cultural heritage transferring messages from Islamic culture of their period of construction and even before, carrying deep meanings and are never merely decorative. It should be noted that “a full understanding of heritage can only be achieved through the study of the multiple reciprocal relationships between tangible and intangible elements” [30]. Hence, first, an awareness is to be gained and disseminated emphasizing their intangible cultural value among the people who will execute their conservation and among many others who are interested. In addition, during their preservation extra care is to be given for their survival. Finally, fake replicas for the sake of modern-historic integration are to be strictly avoided.

4. Conclusions

This manuscript has argued that the mosque - Islamic praying space - has a double value from the point of view of cultural heritage; it is valuable not only because of its rich architectural entity, but also because of its expressional qualities and association with sacredness, certain rituals and with socio-cultural heritage. Considering all these values, the mosque as the part of intangible cultural heritage can contribute to common collective memory. Hence, in this manuscript, it was attempted to explain how certain forms and qualities encountered in Anatolian mosque architecture reveal and reflect Islamic understanding, culture and basic values of the society, as well as craftsmen. It was also clarified basically the forms, decorations, geometries and architectural elements observed visually in historic mosques having certain deeper values and meanings. Finally, the developments in intangible cultural heritage studies in Turkey and their relation with the expressional qualities of mosque architecture with some suggestions towards their longevity and preservation were briefly described.

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