

The Meaning of the Twirl: Understanding Decorative Art and Music

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Figure 1: The page which is known as ‘Chi Rho’ from Book of Kells



<http://file.rackham.blog.shinobi.jp/001.jpg>

Figure 2: Feminine Waves - Ceiling Paintings for the Kan-machi Festival



<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/74/df/f9/74dff916cb100552dda0f1d5f05bcda0.jpg>

§1: Introduction

Why do I feel uncomfortable when I see excessive decoration? People use decorations around religion and power. In the world of religion, there are many decorative styles and each is different. When power and order is demolished or recognized, it is nature to spend money on decorations. During the Kamakura period in Japan, the cloistered government accumulated riches through its autocracy, so that they began to create decorative arts with gold and silver as materials. They tried to be superior in culture to, with Samurai whom they had been in conflict (Ito 2017, 11). Generally, decoration motifs are natural phenomenon or animals in mythology. Each decoration is developed differently in different places. They are used as a function to increase aesthetic effect, but the relation with the historical and social backgrounds is vitally important. This paper examines the relationship between decorations and the religion of Islam. Both decorations and religions have a sense of eternity. There are similarity between religion and decoration, therefore they develop together. I asked questions to Dr Razia Sultanova, an ethnomusicologist who researches religion and gender in Central Asian and Middle Eastern culture, to learn what the Muslim community shares through music and how their traditional culture is affected by interactions with different societies. Although religion is complex, I am interested in how its meanings can be conveyed, specifically via swirl patterns. The swirl patterns of Celtic decorative arts evoke the feeling of movement, nature and life (Tsuruoka 2004, 64). The swirl pattern is used for decoration in all over the world. The concept of nature is mediated through the swirl, so it has been connected with religions (Yamazaki 2007, 147). In this paper, I would like to consider this connection.

§2: Literature Review

The following important themes emerged from my preliminary reading.

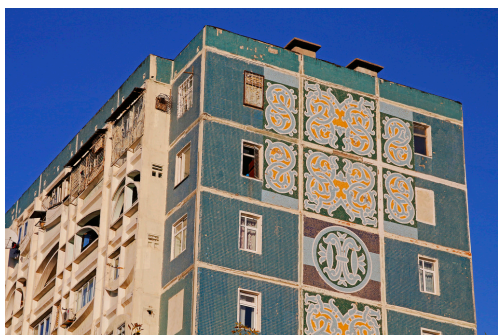
§2.1: About Sufism

This is an ideological movement which appeared in the mid-9th century in Iraq and spread to the whole Islamic world afterward. This was originally constructed based on mysticism, and practicing religious austerities was systematized to result in ultimate experience (Takahashi 2014, 7). Its believers have a deep faith and admire Allah absolutely. Sufism can be defined as a devout principle which places inner faith above all else. The practice of Sufism emphasizes austerity that leads to unity between God and man, which is the ultimate experience for believers.

§2.1.1: Suppression by the Soviet Union

After 1917, Islamic cultures were suppressed by Bolsheviks (a Marxist minority in Soviet Russia) because they were seen as the most resistant to the atheistic Soviet ideology in Central Asia. Many Mullahs, Ishans (descendants of the prophet Muhammad) and Sufis were killed or sent to camps (Sultanova 2012, 133).

Figure 3: Decorative patterns of Uzbekistan



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/11264282@N02/16138589122>

§2.2: Urban Development and Wall Decorations in Uzbekistan

Under Soviet rule, architecture in urban areas changed in style. In the 1930s, the apartment block was transplanted from Moscow and altered in line with Stalinist style. After that, the traditional decorative patterns of Uzbekistan were gradually used on these apartment walls. There are five main types of decorative patterns of Uzbekistan (Eiko 2008, 1093), one is of patterns with industrial motifs, such as cotton or astronauts. Another style is patterns based on religious ideology. For example, the white dove is used as a symbol of peace. Geometric patterns are also used. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, young people in Central Asia have been less religious than previously. Urban buildings have been modernized and traditional architecture has

become a tourist attraction. The traditional patterns which adorned apartment block walls can be seen as a phenomenon that appealed not only to the necessity of traditional cultures for citizens but also as an advertisement for people from foreign countries.

§2.3: The Religious Practice ‘zikr’ and the Group ‘Otin-Oy’.

Zikr means ‘story’ and ‘recall’. Believers chant God’s name or proclaim their faith repeatedly. In spite of the fact that Islam usually avoids music (Imam Afroz Ali online: <http://www.imranhosein.org/faq/59-general/224-is-music-allowed-in-islam.html>), believers perform their rituals with musical instruments. This fact was criticized by Ulama (a body of authoritative Muslim scholars) because they thought it was entertainment, not faith (Takahashi 2014, 49). Dr Sultanova found evidence of the oldest Yassavi zikr, which is still performed today in Uzbek Andijan and Kazakh Turkestan. Despite the common view that Sufi zikr no longer exist in Central Asia, women in the Fergana valley were segregated from men, living within secluded parts of the home. In being politically and socially isolated, a new form of teacher-apprentice relationship emerged within closed female communities. Young women went to a teacher’s house to learn how to read the Koran and books about Sufism. They are called Otin-Oy, they are women who are spiritual leaders within their communities in rural areas. They kept their religion and taught their children about their beliefs in secret

because they were seen as illegal and needed to avoid suppression by the Soviets (Sultanova 2012, 137-138). Otin-Oy had an important role to play in protecting their traditions.

These fascinating women raise many questions, ‘did they express their feeling of rebellion to the Soviets while males in the same religious community were killed?’ and also, ‘What feelings did they share during their ritual?’

Figure 4: Uzbekistan, Ferghana valley , Andijan. Photo : Razia Sultanova, 1999.



<https://ethnomusicologie.revues.org/241>

Figure 5: Dr Razia Sultanova



<http://raziasultanova.co.uk>

§2.4: Man and Woman in the Islamic World

A fundamental feature of Islam is egalitarianism, as a class system does not exist since distinctions between ethnic groups or class do not make sense. Religious communities were created without limits in terms of ethnic groups or nations. However, Koran indicates that the God created man superior to woman because man is in a position to work to support their wife (Atoda 2003, 233). Man has a better position than woman in Islamic society. Fundamentally, the reader of spiritual communities are only male, but female teachers have existed in Sufi communities.

§3: Methodology

The following questions were asked of Dr Sultanova:

Q1 What is the ‘empathy’ of Islamic ritual?

Q2 How are unity and music related?

Q3 Did the Otin-Oy express their rebellious feelings against the Soviet Union when they were singing?

Q4 Did the widespread construction of Soviet-style buildings in Uzbekistan change people’s lifestyles and religious motivations?

The aim of these questions to:

Q1 examine people’s thoughts while they are attending religious rituals.

Q2 examine whether people have a feeling of unity as a member of a religious society.

Q3 examine the change in traditional culture under Soviet rule, and women’s feelings while engaging in the religious chants.

Q4 To examine how Uzbekistani lifestyles changed under the influence of a different culture.

Dr Sultanova's answers to these questions can be found below with my analysis about the relationship between swirl patterns and natural phenomenon, which are: (1) Sea (Figure 2, 6) (2) Fire (Figure 7) (3) Plant (Figure 9) to find what meanings swirl patterns have, and find the similarity between decoration and religious music.

§4: Discussion

- Dr Sultanova answered:

A1: 'It is feeling of devotion. Religious practice leads people to deep feeling, and people keep suitable volume of voice while singing.'

The main thought during practice is devotion, and symmetry is important for Islamic art and is used to show devotion.

A2: 'Community was not originally traditional culture in Central Asia. After the spread of Islam, people created a ritual together with other people through devotion.'

People created rituals together in their communities.

A3: 'Otin-Oy lived in the rural areas and practiced in the underground world. They didn't have feelings of rebellion.'

I wanted to know if there was a change of motivation for ritual practice under the Soviet control, instead the way women cherish their faith was revealed.

A4: People living in rural areas have not been changed. Traditional cultures are passed down because most of the families are living with grandparents, but in urban area, the number of people who study their traditional culture in the school has increased.'

Seemingly, cultural influence by the Soviets changed the lifestyles in urban areas meaning people had to study their culture in schools, rather than at home.

§4.1: Analysis:

Believers share their devotion together in a religious practice. Also, the reason Sufism has continued underground is that it aimed to deepen faith. I relate these understandings with decoration. There are two viewpoints which can be seen in Islamic decorative arts: (1) introversion and depth (2) believer's feelings through devotion. It is assumed that there is a relation between decorative arts, Islamic architecture and the Muslim community which reflects these two viewpoints. Islam spread widely all over the world and the climate is different in each place, therefore the architectural and decorative form of mosques varies widely. Mosques are symbolic architecture of the Islamic world. Central Asian styles of mosques are covered with blue colored tiles. For example, there is a mosque which was built in 17th century in Isfahan, a town in Iran, With the bright tiles covering the inner walls that change depending on the light reflected from outside (Haneda 2001, 186). It is a characteristic of Mosques to put emphasis on inner rather than outer walls. Introversion can be seen by this emphasis on inner walls.

Sentences from the Koran are also used as decorative patterns. At first sight, they look mysterious and beautiful. The Koran is a doctrine which is said to not be understood completely by man because it is handed down by Allah (Akira Goto 2001.92). Muslims should believe the doctrine without question. It is the basis of

learning to memorize all the sentences of the Koran and understand its various interpretations. In the Islamic world, man's ability is meaningless in comparison with the infinitely high position of Allah. The excessive decoration and repetition can be thought of as a demonstration showing the union of Allah and believers, and the great influence of Allah. Decorations show importance in that they are very expensive. People use decorations to make an object's value higher. However, people themselves are part of the decorations in a Mosque because believer's emotions gather there. Muslims believe in heaven. Decorations in a Mosque lead people to imagine the unrealistic world. From this, not only the power of Allah, but also the believer's thoughts can be seen in the form of the decorations.

Twirl patterns in Islamic architecture can be seen in Arabesque patterns. A French poet, Charles Pierre Baudelaire indicated that 'The Arabesque is the most ideal of all decoration forms' (Charles Pierre Baudelaire 1887, Fusées). *He argues* that the Arabesque is created only from people's ideas, not by observation of natural phenomenon. Therefore, esthetes in 19th century resonated with this decorative art form (Tsuruta 2004, 222). Islam avoids representing living things in decoration. It is profane to worship an idol because Muslims are allowed to pray only to Allah. Christianity, Judaism and Islam have a faith to the same God. Nevertheless, idolatry began to be allowed only in Christianity because Jesus was recognized as a Son of God. Islam has been banned on idolatry, therefore many kinds of decorative arts were created instead of fine arts. However, the motifs of natural phenomenon seem to deeply affect people in religious communities. The motifs of plants recall the image of woman that produce life.

§4.2: About twirl patterns:

In Islamic world, the life force of natural phenomenon cannot be expressed by words or pictures, but in patterns. The figurative form of twirl patterns is abstract and symbolic (Tatsuta 1997, 15). Water and plants have a common motif in the twirl, therefore their meanings will be examined next. Also, fire will be examined to compare with them.

§4.2.1: Water:

In Leonardo da Vinci's sketches of water, he considered water as a destructive force that had fluidity. Water is a threat to people but also a blessing. It can mean holy water. Japan is a country rich in water resources and many decorative expressions of water have been created. Japanese running water patterns can be seen as a twirl pattern, which is an expression of eternal moving. This kind of twirl patterns are found in Ancient cultures throughout the world. It means dualism of life and death when two twirl patterns are composed (Yoshida 1985, 150).

Figure 6: Water study by Leonard DaVinci



<https://paulhumphriesriverecology.wordpress.com/2013/02/05/leonardo-da-vinci-water-rivers-science-and-art-part-1/>

Figure 7: Folio from a Falnama (Book of omens)



§4.2.2: Fire:

This miniature is from the Falnama, a book of omens used in the 16th and 17th centuries by fortune tellers in Iran and Turkey. This Falnama miniature depicted riding a dragon and his royal wife, Eve. Influenced by the Mongolian-Chinese tradition that associates the dragon with the Chinese emperor and the phoenix with the empress, Adam is depicted riding a dragon and his royal wife, Eve, is mounted on a peacock / phoenix. Both Adam and Eve have flames surrounding their heads, which denote holiness (Barkman 2015, 83). This picture shows that cultures from Eastern Asia were told to Islamic world in Central Asia through Silk Road. In desert areas, the temperature is very high. One of the reasons why the fire motif is not used for Islamic arts is that it is a symbol of hell.

https://archive.asia.si.edu/collections/edan/object.php?q=fsg_S1986.253

§4.2.3: Plants:

Goethe expressed the change of buds coming up, flowering and producing fruits or seeds in his poetry 'the Metamorphosis of Plants'. Plant patterns were born in ancient Mesopotamia. 'Arabesque' is a combination of the curve and swirl patterns and signifies leaves, stalks, or climbing plants getting tangled. The origin of this pattern is said to be ancient Greece and it spread to various places by way of the Silk Road. We can see arabesque patterns all over the world. In the Islamic world, they have greatly developed, as a decoration in Mosques, on tile, carpet, metalwork and calligraphy. This arabesque style spread to Western countries in the 19th century with complicated geometric patterns as a symbol of the Orient. In Japan, after arabesque patterns were introduced in the 5th century, they were used for

Buddhist art in many ways. Arabesque designs had a magnificent and brilliant artistic effect. The suggestion of Arabesque is considered as people's sensibility that has been felt the vitality by seeing the development of nature, and the power to expand to the world like ivy. The phenomenon that vines grow longer can be seen as a symbol of life. Swirl patterns have a visual effect of moving which are winding or tangling. In addition, the line of the pattern do not conclude so that they represent the unpredictable growth of plants.

Figure 9: Stone relief with arabesque of tendrils, palmettes and half-palmettes in the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabesque>

§5: Conclusion

Decorative motifs are clearly connected to phenomenon of the natural world. The symbolic meanings of decorative arts have effective power on people which works under political force. Swirl pattern is recognized as a symbol of Shamanism and Animism. People's attitudes and perspectives for natural phenomenon can be seen with decorative patterns. 'Repetition' is one of the characteristic of decoration. It works as an artistic effect, filling the surface, and, hiding individuals of the image.

There are common themes of eternity between decoration and religion. The reason why excessive decoration is uncomfortable to some people is that each motif is connected to human life, and it expresses human's feelings of devotions. However, each motif in the pattern does not assert itself. They become a part of the decorative group that mirrors what it means to become a member of society. This construction is similar to a religious community.

In Sufi zikr, people perform rituals by sharing their devotions with others. Despite Islam preferring avoid music, I can hear zikr's sound as a music because it is a culture that was made in people's own lives. Zikr is a great example of a religious culture that was protected by woman. Religion derives power from being timeless, so religious music and decorations are different from popular arts, which change constantly. In the Islamic world, because of the influence of IS, the diversity of denominations is disregarded and the image of a dangerous religion has circulated all over the world. However, Islam has many different contributing religious sects and it should be known that Soviet rule is a contributing factor for today's conflicts in the Islamic world.

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