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Frontiers of Architectural Research

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Study of the ornamentation of Bhong Mosque for the survival of decorative patterns in Islamic architecture

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Received 15 November 2017; received in revised form 15 March 2018; accepted 16 March 2018

**KEYWORDS**Bhong Mosque;  
Decorative patterns;  
Categorization;  
Geometry;  
Arabesque**Abstract**

Islamic architecture is rich in decorative patterns. Mosques were constructed in the past as simple buildings for offering prayers five times a day. However, in subsequent periods, various features of ornamentation in the form of geometry and arabesque were applied to the surfaces of mosques to portray paradise symbolically. This research applied descriptive approaches to examine the surviving patterns of the Aga-Khan-awarded Bhong Mosque and categorized these patterns as geometric and arabesque. This categorization was achieved by photography, use of software for patterns, and conducting interviews with local elderly persons in the region. The geometric patterns were simple 6- and 8-point star patterns. Several of the earliest examples of rosette petals exhibited 8- and 10-point star patterns and were categorized by incorporating the geometric style and location of mosques. This research investigated different arabesque categories and inscription types and determined the aesthetic and cultural reasons for their placement on various surfaces. Frescoes had different types of flowers, fruits, and leaves, and a few of them belonged to the local region.

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Peer review under responsibility of Southeast University.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2018.03.004>2095-2635/© 2018 The Authors Higher Education Press Limited Company. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. on behalf of KeAi. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Please cite this article as: Ahmad, M., et al., Study of the ornamentation of Bhong Mosque for the survival of decorative patterns in Islamic architecture. *Frontiers of Architectural Research* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2018.03.004>

## 1. Introduction

A mosque or masjid for Muslims is a place of worship. In Arab countries, during the spread of Islam, mosques were constructed as simple buildings for offering prayers five times a day; however, in subsequent periods, various features of ornamentation in the form of geometry, arabesque, and calligraphy were applied to the surfaces of mosques to portray paradise symbolically (Othman and Zainal-Abidin, 2011). A complex vocabulary of patterns was established over time. Tawhid, the pillar of Islam, requires believers to oppose idols, and this requirement eventually led to the forbiddance of the representation of human beings and other animals, especially in ornamenting the surfaces of mosques. provided a detailed summary of the art and architecture that spread during periods of Muslim rule in the vast region of the Atlantic to India from 650 to 1250. The era from 1250 to 1800 was also examined by Blair and Bloom (1995). Meanwhile, Critchlow focused on the formation of multifaceted geometric patterns by starting sequentially from the primary building blocks of these patterns (Critchlow, 1976).

Pakistan is an Islamic country with numerous mosques characterized by high style diversity. Apart from Bhong Mosque, the other well-known mosques that are regarded as ideal examples of Mughal architecture are Badshahi Mosque, Masjid Wazir Khan, and Mahabat Khan Mosque in Pakistan (Ansari et al., 2016; Shah, 1999). A study was performed on *kashi kari* in Wazir Khan Mosque by Ansari (Ansari et al., 2016). A comparative study of Mahabat Khan Mosque was conducted by Shah (1999). Bagley revealed the hidden meaning behind the esoteric inscriptions used on the Taj Mahal, and this hidden meaning changed the perspective of readers regarding the renowned monument (Begley, 1979).

Pakistan has many cultural heritage buildings. However, although an attempt has been made to examine heritage buildings by using multi-analytical techniques (Gulzar et al., 2013), interest and information on historical materials and techniques are limited, and this limitation hinders further discussions of heritage sites. Preserving historical buildings is crucial; however, if these buildings require new additions, then compatibility must be ensured between the architectural decorations to be added and existing ones (Yüceer and İpekoğlu, 2012).

### 1.1. Historical background

Bhong is a village in Rahim Yar Khan District and situated 25 km from Sadiqabad. This village is in the southern part of Punjab, where it meets the provinces of Baluchistan and Sindh in Pakistan. Bhong is a meaningless word, but in the language of Baluchistan, a word close to bhong is “bhongu,” which means house. Bhong is assumed to be derived from the word “bhongu” that became common among the people of this region as stated by locals. Bhong Mosque was constructed not only for praying but also as a center of religious learning for the youth in its area (Figure 1).

The Aga Khan Award is a prize for excellence in architecture and was established by Aga Khan IV in 1977. In 1986, Bhong Mosque received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture



Figure 1 View of the modified Bhong Mosque (Picture is taken by the Author).



Figure 2 The old Bhong Mosque (Picture is taken by the Author).

in appreciation of the efforts exerted by a single individual, Raees Ghazi Mohammad, to establish a local center of learning and building crafts in the village of Bhong. A technical review report that highlights the intricacy of the materials used for the construction of Bhong Mosque was prepared for the award (Report, 1982).

Local stories indicate that Raees (the builder of the mosque) had a dream that showed him he would die after the completion of the mosque. In the early 1930s, a small mosque was built (Figure 2), followed by the construction of a *haveli*, which was a place of residence commonly referred to as a palace. When the *haveli* was in the completion phase, the mosque structure was upgraded (Report, 1982). With his dream in mind, Raees spent a large amount of capital on the construction, especially on the rich ornamentation of the mosque.

Approximately 200 skilled craftsmen worked in the construction of Bhong Mosque. These craftsmen were from various parts of the country and brought with them their *shagirds* (students and assistants), who also possessed the experience required to complete the set tasks precisely and accurately. Some of the details related to the origin of the labor forces are as follows. The master mason was from Bikanir, which is in Rajasthan, India. Painters and calligraphers were from Karachi. A few masons from Multan also

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