

[Ir]relevance of *Kashikari*: Traditional Craft in Pakistan

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View of three tombs displaying the finest *kashikari* work. From left to right: Baha al Halim, Bibi Jawindi, and Ustad Nuria from the 14th and 15th century, Uch Sharif. Image courtesy: Abdul Fateh Saif and Shahzaib Arif Shaikh.

(Page 161) Ruins of the interior chamber of Baha al Halim's tomb, 14th century, Uch Sharif. Image courtesy: Abdul Fateh Saif and Shahzaib Arif Shaikh.

The roots of the traditional crafts in present day Pakistan can be traced back to the materials and methods of production from the earliest known civilisations of the region. The archaeological finds of the Indus Valley Civilisation demonstrate a mastery of the craft in the production of faience beads, bronze figurines, stone sculptures, gold, and other metal ornaments and terracotta objects.¹ Over the centuries, the trade routes and conquests facilitated an exchange of objects, ideas, skills, technology, and methods of production, between local and foreign artisans. As a result, the crafts transformed or developed with time, assimilating several influences from crafts of other regions. Some crafts have survived over the centuries and continue to be produced in select centres where artisans persist with their family professions.²

This essay aims to examine the conflicting views on the importance and existence of traditional craft in contemporary times, studied through the craft of *kashikari*. In the context of this essay, the word *kashikari* refers to traditional Islamic architectural ceramics and vessel forms produced in Sindh and Southern Punjab regions. Currently the craft practice continues in Hala and Nasarpur in Sindh, and Multan in Punjab (historically Multan was part of Sindh).³ It analyses literature in the field and takes into account the views of the practitioners, the *kashigars*,⁴ specifically Ghulam Hyder Daudpota, who works towards contemporising *kashikari* with the knowledge of its history and understanding of its guiding philosophy. He has established his workshop in his native town Nasarpur, a historical centre of *kashikari* in Sindh. The essay concludes with the discussion of Bhong Masjid, a mosque situated in Bhong, a village in Punjab. The mosque project is an apt example to discuss in the context of this essay, as at the time it was conceived and subsequently constructed, two of its aims were to revive the traditional crafts and exemplify the Islamic architecture of the region. The project appears to have achieved some success in its former objective but negates the spiritual and philosophical ideas that promoted the development of *kashikari*, and the critical, intellectual, and theoretical discourse prevalent in contemporary architecture.

Islamic Art and Kashikari

The study and documentation of the traditional crafts of different regions of Pakistan reveals that most crafts are in a dismal state. Many artisans working in traditional methods have either passed on or have become too old to work, and their children have left the family profession, finding other occupations for their sustenance. One such craft is *kashikari*, a remnant of Islamic Art⁵ in the region. *Kashikari* encompasses the materials, techniques, and processes used in the production of traditional Islamic architectural ceramics and vessel forms.

The following discussion points to several historical influences on the aesthetic and technological

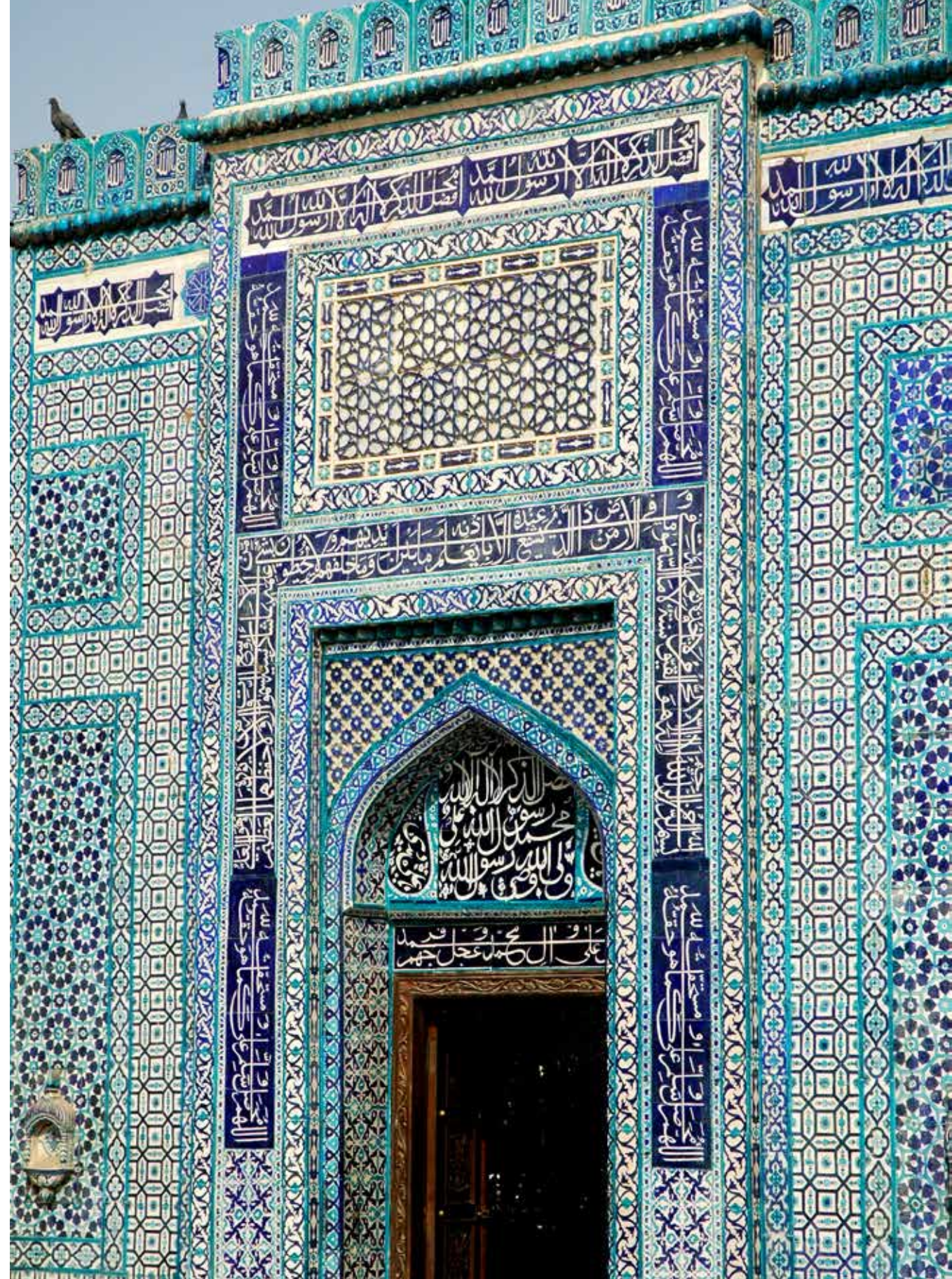
development of the craft of *kashikari* in the region, in addition to the overarching influence of the symbolism of Islamic geometric patterns. This has resulted in its uniqueness, as it varies from the craft produced in other regions of the Muslim world—from Turkey and Africa to Central Asia.

According to various records *kashikari* began in Kashan, Iran, in mid-10th century, and it was refined to an incredible perfection over time. Some speculate that the craft finds its roots in Kashgar,⁶ China, and/or the word *kashikari* is derived from the Arabic word *kash*, meaning glass. During the Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent, artisans from Persia travelled to the Sindh region and set-up their workshops here, while some might have stayed others moved back after transferring their skills and technology to the local artisans.⁷ Moreover, some of the glazing techniques used in tile making in the present day Sindh region, evolved from craft practices of the Indus Valley Civilisation.⁸ In Sindh, the ancestral craft has survived over the centuries as the knowledge is passed on from one generation to another within a family. However, in recent times, the number of workshops specialising in *kashikari* has declined and so has the quality of the craft.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, renowned scholar of Islamic Studies, speaks about the origin of Islamic Art neither being in the Divine Law, nor in juridical sciences and theology. It is not based on individual inspiration and creativity, is not concerned with outward appearance of things, and does not imitate outward forms of nature. Islamic Art reflects the inner quality of the outward existence of things; it is to the inner dimension of Islam—the *batin*—that one must seek the origin of Islamic arts and not in the outward/apparent—the *zahir*.⁹ Nasr connects Islamic arts with the search for the truth, *Hikmah* (wisdom), and Sufism (the spiritual dimension of Islam).

The sacred architecture of the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, mosques and mausoleum of saints, are covered with Islamic geometric patterns. The patterns, also used in *kashikari*, developed from the key elements of classical traditions of Greeks, Romans, and Sasanians in Iran.¹⁰ They were appropriated, elaborated upon, and perfected to create the Islamic geometric patterns that stressed the importance of unity and order.¹¹ According to Nasr these patterns, "are a result of visions of an archetypal world by seers and contemplatives who then taught craftsmen to draw them upon tiles and alabaster".¹² On the surface, they represent the inner structure of corporeal existence and the configurations of animate and inanimate objects, but more importantly, they unravel the structure of cosmos and draw attention to the Centre, which is everywhere and nowhere.¹³

The geometric patterns, including mosaic and arabesque¹⁴ produced in *kashikari*, adorn an architectural structure in a repetitive manner creating intricate surface decoration. According to Ghulam Hyder Daudpota,¹⁵ a practicing *kashigar*, this repetitiveness is a reflection of cosmological principles and it is meditative like the *zikr* of God. The underlying grid of these



patterns is reflective of the unity and order that we find in nature, of how things move systematically; any disturbance in the order results in catastrophe. Outwardly, these patterns represent the beauty of paradise. Imran Ali Daudpota,¹⁶ who is also a practicing *kashigar*, says that the connection of the makers, and generally Muslims, to *kashikari* is *rohani* (spiritual). It is important to note that Imran Ali has not received formal education in his field of work and is not able to articulate the knowledge of his craft as well as Ghulam Hyder, however he knows that the craft, which adorns mosques and shrines in the region, is a spiritual reflection of Islam and not strictly religious.

When one visits historical sites in Sindh and Punjab, the use of Islamic geometric patterns is visible in the craft of *kashikari*, more than the crafts of fresco, stone carving, and woodwork.¹⁷ Ghulam Hyder adds that *kashikari* was used extensively to adorn buildings in the Muslim world, as it was the most durable and technologically advanced material at that time.¹⁸ The material's durability can be seen from the survival of centuries old buildings and their adornment. The medium was further favoured in this region as all raw materials, such as terracotta clay, and



View of the exterior central panel of Bibi Jawindi's tomb, built in 1494 CE, Uch Sharif. Image courtesy: Abdul Fateh Saif and Shahzaib Arif Shaikh

(Page 165) Central panel of the tomb of Sheikh Mohammad Yusuf Gardezi with painted and glazed tiles, calligraphy, latticework, mosaic tiles, and parapet, built in 1152 CE, Multan (restored). Image courtesy: Abdul Fateh Saif and Shahzaib Arif Shaikh.

metallic oxides and pigments used for making coloured glazes, were either available locally or were produced by the artisans.¹⁹

Ghulam Hyder firmly believes in the preservation of age-old methods of production, as it is a means to conserve built heritage. He elaborates that the documentation of the guiding principles, designs, materials, techniques, and processes, facilitate production of traditional craft as and when needed. The understanding of the philosophy that motivated the development of the craft, keeps one connected to the history. On the other hand, he realises that due to the technological advancements, subsequent changes in built environments, and lifestyles, the times have changed and the understanding of this craft in its essence is limited. He admits that the sustainability and quality of a craft is possible only when people are interested in its continuity, or it risks extinction. Nasr states, "[...] whenever and wherever Islamic art has experienced a peak of its creativity and perfection there has been present the powerful, living intellectual—which also means spiritual—current of the Islamic tradition"²⁰

Ghulam Hyder has set up a workshop in his native town Nasarpur, a historical centre of *kashikari* in Sindh, and works towards revitalisation of the craft. He has faced numerous challenges in establishing the workshop but believes in research and experimentation to develop his work. His family background, education, and professionalism are major factors in sustainability of his workshop. Since his uncle was a *kashigar*, Hyder learnt the traditional craft from him and now works with his relatives who are also well trained, establishing a trusted network of workers. Additionally, his education at the Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London adds depth to his practice, apart from providing numerous opportunities in teaching, connecting with professionals from the field, and securing projects. In Hyder's workshop, both traditional and non-traditional making methods are employed and both types of work are produced, based on a project's demand. He understands that if wood is not available for firings and it is not an environmentally suitable fuel, then he should move away from traditional firing methods and look for alternate fuels for firing. He often experiments with new materials, methods, styles, and aesthetics that may be based on the traditional craft but are quite a departure from the traditional *kashikari* of the region. Being an optimist, he feels that there is an interest and revival in traditional designs as seen in textiles and fashion. It is an interesting time when things can improve if one makes an informed effort. Therefore, it is imperative that artisans find ways to make their work relevant in the current times and keep on improving it and maintaining its quality.²¹

Detour—Lateral Thinking in Art, Craft, and Technology

Extending the above discussion, this section draws from other prominent thoughts on art,



A *kashigar* painting oxides over white slip, in Ghulam Hyder's workshop, Nasarpur, Sindh. Photograph by Sadia Salim.

(Pages 170-171) Exterior of the Bhong Masjid displaying various types of traditional and industrial ceramic tiles, ceramic minarets, cement and marble tiles, and architectural pieces. Image courtesy: Mohammad Ali/White Star.

architecture, craft, and technology. Walter Benjamin delved into the notion of the lack of aura, or if one may broaden it to the lack of spirituality, in mechanised methods of (mass) production of art.²² As a positive consequence, the mechanical reproduction reaches the masses more easily and adds a political dimension to liberation from aura, i.e. democratisation. At the same time, a copy or a reproduction raises the issues of authenticity.²³ Benjamin's ideas, of technological advancement, mass reproducibility, lack of aura, democratisation, and issues of authenticity, make an interesting reading in the context of the proceeding discussion.

In every era humans endeavour to move forward, building on the knowledge of their ancestors. During Industrialisation societies advanced from the perfection of the handmade to mechanisation. In some cases, traditional crafts were also mechanised to further flawlessness and mass production. Sometimes people also take a step back to appreciate what may have been overlooked in human progression as observed in *Wabi-Sabi*,²⁴ the Japanese aesthetic of finding beauty in imperfection. *Wabi-Sabi* developed in the 16th century when Sen no Rikyū elevated ordinary craft objects to the same level as the imported (Chinese) luxury objects.²⁵ Much later (and perhaps indirectly), it also led to Yanagi Sōetsu's *Mingei*²⁶ movement that primarily focussed on the appreciation and preservation of the handmade by the unknown craftsman. The survival of Japanese traditional crafts today is the result of the Japanese philosophers' vision (from Sen no Rikyū, who was informed by Taoism and Zen Buddhism, and Yanagi Sōetsu influenced by Korean pottery). This vision shared by the society, enabled crafts to remain part of the everyday existence of the Japanese people. Both Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ghulam Hyder concur with this idea that development of arts is dependent on the seers and when their vision is shared by the people, architecture, art and craft survive and prosper as part of the living traditions.

The idea of authenticity is explored by Ayad Rahmani, architect, scholar of urban development and associate professor at Washington State University, with reference to the current building trends in the Muslim world. Architecture plays an important role here due to the forthcoming discussion in the essay about the Bhong Masjid, and dependence and existence of *kashikari* and many other architectural crafts on architectural structures. Rahmani compares Dubai and its development as a mega metropolis to Las Vegas and Disneyland. In essence, this kind of architecture is inauthentic with no point of origin, creating a sense of placelessness.²⁷ In the Muslim world, the aimless aping of the West, and a disregard of local contexts, histories, cultures, materials, and environments (aided by technology), is in complete contrast to earlier Islamic architecture that considered these elements in buildings and urban planning. The current trends in architecture in the Muslim world, such as Dubai, do not follow any particular school of thought and due to excessive use of technology, negate the local contexts.

Mohammed Arkoun, an influential and secular scholar of Islamic Studies, discusses the historical



rupture in the Muslim world and calls for intellectual and scientific enquiry in academia to understand its consequences. In the absence of critical approaches towards tradition and religion, the rupture is translated in a discontinuous built environment, where on one hand we see rich modern building styles and on the other, deteriorating ancient architecture and haphazard development. According to Arkoun, "These show clearly a dislocated society, a dependent economy, and a disintegrated culture".²⁸

The Conflict

Individuals and experts in the field often contend that the traditional craft practices should not go extinct and must be preserved in their authentic state as these crafts reflect our identity. With reference to *kashikari*, it is a means to preserve an important part of our built heritage, our shared history within and outside the region and our identity as distinct from others. Some argue that a craft, which came into being as a result of the scientific, social, religious and/or aesthetic necessities of a certain time in history, may not be relevant in contemporary times, and need not be preserved in its authentic form. Additionally, if there is no market demand for the traditional crafts, the artisans must find other ways of making a living.

Extending this discussion beyond *kashikari* to traditional crafts of the country—partly inspired by Islamic arts—the questions that arise are: Should one move along with a globalised world and popular and populist demands and slowly let traditional crafts fade away? Should one strive to keep a connection with the history and identity and try to preserve the crafts? Can history and identity be static or are they constantly in flux? Should traditional art and craft keep abreast with the present times or is the current state of crafts reflective and representative of our times?

The above questions motivate us to examine the modes and methods in which the traditional forms of craft survive in Pakistan. It seems befitting to answer the questions and conclude the essay through the discussion of a mosque in a village in Pakistan. In Bhong, a village situated near the town of Sadiqabad in district Rahimyar Khan, Rais Ghazi Mohammed, a wealthy landlord of Bhong, decided to construct a mosque—a house of God that would be a sight to behold. From its conception in 1930, construction and expansion continued for more than 50 years till Mohammed died in 1982.²⁹ According to its successive patron, Sardar Rais Shabbir Ahmed, son of Rais Ghazi Mohammed, the objectives of the built complex were to provide a congregational mosque for the villagers and a place for learning for the students from the region. In addition, Rais Ghazi Mohammed wanted the crafts to flourish therefore workshops were set up for training artisans of the country. It is said that two generations of artisans were trained here and that there were over 200 skilled artisans working for the project at one time.



Exterior of Bhong Masjid decorated with industrial tiles, painted designs and *kashikari*, Bhong. Image courtesy: Tanzeel Uz Zaman Babar (This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).



This section of the mosque shows a complete departure from the traditional style of mosque architecture and ornamentation. Image courtesy: Time Blight, <http://urbanduniya.com>



Interior of the Bhong Masjid decorated with *naqqashi*-fresco, mirror, and marble work, with crystal chandeliers and stain glass, Bhong. Image courtesy: Tim Blight, <http://urbanduniya.com>

Sardar Rais Shabbir Ahmed goes on to compare the mosque to the buildings sponsored by great patrons of Islamic architecture.³⁰ Set against humble mud and brick houses, the Bhong Masjid is (an apt example of) a masterpiece of contemporary art. At the outset, the project was meant to project grandiosity; it encapsulates the pulse of the people of this country in the most extravagant way.

Kashikari has been used extensively in the ornamentation of the Bhong Masjid, along with other traditional crafts including stucco, gilt, woodwork, stone carving, *naqashi*-fresco, mirror work, and glasswork. Alongside, and mostly on the exterior, modern building materials such as imported industrial tiles, terrazzo, wrought iron, cement tiles and artificial stone, have also been used. The mosque incorporates stylistic influences from Islamic architecture of Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Spain, and Western colonial building styles of 1940s. The project won The Aga Khan Award for Architecture³¹ in 1986 on the basis that it "enshrines and epitomises the popular taste in Pakistan with all its vigour, pride, tension and sentiment", and that an individual took it upon himself to bring attention to the traditional crafts and build infrastructure in the village for the sustenance of its people.³²

Despite the award, it is not an example of erudite architecture. Due to its numerous influences, it has no singular point of origin. The influences are not imaginatively employed but are whimsical and fanciful internal visions of Rais Ghazi Mohammed, its architect and patron. The award description further states, "They [the borrowing of stylistic elements] are the product of boisterous gusto reminiscent of the vitality and vulgar insouciance of the self-confident millionaires of nineteenth century America".³³ The mosque does not adhere to Islamic principles of sacred architecture. Outwardly it may represent the beauty of paradise or perhaps the Creator too (albeit subjectively), but in principle it does not reflect Islamic spirituality, the structure of the cosmos, the *batin* and the unseen heavens. It relies on mimesis and projects an outward appearance of splendour through an amalgamation of multiple styles, crafts, and materials. It is a modern-day spectacle that disregards the essence of the Islamic tradition (of spirituality, unity, and order) and yet a monumental effort to revive and preserve the traditional crafts. It is a democratised representation of the people of this country and our contemporary times—a result of certain disconnect with history and therefore its fragmented interpretation. The traditional crafts thrive in Bhong Masjid's uninformed architecture and serve a decorative purpose—an outward beauty of things.

For a number of influential scholars of Islamic arts, including Nasr and Arkoun, the Bhong Masjid may represent a desacralisation of the Islamic arts, a rupture in tradition and a chaotic disposition. However, Arkoun, also considers a strict adherence to tradition as suppression of creativity and advocates critical approaches to spirituality in the face of globalisation. The members of The Aga Khan Award for Architecture jury recognise that the mosque's architecture

may not be authentic, but also see the creativity and originality of artisans in bringing together disparate styles, materials, and techniques. In the process, new meanings may have evolved from new contexts and juxtapositions.³⁴ As discussed earlier in the essay, the art and craft of the Muslim world appropriated from the knowledge of those who came before them, thereby assimilating multitude of influences and evolving with time. This was also observed in Ghulam Hyder's work and his methods of production in his workshop in Nasarpur. If human history were linear, Islamic Art could have creatively developed to further perfection, complexity, and universality by Muslims. Perhaps it was developed in places outside of the Muslim world and in other forms that we have failed to recognise. And as for spirituality, access to the Centre and nearness to the Creator, we already know that one can find it anywhere, everywhere, and nowhere.

Notes

1. Michael Jansen, Maire Mulloy, Günter Urban, eds., *Forgotten Cities on the Indus: Early Civilization in Pakistan from the 8th to the 2nd Millennium BC* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1991).
2. All crafts do not survive in their entirety but either retain certain stylistic elements, or continue use of similar materials and methods of production.
3. It is quite likely that it is produced in some other cities or towns, too.
4. *Kashigars*, descendants of traditional *Kashigar* families, are the makers of glazed tiles and panels, intricate cut mosaics, architectural pieces, and vessel forms. Traditionally *kashigars* were always men, as the craft was not taught to the women in the family. Nowadays, one who practices the craft regardless of the family background is called a *kashigar* or *kashikar*.
5. The term "Islamic Art" is highly contested and considered a product of the Western thought to represent the significant *other*. It has been challenged by a number of scholars due to the vastness of what it intends to represent, such as the geographical areas, periods, and styles (especially those informed by local traditions). The scope of this essay does not permit discussion on the topic, but touches upon it in the concluding section. In the context of this essay, the term Islamic Art (and/or) Architecture refers to arts that were shaped by the spiritual understanding of Islam.
6. Kashgar is one of the westernmost cities of China located near the border with Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. One can see examples of *kashikari* (or its variants) in all of these cities and countries.
7. It is interesting to note that the potters producing terracotta pots in Karachi *Kumbharwara* have recently upgraded their kilns. According to them, they were designed and constructed with the help of visiting Iranian potters. Sadia Salim, "Survival and Revival: Clay Traditions in the Sindh region," *Craft Research* 7, no. 2 (Intellect, 2016): 207–230 (24).
8. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, "Craft Traditions of the Indus Civilization and their Legacy in Modern Pakistan", *Lahore Museum Bulletin* 9, no. 2 (July–December 1996): 1–8.
9. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 6.
10. Department of Islamic Art, "Geometric Patterns in Islamic Art", *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/geom/hd_geom.htm (October 2001).
11. Abdul Hamid Akhund and Nasreen Askari, *Tale of the Tile: The Ceramic Traditions of Pakistan* (Karachi: Mohatta Palace Museum, 2011).
12. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 49.
13. *Ibid.*

14. The link between Islamic geometric patterns and arabesque is considered debatable. For this essay, geometric patterns in ceramics include arabesque and mosaics. In addition to geometric patterns, *kashikari* on sacred buildings also includes Islamic calligraphy.
15. Ghulam Hyder Daudpota is not a direct inheritor of the craft of *kashikari*, as it was practiced on the maternal side of his family. In traditional setting, the craft is passed on from father to son and not to daughters, as they may reveal the secrets of the craft to their family through marriage. Daudpota learnt the craft due to the proximity within his family from his maternal uncle and through his studies at Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London. Currently he works with his family members, some of whom have also studied the craft and/or are part of the *kashigar gharana* (family).
16. Imran Ali Daudpota works with Ghulam Hyder Daudpota in Nasarpur.
17. Ghulam Hyder Daudpota, interview, 17 February 2018, at VM Centre for Traditional Arts, Rangoonwala Community Centre, Karachi.
18. Ghulam Hyder is referring to the time beginning in mid-10th century and the following centuries when the craft was technologically improved.
19. Sadia Salim, Field notes, Hala (Sindh), 20 December 1993, "Kumbhars of Sindh", unpublished dissertation (Karachi: Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, 1994).
20. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 9.
21. Ghulam Hyder Daudpota, interview.
22. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Sage, in association with The Open University, 1982), pp. 217–227.
23. Ibid.
24. The initial inspiration for Wabi-Sabi's metaphysical, spiritual, and moral principles came from ideas about simplicity, naturalness, and acceptance of reality found in Taoism and Chinese Zen Buddhism. Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1994), p. 25.
25. Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*, p. 25.
26. The Mingei movement began in 1920s, influenced by Korean pottery, and formally declared by Yanagi Soetsu in 1926. The term Mingei was coined by Yanagi and potters Hamada Shoji (1894–1978) and Kawai Kanjiro (1890–1966).
27. Ayad Rahmani, "Catching up with *The Kite Runner*: Architectural Authenticity in a World Overrun by Globalization," in *Heritage and Sustainability in the Islamic Built Environment*, ed. Bashir A. Kazimee (Southampton, Boston: WIT Press, 2012), pp. 173–186.
28. Mohammed Arkoun, "Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture," in *Architectural Education in the Islamic World*, ed. Ahmet Evin (Singapore: Concept Media/Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1986), pp. 15–21.
29. The complex expanded over the years to house the main mosque, a small mosque used as female prayer hall and library, madrassa, dormitories for students and visitors, and gardens. Apart from this complex, Rais Ghazi Mohammed also built a palace for himself, and roads and infrastructure for the village including irrigation and water system, and a market. He is also known to have built the shrine next to the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Multan, and smaller shrines near the city of Sadiqabad.
30. "Bhong Mosque," in *Space for Freedom: The Search for Architectural Excellence in Muslim Societies*, ed. Ismail Serageldin (London: Butterworth Architecture, 1989), pp. 144–154.
31. The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is given every three years to projects that set new standards of excellence in architecture, planning practices, historic preservation, and landscape architecture.
32. "Bhong Mosque," in *Space for Freedom*.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.