

# The iconography of Iranian-Islamic Mosques (Case studies: Sheikh Lotfollah and Kaboud Mosques)

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*Abstract:* - The mosque is more than just somewhere for Muslims to pray. From an artistic perspective, a mosque is a place to express the infinite nature of God and Islamic spirituality. In other words, it is where art and religion meet together and represents the essential manifestations of Islamic art and architecture. Over a period of time, the mosques have been more embellished by using traditional techniques such as tiling works (mosaic, seven colours) and plastering. The evolutionary process in decorating Iranian mosques occurred in the past centres in which the date and location of construction indicate the applied methods and patterns. This paper investigates the iconographies of tilework, which were used in the design of two Iranian mosques: Kaboud and Sheikh Lotfollah. Mosques related to two different locations and periods. The data collected through the observational study and literature review, and the result conducted through an analytical method. The results show that all the motifs and symbols which were depicted on the minarets, domes, under the roof, and altar, are representative of the embodiment of God's power. For example, the patterns such as animal, vegetal and geometric have a hidden Islamic concept inspired by nature. Also, the arabesque motifs and Khatai flower, compared to the other Islamic patterns, play an essential role in creating the Islamic atmosphere.

*Key-Words:* - Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Kaboud Mosque, Sacred Art, Islamic patterns, Tilework, Iconography

## 1 Introduction

What is Islamic art? Considering the Islamic community, Islamic art is the expression of a whole culture, intimately intertwined with religious, theological, and legal commitments. It is a way of expressing and celebrating the defining ideology of a community[9]. Another definition states that as a consequence of a strong relationship with the spirituality of Islam, Islamic art represents the manifestation of unity in the realm of plurality.

On the other hand, Islamic architecture, as a clear symbol of the sacred art, is one of the distinctive-known branches of Islamic art, which present the highest level of complexity in decorative art. Besides, Islamic architecture is based on Islamic regulations and restrictions in using the figural, animal-based designs and sculptures. However, in some cases, there were few numbers of figural artworks that do not follow the Islamic restrictions and exist in secular buildings. Islamic architecture represents a profound insight into the Muslim artists' beliefs and practice over the period and kept its spirituality by considering the diverse culture and traditions[11].

Indeed, the Muslim artist intends to create a spiritual identity by applying color, light, and pattern so to indicate the implicit and mystic concept of Islam. In this paper, the discussion is mainly around the patterns. The spiritual identity primarily stems from the essence of Islam, the artist's profound belief and

creativity. In other words, "the Muslim artist uses the visual dimensions as a mediator for transferring inspiration to the world of meaning and reality[18]. In addition, to adorn the monuments, the artist employs traditional Islamic art components as tile, brick, stone, plaster.

In Iranian architecture, the mosque undoubtedly comprises the form and concept to highlight the sense of humanity and sacredness, which represents the super empirical identity of Islam. Notably, in Shi'a mosques, sacred quality is quite evident because of the Muslim artist's religious beliefs and thoughts[18]. In essence, the Muslim artist attempts to express that his/her religion is self-contained of any historical happening or occasion [9]. Therefore, the artist points out that God's nature is beyond man's power to know or portray; and, employs the infinite patterns and arabesque to create the holy sense of the divine.

Kaboud Mosque is one of the Islamic architecture treasures which is located in Tabriz, Iran and is known as Isalm Firoozeh, due to its diaphoretic blue tilework[8]. The maintained epigraphs of Kaboud mosque indicate that it was built in 870 AH. The outstanding tiles of the façade have a core role in making construction exclusive for archaeologists.

Unfortunately, the outer portion of this historical site was destroyed by an earthquake in 1193 AH[29]. However, the central structure consisting of the

ornamentation and entanglement of tiles and bricks with various colors remained mostly intact.

Another unique structure in Iranian-Islamic architecture is Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque located in Isfahan, and precisely on the east side of Naghshejahan Square and in front of the Alighapoo Palace. This masterpiece of Iranian architecture constructed in the first half of 17th A.D. and its restoration belong to between 1933-1937[17]. Despite the other mosques, Sheikh Lotfollah does not have the courtyard and minaret, so, it seems like a domed seraglio. The mosque also is connected to Naqsh-e-Jahan square through a frontage. The Moaraq tiles used in mosque interior and exterior design are the incredibly exquisite type of tiles. Cream-color is the dominant colour of Sheikh Lotfollah's tiles; however, the primary colour used in Iranian mosques frequently is blue. The façade, outside of the dome, and two upper epigraphs are covered by Thuluth style calligraphy with diaphoretic tiles on an azure blue background[15]. On the other hand, the inside of the dome, sanctuary, and top side of windows adorned by Nasta'liq style calligraphy[15]. Besides, curved arches, domes, minarets, as well as interior and exterior design are covered by glazed tilework[20].

In principle, the excessive use of cutting tiles (mosaic) reached unprecedented superiority during the dynasty of Timurids and Safavids. The tiles had been designed based on Arabic Calligraphic inscription, coloured vegetative patterns, and other decorative elements with the turquoise blue color in priority.

Both mosques have one feature in common, which is the authentic feature of Iranian mosques: tilework with meaningful patterns and symbols. Since symbolism of early Iranian Islamic art has been barely discussed, this is of an importance to disclose the used motifs' notions in order to make a trajectory between the Islamic art and contemporary art in Iran.

Therefore, this article investigates the concept behind the tiling patterns (vegetal and geometric patterns) of Kaboud and Sheikh Lotfollah Mosques. More precisely, this study intends to figure out the mysterious concept of motifs such as the arabesque, rosette, five-point star, and eight-point star patterns, which were often used to illuminate the precious tilework of the mosques mentioned above. The results show that symbolic geometric patterns and arabesque over the period have been changed by form and colour, although the sacred concept of patterns protected. In other words, tilework undoubtedly employed to adorn the mosques so as to create an intense sense of the presence of God.

## 2 Material and methods

The research on patterns of Sheikh Lotfollah and Kaboud Mosques was conducted by the descriptive and data analysis method. The data was collected through library documents and literature review, direct observation, and photography of predetermined cases. In order to study the interpretation of the existing iconography in tilework of Iranian Islamic Art, it was also necessary to select the mosques, which provide comprehensive information in terms of the glazed tiles, the culmination period of using tilework and the symbols. The author decided to study the Kaboud and Sheikh Lotfollah mosques since both cases contain a variety of symbols in tilework and worthwhile proposition in Islamic architecture in Iran.

Kaboud and Sheikh Lotfollah mosques, which belong to the Timurids and Safavid empire, respectively, are prominent structures where the flourishing and climax of using different sort of tiling and innovation in this field occurred. To accomplish this project after conducting the related literature review, and being knowledgeable within this field, firstly, the Kaboud mosque was carefully observed through doing the field studies and in order to further analyse extensive photography was taken place. Afterwards, photos precisely were focused on looked upon tiling artworks' details and classified the type of symbols. This procedure was used in studying Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, the second mosque, which was visited to figure out similarity and disparities in details of patterns and symbols. In principle, this article will review the patterns of tilework in the mosques, as mentioned earlier, the concept behind the patterns, and patterns sources.

## 3 Results

### Symbols

Tilework was employed during the Islamic period mainly for increasing structural stability rather than decorating[5]. In this period, Muslim artists used several non-portrait symbols on tills to create the holy sense of Islam. Generally, the symbol is a sign standing for a specific concept or representation of an object[5]. As was expected, numbers and shapes have a significant contribution to creating a symbol; meantime, culture, art, politics that associate with establishing them in society. Symbols in the form of patterns, either abstractly or realistically, have been using on objects, clothes, and buildings. The following sections briefly describe the different types of symbols.

### 3.1 Animal patterns

Animals have had a strong relation to human life over time. It seems that animal-based patterns were employed as adornment in Sasanid Art, rather other patterns and symbols[26]. However, as animal patterns have not been used in the Sheikh Lotfollah and Kaboud Mosques, it is not the case for discussion in this article.

### 3.2 Vegetal patterns

Floral and vegetal patterns remarkably used in Islamic art architecture also rooted in Sassanid and Byzantine architecture[2]. The reason for the existence of the pervasive vegetal patterns in Iranian art is that Iranians have had a profound respect and sanctity-oriented attitude towards plants throughout history. For instance, plenty of floral and plant-based ornaments were illustrated on the surface of items and monuments[25]. According to the Illustrated Dictionary Of Symbols In Eastern And Western Art, cypress is the symbol of evergreens, acanthus metaphor of the sky and the lotus symbol of water and life[13][11]. Moreover, plant patterns representing the delicate form of life are used in holy places, which might associate with the mosques' sacred space and symbolise the heaven atmosphere[1].

#### 3.2.1 Biomorphic patterns (Arabesque)

The floral, vegetal forms in a spiral pattern is called "biometric" or "arabesque" and refer to adornment or style that employs flower, foliage, or fruit to produce an intricate pattern of interlaced lines[22]. This pattern is one of the outstanding features of Islamic art. Figure 1a illustrates the arabesque patterns on the façade of Kaboud mosque (Figure 1a). Also, arabesque patterns have been used in the dome and both external and internal parts of the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque (Figure 1b). Although arabesque patterns do not exclusively belong to Islam (Arabic), they were the most common pattern used in the Islamic period. Since Islam had prohibited figural representations, artists became more creative in utilising the elaborated non-figural patterns, which mainly lead to employing the appropriate symbolism of Islam. Arabesque was the most popular pattern for Islamic artists as they could convey their creative message in abstract form. In theory, arabesque symbolises the essence of the Islamic art concept, which represents the unity in plurality and plurality in unity. The arabesque is a type of dialectic in the category of ornamentation, in which logic is allied to

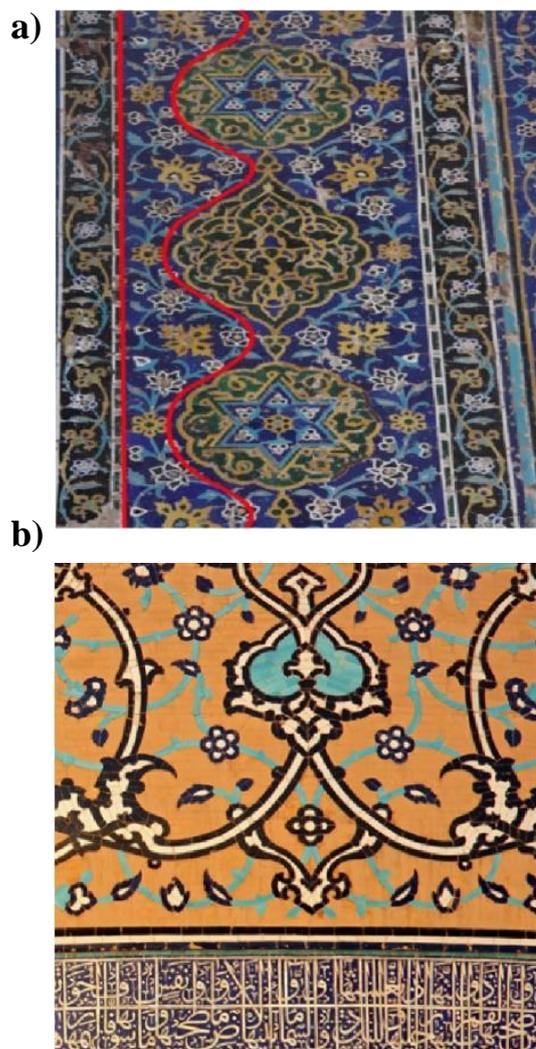


Fig. 1 Biometric pattern of a) Kaboud mosque's façade and b) Sheikh Lotfollah mosque's dome

a living continuity of rhythm. It has two essential elements, the interlacement and the plan motif[7].

The former is essentially a derivative of geometrical speculation, while the latter represents a sort of graphic formulation of rhythm expressed in spiralled designs. Both elements may possibly be derived not so much from plant forms as from a purely linear symbolism[7]. Furthermore, historically, arabesque emanates from the grapevine. Grape and tendrils initially were used in Sasanid palaces, and afterwards, Muslim artists borrowed these ornaments from the Sasanid dynasty[26].

### 3.3 Geometric patterns (Girih)

Due to the fact that the figural patterns has been prohibited in Islam, geometric pattern as one of

nonfigural pattern grasped more attention to be gradually applied in Islamic art and ornamentation[31].

The Geometrical patterns become one of the widespread ornamental elements in the Islamic Art and architecture, which are based on the "mathematical division of surface and reticular system"[19]. The reason behind the flourishing of the Geometric patterns in the early Islamic culture was the evolvement of the mathematical knowledge of the ancient Greeks, Persians, and Syrians where influenced Damascus and "*Baghdad, the capitals of the Umayyads and the Abbasids*"[19]. The existing orders in the geometric patterns demonstrate the harmony and beauty of the geometric patterns reflecting the cosmic law, using a trajectory to "*discover and understand the God*" [14]. The evidence presented thus far about Islamic artwork supports the idea that the most popular group of patterns are geometric patterns[3]. The adjustability and overlapping feature of shapes in these patterns lead them to fit in many forms for decoration purposes. Therefore, they are abundantly seen in preeminent Iranian historical sites in regular geometric shapes such as circle, square, triangle, or compound of checkered surfaces, six-pointed star, mandala, cross shape, and non-geometric symbols[16]. Another motivation to employ the geometric patterns is Islam's discouragement of figurative art. As we can see in the figures, geometric patterns were combined with floral patterns in the background[6] to create an atmosphere of connection between prayer and the divine.

### 3.3.1 Shamsah (Little suns)

The outstanding design of Shamsah in the internal layout of the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque's dome is the distinctive feature of this mosque (Figure 2a). On the other hand, Shmasah is observed in the internal section of the Kaboud façade, having been adorned by the sacred names of divinity (Figure 2b). Indeed, Shamsah has different symbolic notions.

In the Iranian pre-Islamic era, Shamsah is the metaphor of a way to bring divinity radiant into the earth. From Islamic art point, Shamsah arose out of circular medallion which is generally embellished by arabesque and calligraphy and in some specific cases, by animal (bird&fish) patterns. These patterns broadly have been utilised for various proposes, either religious inspiration, as illumination of the first

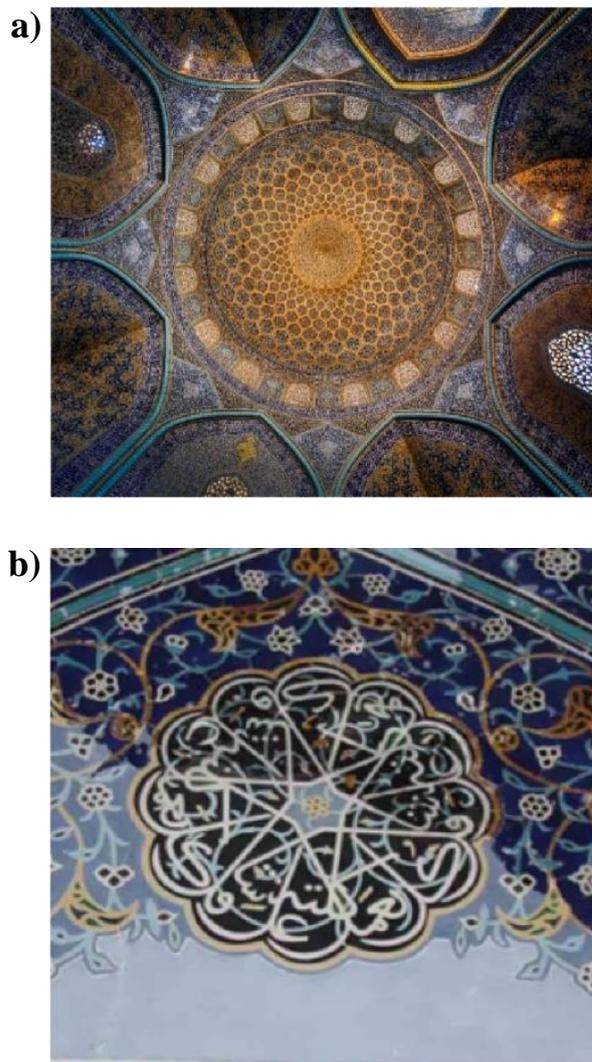


Fig. 2 Shamsah a) Sheikh Lotfollah mosque's dome and b) Kaboud mosque's facade.

page of Q'oran or non-sectarian types of Islamic art encompasses metal, pottery and carpet [21] [4]. Furthermore, they conspicuously were considered to illustrate the profound notion of the divinity light, in which Q'oran introduced that Allah is the light of the heavens and earth, so, the shamash is the symbol of Allah/god[27]. For example, the tilework in the interior part of the dome in Sheikh Lotfollah mosque has been adorned by arabesque pattern, which indeed shows the concept of unity in plurality and plurality in unity (Figure 2a)[10].

### 3.3.2 Five-pointed Star (Pentagon)

Although the large section of the east side in Kaboud mosque has been wrecked, there are still a variety of adornments of tile art. The tiles designed by the five-pointed star along with Naskh calligraphy of divine names and Arabesque motifs have remained on the outer walls (Figure 3a). Also, the geometric patterns adorn the east wall of façade and the ceiling of the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque (Figure 3b). Pictograph of five-pointed star dates back to the Sumeric period (3300 BC), which shows the symbol of the superiority of the monarch[13].

Furthermore, number five usually has a spiritual meaning in human life related to the five human senses and a significant role in astronomical observations. In Islam, number five reflects the five pillars of Islam, five daily ritual prayers and five members of the household of the Holy Mohammad that called Ahl al-Kisa ((Arabic: آل الأنبياء 'Āl al-'Abā'). Ahl al-Kisa is also called the five prominent figures in Shia and well-respected ones for the Sunni denomination[30].

### 3.3.3 Cross pattern

The star-cross pattern has been frequently used in many areas of the Middle East as well as in Spain[24]. The exterior of Kaboud mosque is made of brick (Figure 4a); however, the particular districts behind and the east edge is ornamented by tiles. The cross pattern of tiles was used by explicit symmetry beside other geometric patterns (Figure 4b). Meantime, entire walls of the mosque are embellished by Cross and different geometric patterns (Figure 4c,d). Cross pattern also covers the walls of the corridor (Figure 4e) as well as the arches of Shabestan in Sheikh Lotfollah mosque (Figure 4f). The tiling was introduced during the Ilkhanid period. Chalipa (Mehraneh, Mehr-e-gardun, Swastika) as a cross pattern is a universal religious symbol of the ancient world, and its name was derived from the combination of Sanskrit, meaning "joy" and "good fortune"[33]. by employing in a variety of sizes for adorning the religious and secular constructions, the most noticeable knowledge transformed on tilework occurred between Seljuk and Timurid.

Generally, the employing of Chalipa pattern, particularly Swastika, either because of its concept or aesthetical aspect was very common in Seljuk and Safavid dynasties compared to the other Islamic era. However, its origin and the

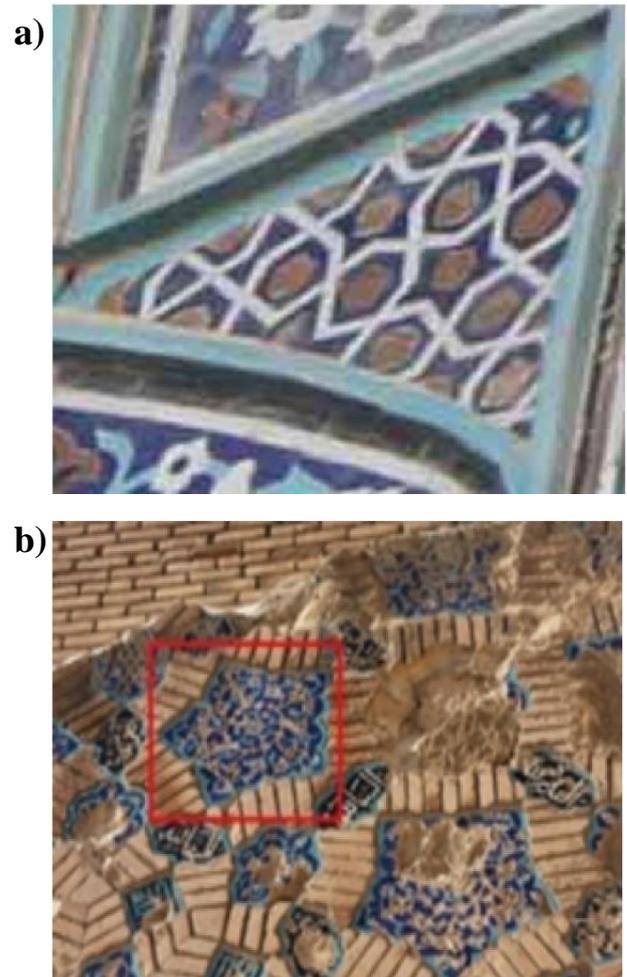


Fig. 3 a) Five-pointed of Kaboud mosque's exterior walls and b) East wall of Sheikh Lotfollah mosque's façade

reason which made this pattern popular among tribes are ambiguous. Also, the Chalipa pattern and the Swastika have been used a lot in the-Islamic era until the Sassanid dynasty. These patterns uniquely could be observed in Susa, Tape Hesar, Shahr-e Sukhteh, Tall-e Bakun[28].

In the Islamic period, the Chalipa pattern symbolised as unity, four geographical directions, and four archangels. At the same time, in literature and mysticism, the Chalipa is the manifestation of nature and glory attributes of the divine[28]. The earliest recorded occurrences of the Swastika seem to have been at Samarra in central Mesopotamia and at Susa in western Iran, where clear swastikas appear on pottery from about 4000 B.C. [28].

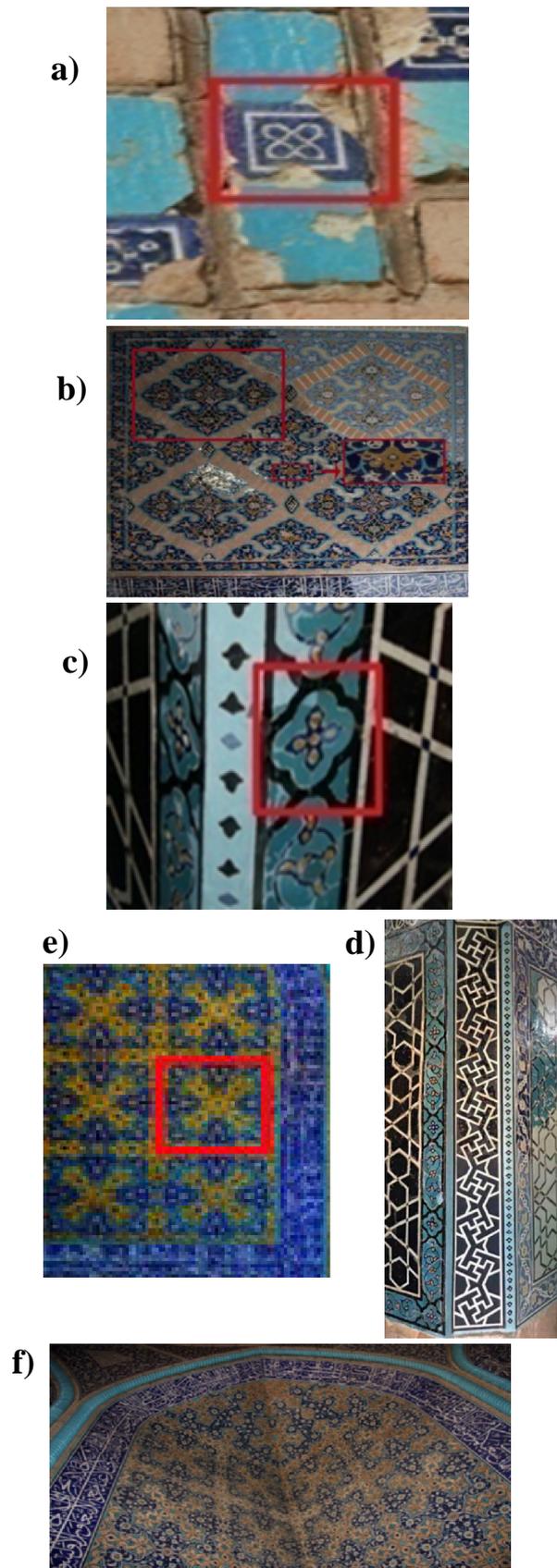


Fig.4 a) Exterior wall of Kaboud, b) Cross pattern in Kaboud mosque's central shbestan, c) Seraglio of Kaboud mosque, d) Interior wall of Kboud mosque, e) Corridor of Sheikh Lotfollah, f) Arches of Shabestan (nave), Sheikh Lotfollah and (Swastika).

### 3.3.4 Eight-pointed star (Khatim or Khatim Sulayman)

Although a considerable part of the tiling art of the interior portion in the Kabous Mosque was demolished, precious tilework of the eight-pointed star remained unchanged and obviously revealed that there was the eight-pointed stars adjacency of the divinity names (Figure 5a); also the combination of goldwork and tilework on the ceiling and outside of the Kaboud makes it further exclusive (Figure 5 b and 5c). Whereas in the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, the eight-pointed star pattern has juxtapositioned the Bannai calligraphy on the exterior illustration of the dome (Figure 5d). Emami explained that this pattern represented as two overlapping squares and is one of the earliest used patterns. That was the symbol of the Sun in Europe and Asia; however, in Islamic notions, it determines the eight heaven (paradise) and eight gates of heaven. In mysticism, the eight-pointed star indicates the eighth door of repentance which is for resorting to Allah[32]. According to Avesta, Yasht 128, the number 8 is holy so that the goodness of water was illustrated with the eight-pointed crown.

## 4 Discussion

Regardless of initial using the tilework as a structure-strength in Kaboud and Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, there was an intention of presenting spiritual values through decorating the religious structures. The repetition and harmony of geometric pattern specifically used in both case studies reflect the higher meaning of understanding of the sacred art which is spreading the holy notion of God in the space [23]. The study shows that although the colours and style of patterns were localised by the dynasty, nonfigural patterns were commonly used in different Islamic era to present the transcendent essence of Islam [23]. In addition, considering the plant and floral patterns inside of these mosques can be interpreted as creating the holy space of heaven and following that reminding of the presence of God and "inviting the prayer to mediate over the heaven" [10] by Muslim artists. As Goudarzi et al. discuss, the primary definition behind the symbolism of the patterns used in the mosque, as mentioned earlier, was to represent the spirituality of Islam through Islamic art, which is the manifestation of unity in the realm of plurality [10] [12].

Besides, the Ebad says the thought behind the using the different concept in religious buildings is to provide “hierarchies for human’s presence to feel a travel form material to spiritual

world by moving in this atmosphere”[8].

## 5 Conclusion

Each mosque set up in different periods; however, the similarity in their details of adornments clearly can be observed. Over time, both mosques, as mentioned earlier, have undergone damages, which caused their initial features to be changed. The result of the investigation, indeed, indicates tilework employed to not only adorn the mosques but also there is a purpose of creating an intense sense of the presence of God. And because of restriction rules of Islam to not show figural representation, the vegetal and geometric patterns were the contributing factors for both symbolic and spiritual reasons. Thus, these patterns by the combination of calligraphic characterisation considered to highlight divinity notions.

In both mosques, every single pattern engages in enhancing the spiritual concept and play a critical role in giving the holly sense of God (Mona Abdullahi Hanifi). As might be expected, creating the distinctive holly space in monuments by employing the embellishments had a root in the pre-Islamic era. Thus, by considering an aspect of visual fascinations as well as the sensible utilising above mentioned mosques, have used the notion of unity in plurality and plurality in unity.

Shamash that used in the interior ceiling of Sheikh Loftollah mosque, as well as the combination of Shamseh and divine names in facades of Kbood mosque, show that this pattern is the symbol of the light of the divine; furthermore, the cross pattern indicates the unity of Islam and four main directions, for instance, Sheikh Lotfollah mosques ornamented by this pattern so as to indicate the unity of the place and its holly values. Meantime, combining the Shamseh with Arabesque patterns in the outside section of the mosque point out the unification of

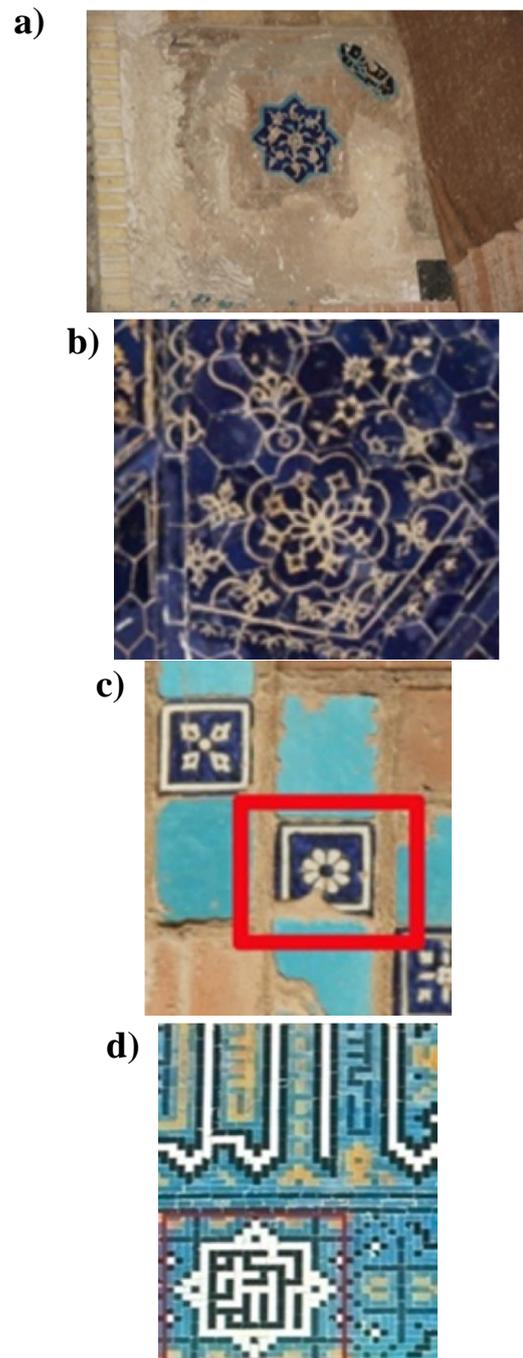


Figure.5 a) Eight- pointed star of Kaboud mosque’s interior wall, b) Kaboud mosque’s interior wall c) exterior wall of Kabiud mosque and d) Sheikh Lotfollah mosque’s dome.

Islam and transcendental power. According to the concept behind the five-pointed star, it symbolised the Ahle-beit and five pillars of Islam. Besides, an eight-pointed star in Islamic art used as a metaphor of eight angels who carry His (God) Throne. In Sheikh Lotfollah mosque,

the eight-pointed star surrounded by the name of the divine, and this pattern alongside Allah names, which employed partly in entire walls of Kbood mosque to point the eight gates of paradise and eight holy angles of Islam. Overall, Muslim artists attempted to illustrate the notion and mystery of Islam by utilising the patterns derived from nature, and they kept the concept over the eras. Therefore, the complexity of these patterns reveals the artist's conceptual world and help to create a transcendental atmosphere.

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