

A place between life and death

A Material Culture study of Agha Besmel Cemetery in Ramsar, Iran

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For my wife, Sepide

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Abstract

This research project is a material culture study of a cemetery in northern Iran. The main purpose of the study is to illustrate connections between vernacular architecture and religious beliefs in Agha Besmel Cemetery in the city of Ramsar. This cemetery, which follows the pattern of a shrine-cemetery, works as a multifunctional space. For local people, this place is popular because it is a burial ground, mosque, shrine, and a place for socializing. It is an everyday space. In addition to religious and cultural factors, the popularity of this space has architectural causes. The vernacular architecture of the cemetery follows the style of traditional rural housing in northern Iran. The climatic design elements of basic housing architecture, including four-sided sloped roofs, multiple face-to-face openings, and local materials, are applied to the architecture of buildings in the cemetery. However, the architecture of the cemetery is also affected by religious beliefs. This research project investigates some adaptations of the cemetery's vernacular architecture exerted by religious beliefs and rituals.

Resume

Cette recherche est une étude de culture matérielle d'un cimetière au nord de l'Iran. L'objectif principal de l'étude est d'illustrer les liens entre l'architecture vernaculaire et les croyances religieuses dans le cimetière Agha-Besmel de la ville « Ramsar » en Iran. Ce cimetière, qui est l'un des motifs du sanctuaire-cimetière, fonctionne comme un espace multifonctionnel. Pour les populations locales, cet endroit est très populaire car il s'agit d'un cimetière, d'une mosquée, d'un sanctuaire, d'un lieu de rencontre. En résumé, c'est un espace quotidien. Plus que des raisons religieuses et culturelles, la popularité de cet espace a des causes architecturales. L'architecture vernaculaire du cimetière suit l'habitat rural traditionnel du nord de l'Iran. Les éléments de conception climatique de l'architecture de base du nord de l'Iran, y compris les toits en pente à quatre côtés, les ouvertures multiples face à face et les matériaux locaux sont appliqués dans l'architecture du cimetière. Mais l'architecture du cimetière est affectée par les croyances religieuses. Cette recherche examine certaines adaptations de l'architecture vernaculaire du cimetière qui sont exercées par des croyances et des rituels religieux.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

1 LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

Goals and rationale for this study

This study provides an investigation of the vernacular architecture of a cemetery in the city of Ramsar in northern Iran. Its main purpose is to illustrate connections between vernacular architecture and religious beliefs in the cemetery. Studying the artifacts and architecture of this region facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the “beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions” of this particular community at a specific time (Prown, 2001). The scope of this study also encompasses the rituals and religious beliefs rooted in the physical built environment of the cemetery.

In northern Iran, architecture is strongly interwoven with geographical conditions. Over the years, residents have constructed houses based on the experiences of their ancestors. They created a specific regional architecture that has been adapted to the variable climate of northern Iran. Religious beliefs, which have deep roots in the minds of local people, also affect this architecture, especially in religious structures. Vernacular architecture and religious architecture in this area contribute to create valuable results that are particular and unique in their context. Agha Besmel Cemetery in northern Iran is the product of one of these contributions.

In recent years, urban development has dramatically changed the cultural landscape of Ramsar. Constructing tall buildings near the cemetery has affected the peaceful atmosphere of this neighbourhood. Moreover, the capacity of the cemetery is almost full. Officials have decided to extend it, even going so far as to suggest that

adjacent houses should be bought and demolished to increase the sprawl of the cemetery. These unplanned decisions will affect characteristics of the cemetery and will damage tangible and intangible values related to it.

It is worth mentioning that the cemetery serves as a community area for local people during their everyday life. Since they do not have any other open spaces in this neighbourhood, the cemetery is more than a cemetery. For them, it is a burial ground, a mosque, a place for religious ceremonies, a place for contemplation, and also a place to get together and hang out. The number of people who come to this cemetery to socialize is higher than the number of people who come to commemorate their dead. They spend a large part of their daily life here. In this traditional society, the demand for public space has influenced the characteristics of the cemetery and transformed it to a multifunctional space. Indeed, this cemetery has three urban functions: a burial ground, a religious landscape, and an everyday space.

The objective of this study is to document and preserve the local everyday life, rituals, culture and vernacular architecture of this community.

Research question

Three subjects will be explored in this study: vernacular architecture, religious beliefs, and cultural behaviors. Combinations of these factors have resulted in different forms of religious vernacular architecture depending on the area of Iran in question. In northern Iran, the cooperation of these factors can be traced in cemeteries. The presence of sacred graves in cemeteries has enhanced the religious atmosphere of these places

and has transformed them into respectable places. Cultural behaviors, such as certain death ceremonies that are important in Iranian culture, are also significant.

Through this study, I will address this question:

“What is the relationship between the people’s religious beliefs and rituals and the vernacular architecture in Agha Besmel Cemetery?”

Methodology

My methodology in this research consists of three types of studies: a religious study, a cultural study, and an architectural study. Each study is carried out through a literature review, an observation, and a record of oral histories [table 1].

In the religious study, the research concentrates on the concept of death in Islamic culture and Iran, especially in the north. It will also discuss religious ceremonies and rituals, including burial practices, funerals, and commemorations in the community of Ramsar. The study of religious beliefs reveals the relationship between artifacts and religion.

The topic of the cultural study is the lifestyle of the residents of this small neighborhood: why they use a cemetery as an everyday space.

The architectural study forms the largest part of this research project. It explores architectural patterns in the vernacular architecture of northern Iran. Analytical diagrams showing circulation, sun orientation, gathering places, and walking patterns are studied alongside the material culture of cemeteries, artifacts, buildings, and shrines to discover the hidden relations between architecture, religion, and culture.

Although cultural and religious studies form a smaller part of this research project, they provide the backbone of the architectural study which strives to answer the research question.

Interviews with locals form the most important part of this project's research. Interviews are the best source of information to use in a material culture study. In his book, *Material Culture*, Henry Glassie says that while consulting information sources "we choose new facts about new people and attend to new sources, expanding our view beyond the written record to incorporate oral history and material culture" (Glassie, 1999). More than casual interviews with people about culture and everyday life, interviews with experts who are informed about the city of Ramsar, cultural behaviors, and the architecture of the cemetery provide valuable research information. Local craftsmen share their precious experiences of vernacular architecture and local art. Furthermore, the material culture of wooden constructions can provide a better understanding of architectural traditions and the methods and resources such craftsmen used to create their built environment.

Table 1.1-1 Methodology of research

	Religion	Culture	Architecture
Literature review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Death in Islam and Iran (Islamic studies of McGill, Iranian archives) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Northern Iranians' culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vernacular architecture of northern Iran Architectural patterns of northern Iran
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Death rituals (burial practice, funeral, commemoration, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lifestyle of the local people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typology of the vernacular architecture of the neighborhood Analytical diagrams (function, circulation, sun orientation, gathering places, walking patterns, etc.) Material culture of the shrines, mosques and graves (architectural drawings, photography)
Oral history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local people's stories of death rituals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local people's expression of culture Influential people buried in the cemetery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local architects and craftsmen

1.2 Theoretical framework

Religious architecture

Religious beliefs have always been a part of human beings' interaction with their environment. Generally, people build sacred places to show their devotion to their gods. Some believe these artifacts are products of faith: "religious architecture is the manifestation of man's attempt to create sacred spaces to pay homage or to pray to his god. It is created to experience the sacred, to provide forms into which spiritual energies flow and reflect a sense of divine" (Kaur, 2012). But another perspective claims that building huge constructions just for religion's sake is meaningless. One of the most perceptive answers to the puzzle of why people put time, money, and energy into building such structures is that "religious buildings may not be crucial for religious reasons but are important in a social or political sense" (Verkaaik, 2013: 8). To prove this claim, Oskar Verkaaik refers to the Islamic world's impressive contemporary mosques, such as the ones in Casablanca or Islamabad, which are products of the postcolonial period and are considered nationalist monuments rather than religious buildings (In Verkaaik, 2013: 8).

In defining religious architecture, three different approaches originate from the interaction between religious and secular spaces. The first approach argues that the "religious is always constituted by the secular and vice versa" (In Verkaaik, 2013: 14). A religious space is a heterotopia, a term coined by Foucault to denote "other spaces" or "espace autres": in the "infinite, and infinitely open space" of the secular, some

spaces defy the “desanctification of space” by being “other,” “counter-sites” that are “fantasmatic” and serve as “a mirror” to secular space (Foucault 1967). Ancient definitions of public, private, and sacred space are different from today’s understanding of these words. In fact, Hippodamus’ definition of ‘public space’ refers to political space, ‘private space’ to economic space, and ‘sacred space’ to neither political (public) nor economical (private) space. As Dehaene and Cauter explain, “In our terminology today this third category of (mostly secularized) sacred space probably comes closest to what we commonly describe as the ‘cultural sphere’: the space of religion, arts, sports and leisure” (2008: 91). Hippodamus named this important third category of space ‘heterotopia.’ It was a multifunctional space for bathing, rituals, games, and cultural contests for an “anti-economical time: the time of sacrifice, gift, play and squandering” (Dehaene and Cauter, 2008: 98). In his book, *Slaughterhouse*, George Bataille compare religious places to slaughterhouses. Bataille says that “both are expelled from the secular main street and, on top of that, are places of sacrifice” (1997: 22). In this point of view, religious architecture is not defined by its inherent qualities but by its opposition to secular space and its potential to create spaces of [affirmative transgression] (In Verkaaik, 2013: 14).

The argument put forward by the second definition of religious architecture is also noteworthy. It returns to a functional definition of religion and religious architecture. According to Roy Rappaport, the function of religion lies partly in its capacity to offset the deficiencies of language and symbolic culture (Lambek 2001): “Religion evokes a domain beyond the social world of learned speak and symbolic behaviour, offering a

ritually defined entrance to this domain. ... Art, psychology, travel, violence and other bodily practices may generate similar desires and techniques to fulfill them.” (In Verkaaik, 2013: 15). In a modern society, religious architecture is an effective way to evoke and fulfill this desire.

The third definition refers to people’s experiences of religious buildings. It assumes people from a similar background have common sense and a clear idea about “religious buildings as purpose-built places where people come to perform rituals they themselves call religious or where communities gather under the flag of some faith” (In Verkaaik, 2013: 16). In other words, although these three schools of thought might disagree about the details of the definition of religious architecture, it is clear that when someone says he is going to the mosque, he is going to a mosque. In fact, religious architecture is defined by a certain form as well as the interactions and experiences people have when they individually or collectively engage with the building as a self-defined religious place.

Vernacular architecture

During the second half of the twentieth century, vernacular architecture became an academic field, which attracted many scholars to do research within the scope of “architectural anthropology” (Ozkan, 2006: 100). Bernard Rudofsky (1910–87) and Paul Oliver were two pioneers who started to work in this untapped field of architectural studies. In *Architecture Without Architects*, Rudofsky addressed a hidden part of world architecture that was neglected for many years: “Suddenly, edifices that

had been kept within the field of interest of human geographers, folklorists, anthropologists and architectural scholars became a subject of wider architectural interest” (Ozkan, 2006: 99). Before the popularity of the phrase “vernacular architecture,” the type of architecture to evolve within a community during a significant period was called “traditional architecture” (Ozkan, 2006: 100). Enrico Guidoni used “primitive architecture” to describe the basic form of architecture that provides for a society’ necessities (1978). The term “vernacular,” on the other hand, defined the subject by embracing its entirety, including the complexities of societal and cultural processes (Oliver, 1969). In *The Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, Oliver defines vernacular architecture as comprising “the dwellings and all other buildings of the people. Related to their environmental context and available resources, they are customarily owner or community built, utilizing traditional technologies. All forms of vernacular architecture are built to meet specific needs, accommodating the values, economies and ways of living of the cultures that produce them” (Oliver, 1997: 56).

Henry Glassie explains that we call buildings “vernacular” because “they embody values alien to those cherished in the academy. ... The study of vernacular architecture, through its urge toward the comprehensive, accommodates cultural diversity. It welcomes the neglected into study in order to acknowledge the reality of difference and conflict” (Glassie, 2000: 20). He says labeling buildings as ‘vernacular’ is one way “to use buildings as evidence in order to tell better versions of the human story” (Glassie, 2000: 21).

Mohammad-Karim Pirnia (1920-1997) was one of the first Iranian scholars to document the processes of traditional construction using their original Persian names. He believed that “understanding Iranian architecture is only possible through comprehension of its bond with the Iranian culture” (Qayyoomi Bidhendi, & Abdollahzadeh, 2014: 73). Instead of vernacular architecture, Pirnia refers to traditional architecture. He also was the first Iranian scholar to propose general principles for Iranian architecture: “‘Human Scale’, ‘Inward-Looking’, ‘Self Sufficiency’, ‘Avoiding non-essentials’, ‘Structural Rigidity’, and ‘Proportion’” (Qayyoomi Bidhendi, & Abdollahzadeh, 2014: 74). Rather than concentrating on significant historical masterpieces in Iran, he emphasized ordinary buildings and especially Iranian houses. He saw architecture as a practice of everyday people. The impact of Pirnia’s practices evolved in his students’ research, but most of these projects “have a historical perspective and described various functions of buildings in the past” (Foruzanmehr & Fergus, 2008).

Studying vernacular architecture should lead to a drive to employ more of the community’s traditional architectural patterns when designing structures. This is the only way we can appreciate our past architecture while creating valuable works for the future.

Material culture

The study of material culture, a branch of cultural history or cultural anthropology, is the study of man-made objects for the purpose of understanding the reason behind the

creation of these objects. Material culture is a means rather than an end, a discipline rather than a field (Prown, 1982: 1). In his article “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” Jules David Prown defines material culture as “the study through artifacts of the beliefs-values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions-of a particular community or society at a given time” (1982: 1). Henry Glassie defines it as “culture made material; it is the inner wit at work in the world. Beginning necessarily with things, but not ending with them, the study of material culture uses objects to approach human thought and action” (1999: 41). He adds that furthermore, “material culture is the conventional name for the tangible yield of human conducts” (1999: 41). Woodward enriches these definitions, saying that “the term ‘material culture’ emphasises how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity” (Woodward, 2007: 2). The word “material” in material culture refers to any object made by human beings. These are artifacts, a category which excludes natural objects. As Prown states, “Thus, the study of material culture might include a hammer, a plow, a microscope, a house, a painting, a city. It would exclude trees, rocks, fossils, skeletons” (Prown, 1982: 2). “Artifacts recall the technology by which nature was made cultural, and they incarnate the creator’s mind, holding in form and ornament the plan that preceded them and the decisions committed in their making” (Glassie, 1999: 42). The range of materials in material culture is too wide to serve as markers in a classification scheme. The object of material culture can be a piece of art, an example of architecture, a tool, or any other

artifact. Prown, however, provides the following “classification based on function from the more decorative (or aesthetic) to the more utilitarian (Prown, 1982: 3):

1. Art (paintings, drawings, photography)
2. Diversions (books, atrical performances)
3. Adornment (jewelry, cosmetics, tattooing, body)
4. Modifications of the landscape (architecture, town planning, agriculture, mining)
5. Applied arts (furniture, furnishings, receptacles)
6. Devices (machines, vehicles, scientific instruments, musical instruments, implements)

Artifacts as the basis of information in a material culture study are valuable as long as they have been made by hand. This is because the study of artifacts is not the end of this field of study but the means through which it is possible to distinguish people’s mindset and the reasons they created a given artifact. Modernization has changed hand-made artifacts to industrial products which are totally identical. “Nobody ... makes things by hand anymore. Now it is all industrial production and consumption. It can feel like that because we are consumers more than creators. We buy houses, clothes, and electronic devices, not knowing who made them or how” (Glassie, 1999: 78). Industrialization has destroyed uniqueness and has transformed different places around the world into similar spaces. The authenticity of material culture must be determined based on hand-made artifacts, otherwise the study of a specific community based on its material culture is impossible.

In the study of material culture, people have only recently been used as a source of data. Oral histories die along with the people who can tell them. About human information sources, Glassie says, we should “choose new facts about new people and attend to new sources, expanding our view beyond the written record to incorporate oral history and material culture” (Glassie, 1999: 7). From people’s stories, we discover the way they lived and the hidden layers of their thoughts. Connecting these stories with artifacts reveals the reasons behind creating these objects. In Turkey, Glassie described the art of carpet and rug making, explaining, “The carpet is not like a book written with a direct communicative purpose, yet its appreciation is analogous to reading a good book in which momentary surprise is contained by a unity of plot. It is more like a poem than a novel, though, for its meanings are associative and incomplete, more affecting than intellectual, and it is still more like music than anything of words” (1999: 123).

Patterns

A large part of this study is based on Christopher Alexander’s ‘pattern language’ theory. In *The Timeless Way of Building* and *Pattern Language*, Alexander explains how people build living buildings and towns by sharing a common pattern language. He believes that each part of a town has a pattern and that these patterns are situated in relation to each other. People’s cooperation in creating these patterns makes towns, villages, and places beautiful and vital.

In describing one type of pattern, he concentrates on the subject of cemeteries in towns. He claims that since death is a fact which should not be hidden from society, each neighbourhood should have its own cemetery for people who live nearby and who will one day die there. He criticizes huge cemeteries on the outskirts of cities that people hate going to because they don't know each other. Contrary to this, small scale cemeteries "bring people into contact with the experience of mortality, and in this way, they bring us closer to the facts of life, as well as death. When these experiences are integrated with the environment and each person's life, we are able to live through them fully and go on" (Alexander, 1977: 354).

A cemetery is a site of moral behavior in the city. Different cultures celebrate death in different ways. But in the big industrial cities during the last one hundred years, the power of death ceremonies has vanished. Beautiful, "simple forms of mourning have been replaced by grotesque cemeteries, plastic flowers, everything but the reality of death. And above all, the small graveyards which once put people into daily contact with the fact of death, have vanished—replaced by massive cemeteries, far away from people's daily business" (Alexander, 1977: 356).

Alexander proposes ways of incorporating the old ritual forms of the cemetery with its new conditions to revive forgotten values. Most importantly, huge cemeteries should be broken down. The small-scale cemeteries must be in connection with local communities. People should be able to choose their grave in a graveyard, park, or on their own property. Since cemeteries will not have enough space in the future, regulations should be issued allowing the burial of new bodies in two-hundred-year-

old graves to supply society's demand for space. Finally, Alexander provides a pattern for an ideal cemetery: "Never build massive cemeteries. Instead, allocate pieces of land throughout the community as grave sites—corners of parks, sections of paths, gardens, beside gateways—where memorials to people who have died can be ritually placed with inscriptions and mementos which celebrate their life. Give each grave site an edge, a path, and a quiet corner where people can sit. By custom, this is hallowed ground" (Alexander, 1977: 357).

CHAPTER 2

THE AGHA BESMEL CEMETERY IN
ITS URBAN CONTEXT

2 THE AGHA BESMEL CEMETERY IN ITS URBAN CONTEXT

2.1 Mazandaran

Mazandaran is a narrow region in the north of Iran surrounded by the Caspian Sea and Alborz Mountains. The mountains work like a great wall to trap the humidity rising from the sea in this narrow section of the country. This combination of natural



Figure 2-1 Narrow, green section between the Caspian Sea and Alborz mountains.
Source: <http://www.freeworldmaps.net>

features has created a distinct climate from other parts of Iran: it is always green and humid [fig. 2-1]. The western part of this narrow region is in Gilan Province, on the shore of the Caspian Sea, while the eastern part is in Mazandaran Province [fig. 2-2].

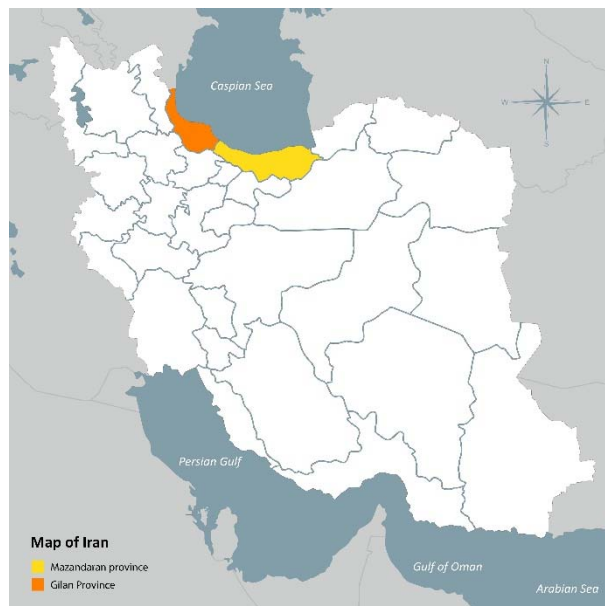


Figure 2-2 Map of provinces of Iran. Illustrated based on www.iranpoll.comregions

Naming

In the tenth century, some historians called Mazandaran “Tabarestan” (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 175). There is disagreement about meaning of Tabarestan, but some believe that in the local language it meant “mountainous area” (Sajadi, 1999: 36). In his book, *History and Geography of Historical Ramsar*, Sajadi mentions that Mazandaran is a combined phrase of the words “maz,” “andar,” and “an,” meaning a meandrous mountain area (1999: 38).

Statistics

The area of Mazandaran is 23,756 km² and its population, based on the 2016 census, is about 3,283,582. This province occupies 1.46% of Iran’s total area. It has 22 counties and its capital is Sari (www.wikipedia.org).

Geography

Mazandaran is a crescent-shaped area with ground that slopes from the mountain ranges to the Caspian Sea. Many rivers have carved the land owing to the area’s moisture: “The forests covering the mountain slopes store moisture all year around, and the innumerable river, rivulets, streams, brooks, etc., ... flow down into the sea” (Polovtsoff, 1932: 150) [fig. 2-3].

Mazandaran is naturally divided into two zones: first, the coastal zones and sedimentary plains and second, the mountain zones. The first zone was formed by the

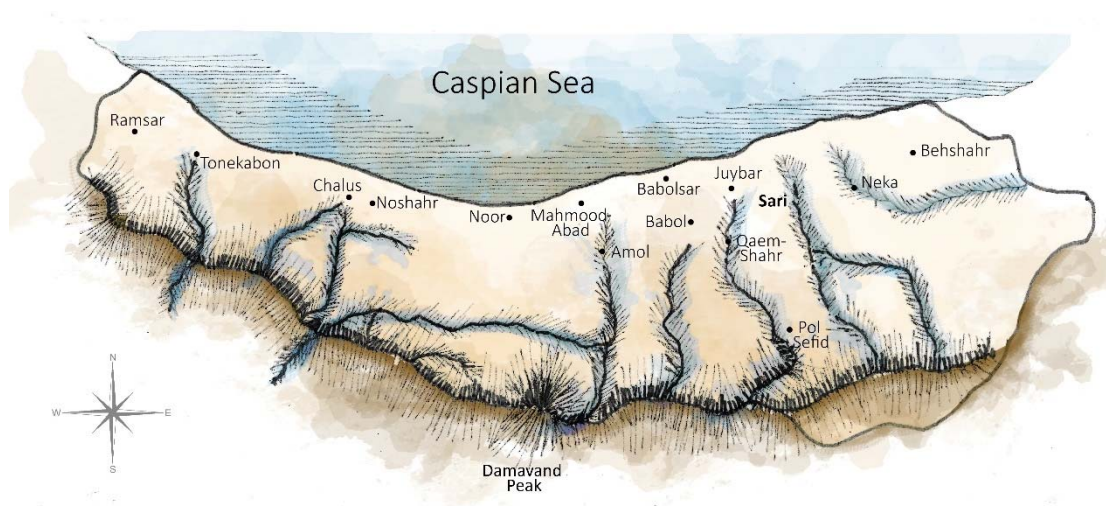


Figure 2-3 Geography of Mazandaran. Illustrated based on google map.

sediments of the rivers leading into the Caspian Sea. This area is green and full of water, the shoreline covered by coastal sand. The second zone contains the Alborz Mountains, which separates Mazandaran north and south. The highest point is Alborz mountaintop which is located in the middle of Mazandaran. These mountains act as a great wall keeping the moisture from the sea in the north, which affects the climate of this province dramatically (Mahmudzadah, 1971: 108).

The climate of Mazandaran is divided into three zones. The northern zone, which is close to the sea, has temperate climate. The middle zone consists of Alborz hillsides and mountaintops and has a mountain climate. The southern zone, due to its distance from the sea, has semi-desert climate (Sajadi, 1999: 40) [fig. 2-4]. The most important factors in Mazandaran's climate are the orientation and height of mountains, proximity to the sea, vegetation, local winds, and latitude. These factors combine to create a temperate climate that becomes colder from north to south. This narrow strip of land beside the Caspian Sea has become a green land with rich vegetation.

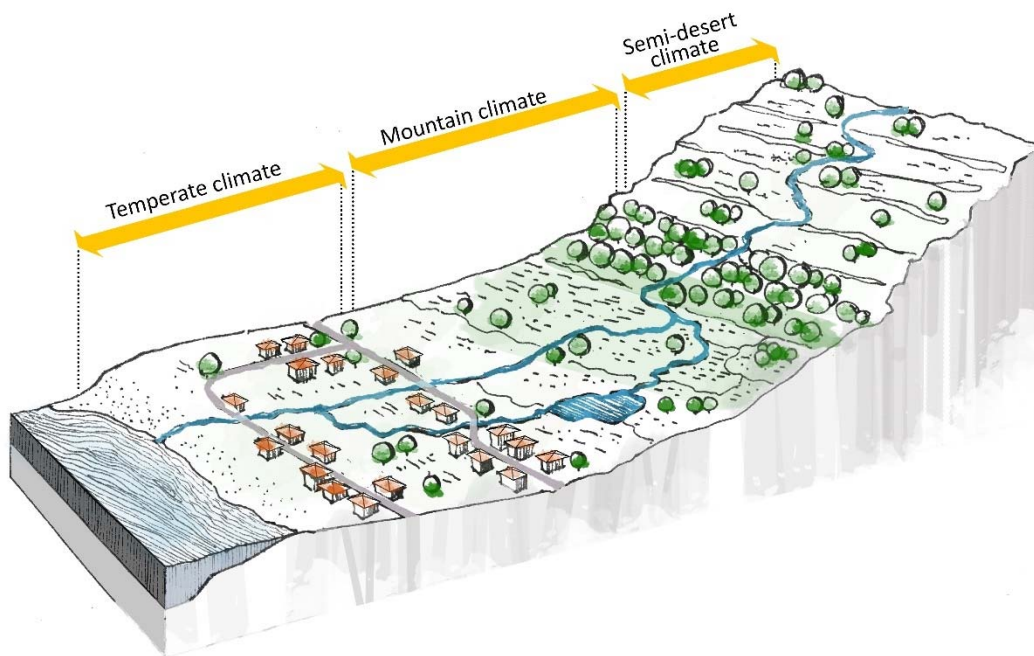


Figure 2-5 Triple climate of Mazandaran in a general section. Illustrated by author.

Access

In 1621, the great Shah Abbasi road was founded in northern Iran beside the Caspian Sea shoreline to connect the northern cities to each other (Sajadi, 1999: 47). Shah Abbas the Great (1571-1629) was the fifth Safavid king of Iran and is generally considered the strongest ruler of the Safavid dynasty. He was inclined to expand connections with other countries, especially



Figure 2-4 Left overs of Shah Abbasi road.
Source: <http://www.cloob.com>

economically; therefore, he constructed many roads to facilitate access between the cities for businessmen. Among them, the Shah Abbasi road was among the most important, since it facilitates access from the east to the west of the Caspian shoreline. Some part of this road remains today, and people use its bridges (www.wikipedia.org) [fig. 2-5].

Today, access to the northern cities of Iran is provided by a coastal road. Four other roads connect the coastal road to Tehran. The Alborz Mountains have restricted access between Tehran and the northern cities. In order to reach the north, travelers must round the mountains or use the Kandovan road, which is a more mountainous and serpentine access route [fig. 2-6].

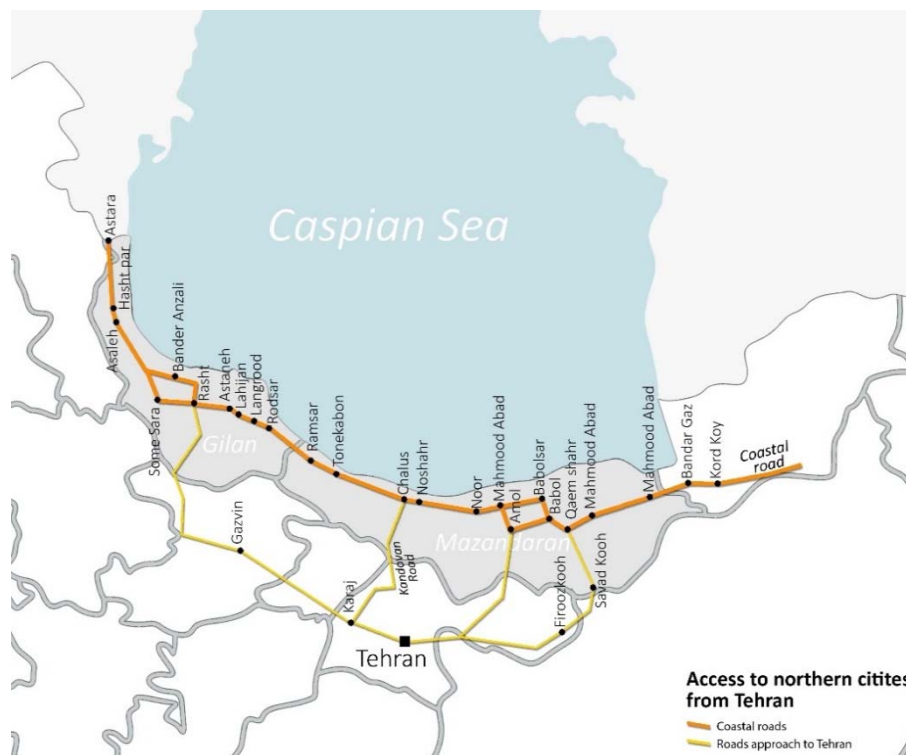


Figure 2-6 Roads of Mazandaran. Illustrated based on google map

2.2 Ramsar

In the western part of Mazandaran province there is a small city called Ramsar, which is ranked amongst the most beautiful cities in the country. Its reputation comes from its intact natural spaces and spectacular landscapes, which come from its geographically strategic position in the green mountains near the Caspian Sea [fig. 2-7].



Figure 2-8 A bird view of Ramsar city
Source: <http://www.ecocci.org>



Figure 2-7 Location of Ramsar in Mazandaran. Illustrated based on google map

The area of Ramsar County is 729.8 km², which is 3% of the area of Mazandaran province. This county is limited by the city of Chaboksar from the west and Tonkabon from the east [fig. 2-8].

Naming

Before 1935, the city of Ramsar was called “Sakht-Sar.” These two phrases are antonyms. “Sakht-Sar” in Persian means “indomitable,” while “Ramsar” means “flexible.” It is said that many years ago, people in this area resisted oppression and fought the government. In 1931, Reza Shah (1878-1944) the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, started new construction in the city. It was a revolutionary movement in terms of constructing new roads, buildings, and infrastructure. In order to unify the people under the government, parliament decided to change the city’s name to “Ramsar” (Sajadi, 1999: 217).

Geography

Ramsar is naturally divided into two parts: foothills and the Alborz Mountains. The lower altitudes are covered by dense forests, while rangeland forms the higher altitudes (Sajadi, 1999: 221). The foothills are the result of the sediment of several rivers and form a fertile area appropriate to agriculture, especially rice cultivation.

Climate

Ramsar has three climate zones (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 185):

- Plain weather, which covers an area five kilometres wide from the shoreline to the foothills and is very humid.
- Forest weather, which covers an area twenty kilometres wide from the foothills to the mountains. Its climate is moderately humid.
- Mountain weather, which occurs at a minimum 1,200-metre altitude above sea level. Its climate is cold and dry, and snowy in winter.

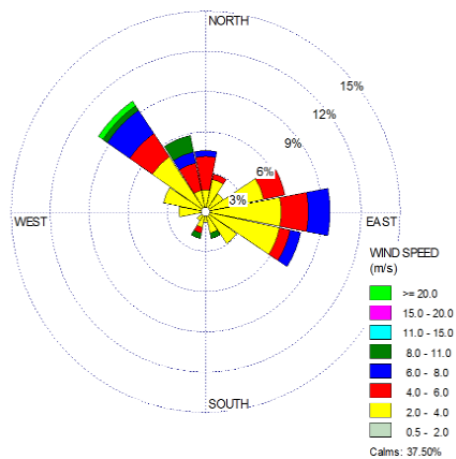


Figure 2-9 Wind rose of Ramsar
Source: Monthly magazine of marine meteorology, April 2017

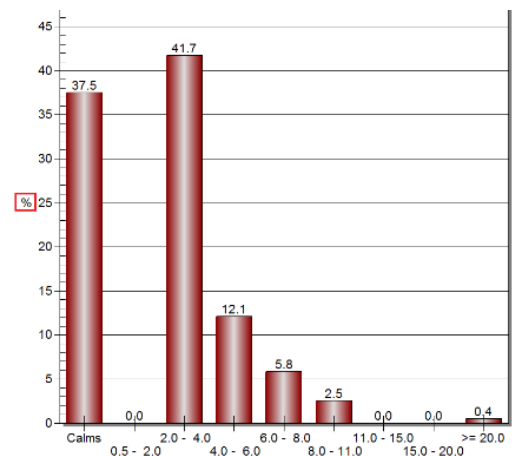


Figure 2-10 Wind distribution of Ramsar
Source: Monthly magazine of marine meteorology, April 2017

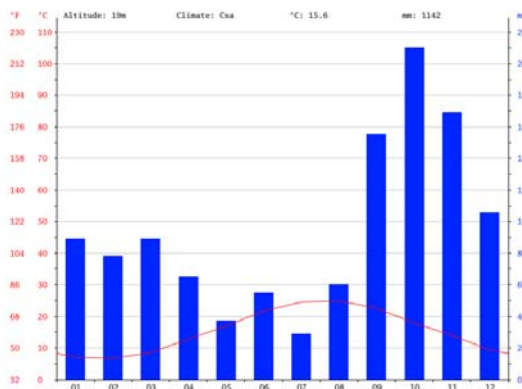


Figure 2-12 Monthly climograph of Ramsar
Source: www.en.climate-data.org

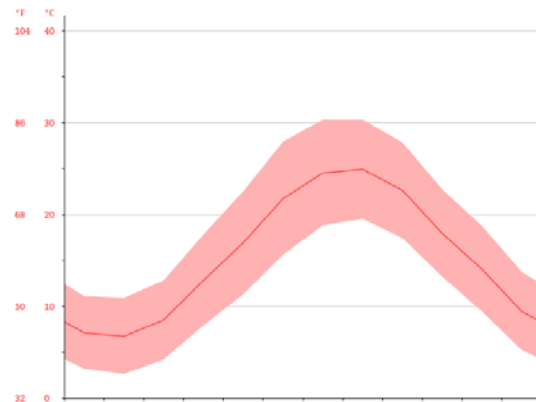


Figure 2-11 Monthly temperature graph of Ramsar
Source: www.en.climate-data.org

Based on meteorology data collected over the last thirty years, the average precipitation level in Ramsar is 1227 millimetres. The highest precipitation level, 1934 millimetres, fell in 2014. The average annual air temperature of Ramsar was 16.49 °C, the average annual minimum air temperature was 9.13 °C, and the average annual maximum air temperature was 25.84 °C (www.irimo.ir) [fig. 2-9, 2-10, 2-11, 2-12].

Administrative division

The county of Ramsar has two cities, a central district, four rural districts, and 122 villages. Katalom and Sadat Shahr, located in the eastern part of county, is its smallest city [fig. 2-13].

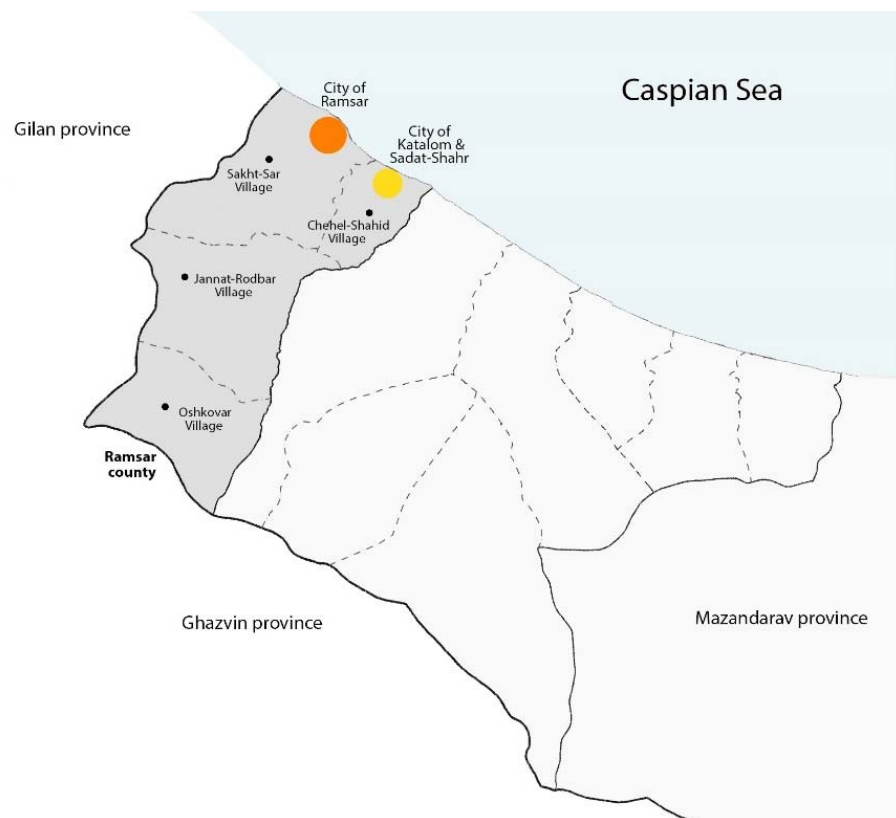


Figure 2-13 Administrative division of Ramsar. Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat-Shahr (2004)

Ramsar convention

One way the name of Ramsar has become better recognized is that it hosted the Ramsar Convention in 1971, an international conference at which a treaty was signed for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. It is also known as the Convention on Wetlands.

2.3 Ramsar's community

Population

Based on the 2016 census, the population of Ramsar County is about 74,179 and the population of the city of Ramsar is 35,997. Relative population density of Iran in 1991 was 40 persons per km², while the density in Mazandaran was 80 persons per km² and, in the city of Ramsar, 98 persons per km². These numbers demonstrate that largest part of Iran is uninhabitable. The unequal population distribution of Iran originates from factors such as climate, geography, land fertility, favorable soil, and income (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 439). Due to a combination of these factors and a suitable condition of life, Mazandaran province has absorbed a greater population density relative to the other provinces of Iran.

Occupations

Most people in Ramsar follow farming as an occupation [fig. 2-14]. The manner of agriculture differs in the mountains and foothills. In the foothills, farmers cultivate rice, tea, citrus fruits, and vegetables. In mountainous and high-altitude areas, farmers are more inclined to cultivate wheat and barley and also practice animal husbandry (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 380).



Figure 2-14 A northern women
Source: www.karnaval.ir

Based on the 1986 census, 31.8% of employees in Mazandaran work in the fields of agriculture, gardening, animal husbandry, fishery, and forestry, while 23% work in general and social services, while 9.7% work in retail, wholesale, restaurant, and hotel services. The remainder work in construction (Halaji Sani, 1997: 79).

Tea and rice are two significant products of northern Iran that form a large part of the culture in the area. In Iran, if you ask anyone about the best producers of tea or

rice, they will refer you to one of the northern cities of Iran. The city of Ramsar is an important representative in terms of these products.

Religion and beliefs

Before Islam was introduced to Iran, the religion of most Iranians was Zoroastrianism. There are still some Zoroastrian fire temples around Ramsar that demonstrate people in this area were Zoroastrian before Islam. Archaeologists have also found Zoroastrian cemeteries, called Gabri cemeteries, in this area (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 377).

In the year 864, after the Arab invasion of Iran, people in this area converted religion to Islam. In 1596, by order of the king, Shah Abbas, Gilan and Mazandaran accepted Shia¹ as the accepted religion, a branch of Islam (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 377).

2.4 The city of Katalom and Sadat Shahr

Katalom and Sadat Shahr is a city in the eastern part of Ramsar County. Its area is about 19 km². It is formed of two city centers, Katalom to the east and Sadat Shahr to the west.

¹ Shia holds that the Islamic prophet Muhammad designated Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor (Imam) while Sunni, the other branch, believes Muhammad appointed Abu Bakr as his successor.

Naming

Sadat Shahr in a combined Persian phrase meaning the city of “Sadat.” “Sadat” is the plural of “Sayyid” or “Seyyed” in Arabic, meaning a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam. This naming demonstrates that the city has a religious background. Many years ago, most of the residents were descendants of Muhammad, but today, because of city growth and immigration, many live here who are not *sadat*.

“Katalom,” in local language, means a great pond (Sajadi, 1999: 282).

History and evolution

Sadat Shahr was the center of Sakht-Sar (the city of Ramsar) during the Safavid dynasty. In 1858, the Russian historian Sergei Melgunov traveled to this city, describing Sadat Shahr as the center of Sakht Sar in his travelogue (General plan of Katalom and Sadat Shahr, 2004: 1). Sadat Shahr was a small village in which most of the inhabitants were farmers. In modern times, during the past half-century, the absorbing population has transformed it into a developed city. The most important factors in this change are Sadat Shahr’s neighboring touristic zone and the city’s proximity to the Caspian Sea.

The primary core of Sadat Shahr is near the center of western Ramsar County. It includes the bazaar,² houses, mosque, and cemetery [fig. 2-15].

² A market in a Middle Eastern country.

Katalom is a new city to the east of Sadat Shahr. Before 1941, there was no village and no inhabitants, but people used to let their animals graze in the area. In 1945, a tea factory founded by Haj Alireza Ahmad-Nejad transformed it into a

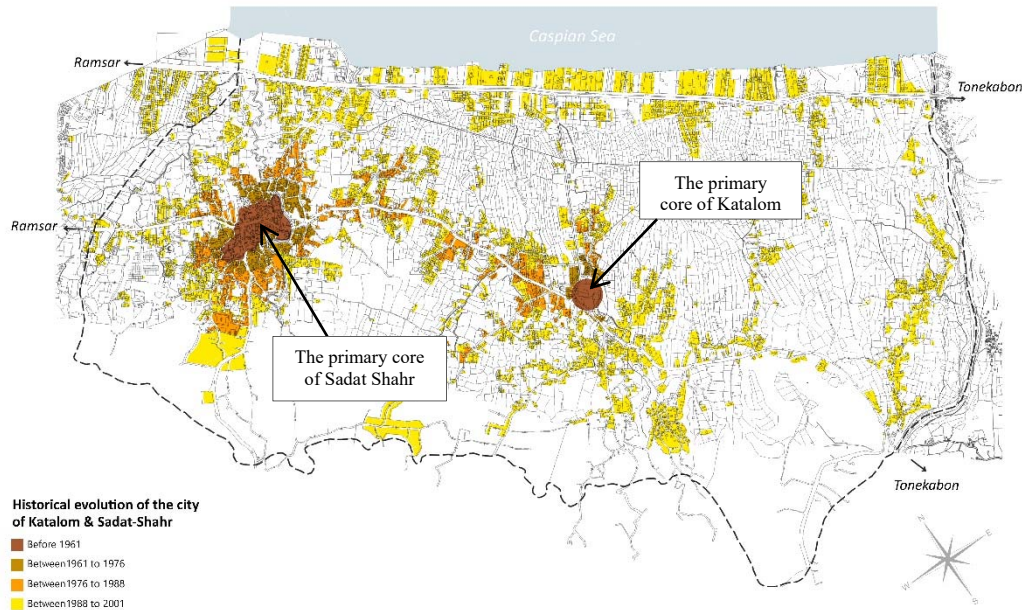


Figure 2-15 Historical evolution of the city of Katalom and Sadat-Shahr. Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat-Shahr (2004)

developed city and changed the landscape [fig. 2-16]. Since there were many tea plantations and most of the population were farmers, the houses built around the factory became the primary core of the city (Sajadi, 1999: 281) [fig. 2-15].

In fact, the city has two cores, one founded two hundred years before the other. Over the years, both have sprawled to create two separated urban fabrics connected by a main street. Both sides of this street are fronted by houses and shops, while behind



Figure 2-16 Current condition of Katalom tea factory
Photo by author

them are agricultural areas. The core of Sadat Shahr enjoys more centralized urbanization, while the core of Katalom is more scattered.

Moreover, a west-east coastal road crossing the north of this city has led to the development of services in a strip of land uses close to the sea.

The city is formed by two east-west streets. The southern street connects the two urban cores and supplies access within the city. The northern street, which is speedier, serves travelers passing between the east and west and connects the city to the sea. Three north-south link streets supply vertical access between main streets. Agricultural areas form many empty spaces between the two urban fabrics and the fabric of the coastal strip. Most of these are tea gardens, rice fields, and citrus gardens [fig. 2-17].

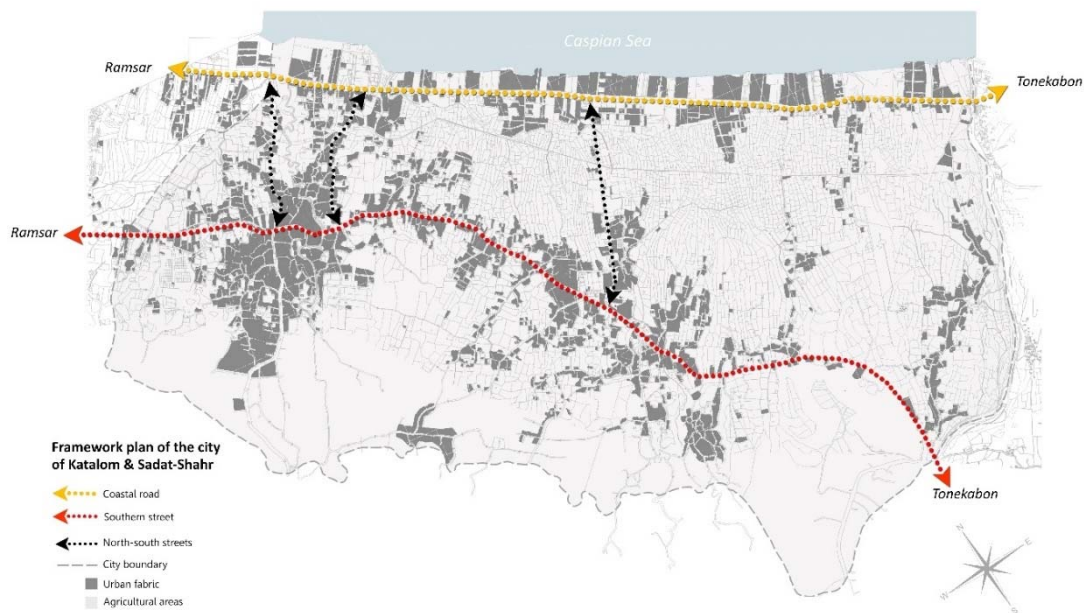
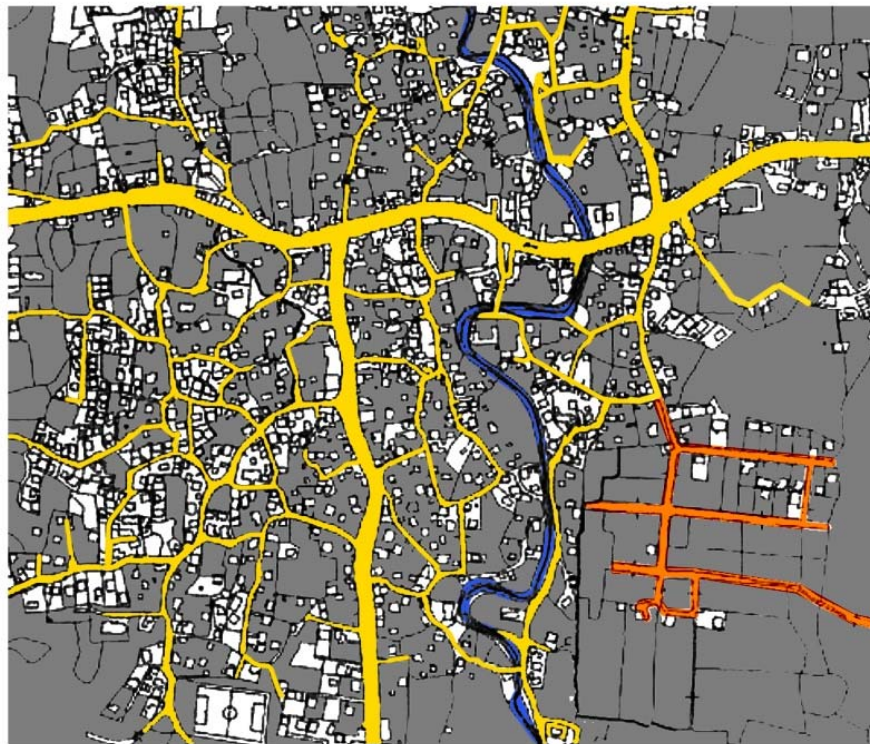


Figure 2-17 Framework plan of the city of Katalom and Sadat Shahr. Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat Shahr (2004)

Organic patterns

Geographic circumstances and climate have dictated the agricultural basis for Katalom and Sadat Shahr's economy. Life affiliated with agriculture has shaped the pattern of urbanism and urban development. The best witness to prove this claim is the texture of organic and maze-shaped roads in the city.

Since agricultural areas occupied the largest part of the land, the city became compact, placed between the tea and rice fields and citrus farms. Organic roads originated from land tenure. Land tenure may be defined as owning production on a piece of land. It meant that anyone who could grow any product on a piece of land would become owner of that land after a certain time. This type of ownership led to farmland gradually forming in an organic pattern. They built houses on their land and



City network pattern

- Organic network
- Rectangular network
- Urban fabric
- ~ River

Figure 2-18 Network pattern of the historical part of Sadat Shahr. Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat Shahr (2004)

neighborhoods progressively emerged. Many years ago, when automobiles did not affect urban life, roads had a different meaning. People simply needed access to their houses. In order to maximize the capacity of their fields, farmers built narrow roads or even shared a part of their land to provide access to their homes. This method of development gradually led to a network of organic roads in an urban fabric consisting of houses, gardens, and fields. This pattern can still be seen in most of the old neighborhoods in Iran's northern cities [fig. 2-18]. As Christopher Alexander says, "These patterns can never be "designed" or "built" in one fell swoop—but patient

piece-meal growth, designed in such a way that every individual act is always helping to create or generate these larger global patterns, will, slowly and surely, over the years, make a community that has these global patterns in it” (Alexander, 1977: 3). Alexander considers the growth of town and country, the layout of roads and paths, the relationship between work and family, the formation of suitable public institutions for a neighborhood, and public space as a large-scale structure of the environment. He also mentions: “We do not believe that these large patterns, which give so much structure to a town or of a neighborhood, can be created by centralized authority, or by laws, or by master plans. We believe instead that they can emerge gradually and organically, almost of their own accord, if every act of building, large or small, takes on the responsibility for gradually shaping its small corner of the world to make these larger patterns appear there” (Alexander, 1977: 3).

Introducing automobiles did not destroy the urban pattern in the old city. In order to supply access for automobiles, the roads were widened. But since changes were restricted by the current, older buildings, they exerted minimum intervention. Today, there are some narrow roads that a car can hardly cross.

New constructions emerged beside old neighborhoods. Without this restriction, their paths adopted a rectangular network with a standard width for automobiles.

Slope

Since the city was founded between the sea and mountains, there is a general slope toward the sea from south to north. This makes the city more resilient to floods. All the roads have a gentle slope to conduct rainfall into rivers. Several small and large rivers connect south to north. They direct surface water and groundwater to the sea [fig. 2-19]. Rivers that cross the city make the landscape more natural and organic [fig. 2-20].

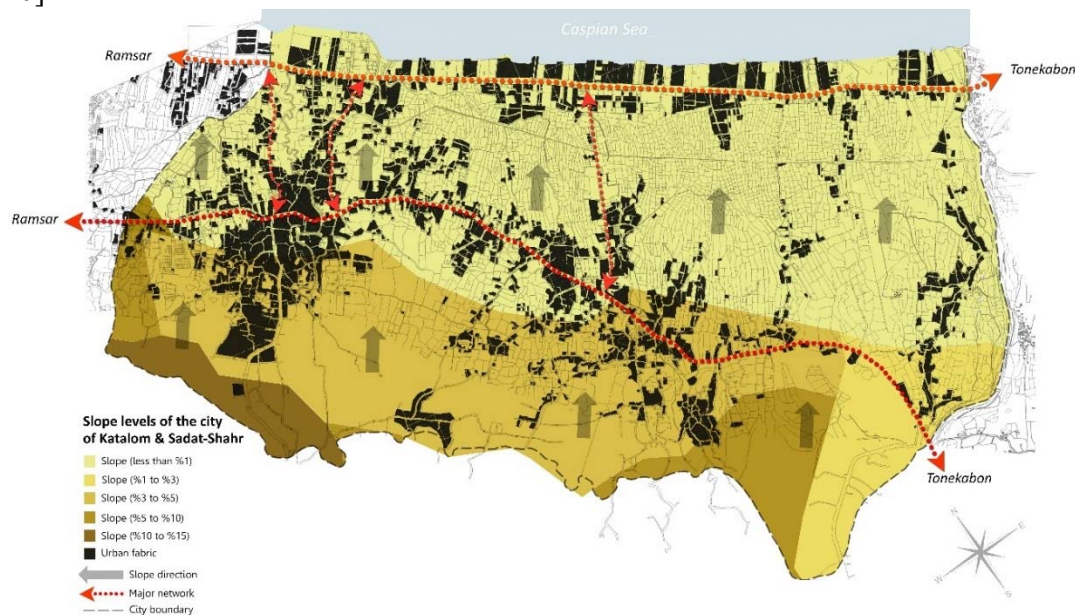


Figure 2-19 Slope levels of the city of Katalom & Sadat-Shahr. Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat-Shahr (2004)



Figure 2-20 Rivers in the city
Photo by author

Neighborhoods and local services

Traditional life gathered people tightly together. They formed small communities close to their agricultural fields. Isa Khatami says that formerly, there were several separated neighborhoods in Ramsar. Each neighborhood had its own houses, a square as a gathering place, a mosque, an imamzadeh,³ a cemetery, and even a public waterfall or fountain. Usually, a bazaar providing for the people's needs was in the center of the neighborhood. Nothing lay between neighborhoods except agricultural fields, gardens, and pasture. People were more inclined to marry within their family or neighborhood. In the 1960s, an increasing population and changes in people's traditional beliefs due to mass media and university education led to increasing marriage between neighborhoods. Demand for accommodation increased and many houses emerged outside the core of neighborhoods. Population growth on one hand and technology development on the other resulted in the expansion of neighborhoods. Empty spaces between residential areas were converted to habitable spaces. Today, neighborhoods are connected to each other and there is hardly a border between them.

2.5 Cemeteries in Iran

Separated neighborhoods in Iran usually had their own cemetery. People built cemeteries outside residential areas but close to neighborhoods. Many years ago,

³ Shrine-tomb of the descendants of imams who are directly related to the first prophet, Muhammad.

because of the popularity of eerie stories and a lack of lighting technology, cemeteries were considered horrifying spaces, especially at night. People avoided staying in cemeteries after sunset. Today, nights are better lit and thanks to the media, ghost stories seem more unreal. The passing of time led to a change in understanding of cemeteries as a serious social need. Furthermore, population growth led to the expansion of neighborhoods. Houses inevitably approached cemeteries because residents wanted to keep their ties to their families and communities. Today, newly built homes are often constructed around cemeteries. According to Khatami, most houses around cemeteries were built recently in the last thirty years.

The pattern of cemeteries in northern Iran

Most cemeteries in northern Iran are small scale and allocated for people in a specific neighborhood. Studying urban development shows that this is a referable pattern in this region. Alexander complains about large-scale cemeteries and says that “huge cemeteries on the outskirts of cities, or in places no one ever visits, impersonal funeral rites, taboos which hide the fact of death from children, all conspire to keep the fact of death away from us, the living” (Alexander, 1977: 354). He says death should be accepted as a part of life and that it should not be concealed from people, especially children. Facing death helps people value life and enjoy it more. Alexander advises, “Never build massive cemeteries. Instead, allocate pieces of land throughout the community as grave sites - corners of parks, sections of paths, gardens, beside gateways - where memorials to people who have died can be ritually placed with inscriptions and

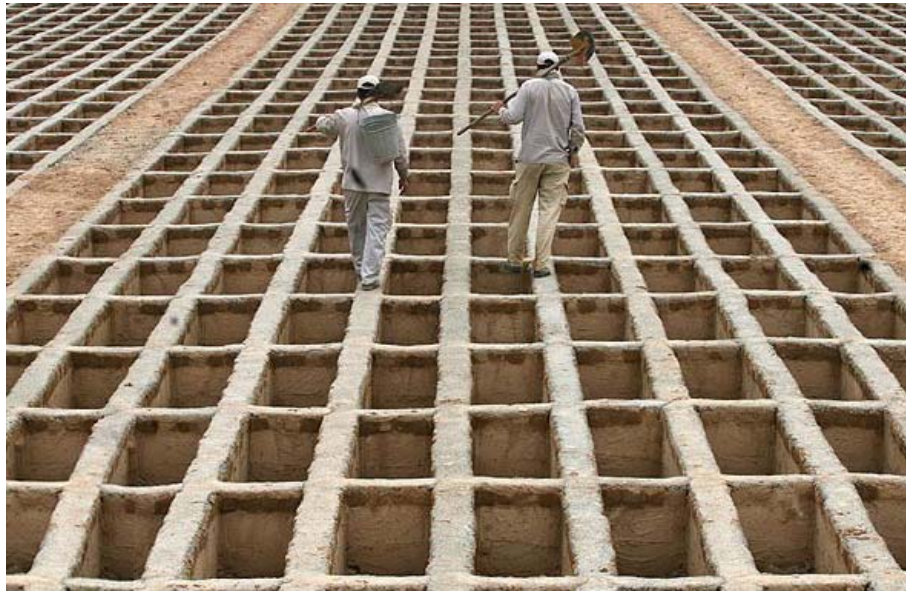


Figure 2-21 The large cemetery of Tehran
Source. www.tarikhirani.ir

mementos which celebrate their life. Give each grave site an edge, a path, and a quiet corner where people can sit. By custom, this is hallowed ground” (Alexander, 1977: 357). In recent years, large cemeteries have been built in metropolitan areas including Tehran [fig. 2-21]. Fortunately, small cities like Ramsar have not been affected by these movements. They are more inclined to build small scale cemeteries to answer local people’s need.

The story of imamzadehs in northern Iran

An imamzadeh is an immediate descendant of a Shi’a Imam.⁴ Imamzadeh is also a term for a shrine-tomb of the descendants of Imams, who are directly related to

⁴ Imam is an Islamic leadership position (www.wikipedia.org).

the first prophet, Muhammad. Many imamzadehs are located in Medina, as well as in Iraq, India, and Iran.

One of the elements found in most old neighborhoods in northern Iran is the imamzadeh. These places of reverence and respect are so old that communities have grown around them. People also come from abroad to visit graves of imamzadehs. These behaviors create a religious atmosphere around these shrines, leading people to bury their dead beside them.

In this way, imamzadehs often become the core of cemeteries. Today, there are shrines belonging to an imamzadeh in most cemeteries. A considerable number of imamzadehs are in Mazandaran province. One of the reasons for this owes itself to the natural environment. During the period of the Abbasid Caliphate which was Sunni,⁵ the Sadats were pursued by the ruthless government to be compelled to promote the Sunni religion. In Mazandaran, they found a land where they could be safe. The natural features of the land provided a safe haven for them to escape and live for a long time, away from any threat. The impassable Alborz Mountains and the dense forest on one hand with the Caspian Sea on the other made this a safe land (Sajadi, 1999: 123). Sadat lived many years in this area and found respect among the local people who were unsatisfied with the ruthless government. After their death, the people remembered them by building special graves. They were kept safe until the Safavid dynasty, when the official religion of Iran changed to Shi'a and tombs and shrines could be built for the imamzadehs.

⁵ The third of the Islamic caliphates to succeed the prophet Muhammad.

2.6 Facing death

Death has different meanings in different cultures and religions. Some believe death is the final point of human presence in the cosmos, while some believe there is another life after death, so human life will not end. Most of these beliefs originate from a belief in God, or the opposite.

Death in Islam

Muslims deem that the first phase of life—life in this world—is a test to receive reward or punishment in the second phase of life, which is eternal life. This belief represents the second central tenet of Islam: “One is the belief in the existence of a single God, Allah, and the creator of the universe and all that is in it. ... The second central Muslim tenet is that death is not the end of an individual’s life but rather a transition into a new phase of existence” (Spiro, Curnen, Wandel, 1996: 149). In Islamic wisdom, not only is death not the end of everything, but it is also a transition toward a better life. In Islamic mysticism and poetry, death is deemed as a phase of life that does not necessarily have dark side; in fact, it is even sweet and desirable for believing Muslims. Islam contends that the physical life of the body will terminate in this world but that a spiritual life will continue in the other world. Humans do not need bodies in their spiritual life, so death is a step towards delivering oneself from the physical body, which is only on loan to human beings. Muslims are advised to live their earthly life with their next life in mind: “In Islam, life in this world is a small but

crucial part of a larger human existence. A human life should be conducted accordingly with a sense of proportion. It should be conducted appropriately by fulfilling God's commands, by doing good deeds. A good Muslim should live in a sober, restrained way before the judgment and not be given to excess, heedlessness, or neglect of religious duties. ... He should live in but not care too much for the life of this world. With detachment, humility, and patient waiting, he makes this way through life to the world beyond" (Spiro, Curnen, Wandel, 1996: 158).

In Islam, funeral ceremonies are simple and sanitary affairs: "The funeral and burial follow as soon after death as possible, preferably within the same day, or if the death occurred at night, the following day. A religious funeral is marked by upmost simplicity" (Spiro, Curnen, Wandel, 1996: 153). The body is washed in a special manner, covered with a specific white cotton dress, and put in a coffin to be carried toward the cemetery. Usually, the coffin is carried by an ambulance until it is near the cemetery. Afterwards, mourners follow the coffin from a certain distance for the rest of the way to the cemetery. During this procession, mourners pray for the dead person's soul. They put down the coffin, pray over it, and pick it up again, repeating this process seven times to make the dead person ready for burial at the funeral. At last, they place the coffin on the ground and gather to pray for the dead person. After saying the prayers, they bury the dead person in a carved grave without a coffin and cover it with soil.

Death in Iran

In Iran, especially among traditional people, a popular version of Islam is practiced where God is believed to be a merciful being. This understanding of Islam differs from Islamic literature, which illustrates God as a scary and violent being who just wants to punish sinners. This popular version of Islam claims “that God will more readily forgive sins against Himself than sins against people” (Friedl, 2014: 143). These beliefs make the face of death brighter than Islamic teachings of death do. Muslims believe that after death, the soul is transferred forever to heaven or hell, an eternal life spent in pleasure or suffering based on your deeds in this world. Iranians believe in this kind of justice in the Hereafter, but they live based on a belief in the forgiveness of God: “God appears in occasional exclamations in the tales, such as ‘By God...’ and ‘Thank God...’. In everyday speech, as well as in the tales, people invoke God quite routinely to give emphasis to a request, a claim or an assertion, to express astonishment or gratitude, or as a largely rhetorical expression of vexation, frustration on confusion such as ‘O God, where am I to go, what am I to do?’” (Friedl, 2014: 132). These examples demonstrate the close relationship between Iranians and God.

Since the soul’s visit to God in the Hereafter is expressed in Islam, death does not panic believers. They accept it as a part of life that connects them to their God. This attitude can be seen in their relationship to cemeteries. Usually, Muslims visit the cemetery every Friday, calling it the “House of the Hereafter.” In his book, *The City of the Dead: A History of Cairo's Cemetery Communities*, Jeffrey A Nedoroscik describes a group of vast Islamic cemeteries that have been the primary burial grounds for the

city of Cairo for twelve thousand years. Given the housing crisis that plagued Cairo in the twentieth century, the cemeteries became the primary source of shelter for hundreds of thousands of otherwise homeless Egyptians. Nedoroscik paints a portrait of how these people lived so close to death: “Contrary to its name, you will find the City of the Dead to be very much alive as you attempt to make your way through the giant, complex labyrinth” (Nedoroscik, 1997: 1). Zeinab Ali describes her life in the cemetery: “Perhaps this is my favourite place on earth. Of course I haven’t seen too many places! I think that it would still be my favourite place though. ... I enjoy the quiet of the cemetery except, of course, when the silence is broken by the crying of a passing funeral and the air is filled with pain. ... I also enjoy the company of my neighbours. Our difficult lives have brought us closer together, and we help each other we are in need. ... [Here] is more like a small village where everyone knows each other and cares about one another” (Nedoroscik, 1997: 31). This city of the dead is an image of the close relationship between life and death in Islamic culture.

Iranians hold several mourning ceremonies after a family member dies. Though “in some countries women are not permitted to accompany the funeral to the cemetery” (Spiro, Curnen, Wandel, 1996: 155), in Iran, the role of women in funerals and other death ceremonies is important. While men usually prevent themselves from being seen to cry, women cry and moan freely. After the funeral, relatives and friends come to the dead person’s house to express their sympathies with the family. Usually, three, seven, and forty days after death, the family arranges mourning ceremonies to remember the

deceased. These can be held in a mosque, in the deceased's house, or both. Some families gather for a ceremony every year on the anniversary of the death as well.

Mourning ceremonies in Iran precede Islam. There is evidence that demonstrates death ceremonies were common among Iranians during the Zoroastrian period. Herodotus describes the death of Cassandane, the wife of Cyrus the Great.⁶ “When she died before him, Cyrus himself mourned deeply and bade all his subjects mourn also” (Herodotus & Godley, 1982 Volume II: Books 3-4: 275). Grayling further mentions that all the nations of the Persian Empire observed “a great mourning” (Grayling, 2011: 206).

Siyavash mourning

In *Sogdian Painting: The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art*, Guitty Azarpay discusses some wall paintings found in a cave in Panjakent, Tajikistan, which was a part of Iran before Islam. It illustrates a famous scene of mourning in ancient Iran called Siyavash mourning [fig. 2-22].



Figure 2-22 A scene of mourning (attributed to Siyavash mourning)
Source: Azarpay, 1981: 127

⁶ Cyrus II of Persia (600–530 BC) is founder of the Achaemenid Empire, the first Persian Empire.

Tamara Talbot Rice published a repaired painting of this depiction [fig. 2-23].



Figure 2-23 Illustration of a scene of mourning by Tamara Talbot Rice (attributed to Siyavash mourning)

Source: Rice, 1965: 358

Siyavash is a legendary Iranian prince from the earliest days of the Iranian Empire. A handsome young man, his name literally means “the one with the black horse” or “black stallion.” Ferdowsi, the author of *The Book of Kings*, or *Shahnameh*, narrates his sad story. When Siyavash refuses the sexual advances of his stepmother, Sudabeh, the Queen of Iran, she stages a fake rape scene and accuses him of the crime. Siyavash is forced to prove his innocence by riding through a colossal mountain of fire [fig. 2-24]. Despite his proven innocence, his father, the king, eventually rejects Siyavash, since he does not want to punish the woman he loves or anger her father, a powerful ally in the east. Siyavash abandons his country to Turan and is finally beheaded by enemies in a strange land.



Figure 2-24 Legend of Siyavash in fire
Source: www.blog.navaar.ir

Siyavash is the symbol of innocence in Iranian literature. His defense of his own chastity, his self-imposed exile, his constancy in love for his wife, and his ultimate execution at the hands of his adopted host have become intertwined with Iranian mythology and literature over the past millennia. Ancient Iranians held a ceremony of Siyavash mourning to memorialize his innocence every year. Although the legend of Siyavash dates from before Islam, the common people mixed his legend with Islamic religious beliefs and made it into an epic religious story. In *Savushun*, a novel whose title means “mourning for Siyavash,” Iranian writer Simin Danishvar has a local woman explain the death ceremony of Siyavash: “Tomorrow is Savushun. ... When we arrive they drum. ... People gather around a huge fire in the middle of the square. A young man who plays the role of Siyavash on his horse will appear. He has dressed up in black like his horse. He rides and passes through the fire. People cheer and drum”



*Figure 2-25 Modern Theater about
Source: www.theater.ir*

(Danishvar, 1990: 270). She describes elaborately how actors play the painful story of Siyavash's death and people's feelings about this performance. This ceremony was common in Iran until recent decades. In recent years, Siyavash mourning has merged with Islamic religious mourning and, unfortunately, the role of Siyavash is fading out.

Recently, theatrical dramas connected with Siyavash mourning have been shown to maintain this part of Iran's ancient culture [fig. 2-25].

Ta'zieh (Persian passion play)

Upon the arrival of Islam, Iran was influenced by religious philosophy. The new religion had a great impact on each part of life. Religious beliefs that did not exist in Iran before were combined with Iranian culture. For example, the name of the

prophet Mohammad and his household entered Iranian homes and people respected them as holy people who had come to improve their lives. Husayn, the grandson of Mohammad, was one of the most famous religious people and was highly praised in Iran. His reputation comes from the battle he fought at Karbala,⁷ where he was killed and beheaded on October 10th, 680, along with most of his family and companions, including his six-month-old son, with the women and children taken as prisoners. Husayn is highly regarded by Shi'a Muslims for refusing to pledge allegiance to Yazid, the Umayyad Caliph. His actions at Karbala fueled the later Shi'a movements.

The day of his martyrdom is called "Ashura" and is commemorated by Shi'a Muslims as a day of mourning for the death of Husayn. The commemoration of Husayn has become a national holiday and different ethnic and religious communities participate in it.

Muharram is the first month of the Muslim lunar year, the month in which the Battle of Karbala happened. In this month, Iran displays the religious face of its culture. People wear black or dark cloths during the first ten days of the month, mourning the hardships Husayn tolerated in Karbala.

Foreign People who are not familiar with this culture becomes confused when for the first time face this ceremony in Iran. "The traveller from Europe who for the first time rambles through the streets of Persia's capital in the sacred month of Muharram, will be surprised by a sound which is especially remarkable in the comparative stillness of an oriental city. It is the voice of children singing, in clear

⁷ Karbala is a city in central Iraq.

tones, snatches of a song he has never heard before. The notes are weird and plaintive, suggesting, in a certain indefinable way, strophes of the 'Stabat Mater' and yet the strain has a distinct individuality of its own, a musical cadence that fixes the attention, and touches the chords of the emotions. "Is yon child recalling bits of a popular song or a recent opera which has taken the city by storm?" asks the interested stranger from Europe, who knows not that neither popular airs, nor operas, exist in Persia.

"No," you reply to him, "the strain you hear is part of the solemn chant of the Tazieh." (Benjamin, 1982: 92).

The Ta'zieh is a type of theater with a structure similar to the passion plays of medieval Europe. Most scholars assume that the form of Ta'zieh developed from a variety of religious observances. These festivals received royal encouragement in the sixteenth century under the Shi'a Safavid dynasty and developed costumed



Figure 2-26 Ta'zieh in the period of Ghajar dynasty
Source: www.mforum.cari.com.my

processions, tableaux, and mock battles (Ta'zieh, 2010. Oxford University Press) [fig. 2-26].

Some Iranian scholars believe the Ta'zieh originates from the mourning for Siyavash. Although this claim has not been demonstrated or rejected outright, the structure of the two performances are similar. The role of innocent Siyavash and Husayn could be matched with each other, although religious people revere Husayn more than Siyavash. These ceremonies are a point of interaction between Iranian culture and religion. Sometimes culture and religion complete each other—for example, in the case of Savushun—but at other times, they are antagonistic towards each other and one side accuses the other of destroying what belongs to it.

The concept of the Ta'zieh is to remember the persecutions Husayn tolerated in Karbala by showing a dramatized version of his martyrdom. A group of amateur or professional actors play the roles of the different participants of the battle. Using bloody horses, wandering little kids, and soldiers with battle clothes, the drama illustrates a clear image of a horrible event that happened fourteen hundred years ago. It makes people sad and thoughtful about their Imam, Husayn.

The places where people gather to watch these performances are called tekya or huseiniehs. Usually the plan of a tekya is rectangular with a platform in the middle to raise the level of the scene for viewing [fig. 2-27]. While actors play their roles, the audience circles around the stage. In the past, tekya were two stories high, with the

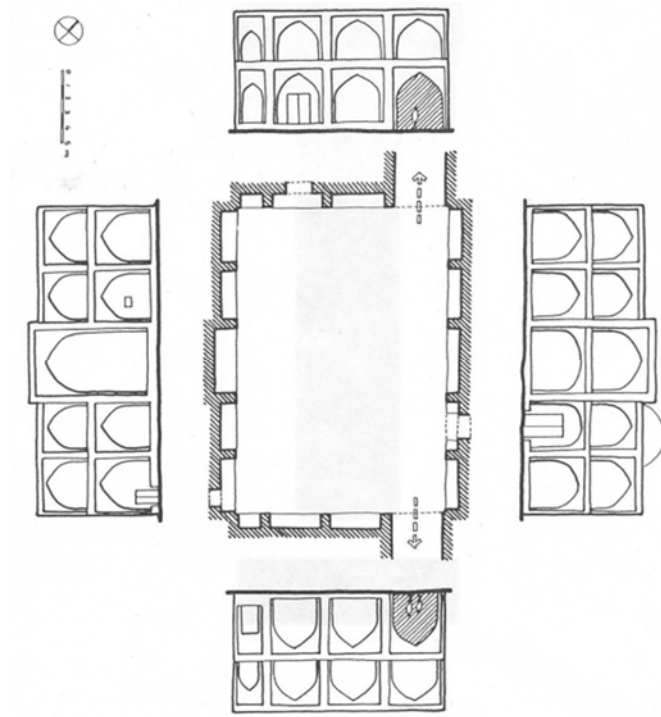


Figure 2-27 Huseiniehs Sang, Naeen
Source: Tavasoli, 1991

second level designated for women. Today, women may sit with their husbands and family. Since the tekya is used only ten days a year, on the other days of the year, it has another function. For example, the tekya of Tajrish Bazaar is located in the market of Tajrish in Tehran. Its main function is presenting fresh fruit and vegetables throughout the year, but in Muharram, it is decorated by black and green fabrics containing religious poems about Husayn and Karbala. During these ten days, people gather at night to watch the Ta'zieh and during the day, the shopkeepers sell their products [fig. 2-28, 2-29].



Figure 2-29 Tekya of Tajrish in Muharram month
Source: www.anasr121.mihanblog.com



Figure 2-28 Tekya of Tajrish in a casual day
Source: www.commonswikimedia.org

Aside from Ta'zieh, there are several different kinds of performance during Muharram. One of the main ones is Nakhl Gardani, which involves the carrying of a huge wooden structure through the city. The Nakhl is a symbol of Husayn's coffin, a structure decorated with black and green fabric, swords, spears, mirrors, bells, and other things [fig. 2-30, 2-31]. Dozens of strong men pick up the Nakhl and carry it



Figure 2-31 Nakhl Gardani in the period of Ghajar dynasty
Source: www.parstoday.com



Figure 2-30 The Nakhl of Yaz in Amir-Chakhmagh square
Source: www.karnaval.ir

around the city. While watching the festival, people sing religious songs and mourn for Husayn. This festival is famous in the city of Yazd [fig. 2-32].



Figure 2-32 Tourning Nakhl around city
Source: www.karnaval.ir

In other cities, instead of the Nakhl, a kind of metal cross structure is used known as the Alamat, meaning “sign.” It is lifted by one person and decorated in black



Figure 2-33 People taking photo with an Alamat
Photo by author

and green fabric, colorful feathers, lanterns, and metal animals like lions and birds [fig. 2-33, 2-34, 2-35].



Figure 2-35 A man picking Alamat up
Source: www.hormoz.ir



Figure 2-34 Decoration of Alamat
Photo by author

Death has become a part of Iranian culture. Iranians experience several mourning ceremonies in the lunar calendar annually, although their official calendar is the solar calendar. Most of these ceremonies are religious memorials for martyrs and Imams and involve grief and sorrow. Undoubtedly, dealing with death and mourning has a deep impact in Iranians' lives. Sociologists state that sadness due to religion has had a negative impact on the spirit of Iranian society and that it should be controlled, since Islam holds beneficial beliefs for human life while Iranians tend to focus on the depressing aspects of religion.

2.7 Vernacular architecture of northern Iran

Definitions

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “vernacular” refers to what is domestic, native, or indigenous (Simpson and Weiner, 1989). It is either derived from the Latin *vern*, a home-born slave, or from *vernaculus*, meaning domestic and indigenous (Bowyer, 1980). In the field of architecture, “vernacular refers to architecture concerned with ordinary domestic and functional buildings as opposed to the monumental” (Foruzanmehr, 2018: 13). Many attempts have been exerted to define “vernacular architecture” but most of them are unsuccessful (Oliver, 1997: xxi). Oliver states that the complexity of this definition originates from the diversity of building types, forms, traditions, uses, and contexts to which this phrase refers. According to *The Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Oliver, 1997, p.xxiii) and

The Atlas of Vernacular Architecture of the World (Vellinga et al., 2007, p.xiii), “vernacular architecture comprises the dwellings and all other buildings of the people which, related to their environmental contexts and available resources, are customarily owner- or community built, utilising traditional technologies.” Additionally, descriptors such as “permanent,” “traditional,” “simple and ordinary,” “related to place,” “built of local material,” and “designed with thought and feeling” are the main attributes that Brunskill assigns to vernacular architecture (1981).

Climate and climatic design

In Iran, vernacular architecture mostly refers to dwellings and is usually called traditional architecture. It includes a wide range of architectures based on local traditions, knowledge, culture, and architectural practices, as well as climate conditions, available local materials, and construction technologies (Daneshyar, 2015: 68). Among these factors, climate conditions have a deeper impact on the variety of vernacular architecture styles in Iran.

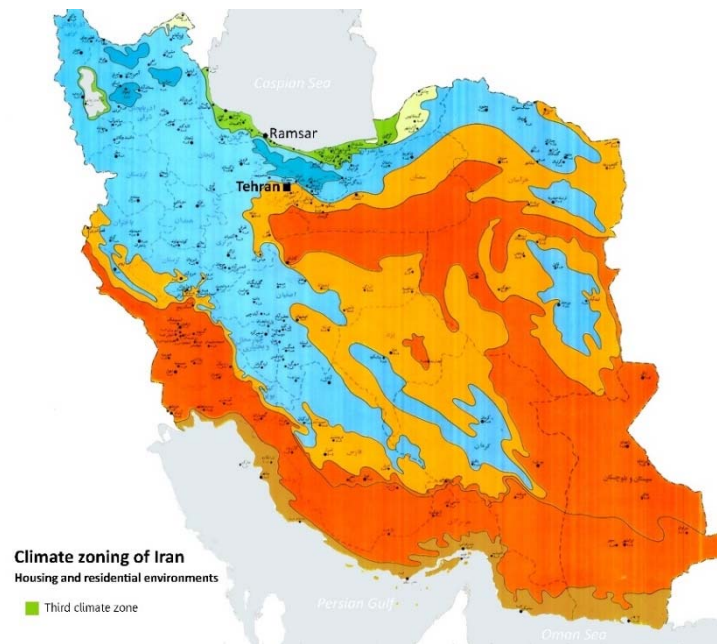


Figure 2-36 Climate zones of Iran. Illustrated based on Kasmaei, 1993: 278

In *Climatic Zoning of Iran: Housing and Residential Environment*, Morteza Kasmaei divides Iran into eight climatic zones [fig. 2-36]. The southern beaches of the Caspian Sea, including the provinces of Mazandaran and Gilan, are located in the third climatic zone. A high latitude, low altitude, and proximity to the sea are three important factors that make the weather in this zone partly cold in winter and humid in summer. Kasmaei calculates the percentage of annual thermal needs of different cities in each zone. The city of Ramsar, which is located in the third climatic zone, needs 10 to 20% natural cooling annually, though it does not need mechanical cooling. In terms of heating, 10 to 20% of annual demand could be supplied through mechanical systems and 25 to 35% by solar. In addition, Kasmaei defines the major goals of climatic design and prioritizes them for each city. These goals, by order of priority, are listed as followed:

1. Reducing building heat dissipation.
2. Protecting buildings against rain.
3. Reducing wind impact in building heat dissipation.
4. Creating airflow in indoor spaces.
5. Using suitable outdoor weather conditions.
6. Using solar energy in building heating.
7. Protecting buildings against sunlight.
8. Avoid increasing humidity. (1993: 278)

These elements and their priorities create varieties of vernacular architecture in different sections of Iran.

Classifying them academically should not detract from the point that traditional people have long understood these attributes deeply and exerted them in the design and construction of their houses. They developed the features of their traditional architecture in response to their climate through trial and error. Over the years, they have built naturally sustainable houses resistant against the harsh climate.

The urban fabric

The regions of Iran close to the sea deal with high humidity, a problem for residents. Humid weather is heavier than dry weather and stays low in the atmosphere, making breathing hard if air circulation in the city is low or does not exist. To combat this problem, the vernacular architecture of northern cities maximizes the use of airflow to create climate comfort (Ghobadian, 2006: 38).



Figure 2-37 Semi-separated urban texture in Ramsar city center
Source: public archive of Chaboksar

Buildings were built separated by large courtyards enclosed with low fences less than human height. This method created airflow between buildings and pushed stagnant air out of residential areas. Approaching the city center, where land prices are more expensive, it can be observed that there is less space between buildings than in the outskirts.

The major features of urban fabrics in northern cities of Iran are:

- An open and wide urban fabric
- Open spaces with short fences
- Fairly wide roads
- Buildings separated in the outskirts and semi-separated in the city center (Ghobadian, 2006: 40) [fig. 2-37].

Housing

The basic form of northern Iran's vernacular architecture may be observed in rural housing. These final products have resulted from the trial and error processes of rural people in order to find an optimum approach to sustainable housing.

The basic residential cell in rural areas is a room with a length of 3-to-4-meters and a width of 4-to-6-meters, depending on whether the ceiling is covered with wooden beams. Sometimes, based on demand or lifestyle, the room is longer. The room can serve as a multipliable unit along a horizontal or vertical axis. Humid areas specify a porous placement of rooms and their relationship with open space, while cold areas specify compaction. The form of houses close to the sea in the humid plains is a long rectangle with wide porches around the building. In the foothills, the form is rectangular with a semi-enclosed porch, which is completely closed in mountain homes. In cold areas, the porch is sometimes eliminated. Two-story houses in the plains have a staircase outside the building on the porch, while in the foothills and mountains, the staircase is inside the house due to cold weather. Houses are usually built on top of a structural foundation called "korsi." This protects the building from floods and the penetration of moisture (Raheb & Habibi, 2016: 57-69). It also creates an empty space below the structure to increase airflow around the building and courtyard. In the foothills and mountains, which are far from the sea, buildings are not built on top of a korsi [fig. 2-38].

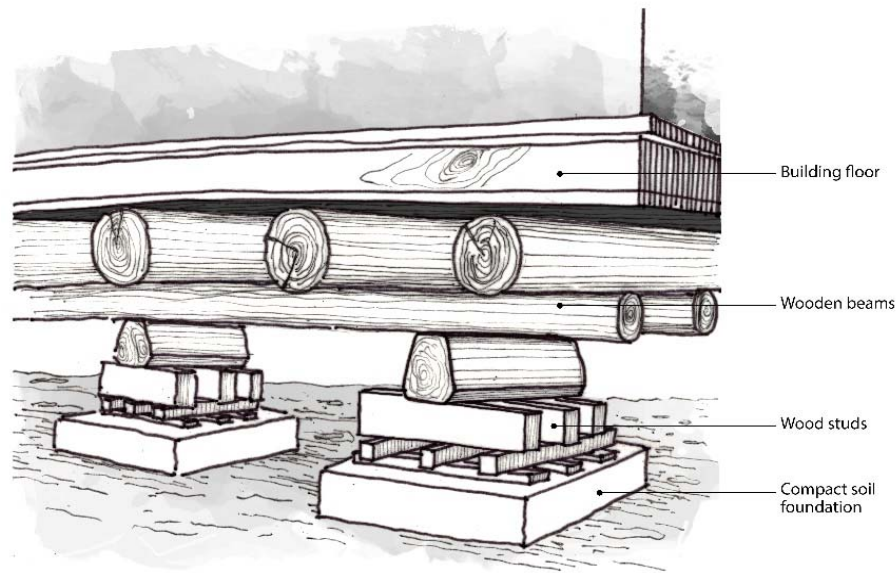


Figure 2-38 Architectural detail of Korsi. Illustrated by author

Roofs are always sloped, often steeply to conduct rainfall and snow downward. One side of the roof typically projects farther than the other to better protect the building from rain. This semi-closed space is an appropriate place for food storage and has good ventilation and airflow (Kasmaei, 2015). Furthermore, the space above the upper room's ceiling and the roof may also be used as a storage [fig. 2-39].

The basic patterns of housing in this region are affected by the three factors of geography, microcultures, and style of dwelling. Geographic conditions change the climate from plains to foothills and mountains. This modifies altitude, slope, and moisture, which are influential on the form of vernacular architecture. Also, different cultures and their lifestyles impact the architecture, especially with regard to decoration (Raheb, 2014: 94).

Vernacular architecture of north of Iran

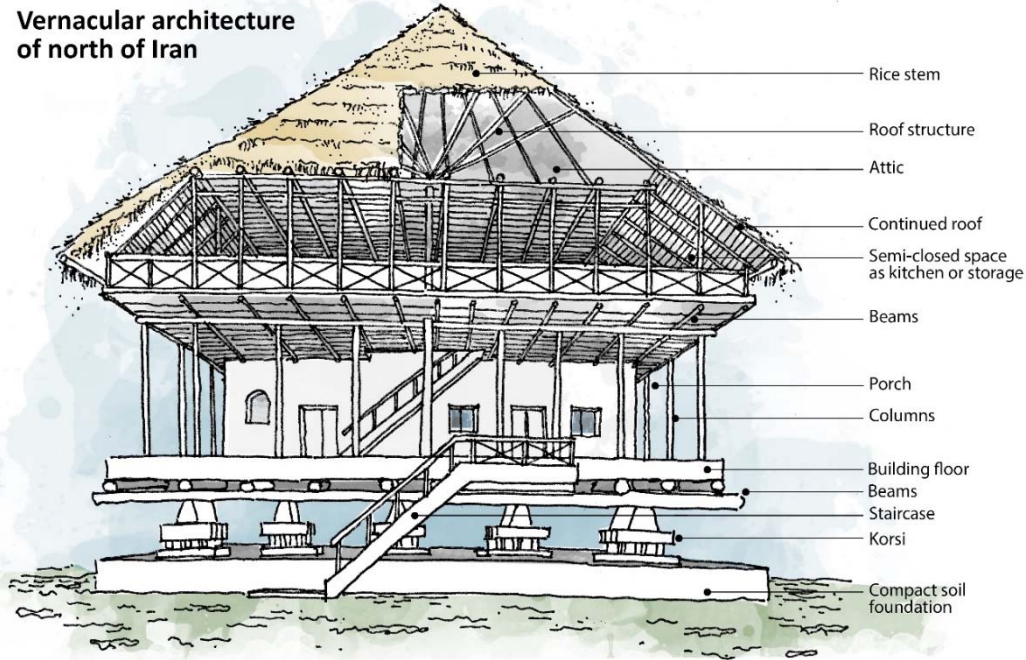


Figure 2-39 Vernacular architecture of north of Iran. Illustrated by author

Kandouj

One of the most obvious representatives of northern Iran's vernacular architecture is the kandouj. It is a traditional structure used in rice fields to store and preserve rice from moisture and insidious animals, especially mice. During the process of modernization, demand for rice storage decreased. After setting up huge rice silos, farmers preferred to deliver their products to factories directly. It resulted in the extinction of this symbol of vernacular architecture. Most kandoujs were destroyed when they lost their function.

The architectural form of a kandouj consists of a square room constructed on top of four columns. It has a square foundation with a 3-to-4.5-meter length and width. There are four wooden columns in each corner of the square. Two major beams connect

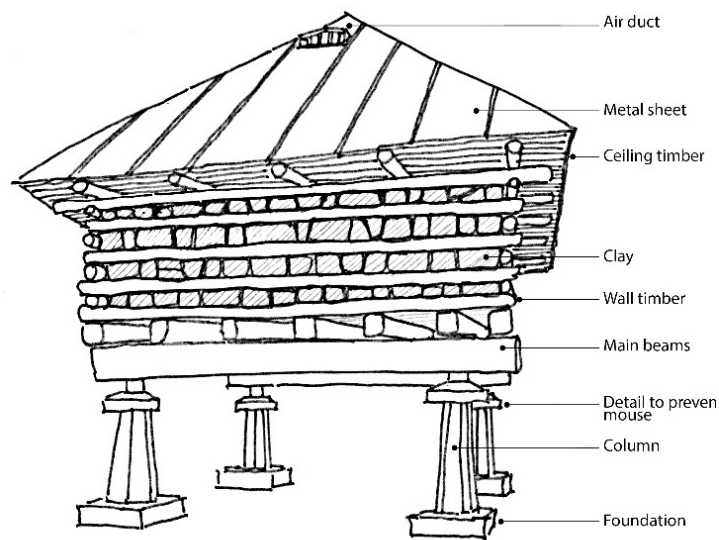


Figure 2-40 Architecture of Kandouj. Illustrated by author

the columns and make a space to set secondary beams on their tops. A square room with a pyramid hip roof sits above the beams. The oldest kandoujs were completely constructed with local materials. Builders used rice stems to cover the roof. After modernization, they used metal sheets. A small trapdoor beneath the room provides access by ladder to the stored products in the kandouj [fig. 2-40]. The space below the room is a cool, shadowy place where farmers can rest or take a nap [fig. 2-41].



Figure 2-41 Farmers eating under the shadow of Kandouj
Source: public archive of Chaboksar

Since mice are stubborn animals and can climb the columns, kandoujs also include a special detail to protect their products: a wooden piece, later made of stone and concrete, in the middle of each column that prevents mice from climbing [fig. 2-42].

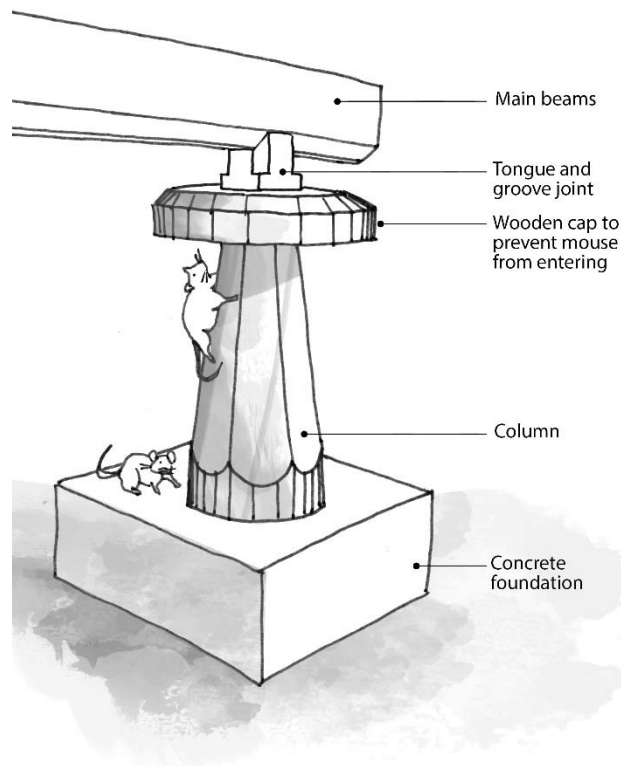


Figure 2-42 Column detail to prevent mouse from entering a Kandouj. Illustrated by author

The architectural form of the kandouj is a reflection of the vernacular houses of northern Iran. It considers the climate, culture, occupation, and lifestyle of a northern family on a small scale.

Housing patterns around Agha Besmel Cemetery

Exploring different patterns of housing in Sadat Shahr reveals that these patterns have followed the traditional northern Iranian form of rural housing. Although the pattern has partially transformed over the years due to new demands and technology, the style of housing is almost the same as at its origin.

All houses have sloped roofs, though most have gentle slopes. Roofs project ahead of the building to protect the walls from rainfall. Since there are several rivers and watercourses and a general slope in the city toward the sea, rainfall is conducted toward the sea. The danger of a flood does not exist. As a result, no homes are constructed on top of korsis. They are just raised a few steps high to prevent the penetration of moisture. Furthermore, multiple face-to-face windows and openings increase airflow and natural ventilation inside the house [fig. 2-43 (1,2)].



Figure 2-43 (1,2) Multiple face to face windows as a major characteristic of vernacular architecture of north of Iran

Photo by author

Most of the old structures were constructed with wood but in contemporary houses, concrete is used. The major material used traditionally in building walls is a mixture of wood and mud. This type of timber framed wall is known as a zogali wall (Ghobadian, 2006: 59) [fig. 2-44, 2-45].



*Figure 2-44 Wood structure of a Zogali wall.
Source: personal archive of Mr. Ali-Esmaeeli*



*Figure 2-45 Water has washed the mud of a Zogali wall
Photo by author*

Today, however, cement blocks and bricks are used. Older roof coverings used metal sheets but they always rusted. Also, asbestos cement sheets were recently replaced with galvanized sheets.

There is a variation of building forms in this region, but we can categorize them based on the building's age. In this classification, we can explore the historical evolution of housing in the city of Sadat Shahr. Based on my findings, the oldest houses around the Agha Besmel Cemetery have sloped, four-sided roofs—for example, pyramid hip roofs—constructed with metal sheets that have now rusted over. They are over fifty years old. Among them, the oldest ones are one-story buildings [fig. 2-46, 2-47].



Figure 2-46 An old one-story traditional house
Photo by author

More contemporary examples are two-story houses with four-way sloped roofs. Most of these have an exposed staircase beside the building facade for access to the second floor [fig. 2-48 (1, 2)]. In these houses, the porch has a major role in terms of



*Figure 2-47 An old damaged one-story traditional house.
Photo by author*



*Figure 2-48 (1,2) An old two-story traditional house which has porch and exposed staircase
Photo by author*

function and thermal comfort. Porches are usually covered on the west side of the house by a wall to protect the building from wind and rain [fig. 2-49] Moreover, formerly the



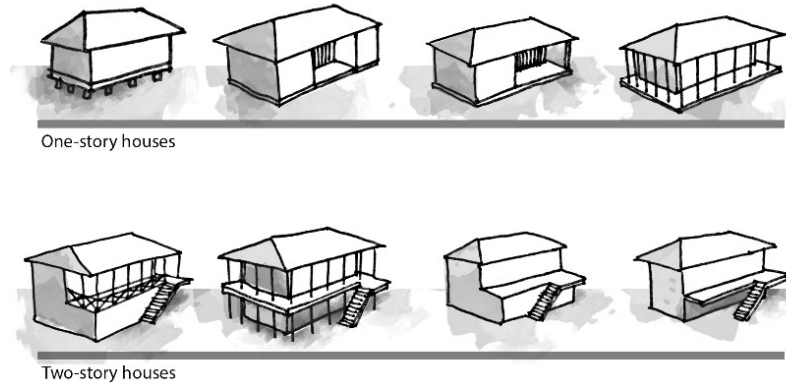
Figure 2-49 An old two-story traditional house which has porch and exposed staircase. Photo by author



*Figure 2-50 An old porch which still has kitchen sink
Photo by author*

kitchen did not exist as a room. Food used to be cooked in a corner of the porch [fig. 2-50]. During hot summers, residents used to eat their meals and even sleep on the

porch, which enjoys better air circulation. In the northern lifestyle, porches were thus a multifunctional domestic space [fig. 2-51].



*Figure 2-51 The role of porch in vernacular architecture of old houses.
Illustrated by author*

One cultural habit among the people of northern Iran is that they gradually extend their houses based on their needs. For example, grownup children and the marriage of children often lead to house extensions and adding more rooms. Since extensions to the second floor need difficult structural requirements, families would gradually decrease the area of the porch, converting it into rooms. It is possible to track two-story houses that used to have a porch, though they have no such space today. Although it disrupted the function of natural ventilation and airflow inside the house, owners consciously renovated in this way based on their changing needs. Also, introducing technologies such as ceiling fans and mechanical air conditioners has helped dwellers not to suffer from stagnant hot air.

The attic is a space used as storage and sometimes as a place to dry fruits and vegetables. Access to the attic is provided from a door in the ceiling. Usually, there is a fixed ladder under the hole for the door. Furthermore, this space isolates the air,

keeping warm air inside the house in winter and cold air inside during summer [fig. 2-52 (1, 2)].



*Figure 2-52 (1, 2) Attic space
Photo by author*

Newer homes have a sloped two-sided roof. One major reason behind this transformation was the change in structural material from wood to concrete. The roofs were covered by asbestos cement sheets and, later, by galvanized sheets, which are more resistant. These houses are two stories high or more. Staircases are located indoors. Also, the porch is not a critical feature of these houses [fig. 2-53]. They are not constructed as a multifunctional space to meet essential needs like cooking or ventilation. One major reason for this is the fixed definitions presented by modern architecture. The traditional architecture of Iran is flexible about room functions. For example, people can sleep, eat, or even cook on the porch. Modern architecture rejected this flexibility by allocating specified spaces for each function. In this definition, the main function for the porch is as a space for drying clothes.



Figure 2-53 Panoramic view of Architectural housing forms around Agha-Besmel cemetery
Photo by author



Figure 2-54 Architectural plans of Mr Mir-Hoseini's house. Illustrated by author



*Figure 2-55 (1, 2, 3, 4) Photos of Mr Mir-Hoseini's house
Photo by author*

Modern buildings in Sadat Shahr are constructed in three or four stories. Although all of them have sloped roofs they do not follow the traditional principles of four-sided or two-sided slopes. Structural technology gives them the chance to create complicated forms. Most of them are a combination of several sloped roofs [fig. 2-56 (1, 2)]. However, these new forms do not value the vernacular architecture of this region. They have even made a kind of visual confusion in the urban scape.

There is a variety of architectural housing forms around Agha Besmel Cemetery. Categorizing them demonstrates that they are an extension of the traditional style of housing in rural areas. Some factors have critically influenced housing design and ensured that housing forms remain intact. On the other hand, the advancement of technology over the years has drastically influenced the climatic design of houses in this area.



*Figure 2-56 (1, 2) Modern houses with fragmented sloped roof
Photo by author*

Religious vernacular architecture of the imamzadeh in Ramsar

The architecture of imamzadehs in Ramsar has two main influences. On one hand, religion and patterns of religious architecture have obvious impacts. On the other hand, the vernacular architecture of northern Iran and climatic design have affected the architecture of the imamzadehs in this region.

The historical evolution of the architectural form of the imamzadeh in Ramsar should be divided to two parts: before renovation and after renovation by Oghaf, a governmental charity organization. This organization is responsible for managing the imamzadehs in Iran. One of its main duties is to collect the donations made to

imamzadehs and spend them on charity affairs. It is also responsible for renovating religious buildings.

Before renovation, the architectural form of imamzadehs in Ramsar was more influenced by the vernacular architecture of the region. One of the basic forms of an imamzadeh was a small, usually square room with four porches around it and columns to hold the sloped roof, which was four-sided and constructed with metal sheets. The middle of room contained a gravestone showing the name of the imamzadeh and the date of his or her death. A simple metal structure was prepared on top of the stone to make it more prominent. There was a purity and intimacy in such places that made pilgrims absorb its atmosphere [fig. 2-57].

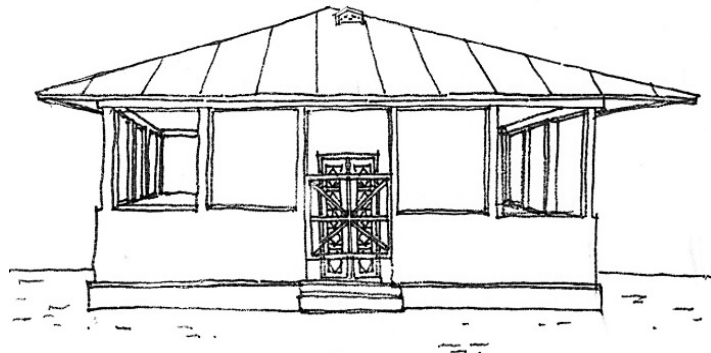


Figure 2-57 One of the original forms of vernacular architecture of imamzadeh in north of Iran. Illustrated by author

Renovations changed this original concept of religious vernacular architecture and converted it into something similar to the forms of imamzadehs elsewhere in Iran. In a nutshell, the impact of religious design was so strong that in some cases, all traces of vernacular architecture were erased. In most of the new imamzadehs, a fake dome of metal was added on top of the roof to make its religious significance more evident

[fig. 2-58]. Though its initial style of design recalled decorated sheds architecture [fig. 2-59].



*Figure 2-58 Fake dome on top of an imamzadeh
Photo by author*



*Figure 2-59 Decorated-shed architecture
Source: www.99percentinvisible.org*

The recent transformation not only valued the prominence of religious architecture in northern Iran but ruined the last sample of vernacular religious architecture in this region [fig. 2-60, 2-61, 2-62, 2-63, 2-64, 2-65].



Figure 2-60 Original architecture of BiBi-Sakineh Imamzadeh before renovation, Ramsar
Source: Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 596



Figure 2-61 Architecture of BiBi-Sakineh Imamzadeh after renovation
Photo by author



Figure 2-63 Original architecture of Imamzadeh Seyyed Abol-Ghasem, Ramsar
Source: Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 595

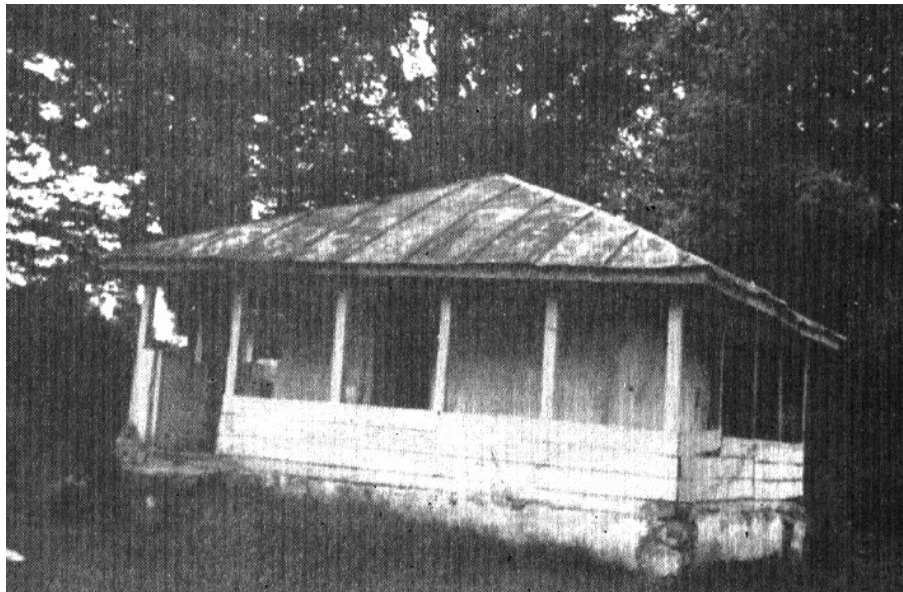


Figure 2-62 Original architecture of Imamzadeh Mir Malek Rajob, Ramsar
Source: Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 596



*Figure 2-65, Imamzadeh Seyyed Mohammad after renovation
Photo by author*



*Figure 2-64 Imamzadeh Agha Seyyed Mohammad after renovation
Photo by author*

2.8 Agha Besmel Cemetery

Agha Besmel Cemetery is a small cemetery located in the historical core of the city of Sadat Shahr. This local community cemetery consists of a burial ground, two historical shrines, and two mosques. It is surrounded by houses and local shops and has a great impact on residents' lives. For them, this place is a burial ground, a mosque, a place for religious ceremonies, a place for contemplation, and also a place for gathering [fig. 2-66].



*Figure 2-66 Bird view of Agha-Besmel cemetery
Photo by author*

The number of people who come to this cemetery to socialize is greater than the number that come to commemorate their dead. They often spend a part of their day there. In this traditional society, the demand for public space has influenced the characteristics of the cemetery and transformed it to a multifunctional space. Indeed, this cemetery has three urban functions, a burial ground, a religious landscape, and an everyday space.

A specific pattern

Communities in northern Iran founded cemeteries close to their neighborhood but outside of residential areas. One can trace this pattern in cities, but there are some exceptions. Some cemeteries are built in the middle of residential areas. Most cemetery grounds are a combination of a cemetery and an imamzadeh or even a mosque. The reason behind these exceptions is that people may have constructed their houses close to an imamzadeh's grave because of the affection they have towards him or her. Over the years, residents buried their dead around this grave and gradually built their cemetery nearby, within their neighborhood. Therefore, there are some cemeteries today in the middle of old residential areas.

History and influential people

The two shrines in the cemetery belong to Agha Pela Seyyed and Agha Besmel. Agha Pela Seyyed, in the local language, means "The Great Seyyed." He lived during the Safavid dynasty and died in 1545. Since the Safavids changed the official religion of Iran, King Tahmasp I sent Agha Pela Seyyed on a mission from Isfahan to Sakht Sar. He was supposed to promote the Shi'a religion in this area. Based on his will, after his death, his body was buried in its current location [fig. 2-67]. His grave was in a location with a religious background at that time, but it was remote and far from residential areas (Sajadi, 1999: 548).



*Figure 2-67 Shrine of Agha-Pela-Seyyed
Photo by author*

Agha Besmel is a descendant of Agha Pela Seyyed. After Agha Pela Seyyed's death, a seminary⁸ was constructed close to his grave to instruct religious believers. Agha Besmel learned the principles of Shi'a there. He studied philosophy, mysticism, and logic to a great degree. Since he experienced a level of spiritual life others could not understand, he left the school and dwelled in a small house beside a river. He tolerated some mortifications, and, after a while, people observed supernatural powers around his person (Mir Hoseini, 2015: 4). Several folktales connected to his powers and miracles emerged among the locals. He was also an adroit poet. He wrote a book of religious poetry about the third Shi'a Imam, Hossain, who is well-respected among Iranians. In 1883, Agha Besmel passed away in Sadat Shahr.

⁸The religious school of Agha Seyyed Saeed (Sajadi, 1999: 304).

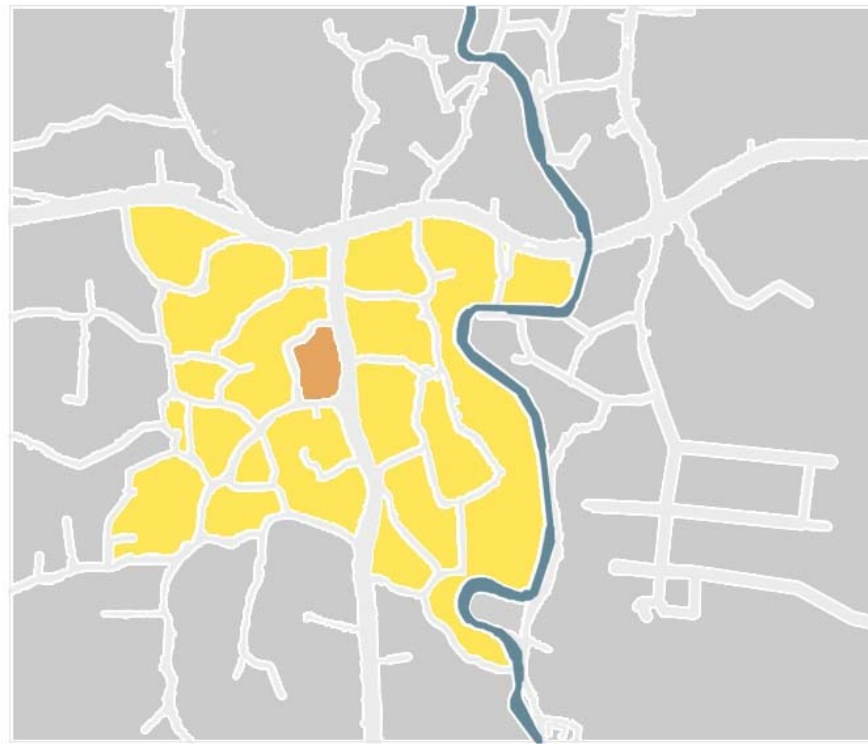
His great reputation has left a deep impact on people's lives. Pilgrims from far and near come to visit his shrine [fig. 2-68]. Sometimes, they put money in his shrine in order to have their prayers answered. Residents have great respect for him and some stores have even named their businesses after him.



*Figure 2-68 Shrine of Agha Besmel
Photo by author*

The cemetery in its urban context

Analyzing a function-based urban plan of Sadat Shahr reveals that organic urban blocks have formed together to make neighborhoods [fig. 2-69]. The cemetery and its dependent spaces, which are organized into about a block worth of space in the middle of residential areas, form the core of the neighborhood. Furthermore, this block is part of historical core of the city. Most of the functions around the cemetery are houses and shops. Gardens and fields are also located behind the houses and shops [fig. 2-70].



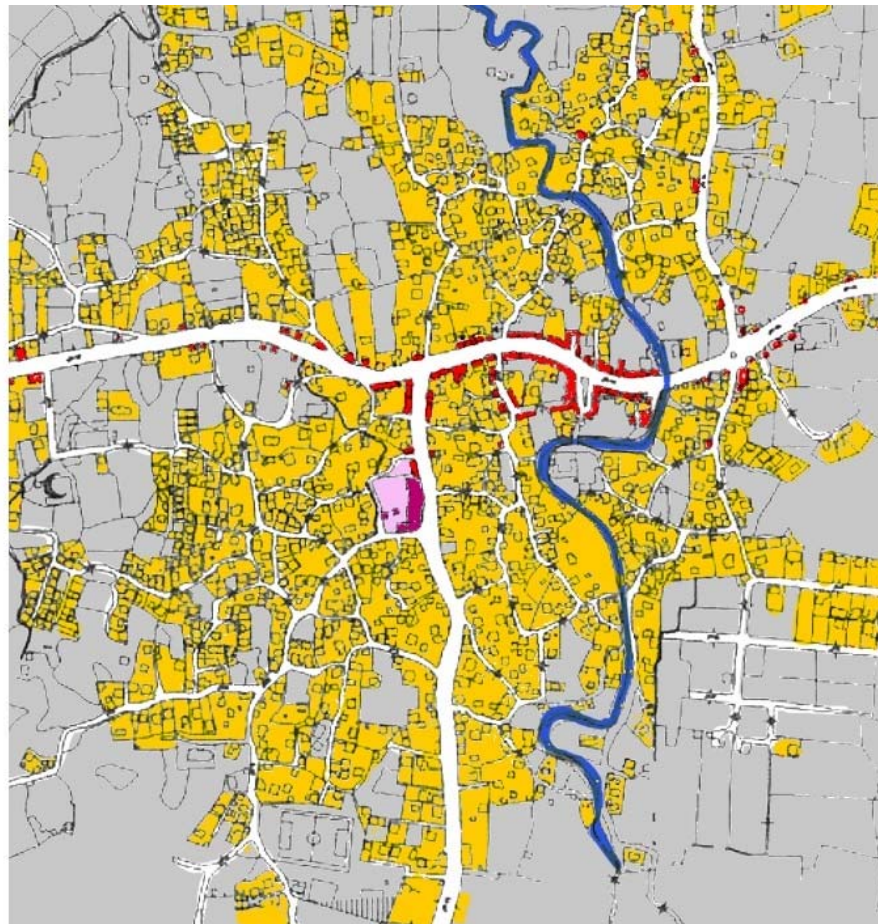
Urban blocks around Agha-Besmel cemetery

- Agha-Besmel cemetery urban block
- The neighborhood linked to Agha-Besmel cemetery
- Urban block
- River

Figure 2-69 Urban blocks around Agha Besmel Cemetery, Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat Shahr (2004)

On one side, the cemetery complex is located next to a main street where there is considerable car and pedestrian traffic. On the other side, its two gates connect the main street to an alley, forming a connection between the main street and the neighborhood through the cemetery which draws many people to cross the cemetery [fig. 2-71].

Moreover, this zone is one of the highest density neighborhoods in the city. The green spaces of the cemetery attract people who need open spaces and consist of an empty space that helps to decrease the density of the neighborhood [fig. 2-72].



Urban functions around Agha-Besmel cemetery

- Residential
- Commercial
- Religious
- Cemetery
- Farms and empty fields
- River

Figure 2-70 Urban functions around Agha Besmel Cemetery, Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat Shahr (2004)

A central complex of religious and cultural functions in a strategic location meets the spiritual needs of local residents in an organized fashion. Every day, people come to pray in the mosque, visit their dead, and visit the respected shrines.



Figure 2-71 Analysis of access around Agha Besmel Cemetery, Illustrated Based on google map and author's observation

Furthermore, a lack of gathering places in this zone of the city has converted the cemetery into an everyday space for locals. Many people spend a part of their day here. In religious ceremonies, the cemetery also works as a space for congregation. Many people from far and near gather in this place to participate in religious and cultural events.

These features have converted Agha Besmel Cemetery into a special place in the city of Sadat Shahr.



Solid and empty plan

- Solid
- Empty space
- Religious

Figure 2-72 Solid and empty plan. Illustrated Based on General plan of Katalom and Sadat Shahr (2004)

3 INSIDE AGHA BESMEL CEMETERY

3.1 Agha Besmel Cemetery

I first visited Agha Besmel Cemetery in 2011. Within the first minutes of my presence there, I found that it is a different experience from my other visits to cemeteries in Tehran or other cities in Iran. I am from southwest of Iran. In my family's culture, the cemetery is a dead place, the place you do not have to go unless a death happens [fig. 3-1]. Usually, houses around a cemetery are cheaper than other places in a city. Living close to a cemetery was disagreeable from my viewpoint. However, being in Agha Besmel Cemetery changed my mindset about cemeteries and their function. I found that a cemetery could be a place of life, even while it embeds death in itself.

It was a Thursday evening. People were coming to visit their dead. As they brought



*Figure 3-1 Imamzadeh Jafar Cemetery in the city of Borojerd in south-west of Iran
Photo by author*

flowers to put on top of graves, the cemetery became a field of flowers. The scene did not look like a ceremony for mourning. It was more like a large family ceremony. People who knew each other shook hands and hugged each other. Groups of people

would gather around a grave and sometimes say some words and pray in front of the headstone. It seemed they were talking with family members who had died and who could not accompany them home. The mourners gathered to spend time with the dead just like in the past, when they used to laugh and cry together. It was not like the horrible image of a cemetery I had had before. It was a place where people performed acts of gratitude to commemorate a person who was once a part of their lives. [fig. 3-2].



*Figure 3-2 A Thursday evening in Agha Besmel Cemetery
Photo by author*

The story of Agha Besmel

I found that some people would visit a shrine in the middle of the cemetery. They would grab the zarih,⁹ the latticework enclosing the tomb, and pray. Sometimes they would change their position, grab the zarih again, look inside the shrine, and say some

⁹ Zarih is an ornate, usually gilded, lattice structure, that encloses a grave in a mosque or Islamic shrine.

words [fig. 3-3]. There was a grave in the shrine visible behind the zarih. I became curious about the imamzadeh buried in the shrine, Agha Besmel.



Figure 3-3 Agha Besmel's shrine
Photo by author

The first things you probably hear about Agha Besmel are his supernatural characteristics. People say he was a gifted man who lived in this neighbourhood. In his life, some miracles happened around him and people attributed them to his specific personality. Interestingly, when I asked about his date of death, nobody knew it, though the date was written in the shrine. He died in 1883, 135 years ago. Some people told me stories they had heard from their grandfathers' mouths.

A young soldier who accompanied his sister to the shrine told me a story his grandfather had once told of Agha Besmel:

The night Agha Besmel died was stormy. People buried his body and lighted a candle for him on top of his grave. Heavy winds were blowing but the candle stayed lit until morning.

An old man at the shrine also narrated the following story:

There was a poor farmer who could not plow his field. He asked Agha Besmel to help him. Agha Besmel gave him the address of a strong cow without owner. He was supposed to take the cow, use it to plow the field, and then return it to the previous address. After that, he was warned not to go back and watch the cow. The farmer found the cow and plowed his field. When he released the cow, he became curious why Agha Besmel told him not to watch it again. So, he came back and found that it was a hog, not cow, that he had used to plow the field. He was horrified by the scene and an away.

I also found that Agha Besmel was a popular poet who wrote a religious poet book about Imam Husayn¹⁰ [fig. 3-4]. The stories people narrated about Agha Besmel and his reputation among his visitors inspired me to learn more about him.

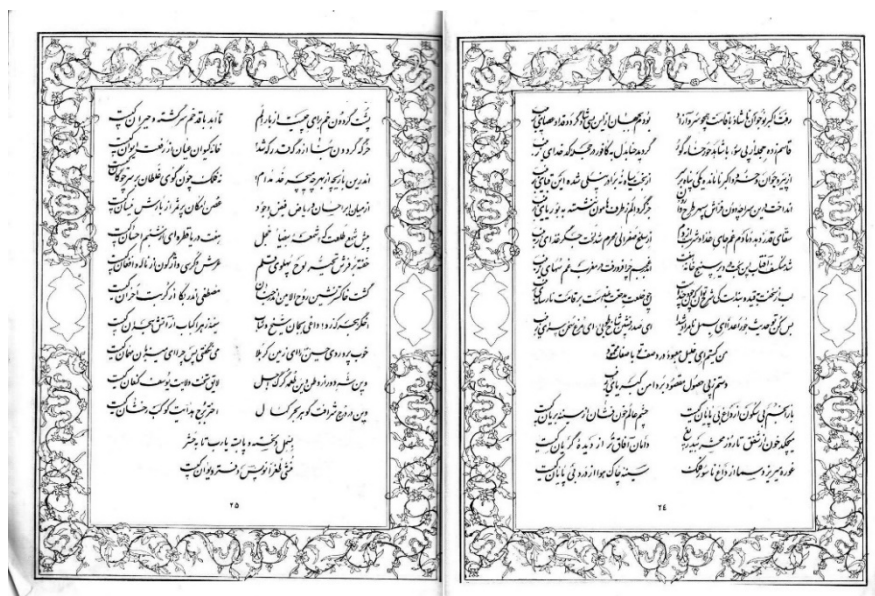


Figure 3-4 Poet book of Agha Besmel, collected by Seyyed Ali Akbar Mir-Hoseini

¹⁰ Husayn is a grandson of the Islamic prophet, Muhamma.

I met Dr. Mir Hosseini,¹¹ who had edited a collection of Agha Besmel's poems and written his biography.

Dr. Mir Hosseini narrated that Agha Besmel, who is one of the grandchildren of Agha Pela Seyyed, studied at an Islamic seminary located in the place of the current cemetery. He had a deep knowledge of Iranian and Islamic literature and had mastered the poetry of other famous Iranian poets, including Sadi, Hafez, and Khaghani. After a while, his mood changed, and he left school to live in austerity. He lived in a small room close to the river and wrote poems. From a literary viewpoint, his poems are strong and well organized. Most of them are elegies for Imam Husayn. During his years of austerity, people observed supernatural things happening around his person and became more attracted to his personality. People would prepare food and drink for him and place them close to his room, but they were not allowed to come into his room.

Dr. Mir Hosseini told me a story he had heard of Agha Besmel through just one intermediary:

Since Agha Besmel lived under austere conditions, he did not wash himself and his body was dirty. The day he died, two friends came to bury him. They poured water on the corpse to make it ready for washing. At that moment, a wave of honey bees came and covered the body. The two friends decided to stop and just

¹¹ PhD in theological studies and professor in Tonekabon Azad University.

watch. After several minutes, the bees left the body and the friends found the body completely clean and washed.

Most of Agha Besmel's reputation in this region originates from folktales common among the people. Grandparents told stories to their children and these unwritten stories have been transmitted to next generation. This granted a majesty to Agha Besmel even among youngsters, which led to the construction of a shrine for him beside his ancestor's grave.

The story of Agha Pela Seyyed

Beside Agha Besmel's shrine lies a larger, more gorgeous shrine belonging to Agha Pela Seyyed. "Pela Seyyed" in the local language means "Great Seyyed."¹² He died in 1534. He was commanded by the Safavid king to promote the Shi'a religion in northern Iran. The current generation of sadats in Sadat Shahr originates from him (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 108). His death happened in a place far from his current grave. To fulfill his testament, he was carried and buried in his current location which was an uninhabited area at that time (Sajadi, 1999: 548). In 1540, a building was constructed around his grave to commemorate him as an influential person in Sadat Shahr (Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 106) [fig. 3-5]. Over the years, the building has been renovated and transformed into a shrine with a zarih enclosing the tomb. Visitors to the grave must

¹² A seyed is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

adhere to some rules. For example, shoes should be taken off when entering the building [fig. 3-6, 3-7].



Figure 3-5 Last shrine of imamzadeh Agha Pela Seyyed before renovation
Source: Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 590



Figure 3-6 Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine, current building
Photo by author



Figure 3-7 The Agha Pela Seyyed's Zarih inside the shrine
Photo by author

Pilgrimage and ‘Ziarat’

Pilgrimage is a journey to a shrine or a place connected to human faith and beliefs in order to change one’s spiritual mood or to purify the soul. There are two forms of pilgrimage in Islam. The first form is the Hajj, or pilgrimage to the Kaaba¹³ in Mecca: “Every Muslim is required to make Hajj at least once in a lifetime, if he or she is physically and financially able. During Hajj a Muslim must perform certain rites and ceremonies, which symbolically represent the experience of Abraham and Hagar (his wife)” (Ebadi, 2016. 71) [fig. 3-8].



Figure 3-8 Pilgrims participating in Haj

Source: <https://alfarah.in/haj>

The second form of pilgrimage is known as Ziarat, which is not an obligation: “The Hajj is considered to be the ‘official’ or ‘normative’ form of Islamic pilgrimage with static rituals, whereas Ziarat is a ‘popular’ or ‘alternative’ form of pilgrimage which is practiced in different forms among people from different cultures” (Ebadi, 2016. 71). Ziarat differs depending on the location and context of the place in question: “Ziarat is

¹³ the house of God

a multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced by geography and local custom as well as by religious tradition. ... Ziarat, in the Islamic context, are not only pilgrimage but also the culture of devotion, of which pilgrimage and saint veneration is an integral part” (Khosronejad, 2012: 13) [fig. 3-9].



*Figure 3-9 A man is doing “Ziarat”
Photo by author*

Ziarat is an important part of Iranian culture. Pilgrims visit religious places to improve their spiritual mood. More than a religious practice, Ziarat is a journey that helps people change their attitude towards life. Religious tourism has a large share of the tourism industry of Iran. Usually, the destination of such tours is an imamzadeh. There is a multiplicity of imamzadehs in Iran. It is estimated that there are about 10,000 to 12,000 imamzadehs and holy shrines in the country, of which less than 4,000 are officially registered. Each year, more than 50 million travellers visit these holy shrines (Ayaz, 2012; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2011).

The presence of the two shrines has dramatically influenced the religious atmosphere in Agha Besmel Cemetery. More people come to visit the shrines than to visit the graves [fig. 3-10]. Observing and talking with pilgrims who come to the cemetery on Ziarat reveals important common traits. First of all, the people who visit Agha Besmel are far more than Agha Pela Seyyed's visitors. Moreover, most pilgrims do not have any precise knowledge of the time of each figure's life and death, or about the family relationship between Agha Besmel and Agha Pela Seyyed. However, most pilgrims do know the supernatural stories of Agha Besmel.



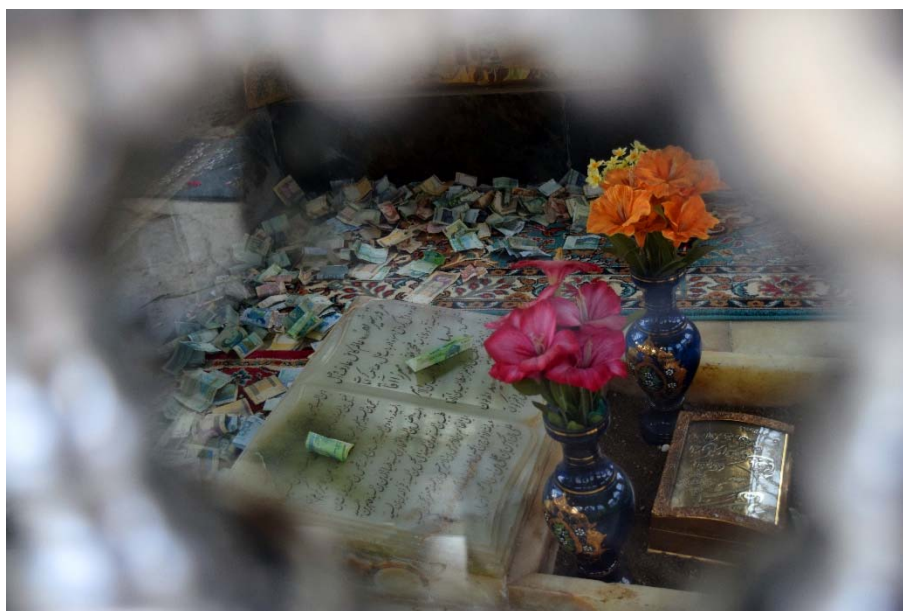
*Figure 3-10 A man is making a pilgrimage to Agha Besmel's shrine
Photo by author*

It seems that for most pilgrims, Agha Besmel is the more familiar and popular figure. One reason behind his reputation is that his death is more recent, with only two generations of distance between him and the people who have heard about his life in the present day. Folktales and poems have also transformed him into a hero in people's minds. Moreover, the architecture of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine forces regulations on visitors, complicating the process of pilgrimage, while the other shrine is more convenient. Most of Agha Besmel's visitors are people crossing the cemetery and they easily have access to the shrine.

‘Nazr’

In Persian, ‘nazr’ means a vow. It is a culture practice in Iran, a charitable gift to an imamzadeh, a religious organization, or the poor in order to receive spiritual rewards from God. Usually, the nazr is conditional. For example, a person performing a nazr may prepare a meal for several poor people after God heals his mother. The devout, especially the elderly, do nazr in order to request something of God. One of the obvious symbols of nazir happens in imamzadehs. Usually shrines have a place to leave money for nazr. In any shrine, you can find money laid out, from the cheapest coins to the most expensive banknotes, depending on the nazr and the wealth of the nazr's owner [fig. 3-11].

There is always a hole on top of the shrine to drop money for nazr [fig. 3-12]. One of the interesting activities to experience while visiting a shrine is watching the nazr money fall into the shrine. It is a great image of people's demands from God.



*Figure 3-11 The monies people have fallen inside the shrine
Photo by author*

I was watching a man who grabbed the frame of Agha Besmel's shrine with his fingers. He put his head on the shrine and prayed. He hung a note of paper money inside the shrine but did not release it. It seemed he wanted to finish his prayer and then release money.

Every day, many people come to drop their nazr in the Agha Besmel and Agha Pela Seyed shrines. Sometimes nazrs are so expensive they cannot be dropped at the shrine. In such cases, people give the nazr to an office that is managed by the clergy beside the shrines. The office gathers money from the shrines and spends them on charities, shrine maintenance, and even new construction related to the shrines and cemetery. Recently, they constructed a hotel for pilgrims who come from far away and have no place to stay. It is a trust between the nazr owner and the religious office that the money will be spent on charitable activities.



*Figure 3-12 A girl is dropping money from the hole in top of the Agha Besmel's shrine
Photo by author*

An old man told me:

Before constructing the shrine of Agha Besmel in this way, it was open and just a grave. There was no place to drop money. People gave their nazrs directly to the poor people of the neighbourhood. But today, they are not supported by nazrs, because the shrine is closed and there is no access to the money except for the clergy. So, people put their nazr in a hole below the shrine, which is open for all. Poor people come and take the money.

Once, I observed this scene:

I was watching people who were in the cemetery. Some were visiting graves and many were praying and visiting the shrines. A poor man came to the Agha Besmel shrine. He did not pay attention to the others. At the bottom of shrine, there was a small box full of soil that had an open glass door. He looked inside the box to search for some money, but there was not any. He left immediately.

‘Soil of Besmel’

Local people believe that the soil of Agha Besmel’s grave, which is called “Soil of Besmel,” has a magical effect. They use the soil for several purposes. For example, some believe it prevents evil in their life or that it has a healing effect. There is a small box with a glass door at the bottom of Agha Bsmel’s shrine. Every day, people take a bit soil from there to release themselves from disease and negative energies.

I was watching this scene:

A woman came and took some soil from Agha Besmel's shrine. A janitor was sweeping the shrine. The woman started talking to the janitor about the soil. She explained that her husband was so sick and she wanted to use this to heal him. She asked how to apply the soil. The janitor explained the soil should be wrapped in a small fabric and tied to the point of the body that has pain. Then the janitor lifted her hands up and started to pray for healing of the sick man [fig. 3-13].



*Figure 3-13 A woman is taking Besmel's soil
Photo by author*

I also talked with Dr. Mir Hosseini about Besmel's soil and its ability to destroy evil. He told me:

When I was child, bedbugs attacked to my paternal house. It was weird because there were no bedbugs in this area. They cannot live here. Anyway, they interrupted our life that summer. I remember that my father went and took some of Besmel's soil. He spread the soil around the house and rooms. After a while, all the bedbugs left. After that, we did not see them.

There are many stories about Besmel's soil. Many people talked to me about using the soil to protect their house from snakes or to protect vegetable fields from hogs. It seems that even educated people have a deep belief in the magical effect of Agha Besmel's presence in their neighbourhood.

Mosques and worshippers

There are two mosques in the cemetery. The smaller mosque, which is called Balla Masjed, or Abo Taleb, is the oldest.

Dr. Mir Hosseini mentioned:

Many years ago, there was a small mosque in which Agha Pela Seyyed prayed. In 1893, 359 years after his death, a benevolent man named Agha Seyyed Abo Taleb built a new mosque in the place of old mosque and people called the mosque by his name [fig. 3-14]. His grave is located on the porch of the mosque.



*Figure 3-14 Abo Taleb mosque
Photo by author*

Due to population growth and an increasing attendance of worshippers, the mosque did not have enough space. Death ceremonies held in the mosque had many participants and its small space was not conducive. A new mosque named Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque was built on the eastern side of cemetery. Before construction, there was a smaller mosque nearby. They demolished that mosque and constructed the new one, which is larger and modern [fig. 3-15, 3-16].

Since the cemetery authorities want to keep the small mosque active, morning prayers, which draws fewer worshippers, are held in it. The platforms around Abo Taleb Mosque also attract many people who spend part of the day at the cemetery. Every day, they come to the mosque, find a place to sit, and look for someone to chat with [fig. 3-17].



Figure 3-15 Agha Pela Seyyed mosque
Photo by author



Figure 3-16 Worshippers in Agha Pela Seyyed mosque
Photo by author



*Figure 3-17 people sitting the platform of Abo Taleb mosque
Photo by author*

The martyrs' cemetery

In the southwest corner of cemetery, there is an area separated by a colonnade and some steps. This semi-private cemetery is allocated to martyrs of the 1980 war between Iran and Iraq. Several Iranian flags and a monumental column highlight the sacred

characteristics of the space. Most of the martyrs buried were young people who lived in this neighborhood and volunteered to fight in defence of Iran's border against the enemy. Their bodies were buried here in their neighborhood so they could be close to their families.

In *Neither East nor West: One Woman's Journey Through the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Christiane Bird, an American writer who spent part of her childhood in Iran, describes modern-day life in Iran. Her book is a combination of a reminiscence, travelogue, and historical account, and it includes interviews with Iranians from all walks of life. In the fifth chapter, called "One Who Yearns for Death Never Dies," she talks about Iran-Iraq War: "When the war began in September 1980 ... the United States and the Soviet Union both supported Iraq against Iran in the belief that it was the lesser of the two evils, and the war dragged on for [eight] years, finally ending in August 1988 with a negotiated cease-fire that both sides claimed as victory. Most Iranians refer to the long, drawn-out tragedy as the 'imposed war,' forced on them by Iraq and the world powers" (2001: 131). Many people, including young boys, died during the eight years of war. Anywhere between 220,000 and 750,000 Iranians were killed, and "nearly every family lost a son, father, uncle, or brother" (Bird, 2001: 123).

Agha Besmel cemetery commemorates the painful experience of war. Every day, people who pass the cemetery stop in front of the martyrs and pray for them [fig. 3-18, 3-19]. In the small community of Sadat Shahr, most people lost a family member or a friend in the war.



*Figure 3-18 A woman visiting grave of a martyr
Photo by author*



*Figure 3-19 A boy visiting grave of a martyr
Photo by author*

I found that several years ago, some changes in the martyrs' cemetery transformed it into a more appropriate place to commemorate the dear martyrs of the city. A young soldier whose uncle was a Martyr who was buried there told me:

The cemetery of martyrs was on a lower level about ten years ago (in 2008) and each grave had an aluminium box marker including a photo of grave owner. Then the authorities of the cemetery decided to heighten the level and remove the aluminum boxes. Afterwards, a colonnade and an architectural monument were designed and constructed.

Putting a box on top of martyrs' graves became a trend in cemeteries after the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War. Many cemeteries allotted to martyrs throughout Iran look the same because of this style of design, which does not have a visual attraction from a designers' viewpoint. Christiane Bird describes her experience of a visit to Tehran's martyrs' cemetery: "Most of the martyrs' graves were marked with awkward aluminum and glass boxes mounted on spindly poles. Inside the boxes hung fading pictures of the dead, some only 15 or 16 years old and many looking exceedingly handsome, with brushed-back hair, shining eyes, and the expectant eagerness of the young [fig. 3-20]. Beside their photos lay a few personal effects—a plastic comb, an inexpensive watch, a dusty copy of the Qur'an. ... In another, photographs depicted the deceased's bloody body parts. In a third lay a toy gun. Many of the boxes were framed like dollhouses on the inside, with miniature lace curtains and plastic flowers; from the outside hung the flag of the Islamic Republic, its fabric tattered and its colors leached by the sun" (2001: 131).



Figure 3-20 Aluminum and glass boxes in Martyrs' cemetery of Tehran
Source: <https://www.farsnews.com>

3.2 Death ceremonies in the cemetery

A report of a funeral

On May 26th, 2018, early on a Saturday morning, I was informed that one of the elders of Sadat Shahr community had passed away. Usually, people are notified about a neighbor's death by the speakers installed in the minarets¹⁴ of the mosque so that all the neighborhood can hear them [fig. 3-21].

When I arrived, a group of people was carrying the coffin in the main street toward the cemetery. Men were in front and women were following them from behind. The body was covered with a black fabric and placed within a Persian rug. Several young

¹⁴ Minaret is a distinctive architectural structure akin to a tower and typically found adjacent to mosques.



*Figure 3-21 speakers installed in Minaret to inform people of Azan or death news
Photo by author*

people were carrying the coffin in their shoulders. People were praying and saying “lā ilāha illā allāh”¹⁵ [fig. 3-22].

¹⁵ “lā ilāha illā allāh” is one of major pillars of the Muslim faith which is said while carrying a dead.



*Figure 3-22 People were carrying the coffin in the main street
Photo by author*



*Figure 3-23 Rows of prayers in front of Agha Pela Seyyed mosque
Photo by author*

The procession crossed the street beside the cemetery and entered it. In front of the mosque, they put the coffin down and stayed while the mullah¹⁶ joined them. They arranged some rows for prayers [fig. 3-23].

After prayers, the young people picked the coffin up again and carried it toward a dug grave [fig. 3-24]. Before arriving, they put the coffin down again, recited some prayers in Arabic, picked it up again, and kept walking. This process was repeated several times.



Figure 3-24 The dug grave
Photo by author

In Islamic thought, the dead should not be sent directly into the grave because of the horror of grave. The dead person has a fear of the grave and needs time to prepare for burial: “When carrying a dead person toward the grave, do not lower it into the grave suddenly because the grave has many terrors. ... Put it down close to the grave and give it a break. Then push it gradually toward grave to get it ready for the funeral” (Ibn, 1987: 306).

¹⁶ clergy in Islam

The young people carried the coffin around the shrines as a symbolic farewell to Agha Besmel and Agha Pela Seyyed [fig. 3-25]. At last, at the grave, the men said “lā ilāha illā allāh” and asked others to pray for dead, while the women cried. The body was buried and the grave covered with soil and stones.

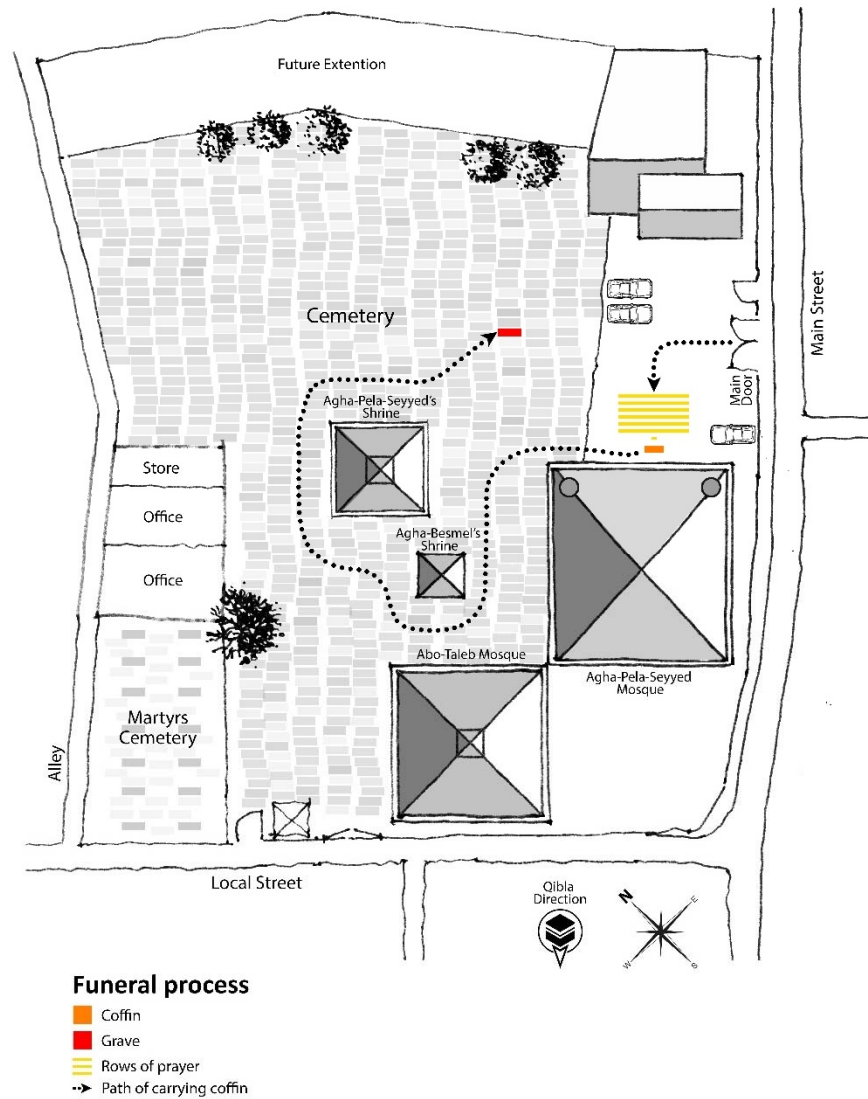


Figure 3-25 Funeral process in Agha Besmel Cemetery
Illustrated by author

One important thing about funerals in Islam is the direction of grave. A body must be buried with the dead person's right shoulder facing the earth and their face turned toward the Qibla.¹⁷ This means the length of the grave should be perpendicular to the Qibla. In most of cities of Iran, the direction of the Qibla is almost southwest. The graves must point northeast. Therefore, in Iran, if you stand in front of a grave, the Qibla is to your left [fig. 3-25].

Islam defines other elaborate principles to follow for funerals. For example, Christiane Bird describes a burial practice that happened in a cemetery in Tehran: “[The] body [was] carried in on a simple stretcher and wrapped in a white burial shroud on which were written verses of the Qur’an; coffins are not used in Islam.¹⁸ Chanting ‘La elaha ella Ahhah’—There is no God but one God—the man laid him in the earth while the women wailed, their voices thin and eerie in the desolate landscape. Rose water from ordinary glass jars was sprinkled over the body, on whose chest was pinned what looked like an identity card. Then a man knelt beside the grave and began shaking the deceased while reciting verses of the Qur’an—a ritual meant to comfort him. Other men laid cement bricks on top of the body and covered them with mud and earth. The wailing and chanting continued, quieter and yet more insistent than before, and as it did, the women seemed to become one, joining together in their grief—and perhaps

¹⁷ The Qibla is the direction that should be faced when a Muslim prays during Ṣalat. It is fixed on the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca.

¹⁸ She means burying with coffin is not allowed in Islam.

lessening their pain. They have an ability to empathize deeply with one another that we westerners don't, I thought, a bit enviously and sadly" (2001: 136).

After the funeral I witnessed, mourners came close to the grave and said a 'Fatehe'¹⁹ for the dead person then left the grave for the close family of the deceased. First, men left, and then women. Close family sat beside the grave for a while. Then they left.

Some people visit the graves of their dead often. It is a tradition in Iran. After they participate in a burial practice, there are future occasions for visiting the graves of the dear deceased and commemorating them.

After the funeral

In Islam, there are several death ceremonies that follow the death of a person. The purpose of these ceremonies is to empathize with the family of the dead and also to ask mercy for the dead from God: "In Islam, mourners commemorate the newly dead with ceremonies on the third, seventh, and fortieth days after their passing. Everyone dresses in black for the funeral and the close family wears black for the succeeding forty days [fig. 3-26]. Traditionally, a widow remains dressed in mourning for a year, at which point the deceased's family comes to her in a ritualized ceremony, bearing bolts of bright cloth" (Bird, 2001: 136).

¹⁹ ○A Sura of Quran people read for their deceased.

A woman talked to me about the traditional death ceremonies that happen in Sadat Shahr:

On the first day of death, extended family gathers in the house of the deceased. They accompany the immediate family of the dead and express their condolences to them. Usually, aunts cook the food for lunch and dinner in order to comfort the immediate family. In some cities in the south of Iran, neighbors prepare food for the family of the dead for forty days. They show their sympathy in this way.



Figure 3-26 Family of a new deceased has worn black and pray for him
Photo by author

Three days after a death, people gather in Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque. An obituary is prepared and installed on the board of the mosque beforehand to inform people about the time of ceremony. Usually, the immediate family stands in front of the doors of the mosque to welcome guests. Men sit on the ground floor and women on the second floor. A eulogist who knows the deceased says some good words about their life. Then

a mullah preaches about death or a related subject in terms of Islam for the audience. He recites moral poems and advises the audience about the necessity of attention to life after death. A kitchen in the back of the mosque prepares tea, dates, and sometimes halva²⁰ for guests. The ceremony usually takes two hours and finishes with a recitation of a pilgrimage letter, known as “Khatm al-Qur’an.” People shake hands with the family and request mercy for the dead from God before leaving.

Some similar ceremonies happen on the seventh and fortieth days after the deceased’s passing. The family also holds an anniversary of death ceremony for the deceased to show their respect and their memory of them after one year.

Ta’zieh in the cemetery

One of the largest yearly gatherings in Agha Besmel Cemetery is the Ta’zieh of Imam Husayn. During Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar, the death ceremony of Imam Husayn is held in the cemetery. Each city of Iran has a gathering place for this event. Agha Besmel Cemetery attracts many people from near and far to participate in the passion play and show their devotion to Husayn.

One of the former residents of Sadat Shahr explained his experience of the Ta’zieh in the cemetery to me. He said:

I was a child when my mother carried me to watch the Ta’zieh about fifty years ago. That time the cemetery did not have specific gate and it was probably

²⁰ Halva is a sweet dessert usually served in death ceremony and cemetery.

enclosed with barbed wire. The street beside the cemetery was a dirt road. Men and women arranged a circle around the Ta'zieh actors. There were two groups of actors: the 'Shemr',²¹ who played the roles of killers, and the 'Imam Husayn' group, who were martyrs.

In recent years, participation in the Ta'zieh has increased, since the authorities have made changes to the cemetery to facilitate the ceremony. Before, the graves were about 10 to 30 centimeters high off the ground, which did not allow people to move easily during peak days, especially during the Ta'zieh. Carts used to carry speakers and equipment could not move over the graves. In response, the graves were flattened, making an even ground on which to hold the ceremonies. Cemetery authorities also built platforms around Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine for audiences to sit and watch the Ta'zieh. In order to keep graves below the platforms, they carved the names of the



*Figure 3-27 carved names of old graves which are covered by new extension on the platform
Photo by author*

²¹ He is known as the man who beheaded Husayn at the Battle of Karbala.

buried, along with other information from the headstones, on the platform directly above their graves [fig. 3-27].

Four years ago, on November 2nd, 2014, I participated in the Ta'zieh at the Agha Besmel Cemetery:

Many people gathered to watch the Ta'zieh. I could hardly move because of the overcrowded cemetery [fig. 3-28]. Different mourning groups entered from the



Figure 3-28 Participation in Tazieh in Agha Besmel Cemetery
Source: public archive of Sadat Shahr

main gate located on the east side. They beat their chests with their hands. This is a symbol to show sadness and is a practice especially designated for the mourning of Shi'a Imams. The mourners marched around the cemetery and then left from another door by the east gate [fig. 3-31].

At noon, the largest group of mourners, called “Sadat Shahr” came and played the Ta’zieh. They torched some tents set up in the middle of the cemetery to depict the tragic event that happened almost 1350 years ago[fig. 3-29].



*Figure 3-29 Tents after fire
Source: public archive of Sadat Shahr*



*Figure 3-30 Participation in Sham e Ghariban
Source: public archive of Sadat Shahr*

After the Ta'zieh, the crowd left for their homes until nightfall. They came back with candles lit in their hands. They mourned and sang a sad song about Husayn while walking around Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine. This night ceremony is called "Sham-e Ghariban" [fig. 3-30].

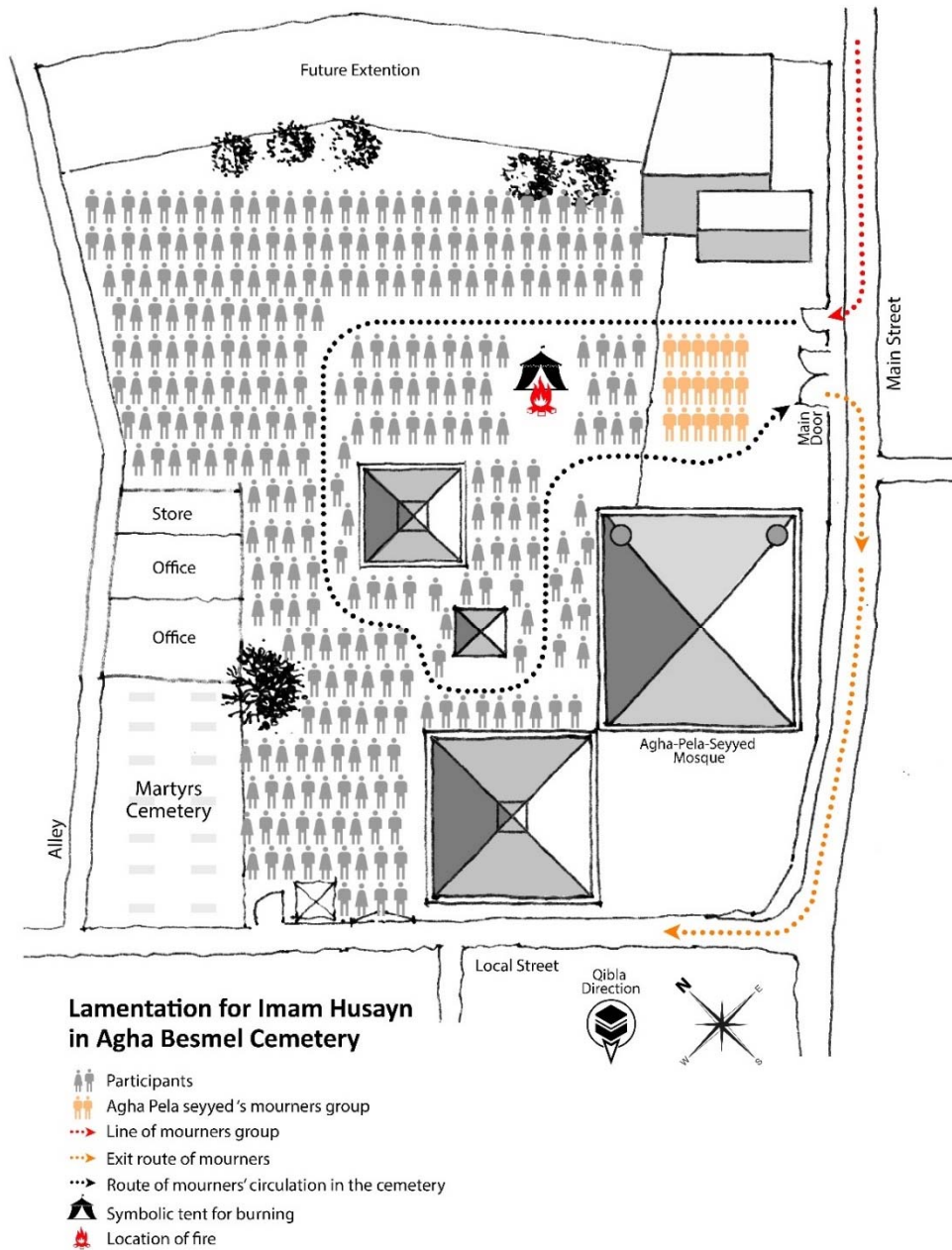


Figure 3-31 The process of lamentation for imam Husayn in Agha Besmel Cemetery
Illustrated by author

3.3 Visiting the cemetery

Visiting time

Islam specifies certain instructions for visiting a cemetery. Islamic texts indicate that the best time to visit a cemetery is Thursday evening before sunset and at midnight before sunrise on Saturday and Friday. Visiting the deceased at these times spiritually rejuvenates visitors (Majlisi, 2017: 256). It is also said that visiting graves at night should be discouraged because souls are visiting God at that time and they should not be interrupted.

In Iran, people usually visit their dead on Thursday evenings before sunset. On Friday mornings, cemeteries are also crowded. In addition to religious customs about visiting the cemetery on special days of the week, the Iranian weekend, which is on Thursday and Friday, influences attendance. This does not mean that people avoid the



*Figure 3-32 A woman visit a grave in midweek
Photo by author*

cemetery on other days of the week, but during midweek, the cemeteries are usually quiet [fig. 3-32].

The last Thursday of the Iranian year is a specific day for visiting the deceased. People go to share the last moments of the almost finished year with those who were once a part of their families. On this day, cemeteries are crowded and full of flowers [fig. 3-33]. People also spend the first moments of New Year's Day beside their dead. The beginning of the New Year is an important time for Iranians. A traditional belief says that your spiritual mood at this special moment affects your mood for the whole year. People want to remember how their dead lived in the best moments of their lives, especially at the beginning of the New Year.



*Figure 3-33 Agha Besmel Cemetery a day after New Year
Photo by author*

Behaviors in the cemetery

Different cultures prescribe different behaviours in cemeteries. According to Iranian beliefs, the cemetery is a sacred, religious space. Most of the old cemeteries have imamzadehs, which increases the holiness of the space. Iranians also believe that the souls of the dead should rest in peace, so they respect them by not making noise in the cemetery. Walking on graves is not permitted, unless the graves are so densely packed that there is no space between them.

Visiting a grave usually consists of cleaning dust from the gravestone by hand—at least from the name of the deceased—or washing it. Sometimes, mourners bring flowers for their dead and place them on top of the grave [fig. 3-34].



Figure 3-34 A visitor made a heart shape with flower for a grave
Photo by author

People stand or sit beside the grave and say the fatehe, a recitation of the first chapter of the Qur'an, in order to pray for soul of the dead. They usually just look at the grave without speaking and read the words on the gravestone which contain information about the dead and a moral poem carved in stone. Sometimes mourners cry while remembering the deceased, especially when the death has happened recently [fig. 3-35].



*Figure 3-35 A family are saying Fatehe and crying for a deceased who recently died.
Photo by author*

3.4 Material culture of Agha Besmel Cemetery

The site of Agha Besmel Cemetery is almost rectangular with a 65-meter width and 85-meter length. The area of the cemetery is almost 5,000 square meters, and it contains about 1,300 gravestones. Since Islamic regulations state that after forty years, another dead person may be buried above an older grave, the number of dead is certainly more than 1,300, but it cannot be estimated. The cemetery is located within the fabric of a

residential neighbourhood in the city of Sadat Shar. Three sides of the cemetery border two streets and an alley, while the last side is adjacent to a row of houses [fig. 3-36].



*Figure 3-36 Agha Besmel Cemetery in urban fabric
Illustrated by author*

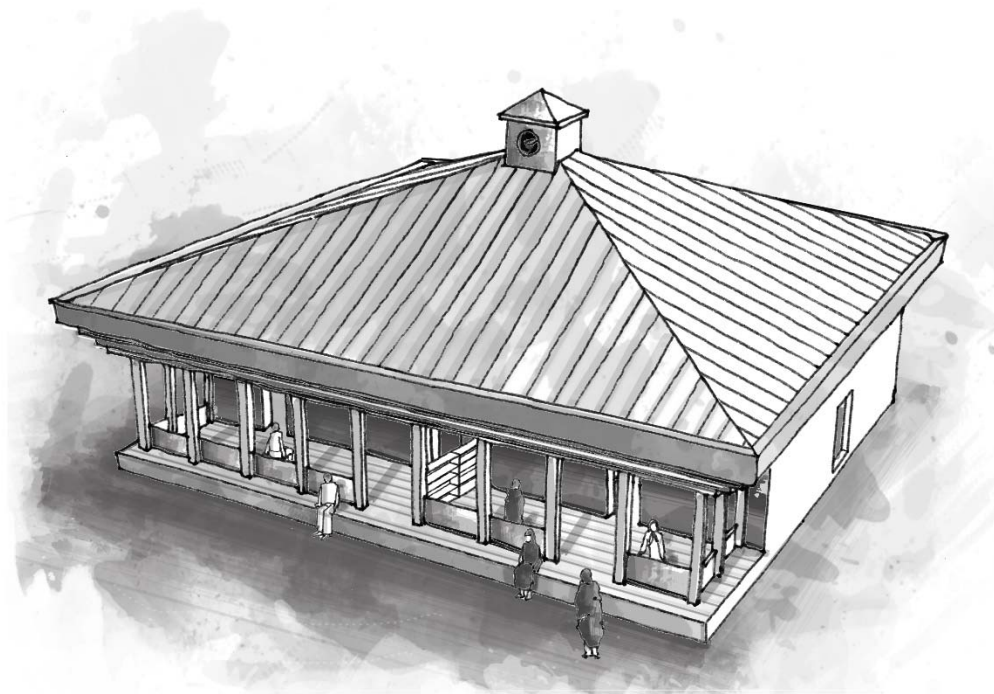
Abo Taleb Mosque

Several buildings stand on the site of cemetery, including two shrines, an old mosque, a new mosque, some offices, and an unfinished hotel for pilgrims.

Among the existing buildings, the old mosque which is called Bala Masjed, or the mosque of Abo Taleb, is the oldest building. It is a sample of the vernacular architecture

of northern Iran. We can trace the patterns of vernacular architecture found in housing in the design of the mosque, though religious specifications were also a priority of the architect.

The roof has a four-sided sloped form, similar to the original pattern of houses in this neighbourhood. It protects the mosque from heavy rainfall and even snow during cold seasons. On top of roof, a cubic form contains speakers to project the azan²² to dwellings in this neighbourhood. The top of the cubic form is also protected by a small four-sided roof. The covering material of the roof is galvanized metal sheets, which are resistant against rust in the humid climate of Ramsar [fig. 3-37, 3-38].



*Figure 3-37 Vernacular architecture of Abo Taleb mosque
Illustrated by author*

²² Azan or adhan is the Islamic call to worship, recited by the muezzin at prescribed times of the day.

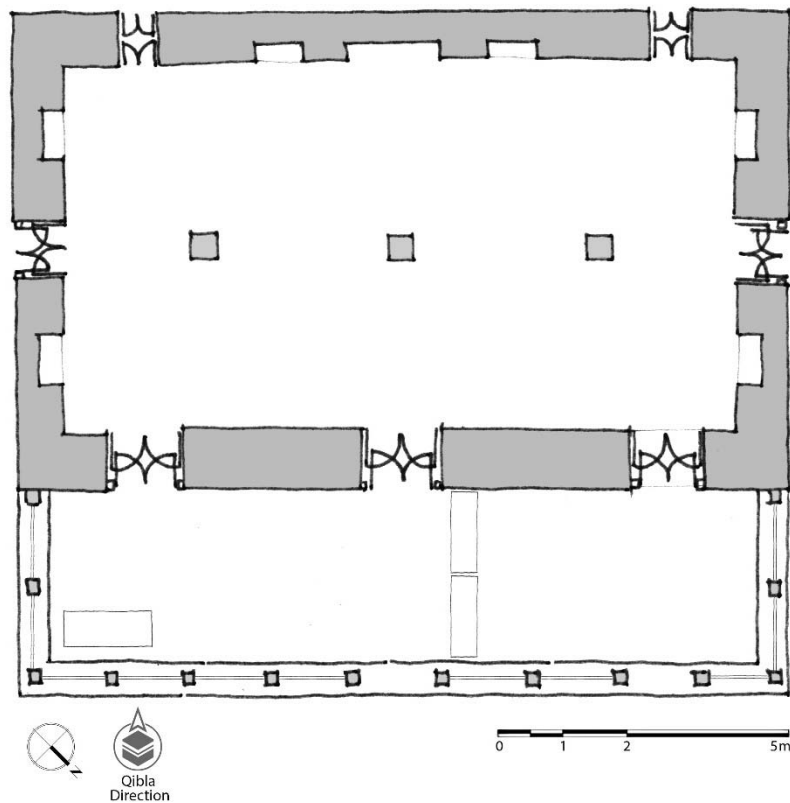


Figure 3-38 Architectural plan of Abo Taleb mosque
Illustrated by author

Mr. Saat Chi, who has been the muezzin²³ of the mosque for about seventy years, told me:

The roof of the mosque used to be covered in pottery shingles. After renovation, they changed it to its existing condition.

It seems that pottery shingles were difficult to maintain. Also, at the time of the construction of the mosque in 1893, galvanized metal sheets were not accessible on this scale. During its recent renovation, the cemetery authorities decided to change the

²³ Muezzin is the person appointed at a mosque to lead and recite the call to prayer for every event of prayer and worship in the mosque.

roof material to galvanized sheets for durability and maintenance, although pottery shingles, a domestic material, are more appropriate to the vernacular architecture of this region.

The aesthetics of the architecture of Abo Taleb Mosque is revealed in its artifacts. Over the years, the religious sphere encouraged many artists and craftsmen in the area to devote themselves and their art to create lasting objects of value for the mosque. Most of them are elaborately designed wooden artifacts. All of the structural features, including columns and beams, were constructed from wood. All openings in the structure are woodcraft designed and made for this special place [fig. 3-39].



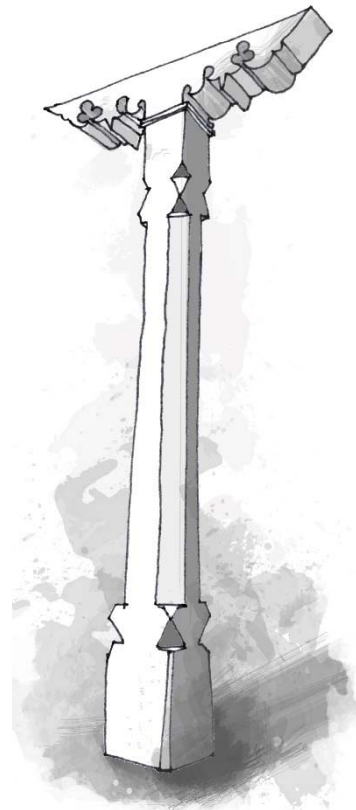
Figure 3-39 Inside Abo Taleb mosque
Photo by author

Inside the mosque, three wooden columns bear the weight of the roof. The cross-section of each column is square at the base and capital but octagonal in the middle, which is decorative [fig. 3-40]. The middle column of these three has more decorative

elements and consists of parallel wooden grooves that become smaller from the bottom to the top [fig. 3-41]. Its design is similar to the fluted columns of Canterbury Cathedral (Harris, 1983: 219) [fig. 3-42].

Each column has an extruding section of carved wood as a capital. The length of the capital is aligned with the direction of the main beams [fig. 3-43].

The design of the mosque's openings is one of the best representations of vernacular architecture. Each opening



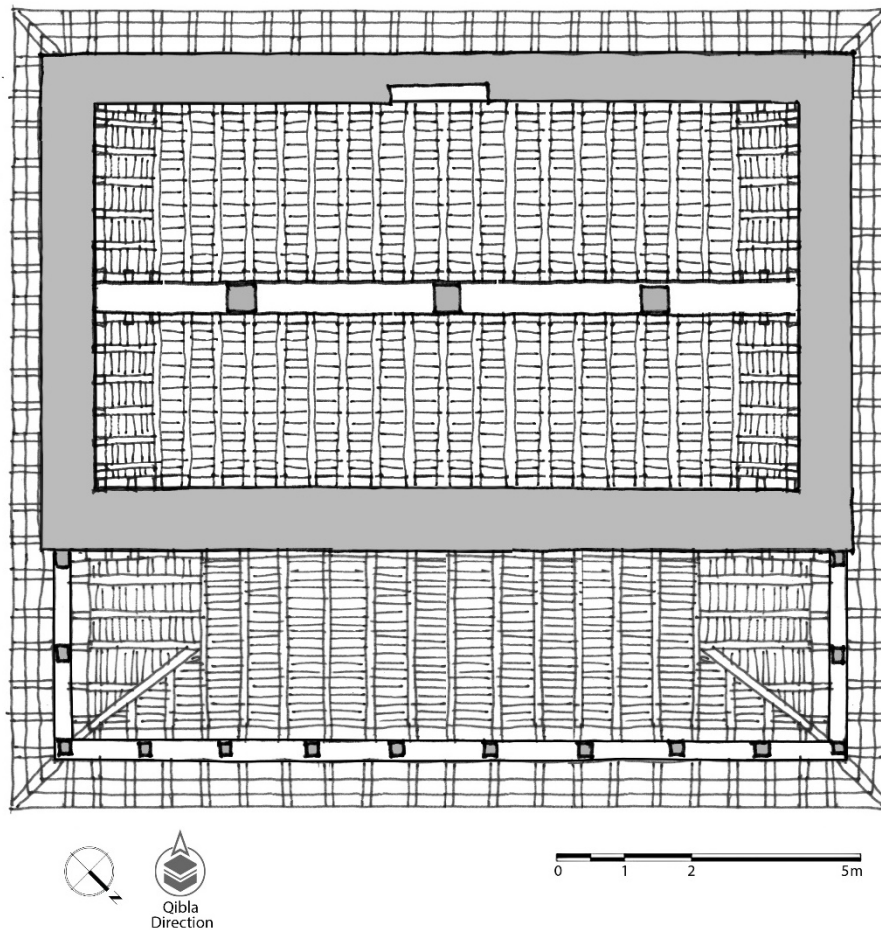
*Figure 3-40 wooden columns inside Abo Taleb mosque
Illustrated by author*



*Figure 3-42 parallel wooden grooves
on the surface of middle column
Illustrated by author*



*Figure 3-41 fluted columns of
Canterbury cathedral
Source: Harris, 1983: 219*



*Figure 3-43 Reflected ceiling plan of Abo Taleb mosque
Illustrated by author*

consists two layers, one closed and one semi-closed [fig. 3-44]. During cold seasons, the closed openings keep the inside of the mosque warm, while the semi-closed openings allow air to circulate in the space during temperate seasons. The semi-closed openings were designed based on the geometry of the mashrabiya [fig. 3-45]. A mashrabiya is an Arabic window enclosed with carved wood latticework. The Islamic geometry of the mashrabiya makes its visual effect magical in shadow and light. More practically, it also “supplies the building with good air movement to reduce high

temperatures” (Özsavaş & Alothman, 2018: 329). This concept has been applied in the design of the windows of Abo Taleb Mosque.

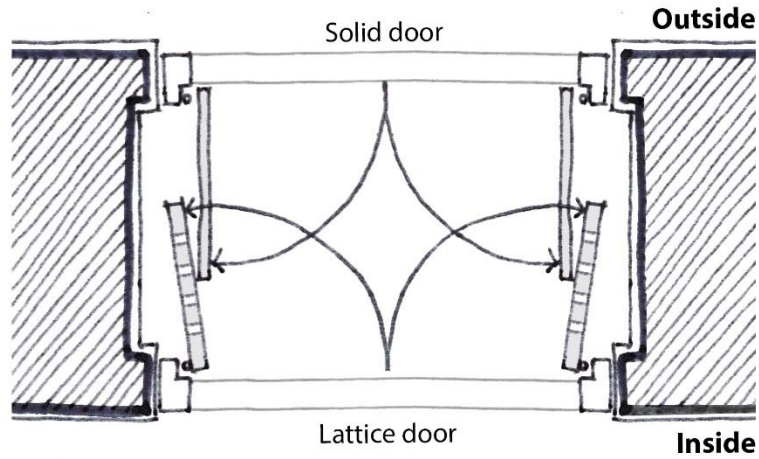


Figure 3-44 Plan of two layers openings of Abo Taleb mosque
Illustrated by author

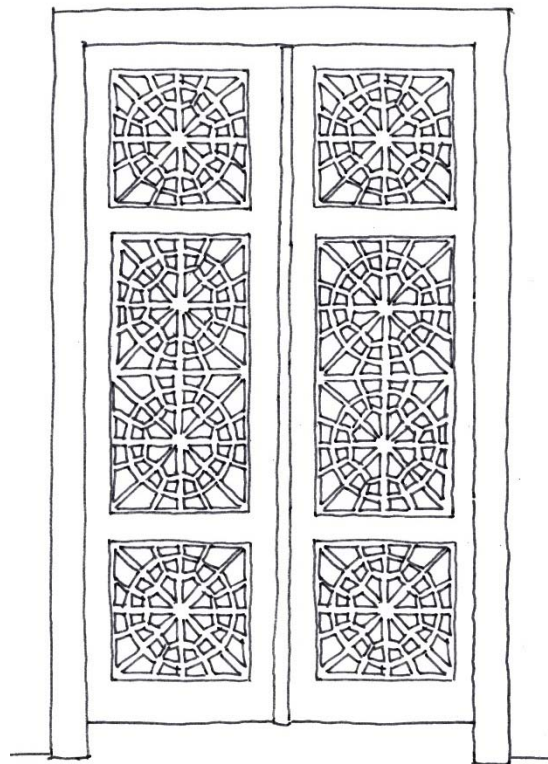
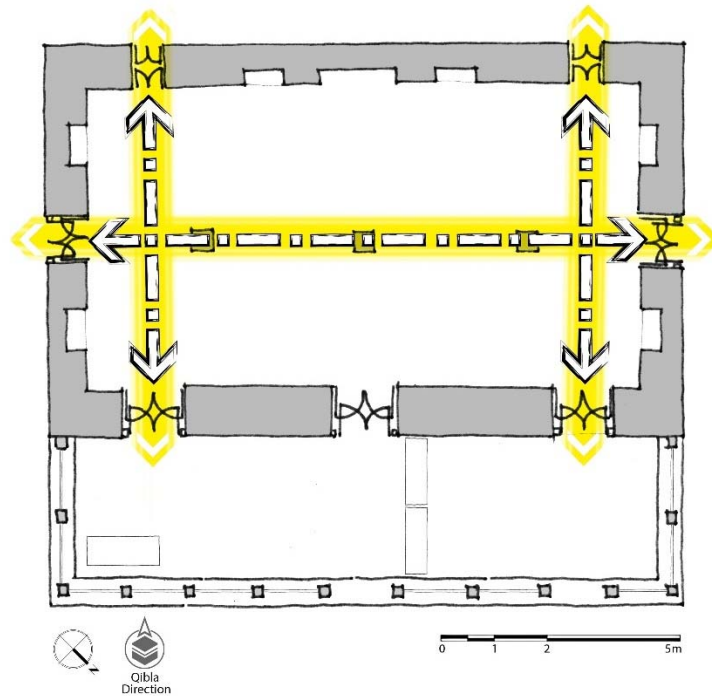


Figure 3-45 Elevation of two layers openings of Abo Taleb mosque
Illustrated by author

The application of vernacular housing architecture patterns to the religious architecture of the mosque can also be seen in the use of face-to-face openings. Three pairs of openings are located directly in front of each other to create maximum airflow inside the mosque [fig. 3-46].



*Figure 3-46 Face to face openings in order to enhance airflow inside Abo Taleb mosque
Illustrated by author*

There is one exception to this climatic design which shows the superiority of religious specifications to the vernacular design. In front of main door, there is no window but a mihrab, a semicircular niche in the wall of the mosque. The mihrab is a significant element of religious architecture: “a mihrab in a mosque is oriented toward the Kaaba, and it is the place where the leader in prayer stands and recites the daily prayers. The niche reflects his incantation of the Divine Word to the congregation, who

then repeat the words after him. The Divine Words which reverberate from the niche are symbol of the Presence of God” (Bakhtiar, 1976: 47).



*Figure 3-47 Mihrab in Abo Taleb mosque
Photo by author*

The mihrab is usually located in the axis of mosque so it is impossible to install an opening in it. Placing a closed niche in front of main door of Abo Taleb Mosque demonstrates that religious values were a design priority in this religious context [fig. 3-47]. Moreover, a plurality of doors has created an opportunity to allocate separate doors for men and women, which is a necessity when entering a religious space [fig. 3-48].

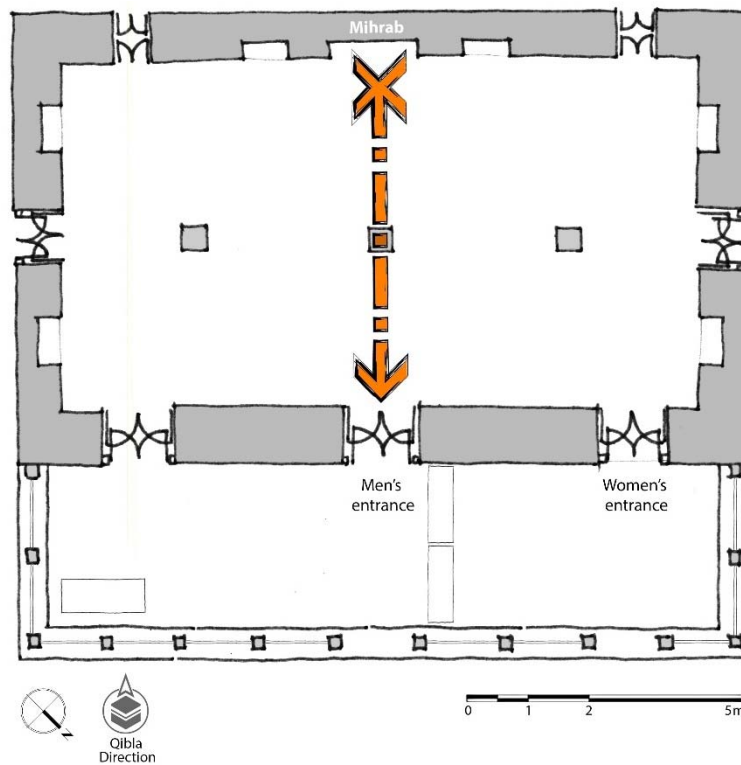


Figure 3-48 Mihrab in front of the main door
Illustrated by author

One of the main factors in the religious architecture of the mosque and cemetery is the Qibla direction. In Islamic architecture, indicating the Qibla direction so it can be found easily is a major principle of design. Usually, either the width or length of a space is parallel with the Qibla. The length of cemetery graves should also be perpendicular to the Qibla. These features of Islamic architecture affected the vernacular architecture of northern Iran in the Agha Besmel Cemetery. Since the width of Abo Taleb Mosque is parallel with the Qibla, all its structure was influenced by this specification [fig. 3-49].

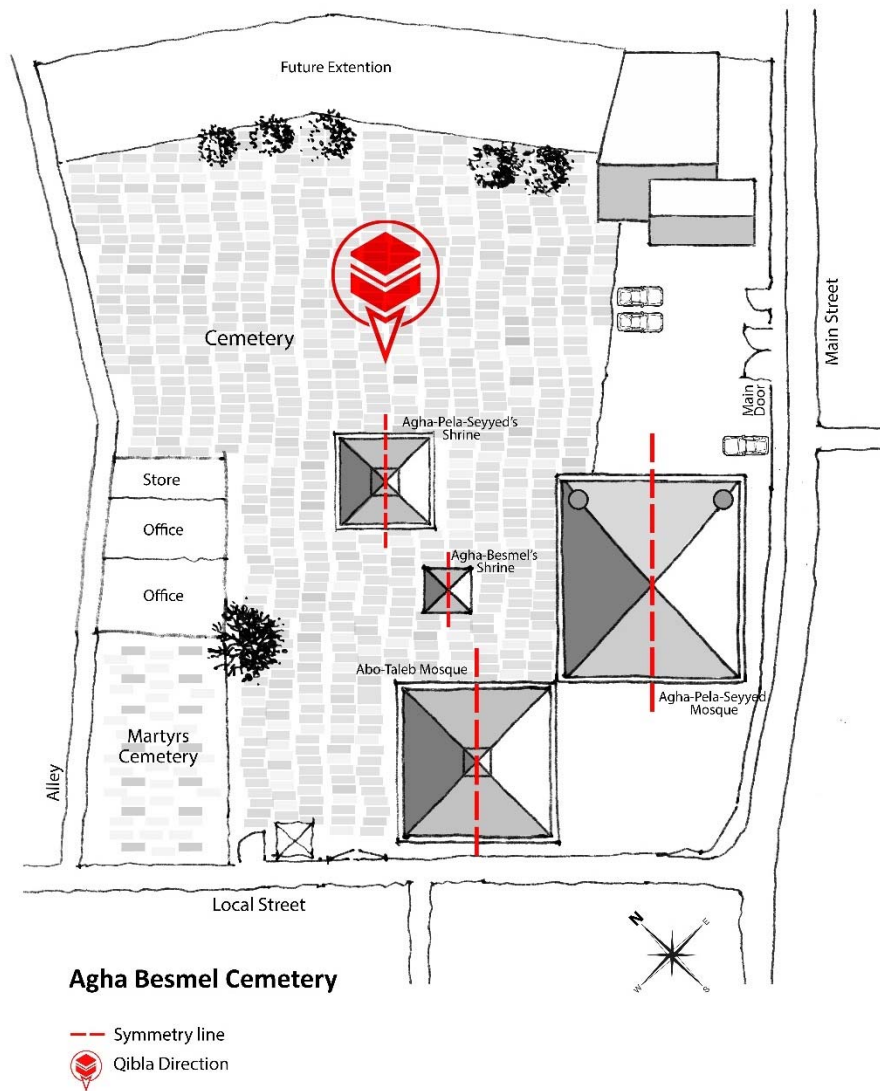
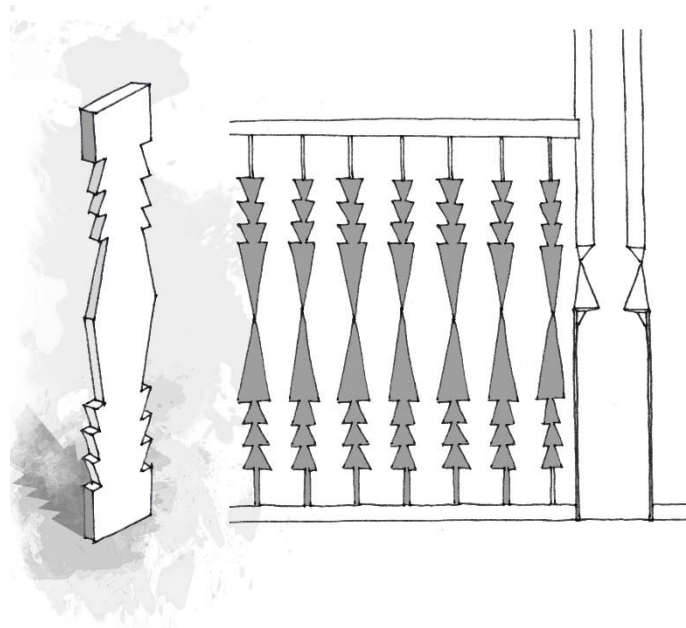


Figure 3-49 Impact of Qibla direction on orientation of graves and buildings in Agha Besmel Cemetery
Illustrated by author

The vernacular architecture of the mosque can also be seen in the allocation of a part of its space to a porch. The long porch in front of the mosque creates a shady space that enjoys better airflow in summer. Artistic woodworks in the porch create a sense of traditional regional architecture and make the space more enjoyable. A row of narrow wooden columns in front of the porch bears the weight of roof. Carved wooden

columns and capitals beside elegant wooden fences and multi-layered beams on the edge of the roof make a special visual effect revealing the originality of the vernacular architecture of Abo Taleb Mosque [fig. 3-50, 3-51].



*Figure 3-50 wooden fences in front of porch of Abo Taleb Mosque
Illustrated by author*



*Figure 3-51 Wooden structure of porch of Abo Taleb Mosque
Photo by author*

In front of the porch, some steps were devised as an appropriate place for people to sit and enjoy the view of the cemetery and shrines [fig. 3-52].



Figure 3-52 Shady space of steps in front of the porch
Photo by author

Aside from the wooden structure itself, there is a wooden minbar inside the mosque. A minbar is a pulpit in a mosque where the prayer leader stands to deliver sermons. Usually, craftsmen show their devotion to Islam by making a minbar and offering it to religious spaces. Abo Taleb Mosque's minbar has intricate latticework and its craftsman designed a small chamber inside it to be used as a closet [fig. 3-53].



*Figure 3-53 Wooden minbar in Abo Taleb Mosque
Photo by author*

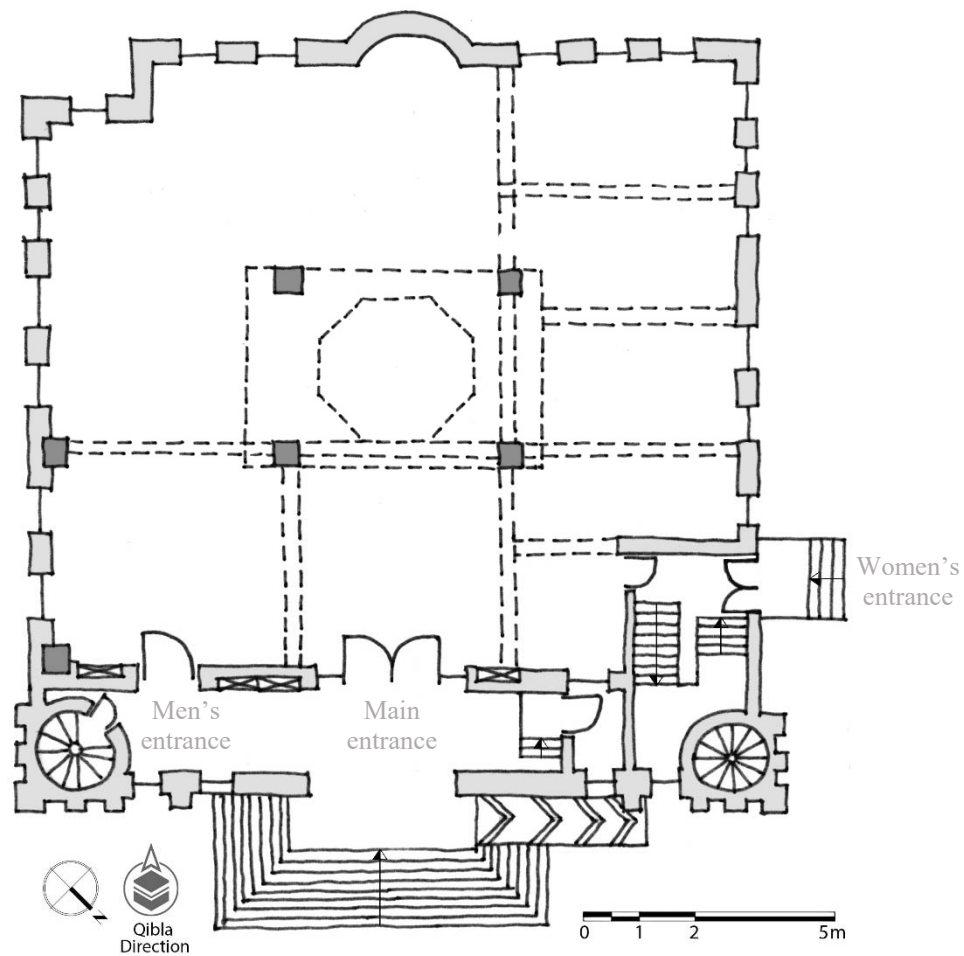
Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque

Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque is located in the south of the cemetery and is used for death ceremonies and prayers that have many participants. The architecture of mosque is influenced by religious principles more than vernacular architecture [fig. 3-54].



Figure 3-54 A bird view of Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque
Photo by author

Since this mosque is newer than the other mosque and the shrines around it, technological advancement has affected its climatic design. The main elements of vernacular architecture in this building are the four-sided sloped roof to conduct rainfall and snow, as well as the multiple face-to-face windows. The high ceiling also makes for better air circulation in the mosque. Several mechanical fans and air conditioners create thermal comfort inside the building [fig. 3-55].



*Figure 3-55 Architectural plan of Agha Pella Seyyed mosque
Illustrated by author*

A mezzanine floor in one section of the mosque is allotted for women [fig. 3-56]. Women's access is from the western side of the building, while the entrance for men is located within the main façade in the north side of building. Since the main door is closed for unknown reasons, men enter from a small door beside the main door. As in other religious buildings, the direction of the Qibla is crucial to the design of the mosque. The plan is almost symmetric, with the symmetry line crossing from the



Figure 3-56 Inside Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque
Photo by author

mihrab to the main door [fig. 3-57]. The main door is a great wooden artifact that has been brought from Pakistan [fig. 3-58]. It contains many engravings of Qur’anic verses and the names of God. Since entering in religious spaces with shoes is prohibited in Islam, especially in mosques, there are shoe boxes in the entrance for people to leave their shoes [fig. 3-59]. This practice has become a part of Iranian culture. Taking shoes off when arriving at an Iranian house shows the guest’s respect to the host.



Figure 3-57 Mihrab in Agha Pella Seyyed mosque
Photo by author



Figure 3-58 Main door of Agha Pella Seyyed mosque
Photo by author



*Figure 3-59 shoe boxes in the entrance of Agha Pela Seyyed mosque
Photo by author*

In the middle of the mosque, four tall and narrow columns bear the weight of roof and divide the space of mosque [fig. 3-60]. There are also several hidden columns in the walls. The columns are made of metal but covered in wood to give a sense of the region's vernacular architecture. The ceiling is covered in the same wood, where designers used the wood's parallel grooves to make an interesting pattern.

A charming spatial relation connects the ground floor and mezzanine. However, the edge of the mezzanine is covered with a curtain to disconnect the visual relation between men and women in these spaces [fig. 3-60]. In the space of cemetery, there is no such gender-based separation. It seems that this type of control is exerted only in closed spaces. In many religious spaces, the separation of men from women is a major problem which leads to the destruction of the quality of space. During some periods of year, Ramadan²⁴, for example, women are allowed to use the ground floor to pray. At such times, a part of the ground floor is covered with a curtain to separate men from women. This separation leads to the blocking of the face-to-face windows and interrupts air circulation. Thus, mechanical air conditioners were installed to create thermal comfort inside the mosque [fig. 3-61, 3-62]. This is one point where the power of religious beliefs exceeds the importance of vernacular architecture.



Figure 3-60 Curtains disconnect the visual relation between men and women
Photo by author

²⁴ Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to Muhammad according to Islamic belief.

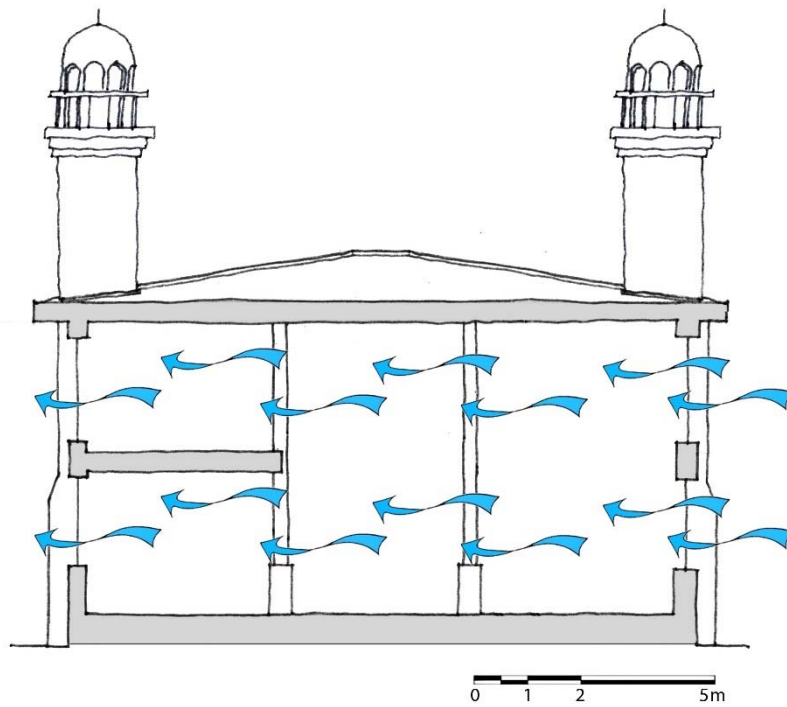


Figure 3-61 Face-to-face windows to make airflow inside the Agha Pella Seyyed mosque
Illustrated by author

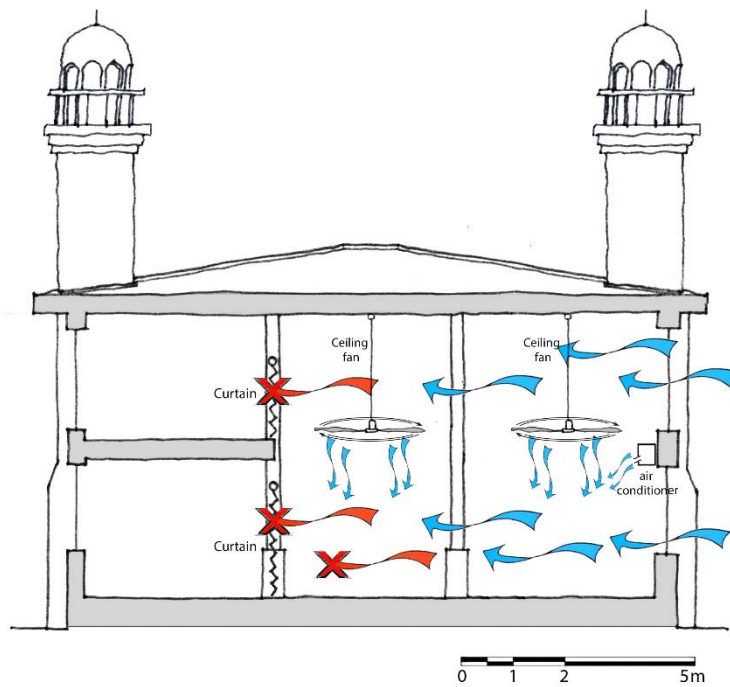


Figure 3-62 Mechanical air conditioners to create thermal comfort inside the mosque after installing curtains
Illustrated by author

One of the main elements of mosque architecture is the minaret. Beyond its function, the minaret has a symbolic role as a sign of the importance of religious spaces. People distinguish a mosque by its minaret and dome. Shi'a mosques traditionally have two minarets, while Sunni mosques have one. Many years ago, before the introduction of sound technologies, the minaret was a high place for muezzins to say the azan. During that time, the structural function of the minaret was to restrain the lateral load of the building. The minaret used to be more functional than it is today, when it is used more as a formal element beside a mosque. Today, speakers are installed on top of minarets to convey the azan or other messages to people who live around the mosque [fig. 3-63].



*Figure 3-63 Minaret of Agha Pela Seyyed mosque
Photo by author*

Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque has a wooden minbar fashioned with intricate woodwork [fig. 3-64]. It was offered by donors whose names were carved on the

minbar. Offering gifts to religious spaces is done with the purpose of asking God for the forgiveness of sins.

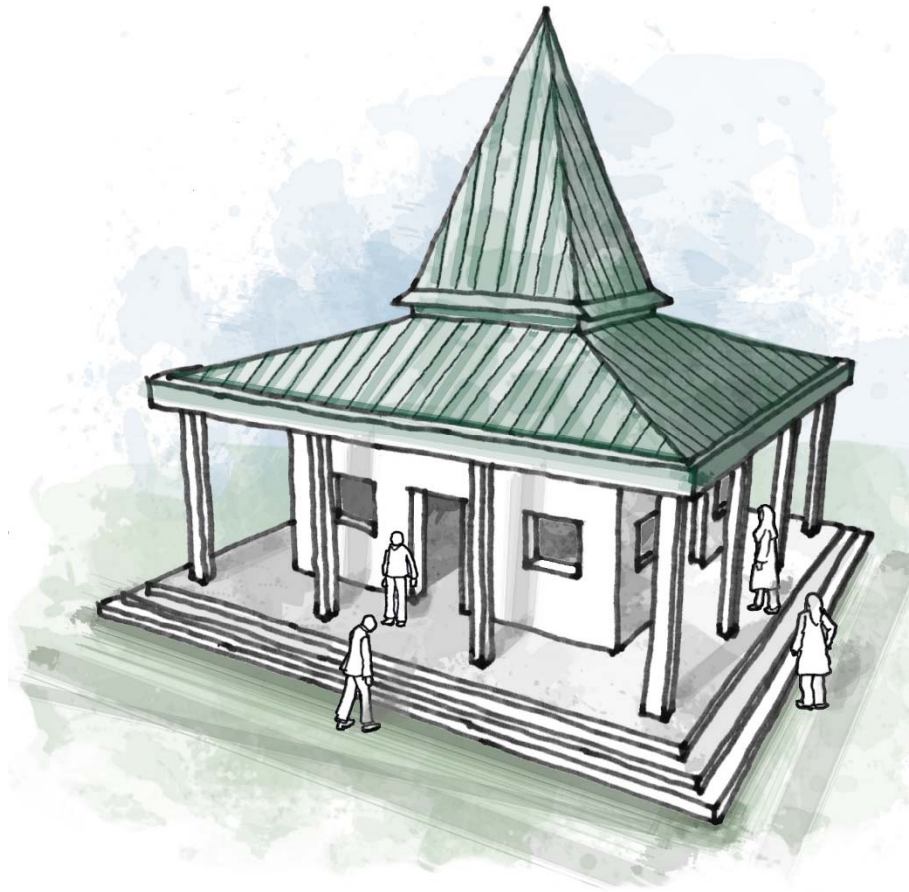


*Figure 3-64 Minbar inside Agha Pela Seyyed mosque
Photo by author*

Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine

In Iranian culture, a shrine is a sacred place dedicated to the grave of an Imam, an imamzadeh, a martyr, or a sacred person. It has a symbolic meaning in terms of the distance between material life and spiritual life.

Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine is located in the middle of the cemetery. Its plan is a square placed in the middle of a square porch. Twelve columns bear the edge of the roof, covers an area larger than the shrine. The combination of porch, columns, and main building originated from the vernacular architecture of northern Iran. Several face-to-face windows are also a major sign of this region's climatic design, although two of those openings are closed by glass [fig. 3-65, 3-66].



*Figure 3-65 Architecture of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine
Illustrated by author*

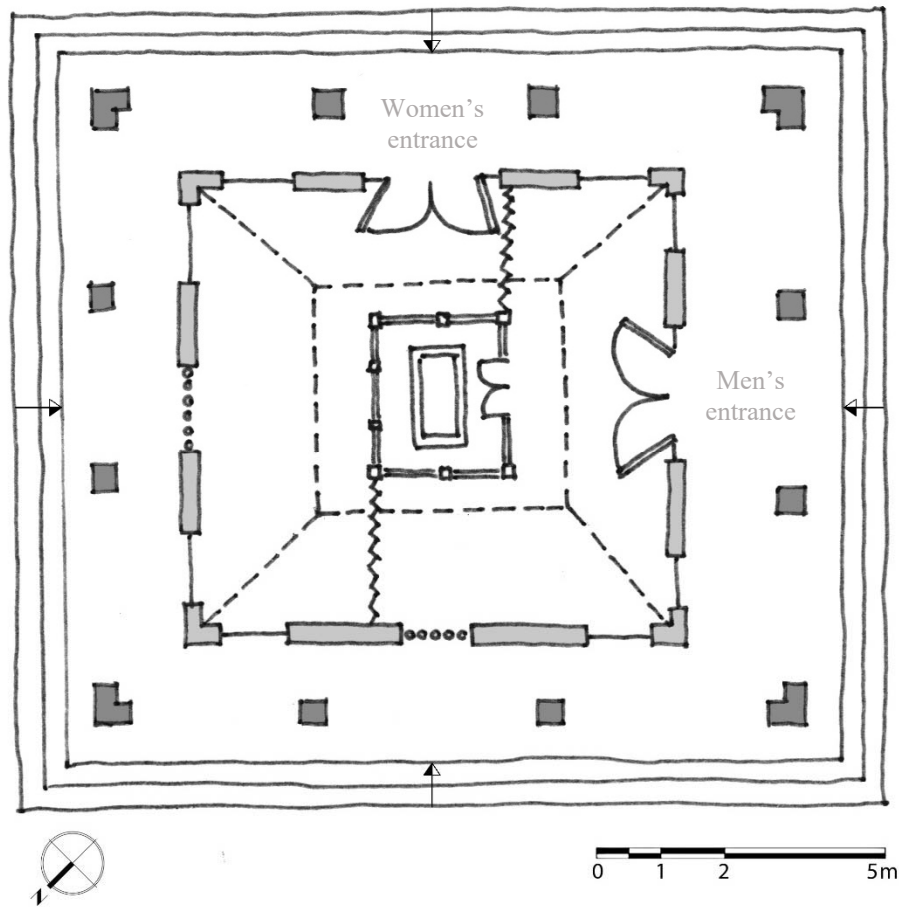


Figure 3-66 Architectural plan of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine
Illustrated by author

Based on a historical photo of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine, the new building has been designed based on the original shrine, which had a porch around the main building and roof-supporting columns. The roof was a simple, four-sided sloped roof that seems to have been covered in metal sheets [fig. 3-67]. Dr. Mir Hosseini and Mr. Saat Chi told me that for a period of time, the roof was covered by pottery shingles. The new roof has kept the style of the old four-sided sloped roof, but it is a combination of two roofs with different slopes [fig. 3-68].



Figure 3-67 Original building of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine
Source: Ghorban Samimi, 2016: 590



Figure 3-68 Existing building of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine
Photo by author

The shrine has two separate doors for men and women. The interior space of the shrine is separated by book shelves and curtains [fig. 3-66].

A woman told me:

A few years ago, there was no separation between men and women pilgrims of Agha Pella Seyyed. It was just one door.

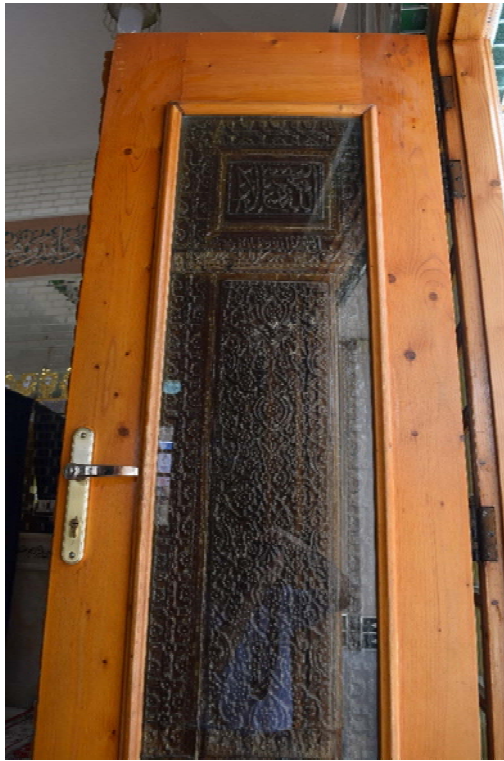
I consulted old photos that showed the main door on the southern side of the shrine in front of Agha Besmel's shrine [fig. 3-69].



*Figure 3-69 An old photo shows that Agha Pella Seyyed's shrine had a closed window instead of existing door in east side.
Photo by Heler Shamsi*

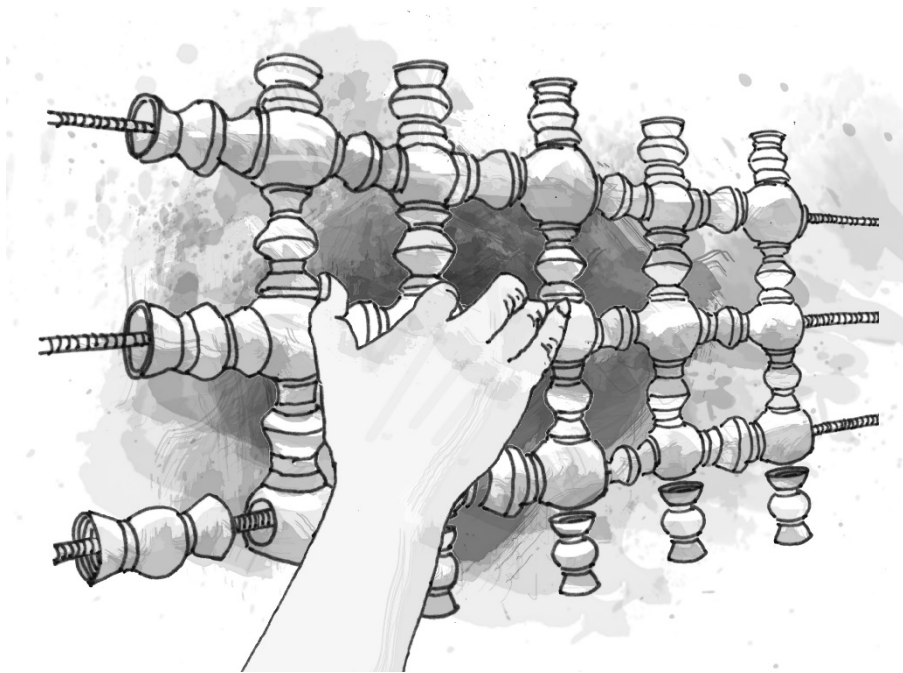
It seems that the increasing number of pilgrims forced the authorities to separate the space of the shrine and devise another door for women.

There is a historical door in the shrine was constructed in 1329, 205 years before Agha Pella Seyyed's death. It belonged to another imamzadeh but was re-installed in this shrine. It has been placed in between two layers of glass, preserving it against weather conditions [fig. 3-70].

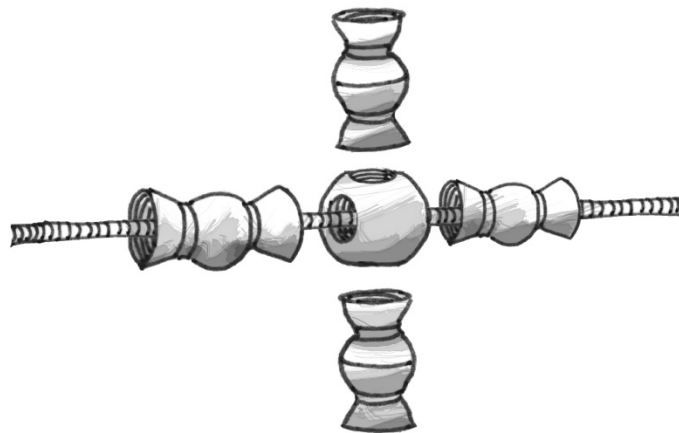


*Figure 3-70 historical door of Agha Pella Seyyed's shrine
Photo by author*

Agha Pella Seyyed's shrine contains a valuable zarih. A zarih is a lattice structure that encloses a grave and separates it from people who want to visit the grave. The zarih at the shrine is a metal box with many components, some structural, others decorative. The structure contains a frame and some beads and union nuts which are called "mohre-masoreh" in Persian. Mohre-masorehs make a strong, non-solid structure so pilgrims can see inside the zarih. The mohre-masoreh may be grabbed by hand while visit a shrine, an Iranian custom [fig. 3-71, 3-72].



*Figure 3-71 Pilgrims usually grab the structure of zarih and pray
Illustrated by author*



*Figure 3-72 Detail of connection between Mohre and Masorehs in zarih
Illustrated by author*

The building of zarihs in Iran dates back to the seventh century. At that time, many wars were fought between the different branches of Islam. Most zarihs were destroyed during those years. In the Safavid dynasty, craftsmen made zarihs because the official religion of Iran changed to Shi'a and people could freely build tombs and

shrines for imamzadehs. The first zarihs were made of wood, but because of moisture and inappropriate weather conditions, they were not long-lasting. Wood was also vulnerable to enemies who might want to destroy a shrine. During the Qajar dynasty, the zarih makers changed the material to steel. They would cover the steel with silver and gold to decorate it (Documentary of 'Metal window to Heaven'; Salehi, Dadvar, Maki-Nejad, 2016). The surface of the golden and silver sheets were carved and designed with abstract flowers, plant motifs, and verses from the Qur'an. Usually a crownlike ornament containing the names of God is placed on top of the zarih. At each corner, a golden flower pot is installed.

A zarih is a masterpiece made by several craftsmen and artists, including metalworkers, gold makers, engravers, calligraphers, miniaturists, and others. More so than its structural function, the spiritual function of the zarih is attractive for pilgrims. It creates a barrier like that between a lover and a beloved which makes the atmosphere inside the shrine more magical.

The zarih of Agha Pela Seyyed was constructed in Isfahan and transported to Sadat Shahr. Isfahan is a city of art and artists where most of the historical zarihs were made. Isfahanian artists even construct zarihs for other Islamic countries, such as Iraq. Usually, the cost of making a zarih is paid for by charities. These donations are part of the culture in Iran. Ordinary people who love imamzadehs donate to provide a part of the costs. For example, women may donate their golden bracelets and necklaces to imamzadehs in order to make a zarih [fig. 3-73, 3-74, 3-75, 3-76].



Figure 3-73 Zarih of Agha Pella Seyyed's shrine
Photo by author



Figure 3-74 Zarih of Agha Pella Seyyed's shrine
Photo by author



Figure 3-75 Golden details of Agha Pella Seyyed's zarih
Photo by author



Figure 3-76 Golden details of Agha Pella Seyyed's zarih
Photo by author

Another function of the zarih is the hole on top of the structure, through which the devout can drop money or valuables. People use these holes to pay their nazrs and ask something of God or a deceased person. In fact, the zarih is where the nazr money is kept. There is an always locked door on one side of zarih. At special times, clergy members open the door to collect the money and clean the dust inside the zarih. In order to keep the money safe, there is a pane of glass behind the latticework of the zarih to make the grave and money visible but not accessible. To further mark the space as sacred, the zarih is lit up with green lamps. In Islamic culture, green light is a sign of sacred places and is used in shrines and places associated with death.

Mr. Saat Chi told me:

The first zarih of Agha Pela Seyyed was wooden. It was an antique zarih. Then authorities ordered a new zarih made of steel and gold and transported the old one to another imamzadeh in a rural area.

It seems that the increasing number of pilgrims and the increasing revenue from nazrs convinced the authorities to change the zarih.

Furthermore, the gravestone of the imamzadeh is a unique artifact that has been made by the hand of a great stone carver. Usually, the gravestone of an imamzadeh is made of white marble, which becomes magical under the green light [fig. 3-77, 3-8].

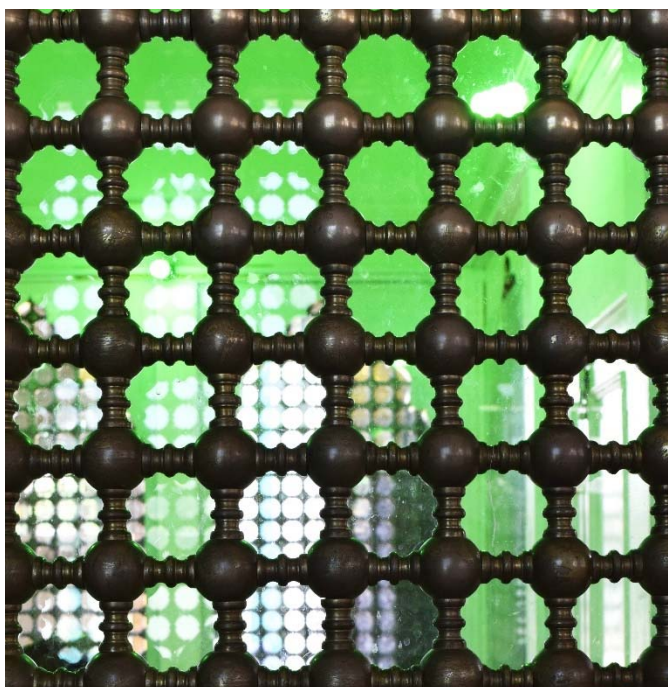


Figure 3-77 Green light inside the zarih
Photo by author

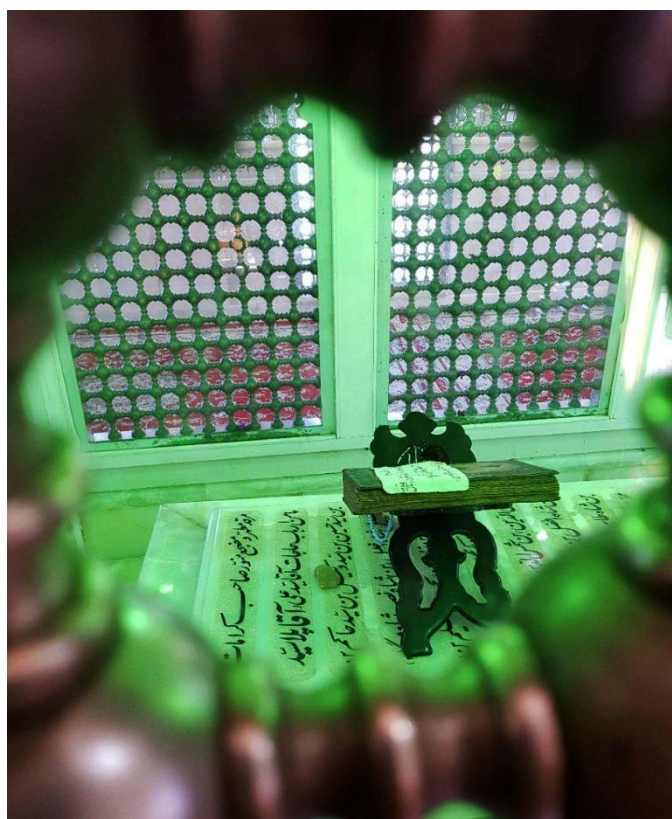


Figure 3-78 Green light inside the zarih
Photo by author

Agha Besmel's shrine

There is a small shrine to the south of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine. It belongs to Agha Besmel, who has a great reputation among people who live in the city of Sadat Shahr. Every day, many pilgrims come from far and near to visit this shrine and ask their demands of him [fig. 3-79]. Although this shrine is smaller than the shrine of Agha Pela Seyyed, the number of pilgrims who visit this shrine is far greater than the other shrine. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, the type of architecture used in Agha Besmel's shrine is different from the other shrine. Secondly, there are no mandatory rules here. For example, there is no special dress required for women and no separation between men and women. People can visit without taking off their shoes. Finally, supernatural stories about Agha Besmel have made him popular and famous in the area. People want to see the grave of this wonderful man. Some remember stories their grandparents told them about Agha Besmel.



*Figure 3-79 Agha Besmel's shrine in the middle of cemetery
Photo by author*

The architecture of the shrine is different from other examples in the area. Usually, a zarih is installed inside a shrine, but here the shrine itself is a zarih. A few years ago, it was converted into a zarih in an open space, with certain components of the zarih being used to close off the windows.

Mr. Saat Chi told me:

Agha Besmel did not have zarih. At first, it was just a grave that had a cap over it to protect it from rain.

Afterwards, authorities constructed a simple building with sloped roof around the grave to protect pilgrims from the rain [fig. 3-80].

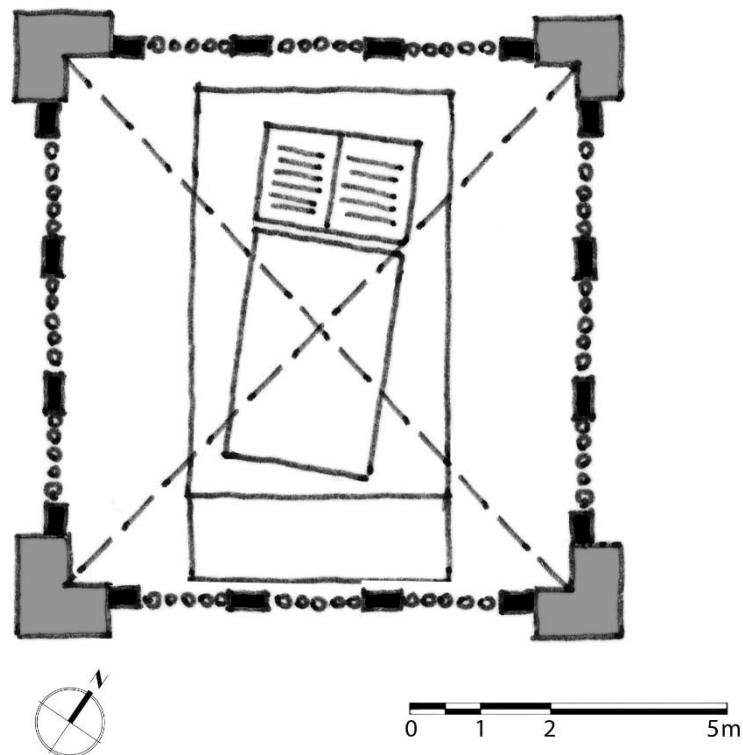


Figure 3-80 Agha Besmel's shrine, the time it did not have zarih
Photo by Heler Shamsi

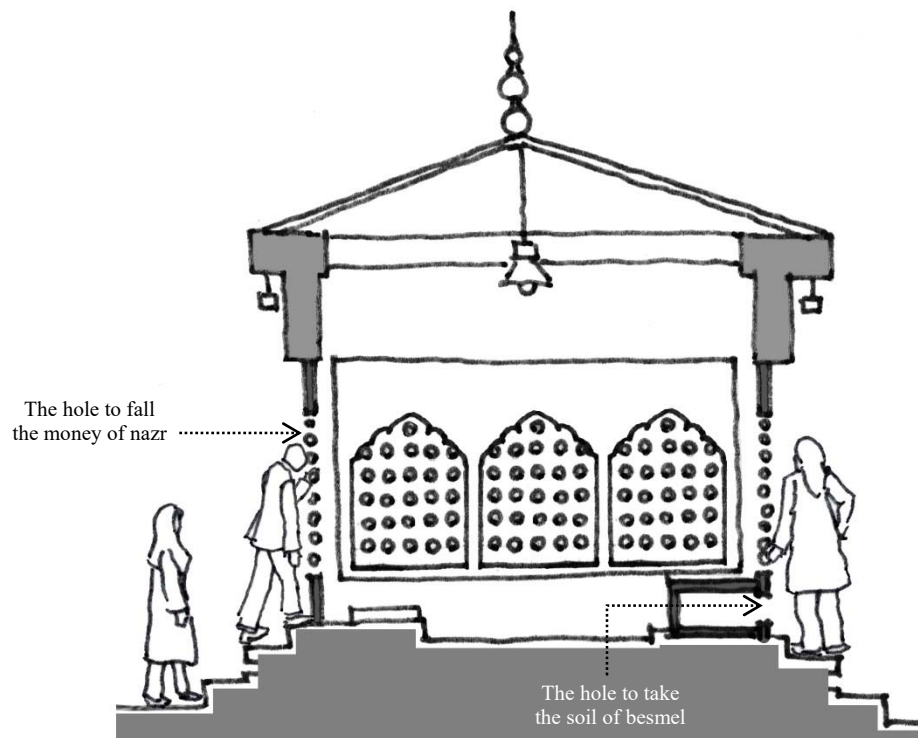
In recent years, the increasing number of pilgrims and the growing revenue from Agha Besmel's shrine motivated officials to order the building of a zarih to respect the personality of Agha Besmel and also manage the money that had been received in a

non-organised manner. Today, most people drop their nazrs in the zarih. Some believe that before constructing the zarih, poor people around the neighbourhood would receive this nazr money, and today they are neglected. To accommodate the poor, it is now possible to put the nazr money inside a hole below the shrine. Poor people can come and take some money from the hole if there is any.

The hole below the zarih also provides access for those who wish to take the soil of Besmel, which has a magical effect in the minds of local people. Officials transfer soil from the grave to this hole for people who have this religious belief [fig. 3-81, 3-82].



*Figure 3-81 Architectural plan of Agha Besmel's shrine
Illustrated by author*



*Figure 3-82 Architectural section of Agha Besmel's shrine
Illustrated by author*

During my observation, I found an interesting thing about people who visit the shrine. In Islamic culture, usually the hijab has a close relationship with religious places and religious attitudes. But there are many cases that demonstrate that the inverse does not apply. Many girls and women came to visit Agha Besmel who did not have the appropriate hijab from a religious, Islamic viewpoint. This indicates that for such women, Agha Besmel is more than a religious person. In their minds, he is a gifted man who spread goodness among the people [fig. 3-83].



*Figure 3-83 People with different religious attitudes visit Agha Besmel's shrine
Photo by author*

Many pilgrims are also young students who are coming back from school. Every day, they come and eagerly revere Agha Besmel at the shrine. The cemetery for them is a safe heaven. They play nearby and sometimes drop money in the shrine and ask for humble wishes [fig. 3-84].



Figure 3-84 Young students who are coming back from school visit Agha Besmel's shrine
Photo by author

I talked with Mr. Eftekhari, the artist who made Agha Besmel's tombstone. He works as a tombstone maker. At first he was a calligrapher, but the art of stone carving inspired him to make tombstones.

He told me:

Almost all the tombstones of imamzadehs in this city and the rural areas around the city are my works. The tombstone of Agha Besmel was ordered from Isfahan twenty-five years ago (in 1993). It is made of green marble, which is a unique stone. I designed and carved it like an open book because of the poetic personality of Agha Besmel [fig. 3-85].



*Figure 3-85 The tombstone of Agha Besmel
Photo by author*

Tombstones

Based on my estimation, there are 1,300 tombstones in Agha Besmel Cemetery. Since the space of the cemetery is almost full, officials want to extend it toward the north side. Another strategy to make space for new dead is using old graves. In Islam, thirty years after a death, it is permissible to use that grave for another family member. For this reason, some graves in the cemetery have two names. Some graves are also built on top of older ones after an interval of forty years.



*Figure 3-86 A top view of a small part of cemetery which shows the variety of tombstones
Photo by author*

The cemetery contains a variety of tombstones in terms of type, color, size, and design [fig. 3-86]. I talked with Mr. Eftekhari, a stone carver who works for the cemetery. He has lived beside the cemetery for many years and his workshop is nearby. Most local people order their tombstones from him. From his point of view, a

tombstone is an artistic artifact. He uses his experience as a calligrapher and portrait painter to design and carve stone [fig. 3-87, 3-88].

He told me:

There are two kinds of stone here: volcanic rock and limestone. Many years ago, we used types of limestone like marble. These were vulnerable and a bit soft. After a while, under the pressure of foot traffic, letters in the gravestones started to separate. Today, volcanic rocks like granite are used. Granite is resistant and its shell is hard. In recent years, artificial stones have been introduced which are famously known as nano-stone. These are durable and crystal white. There are two sizes of stones in the cemetery: the small stones, which are older and about 30–40cm tall, and the newer ones, which are 180–60cm tall.



Figure 3-87 Mr Eftekhari is writing on a tombstone in Nastaliq script
Photo by author



Figure 3-88 Mr Eftekhari is carving written letters on a tombstone
Photo by author

The composition of information on tombstones differs one-by-one, but there are some fixed items found on all of them. Usually, a tombstone contains the name of the deceased, their date of birth, their date of death, and a short poem or a poetic verse that narrates a moral subject meaningful to the deceased. In recent years, a portrait of the deceased person may be carved on the tombstone. Before, portraits used to be carved by hand, but five years ago, laser-cut portraits have come into use.

Mr. Eftekhari stated his beliefs on this matter:

Portraits which are carved with a laser machine do not have artistic value. They do not have spirit, while portraits made by hand have artistic value because of their textures [fig. 3-89].

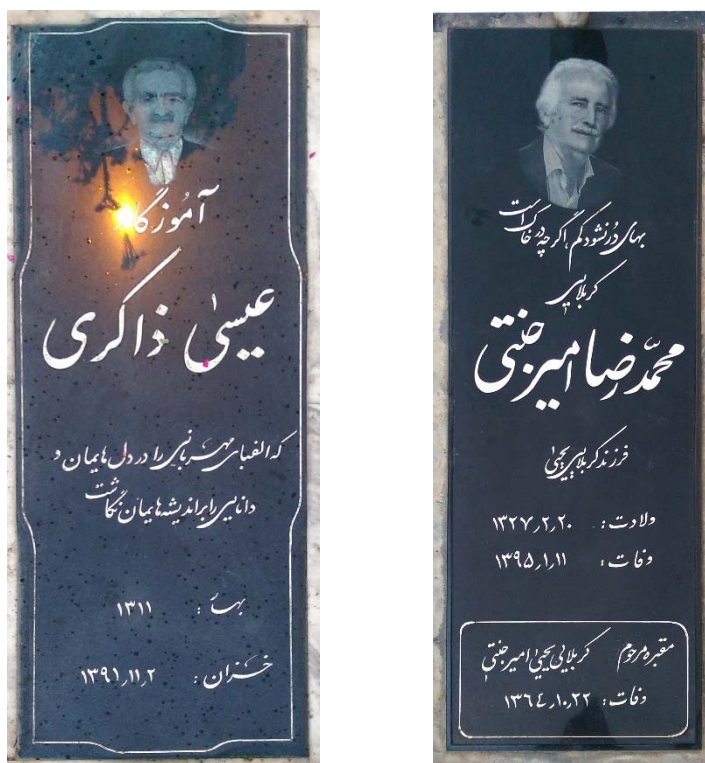


Figure 3-89 Left, a portrait on a tombstone which is carved with hand.
 Right, a portrait on a tombstone which is carved with laser machine.
 Photo by author

The oldest tombstone I found in the cemetery dates back to 1883 and is 135 years old [fig. 3-90]. It does not belong to any grave anymore. It was a special gravestone which was separated from the others to be conserved. The oldest installed tombstones date from the 1940s.



Figure 3-90 A historical tombstone for 135 years ago
 Photo by author

Nastaliq script is used on most of the tombstones, one of the main calligraphic hands used in writing the Persian alphabet and traditionally the predominant style in Persian calligraphy. Recently, sols and naskh scripts have been used [fig. 3-91].



Figure 3-91 Variety of script, composition and design of tombstones in Agha Besmel Cemetery in different years
Illustrated by author

3.5 Architectural analysis

Sun orientation

Thermal comfort in public spaces is one of the principles of the vernacular architecture of northern Iran's humid climate. In summers, humidity rises and people need shady spaces to spend hot days. In the vernacular architecture of Ramsar, public buildings usually use porches to make a shady space in front of the building. Public spaces also include steps and platforms so people can sit and relax in the shade for a while.

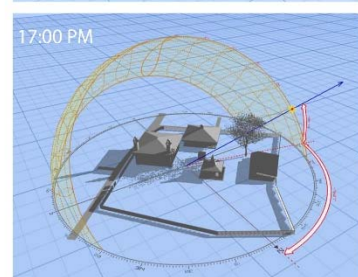
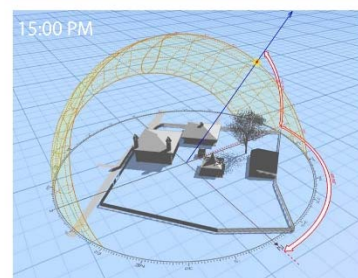
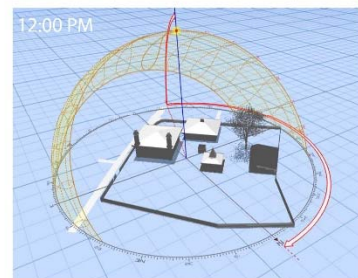
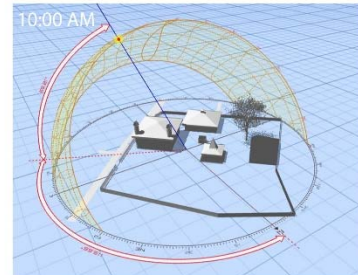
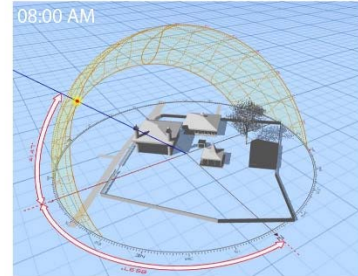
Agha Besmel Cemetery has many pilgrims, worshippers, visitors, and people who want to spend a part of their daily time in the area. One reason behind this considerable number of visitors is the thermal comfort they experience in the space of the cemetery. During the day, there are many corners where people can stay and sit in the shade while enjoying being in a quiet, peaceful place. It is a haven for older women who do not have any other gathering place in the city. They often come to the cemetery without a plan, meet each other there, and hang out.

I talked with two women who were chatting with each other while sitting on the porch of Abo Taleb Mosque. They told me:

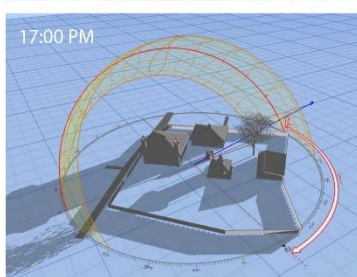
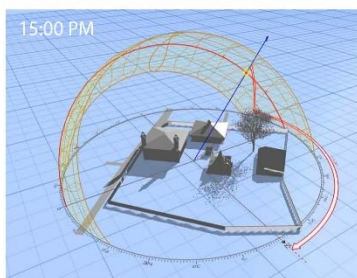
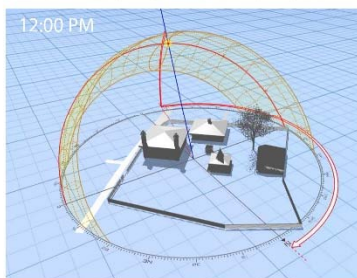
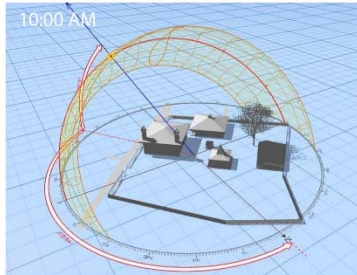
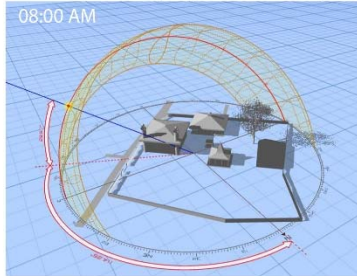
Every day, we come here in the evening. We sit beside Agha Besmel or on the platform. My husband and two daughters were buried here. We do not have any other place [except our homes]. We must come here.

On Thursday evenings, the cemetery is very crowded. All the shady platforms around Agha Pela Seyyed and Abo Taleb mosques are occupied. The sunny platforms remain vacant until the sun leaves and they become shady. The pattern of the sun's movement affects the gathering places in the cemetery. Since all sides of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine have porches, people change their sitting platforms based on the sun's orientation [fig. 3-92, 3-93].

Summer solstice (June 21)

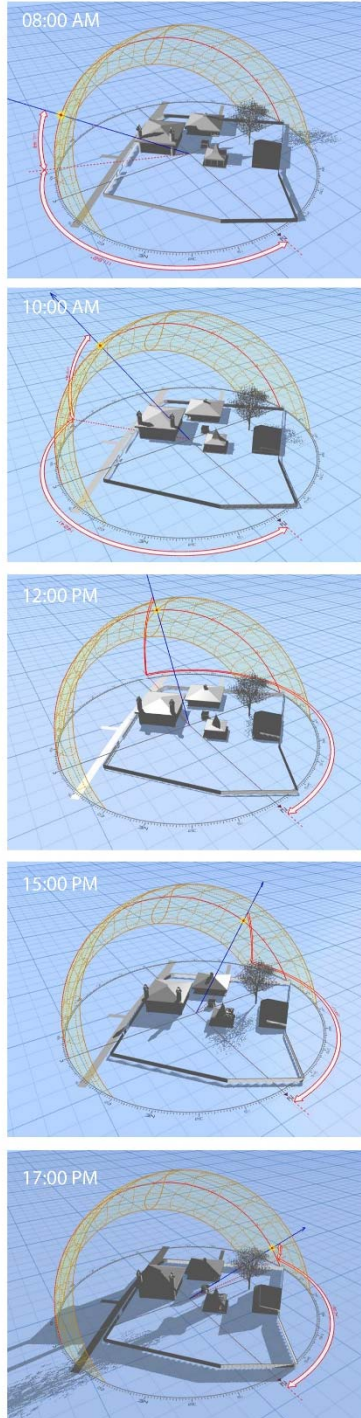


Fall equinox (September 22)

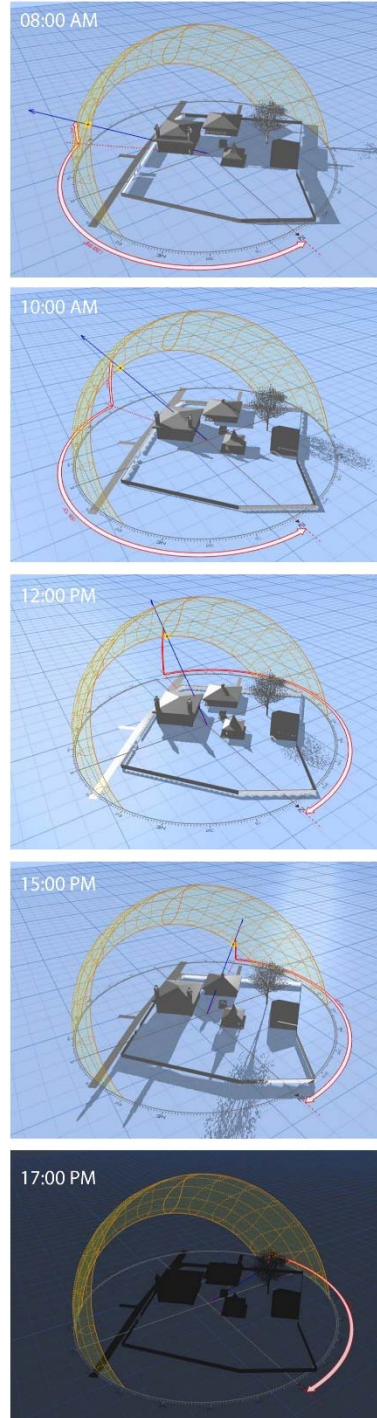


*Figure 3-92 Sun orientation diagram of Agha Besmel Cemetery on the summer solstice and fall equinox
Illustrated by author*

Spring vernal equinox (March 20)



Winter solstice (December 21)



*Figure 3-93 Sun orientation diagram of Agha Besmel Cemetery on spring vernal equinox and winter solstice
Illustrated by author*

Gathering places

Observing people in the cemetery reveals that the southern section, where there is an open space between the mosques and the shrines, is the most attended. The gatherings in this part have several causes. Firstly, people are more inclined to be closer to shrines. Secondly, the platforms of Agha Pela Seyyed's shrine and Abo Taleb mosque are appropriate places to sit. Moreover, the porch of Abo Taleb Mosque makes a shady and cozy place attractive for people for its thermal comfort.

Another popular gathering place is the platform around the large tree close to martyr's cemetery. The tree is a Caucasian elm which is famous in this area. Most imamzadehs have this species of tree on their grounds. The size of this particular tree shows the age of the cemetery.

Those visiting the graves of their deceased are irregularly distributed across the cemetery [fig. 3-94].



Figure 3-94 Ghathering places diagram
Illustrated by author

Circulation

There are two types of movement in the cemetery. The first type of movement is performed by people visiting the graves and other places in the cemetery. Usually, this movement is irregular and differs depending on the person's destination. People mostly visit graves and shrines in the middle of day. At noon, the time of the azan, the mosque of Agha Pela Seyyed is a destination for worshippers. Many people also visit the cemetery just to find a place to sit and hang out. This makes circulation irregular, since it is based on different purposes and times of day.

The second movement is performed by those crossing the cemetery. Because of the location of the cemetery in an urban context, people often use it as a shortcut. The location of the cemetery at the junction of a main street and a local street motivates people to enter it from the eastern gate, cross it, and exit from southern gate. During the crossing, many people visit Agha Besmel's shrine, which is located on their way. At noon, many students who go to school or come back from school cross the cemetery and visit the shrine. This type of movement has created a diagonal path from east to south across the cemetery [fig. 3-95].

Analysing historical aerial photographs demonstrates that this type of circulation has existed for many years. This photo shows that the ground was covered by vegetation before and that this east-south path eroded due to the frequency of foot traffic [fig. 3-96].

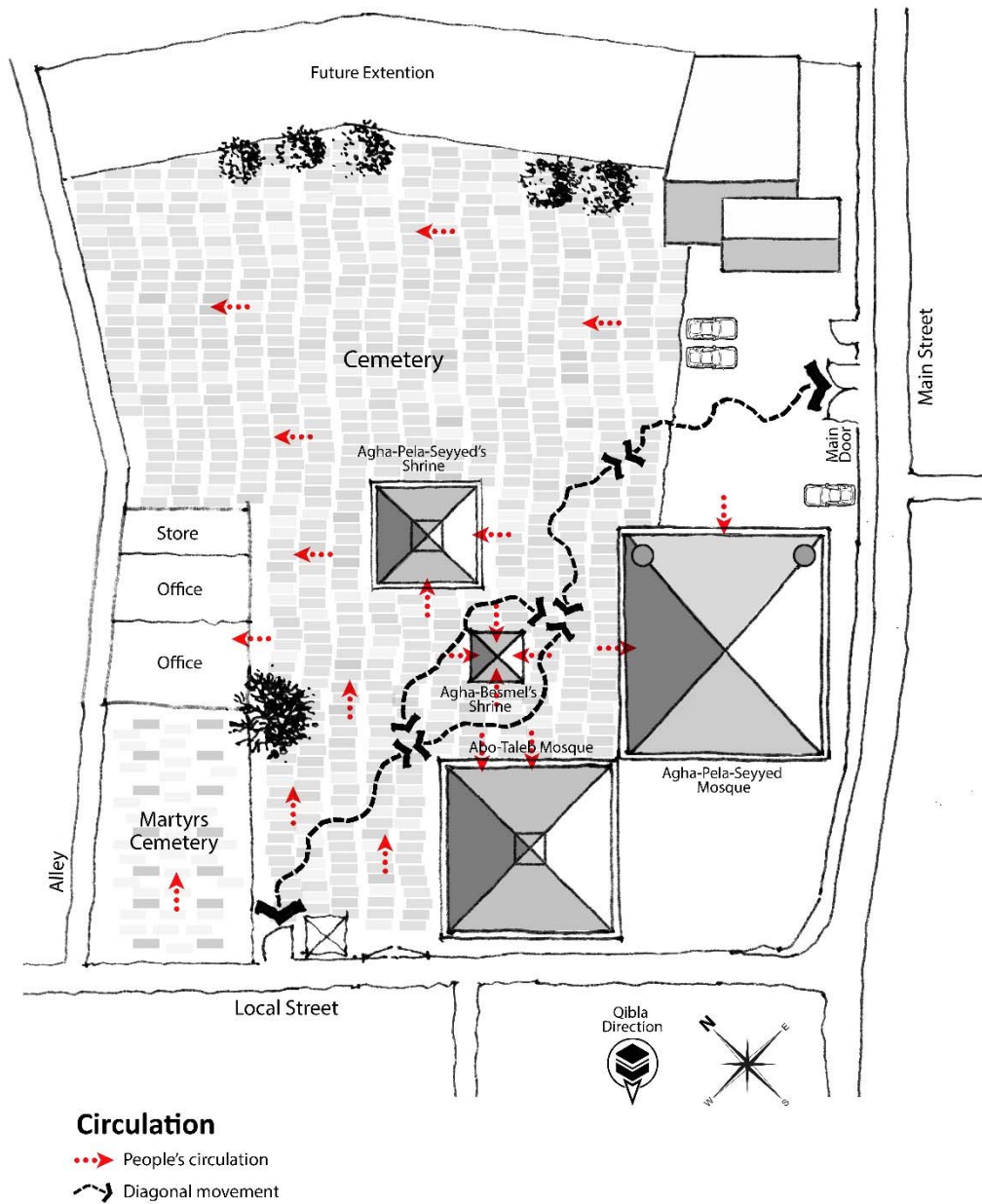


Figure 3-95 Circulation diagram
Illustrated by author



- Limit of the cemetery
- ... east-south shortcut

Figure 3-96 Access analysis in historical photo, 1969
Illustrated by author

4 Conclusion

Conclusion

During this research project, I learned many things about Iran and its vernacular architecture. Each part of this country has specific cultural traits, rituals, and beliefs that have had a deep impact on the built environment and have created unique styles of vernacular architecture.

Agha Besmel Cemetery, in the city of Ramsar, is a distinguished place that functions as more than a cemetery. It is a multifunctional space for a wide range of people who pray, visit graves, and spend a part of day in this quiet, peaceful place. My research revealed many causes behind this space's popularity.

First of all, I should refer to the religious roots of the people who live in this region. The history of Islam in Iran dates back to almost 1,400 years ago. Even before Islam, Iranians were religious people and always faithful. Over the years, they have lived by their beliefs, making religion a major part of their life. One of the obvious signs of their devotion can be seen when they visit Islamic shrines and graves and donate money to these places. In the case of Agha Besmel Cemetery, the presence of two popular shrines encourages religious people to visit these places regularly and donate money for nazr based on their spiritual demands, a spiritual practice in Islamic culture.

Even more than religion, cultural beliefs have a great influence on the reputation of the cemetery. Modern death rituals have roots in Iranian life dating back to ancient times. Iranians have always respected their dead and kept their memories alive. Every

weekend and evening, they visit the graves of relatives to commemorate them. Local cemeteries like Agha Besmel give people the opportunity to visit the dead regularly. In the small city of Sadat Shahr, this convenient cemetery facilitates participation in funerals and other death rituals, while bringing people closer to each other. Cultural rituals contribute to locals' attachment to the cemetery, so that in case of death, they have a meaningful connection to it. Supernatural stories about Agha Besmel and the cemetery also make this place mysterious and interesting to them.

This place's reputation also owes itself to the respect it shows for influential people, including Agha Besmel, Agha Pella Seyyed, and the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War. Every day, many pilgrims from far and near come to visit their graves and offer them their gratitude.

Another factor behind the cemetery's popularity that should not be neglected is its strategic urban location. It is located in the heart of an old residential neighborhood. This makes the cemetery convenient to access and also makes it a safe place for women and children. Furthermore, two gates in east and south have converted the cemetery into a shortcut for residents of the neighborhood. Every day, pedestrians cross the cemetery to speed up their journey and enjoy their surroundings. Many students use the cemetery to shorten their path to school. Through they cross the cemetery, many people stay for a few moments to pray for the dead and the martyrs. They also visit Agha Besmel shrine as well as the other shrines before leaving for their destination. These factors show why the urban location of the cemetery is so influential on its popularity.

The architecture of Agha Besmel Cemetery is another reason for its fame. The vernacular architecture of the cemetery combines a great number of functions to support people's spiritual demands. The architecture of the buildings in the cemetery has a beneficial impact on the quality of the cemetery and encourages people to spend their time here. The type of vernacular architecture exhibited here attracts them because it is familiar to their eyes.

During my research about this cemetery, I also discovered the impact of religious beliefs and rituals on vernacular architecture. The architecture of the cemetery follows the model of northern Iran's traditional rural houses. The buildings' roofs are four-sided, sloped, and project ahead of the building to protect it from rain. Porches in front of shrines can also be traced to traditional housing design, since they are often used to make homes more comfortable during hot and sunny days. Also, multiple face-to-face openings create a climatic design that enhances airflow and adds thermal comfort. The use of local materials, especially wood, is another factor of vernacular architecture that influences the design of shrines and houses.

Although the architecture of the cemetery is dramatically influenced by the vernacular architecture of northern Iran, the impact of religious beliefs and rituals is also a strong factor in designing the space. The entire design concept of the cemetery's architecture is affected by the Qibla direction. The orientation of graves and buildings are also based on the Qibla. Architectural plans are symmetric and adapted to the Iranian style of religious architecture. In mosques, the mihrab is the most important point of design, particularly since the line of symmetry crosses the mihrab. While face-

to-face openings are a principle of this region's vernacular architecture, there can be no opening in front of a mosque's main doors because of the mihrab. In addition, curtains are installed in the middle of Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque to disconnect visual relationships between the men's and women's sections, a feature that was not in the original building's design. These divisions, which owe themselves to religious attitudes, interrupt the function of face-to-face windows and disrupt the natural ventilation. Officials had to install mechanical fans and air conditioners to make the space comfortable. One other interaction between religious and vernacular architecture can be found in the two minarets on top of the sloped roof of Agha Pela Seyyed Mosque. It is a combination of traditional Islamic architecture and the vernacular architecture of northern Iran.

In a nutshell, these dynamic factors produce a sense of belonging among local people who spend time in Agha Besmel Cemetery. For them, the cemetery is an inseparable part of the city. In their mindset, this place is not just a cemetery: it is a place for prayer, commemoration, and socializing, as well as a burial ground.

It is a place between life and death.

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