

SAQA NEFARS: A HISTORICAL WOODEN STRUCTURE IN THE VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF IRAN

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INTRODUCTION

For many years, a huge number of fascinating vernacular buildings survived on the Iranian Plateau. Many occurred in the villages, while their grander counterparts were located in the towns. Some of these structures are either unique to Iran or may be prototypes of buildings elsewhere. However, as most of these vernacular buildings are in a state of disrepair or ruin, the need for their preservation is not only a cultural requirement, but also an economic and development consideration (Kasmaie, 2003, 54-58). The Iranian vernacular building tradition, which makes such ingenious use of natural resources without the consumption of additional power, is still alive. There is also much to be gained from understanding such a highly developed technology (Murakami, 2008, 67).

Saqa Nefars refer to small wooden buildings located in Mazandaran state. These buildings are the sort of religious places made based on the structure of traditional buildings in Mazandaran. The local people of Mazandaran, similar to people in different parts of the world, have achieved the highest interaction with nature over time in their buildings, and this type of property has given a unique identity to the area. The buildings in this region, due to the mild and humid weather, have a certain typology. Mazandaran, being a richly forested province, is a major woodworking centre in Iran and many of its religious places have been made or fitted with carved wooden doors, shutters and cenotaphs. Native people found their tranquillity in coordination and balance with nature; as a result, they attempted to create this coordination and balance by using the natural and available building materials of their region (Habib, 2012, 527-531).

Regardless of the special structural character of Saqa Nefars, the variety of paintings and calligraphy made a big difference between these buildings and other religious places in other states. Although several studies and researchers have revealed considerable data about the history, architecture, construction details, and characterisation of the design material pertaining

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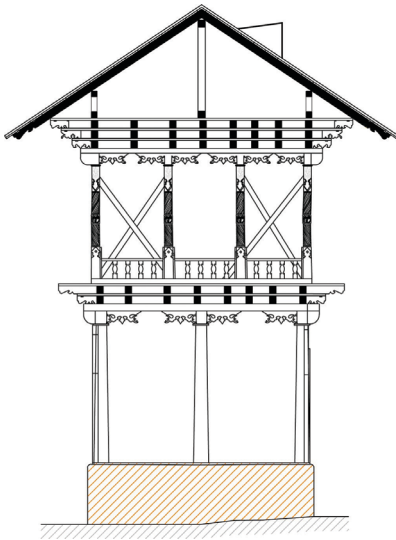


Figure 1. Framework construction and partitioning of *Saqa Nefar*

to the vernacular architecture of Mazandaran, there is no information about the most famous religious buildings in the north of Iran, *Saqa Nefars*. The aspect that makes *Saqa Nefars* a noticeable example of religious buildings is their connection with the events of Karbala. The mourning of Muharram (The first month of the Islamic Calendar), which is the result of the movement of Imam Hussein (the son of Prophet Muhammad) and his loyal followers in Karbala and their martyrdom was the reason for making several types of religious building, such as *Saqa Nefars* and *Tekyieh*. *Saqa Nefar* is the only memorial that has been made and preserved by villagers to keep alive the character and significance of Abolfazl. In addition, it is not only a place to remember Abolfzal, but is also a way to prevent the culture of the Ashura event from being forgotten.

Few travellers, either today or in the past, have been sufficiently interested in recording vernacular buildings. With the exception of John Fryer in the seventeenth-century (Fryer, 1963, 3), C. J. Wills in the nineteenth-century (1981) and Hans E. Wulff in the twentieth-century (Wulff, 1966, 289-319), few people have shown a general interest in both Persian religious buildings and customs. However, Pietro Delavale and Mackenzy mention a kind of vernacular architecture in Mazandaran, which was established in the yards of residential houses as a summer sitting place (Della valle, 1991, 226; Mackenzy, 1980, 74).

There is a need to investigate the principles of the design of *Saqa Nefars* with respect to culture, religion and tradition along with the environmental and climatic conditions of the state of Mazandaran. The methodology of the study concentrates on the documentation, descriptive analysis of the building techniques in this kind of historical religious monument in consideration of their concept and function. Moreover, depending on the availability of information and the existence of the remains of such structures, several key examples of traditional *Saqa Nefars* are investigated to determine the current condition of the buildings and their exact functions based on observational studies.

THE AREA OF STUDY

Mazandaran covers an area of over 44,552 square kilometres. The Caspian Sea is the northern limit, the southern limits are formed by the States of Tehran and Semnan, and the States of Gilan and Golestan form, respectively, the western and eastern limits of Mazandaran (Faghieh, 2003, 30).

Mazandaran is surrounded by the Alborz mountains in the south and the Caspian Sea in the north, which has made the climate moderate and humid.

The amount of rainfall in Mazandaran is around 500 millimetres per year. During winter, the sunshine is between 25 % and 55 %, and, in summer, it is between 45 % and 60 %. There is also a high percentage of humidity, sticky oil, and hurricanes in the winter. However, the situation has some advantages, such as fertile lands, plant diversity, variety in agricultural resources and easy access to water sources (Kasmaie, 2003, 54-58).

MAZANDARAN ARCHITECTURE

Because of the specific nature, the lifestyle in Mazandaran is totally different from other parts of Iran, (Diba, 1993, 24; Rezaie Rad, 1993, 4), and Mazandaran native architecture reflects both the nature and climate. The traditional architecture of this region has found some solution for this climate condition to prevent moisture retention, and also to give dwellers the maximum use of water and yard area (Gorji, 2010, 142).

The two most important solutions to address the problem of ventilation are appropriate orientation and the height of the building. With the linear expansion of the building in an east-west direction, the inhabitants enjoy adequate sunlight and local airflow. Thus, porches were built on one or several faces of the building in order to prevent rain from hitting the body of the building (Bromberger, 1986, 55-78; Khakpour, 2005, 63-72). Because of the continuity and severity of the rain, the roofs of traditional houses were built with two or four slopes. These steep roofs have been used as an element to counter the high rainfall. Also, plant tissue has been applied as an anti-insect and thermal insulator (Miryousefi, 2008, 108-111; Kakouei et al., 2012, 31-36). This style of roof can be considered to be an acoustic insulator, and can also be influential in terms of health and economy (Valinejad et al., 2014, 14-18).

As a result of high humidity, wet soil and overflowing rivers, the houses are two-storey to avoid the penetration of ground moisture into the houses. There are some differences between the height and materials of the foundation in different parts of Mazandaran depending on the soil and the level of the groundwater (Diba, 1993, 24).

DESCRIPTION OF SAQA NEFAR

Nefar or Nepar is a traditional wooden structure higher than the land surface and used as a summerhouse. They are often built to protect the rice from sand, and also as a place for mourning during Muharram. This structure is built with two storeys using pillars and columns with a gable cover. Access to the first storey is by wooden stairs connected to the columns. The ground floor is open and without walls and the first floor is used as a big room with open sides that enables people to enjoy sufficient ventilation in summer from all sides (Figure 2) (Figure 3). The first floor is

Figure 2. Saqa Nefar of Kaboud kola located in Babol

Figure 3. Mourning of Muharram in Saqa Nefar, Shyadeh village in Babol



used mainly for gatherings of men younger than 35; children, women and elderly men are not allowed to enter. Water and tea are the only drinks that are served and the tradition of the mourning ritual for Abolfazl (the valorous brother of Imam Hossein) is held in the Saqa Nefars. The reason for the attendance of young people in mourning is related to the fact that Abolfazl was very young when he was killed and to encourage young people to follow his behaviour and bravery in their lives (Kolaeeeyan, 2006, 10).

Lexicology of SaqaNefar

In the Arabic language, Saqa Nefar means a big container or reservoir, which is built in some places to keep water. Saqa Nefar in the mother language of the native people of Mazandaran (Tabari) means a wooden shelter, which is built to keep the farm safe from any wild or stray animal attacks.

The meaning of Saqa is water carrier, a person who gives the water or wine to another person. In Sufism, it means the spiritual master who forms a formal allegiance (bay'a) with a disciple of Sufism and who authorises the disciple's travels and helps the disciple along the mystical path (Nasri, 1967, 1149). Saqa is also a symbolic name of Abolfazl who was a water carrier in the Battle of Karbala which occurred on 31 May 680 AD (10th Muharram 61 AH) in which all of Hussein's followers and family were slaughtered. Therefore, the most distinct concept behind Saqa Nefars is the disaster of Karbala and the special character of Abolfazl.

Historical Background of Saqa Nefars

The historical background of Saqa Nefars is not exactly known before the Safawid era. The annual mourning ceremonies for Imam Hossein combined with the ritual cursing of his enemies in the capital of Abbasid and other regions of Iran, first occurred in the Buyids' period (934-1055 A.D.) (Majd, 2001, 55). Although the beginning and propagation of religious representation by Mo'ezaddin Ahmad Ale Buye in 945 A.D. suggests that the construction of the Saqa Nefars date back to this period, one cannot be completely sure as to when exactly they became popular among villagers in the north of Iran (Pournand, 2008, 6).

Some scholars believe that, to a large extent, accepting Shi'a Islam as a formal religion in the country by Shah Ismail Safawi, the development of construction in the religious field and the desirable weather of Mazandaran, are most likely the factors that led to the construction of Saqa Nefars commencing in this period (Majd, 2001, 55). The existence of some ancient Saqa Nefars without decorative calligraphy, which do not look like the Qajar and Pahlavi period buildings, are a significant reason for the existence of Saqa Nefar during this period. As mentioned, most of the remaining Saqa Nefars are of those constructed after the Qajar period. The most reliable documents about these buildings are from the sketches of Pietro Delavale, the explorer, who visited Mazandaran during the Safawid era. This also increases the possibility that the Saqa Nefars were constructed before the Qajar era. In addition, because of the wooden material of the Saqa Nefars, and the perishable features of wooden structures, it is most likely that they have been worn out or destroyed over the years.

In Qajar (1785 – 1925A.D.) and the first Pahlavi period, the Ashura culture spread, and, following this, the Islamic and religious architecture, like

the Passion play and Tekiyeh and Hosseiniyeh, became more popular (Ritter, 2008, 44; Schopenhauer, 1996, 81-88). During the Qajar period, Aqa Muhammad Khan, Fath Ali Shah, and Naser Al-din Shah, relative to the other Qajarid emperors, did more to improve the popularity of Shi'ism among the people. Indeed, Aqa Muhammad Khan tried to increase the extent of his empire, under the name of the Shia religion. In contrast, Fath Ali Shah encouraged people's religious beliefs by the renovation and rebuilding of religious places. This period played an important role in the preservation of Mazandaran historical buildings. The earthquake of Mazandaran in 1844 resulted in renovation of most of the religious places by Fath Ali Shah Qajar. Consequently, Fath Ali Shah was the one who returned Mazandaran state to its previous historical and commercial condition.

Due to the political events that happened during the Naser Al-din Shah era, this period was one of the important times for increasing the number of religious places like Saqa Nefars (Madani, 2004). He was the one who supported Ta'zieh as a religious ritual during the holy month of Muharram to show his respect for people's religious beliefs (Varmaghani et al., 2014, 102-107). A great number of Saqa Nefars with epigraphs were built during this period, as evidenced by the popularity of the coffeehouse paintings during the Qajar dynasty (Niyaki, 2001, 147-155).

In contemporary periods, the construction of Saqa Nefars was weakened and the architectural structure of Saqa Nefars changed in terms of building materials and shape.

The Origin of the Formation of Saqa Nefars in Respect of the People's Lifestyle and Beliefs

Based on the information, there is no consensus regarding the origin of Saqa Nefars; however, the connection of these buildings with religion (water worship) and economy (rice farming) is undeniable. The role of these buildings to protect water and the farm is the most important character of Saqa Nefars.

Role of Religion in Saqa Nefar Construction

The pre-Zoroastrian era of Iran in ancient times, focused on natural cults like water and fire. Yasht (a collection of twenty-one hymns in Younger Avestan), refers to the angel of waters (Aban) or Anahita (who is invoked by the epithets aredivi sura anahita – moist, might, pure). Anahita believed to bring fertility, making 'the seed of all males pure' and 'childbirth easy for all females' (Rose, 2011). Because of the belief in naturalism like Mithraism and worship of Anahita, most of the pre-Islamic religious places were constructed beside the water resources (Alikhani, 2005, 164). Although some of the ancient rituals have transferred to Islamic culture and people perform these rituals under different names, such as "prayers for rain", people still perform the rituals near the river or any source of water (Jawadi, 1997, 12-21).

With the expansion of temple worship during the Achaemenid dynasty, people made some magnificent temples for worshiping Anahita. The temples of Anahita were mostly like the places that are now called Saqa Nefars. The places were made using wooden materials and located near the farm, due to the demand of people for rain and fertility from the goddess Anahita. After the rise of Islam, all these places were changed to a place for the remembrance of Abolfazl (Saqa of Karbala plain), especially in

villages in the North of Iran. The main character of these buildings is their connection to the respect of people for water and trees, and their belief in Anahita, the goddess of water, and, although the applications of Saqa Nefars changed during the Islamic period, the wall paintings of these places show the origin of the people's beliefs in ancient culture (Jawadi, 1999, 20-23).

Based on the expansion of Mithraism and the worship of Anahita in Mazandaran territory, the value of water protection and making places for preserving water resources seems quite natural (Yazdanpanah, 1996, 94).

As the Muslim culture established in new areas, it took over local traditions and modified them according to its own formal and liturgical habits and practices. Therefore, the correlation of Saqa Nefars with Zoroastrianism and other pre-Islamic religions seems possible.

Role of Economy on Saqa Nefars

The second most influential item concerning the construction of Saqa Nefars was the people's financial resources. Although, there does not seem to be a direct connection between worshiping water and rice farming, Saqa Nefars, in their simplest form, were made for rice farms and their water resources to protect them both against any predators. Based on the age of farming in Mazandaran since the pre-Islamic era, the construction of such structures as an example of local architecture could date back to the pre-Islamic period (Wulff, 1966, 282-319).

The Origin of Saqa Nefars in Shi'ism

The sacred architecture of Islam is mainly the mosque; however, the people also need another place to request blessing and wealth from God and the Imams (saints). It is a verification of God's mercy and the saint's compassion. There has been this request for God's blessing throughout history. In addition, the attitude of the people for mourning congregations, lamentations and all such actions that express the emotions of grief, especially remembrance ceremonies for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, are undeniable; hence, Shi'a Muslims through the construction of Saqa Nefar, Tekiyeh and Hosseiniyeh tried to satisfy their spiritual needs. In villages, because of the shortage of medical care, people refer more to spiritual powers to solve their physical problems.

In traditional belief, Tekiyeh is a symbol of Imam Hossein, because the mourning ceremony for the martyred Imam is held in this building, which is built especially for this purpose. Saqa Nefars have also been used as a place for the memorial of Abolfazl. Due to the significant role of Abolfazl in the Battle of Karbala and his relationship with Imam Hossein as his brother and comrade, Saqa Nefars were built along with Tekiyeh and opposite the Tekiyeh (**Figure 3**).

ARCHITECTURAL TYPOLOGY AND BUILDING PHYSICS

Structural Characteristics of Saqa Nefars

Saqa Nefars are a product of the accumulated experience and practice of many centuries and constitute a continuous source of knowledge. In respect of this point, it can be claimed that these buildings were designed in accordance with the climatic conditions and materials available in the region. Saqa Nefars are evaluated in terms of building physics criteria that

pertain to solar geometry, thermal mass, heat transfer and air movement (Majedi and Rashidisharifabad, 2011, 1349-1353; Heerwagen, 2004, 940).

The Formation Procedure of Saqa Nefars

Typically, Qajar's *Saqa Nefars* are rectangular two-storey buildings of varying size. The basic structure consists of a wooden frame, in which the roof is erected before the walls and the upper floor is inserted. Generally, in the structure of *Saqa Nefars*, wood is utilized in large amounts as a construction material for the structural elements; due to the abundance of timber in the forested areas of the north of Iran, and possibly their ability to withstand earthquakes. However, other traditional materials, (i.e. brick and cob, a mixture of clay and straw) were used for the walls. Unfortunately, they have been exposed to the natural environmental conditions for a long time (Rahimzadeh, 2003, 39-47).

In the construction of the foundation of *Saqa Nefars*, large stones and lime mud slurry were used. Subsequently, the wooden pillars were positioned in the four corners and extended to the eaves or roof ridge. Then, at a height of between 0.5 and 1 metre from the ground, the first floor was built. The roof structure of the first floor was made of wooden boards upon which the second floor was built.

The plans have a wide and open design and their frame is narrow in geometrical shape. The ground floor is simply described as a timber frame with wood or masonry infill, such as bricks or adobe.

Wood was often used as an infill material to avoid the common shear failure, and the masonry infill falling out of the frame. In addition, wood infill provides additional support to the building during the course of shaking in earthquakes (Dogangun et al., 2006, 981-996). The second floor, which also provides night accommodation, is associated with a porch with a width of 0.5 to 1 metre on four sides of the building and makes easy movement of air in residential floors possible.

High moisture in all seasons is the principle problem of this region; consequently, the most important factor to be considered for creating comfort in buildings in this region is adequate natural ventilation of the rooms through the establishment of openings in appropriate places. This allows the winds from the east (suitable summer winds) and the breezes from the sea to be fully utilized, while the undesirable, severe and long winter winds (southwest direction), and inclined rain are blocked completely.

The porch also facilitates the easy movement of air between the residential floors. In this part, the columns are made of wood and are loadbearing and consist of the base, body and capital. The interior cover of the ceiling on the second floor is mostly decorative wooden panels (Rahimzadeh, 2003, 39-47). One staircase provides access to the upper floor.

The roof structure in *Saqa Nefars* is a wooden truss with a false cover made of wooden frames. Due to the persistent rain during most of the year, four sloping gable roofs are an appropriate design for warding off rainwater. The outer cover of the roof is made of 'gale' (wild plants that grow beside river basins), lat thin boards and sometimes carpentry sawdust that have regular shapes), and, recently, tin plate (**Figure 4**) (Bromberger, 1986, 55-78; Khakpour, 2005, 63-72).

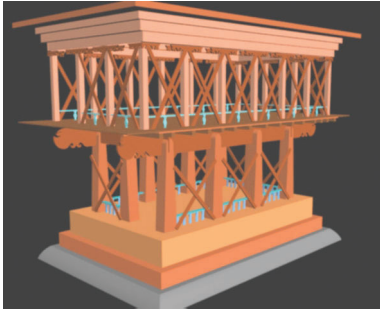


Figure 4. 3D plan of two-storey *Saqa Nefar*, *Shyadeh Village, Babol*

The double covering of the roofs lightens the roof and helps dissipate the heat from the sun by the roof, as it acts as a kind of insulator through the air trapped between the two skins. Thus, choosing appropriate materials creates a perfect insulator against the climatic elements of the region (Valinejad Shoubi and Tizghalam Zanouzi, 2014, 14-18).

GEOMETRICAL PROPORTIONS IN SAQA NEFARS

The Saqa Nefars are of two types – square shape plan and rectangular shape plan.

In the first group, regarding the studies performed on the plans of Dashti Nefars (farm Nefars), which are the oldest architectural kind of Nefar (**Figure 5**), the aspect ratio (the ratio of the longer dimension of a rectangular plan to the shorter) of the Saqa Nefars is 1.1:1; however, in some Saqa Nefars, this ratio has been increased to 1.2:1 (Rafi`ee Sereshki, 2003, 427; Nasri, 1967, 1149). In addition, because of the number of dwellers, the small and simple plan like the square and rectangular shape would be primarily used in Saqa Nefars (**Figure 6**).

At the end of the Qajar dynasty, due to the importance of the Ashura ritual (the first month of the Islamic calendar), the structure of the Saqa Nefars changed through the introduction of two or more new styles of Nefar. In the new structure, due to the stretching of the Saqa Nefar plan and the change from a square shaped plane to a rectangular plane, the concept of Talar (porch) was changed. The new aspects of art shown in these buildings were completely different from the original Saqa Nefars (**Figure 7**). In the Qajari period, the ornamentation of the Saqa Nefars was changed, and the walls of these buildings were decorated with wall paintings and calligraphy.

In the second group, the aspect ratio of Saqa Nefars is 3:1 (**Figure 8**). However, in some Saqa Nefars, this ratio decreased to 2.5:1. The ratio of all storeys and the covered height to the ground floor height is frequently 2.5:1 (**Figure 9**).

Figure 5. Oldest architectural kind of *Nefar* called *Dashti Nefars*, *Kaboud Kola village, Babol*, after the harvest season

Figure 6. Square shape plan *Nefar*, *Mousavi Saqa Nefar, Shyadeh, Babol*



In the construction of the Saqa Nefar buildings, sacred numbers have also been used. For example, the number of columns in the Shyadeh Saqa Nefars is 12, which is probably related to the 12 Imams or 12 months of the year. In most Saqa Nefars, there are twelve or fourteen columns on the first floor, and six columns on the ground floor. Also, the four columns forming the building corners and used as the support columns are described as manifestations of the four skies (Yousof-Niya Pasha, 2006, 93-94).

MATERIALS APPLIED IN SAQA NEFARS

Zelkova Carpinifolia was one of the widely used wood species in the architecture of Saqa Nefars. It is not only a high quality wood species, but it is also a sacred tree for the people in the North of Iran. The analysis

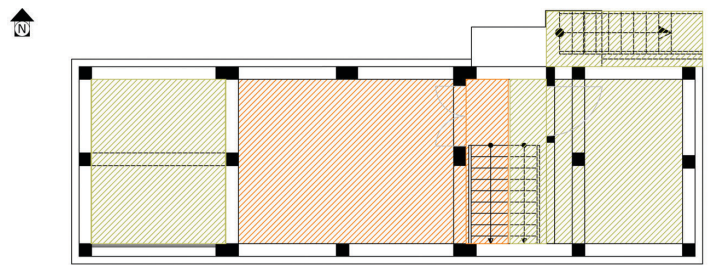


Figure 7. Enclosing two Nefars besides the central Nefar to increase the functionality quantitatively – Main part supplemental part, Saqa Nefar Reshanaq – Shyadeh neighbourhood, Babol

- Main part
 - Supplemental part
- Sagha - Nefar reshneq - shiyadeh neighborhood ,Babol

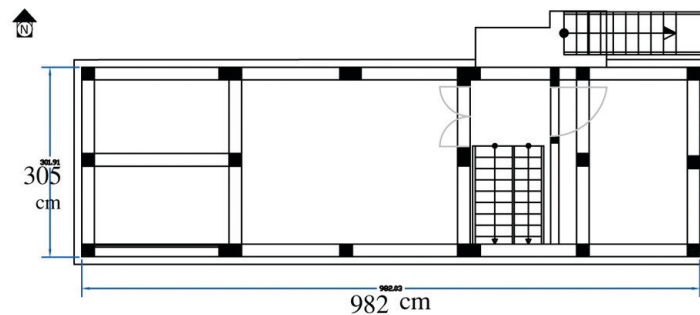


Figure 8. Geometrical proportions in first type of Saqa Nefars, Reshneq, Shyadeh, Babol

Length to width ratio = 3 = 1 ratio

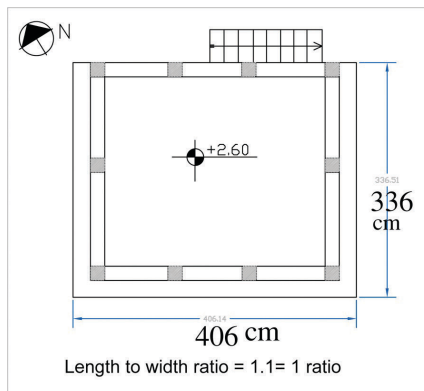
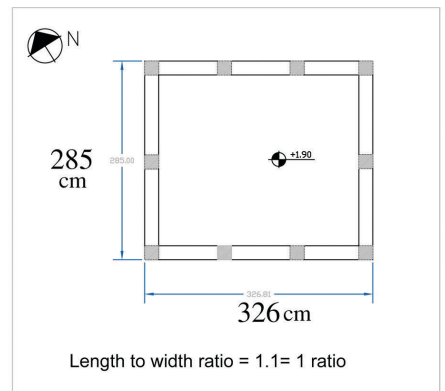


Figure 9. Geometrical proportions in second type of Saqa Nefars, Zaferan Kola and Kasmoun Kola, Babol, Mazandarn



Length to width ratio = 1.1= 1 ratio

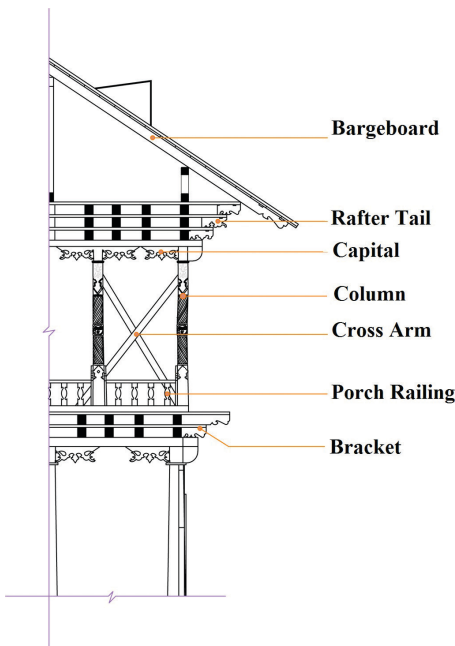


Figure 10. Details of the woodwork with distinctive forms in Saqa Nefars, Babol, Mazandaran

Figure 11. Details of Capital, Column and Rafter Tail of decorated Saqa Nefars, Babol, Mazandaran



revealed that several forms of wooden work with distinctive features were found in the Saqa Nefars. The distinctive forms of the various wooden components are apparent with respect to their placement and layout in the interior and the exterior fabric of the timber houses. A variety of woodwork was juxtaposed on various components of the house, such as the wall panels, door leaves, windows, railings of the porch, stringers, gate leaves and roof eaves, and brackets. The placement of the wooden components was fixed within a specific arrangement and for a significant purpose. The various types of wooden components found in the Saqa Nefars are shown in **Figures 10** and **11**.

In making the walls for the first floor, brick, mortar, and lime plaster and clay were used.

Because the daily temperature is relatively constant, saving heat is not needed and buildings are constructed with minimal thermal capacity. Light building materials increase the influence of the ventilation and draughts, which is a necessity for the region. The colour is mostly white because it absorbs less heat from the sun, and, hence, prevents the inner space of the building getting too hot during the summer.

The fact that Mazandaran has maintained its qualities for more than a hundred years suggests that the techniques of its construction and the building materials employed were well thought out professional choices aimed at sustainability. Moreover, traditional builders not only aimed at achieving comfort without the need of any mechanical systems, but also, were concerned about energy, material costs, as well as the impact of the buildings on the environment. This is obvious by their use of recyclable materials.

TYPES OF SAQA NEFAR

Based on existing documents, Saqa Nefars are classified into two groups according to the history, and functional features. In each group, the buildings are divided into several types.



Figure 12. LamsouKola Saqa Nefar, an example of a Saqa Nefar without any design or ornament (Pirzad, 2012)

Figure 13. Armich kola Saqa Nefar, an example of a Saqa Nefar with interior design (Pirzad, 2012)

Historical aspect

Based on the historical point of view the Saqa Nefars are divided into two types. The first group is a simple building without decorative art; these are classified into the original type of Saqa Nefars. These Saqa Nefars do not have interior and exterior facades like the Saqa Nefars of Shourmast Roudbar or SavadKouh, Pashamir, and LamsouKola of Babol (**Figure 12**).

The second group includes the Saqa Nefars with decorative art like calligraphy and painting, which mostly belong to the Qajar Period or early Pahlavi period.

These types of Saqa Nefar are decorated with calligraphy and wall paintings like the Saqa Nefars of Shyadeh and Serest in Babol, and Hendukola in Amol (**Figure 13**).

Functional aspect

Although Saqa Nefars are referred to as a summerhouse, due to the different functions of these places throughout the year including the winter and autumn, they can also be considered as a winter place. For the winter function of the Saqa Nefars, they often had a panel built between the columns on the ground floor and first floor to provide a warm place against cold winter wind (**Figure 14**). Saqa Nefars can also refer to an entrance gate or Muezzineh, usually located in the mosques, that provides a place for calling prayers to worship. The best samples of this function of Saqa Nefars are located in the MoghriKola Tekiyeh of Babol, and Taher, Motahhar Shrines of HezarKhal of Kojourin Noshahr.

ORNAMENTATION OF SAQA NEFARS

While the facades have been presented in Iranian Islamic architecture at a very modest level, the interiors are often decorated in an elegant way, which can be termed 'introvert architecture' (Memarian, 1993, 448). By creating some openings in the interior spaces, it opens the spaces into a private environment. The decoration of the interior spaces of Saqa Nefars is made of painting and calligraphy, which sometimes extends to the ceiling.

A review confirmed that the wall paintings applied in the Saqa Nefars are illustrated religious and nonreligious paintings.



Figure 14. Example of winter Saqa Nefar, Pa'in Ledar, Babol (Pirzad, 2012)

Religious ornaments

The subjects of these paintings are the disaster of Karbala, which has a long history in the region and the other religious stories relating to Shi'a beliefs.

The central subjects of most of these paintings are the Imam Hossein (**Figure 15**) and Abolfazl (**Figure 16**). The painters did not consider the naturalism and realism even in colouring. The external lines of bodies were shaped in geometric order and the image drawn in two dimensions with symmetry. The composition of paintings is managed by the authority of characters. In other words, the more important persons and holy characters are shown larger than other personages (Rahimzadeh, 2003, 39-47).



Figure 15. Portraying the Ashura event on the ceilings of Saqa Nefars, Hendu Kola, Amol (Pirzad, 2012)

Nonreligious ornaments

The nonreligious paintings are rich with reconstructed scenes from ancient Iranian myths and Islamic narratives. Often, a divine figure from prehistoric times is reimagined as a hero or a mythical king. The most popular stories selected by local painters were the stories of Shahnameh Ferdowsi, and the love story of Layla and Majnun or Khosrow, and Shirin by the Persian poet Nezami Ganjavi (Rahimzadeh, 2003, 39-47) (**Figure 17**).

Fauna motifs

The depiction of animals in the religious paintings of Saqa Nefars is more prevalent in the mythical and epical stories. The most popular epical stories are Kelileh and Demneh in which the animals are the heroes and replace the actions of humans, albeit they follow the behaviour of human beings (**Figure 18**).



Figure 16. Special attention to the characteristics of Abolfazl in the Battle of Karbala, Hendu Kola, Amol (Pirzad, 2012)

The mythical characters of the Saqa Nefars paintings are creatures more like Jinn (in Islamic Mythology the spirits that are able to supernaturally influence mankind are called Jinn), and fairies, demons and ogres (ghouls) (Rahimzadeh, 2003, 39-47).



Figure 17. Figurative motifs of angel, Kaboud Kola, Babol (Pirzad, 2012)



Figure 18. Fauna motifs in Kaboud Kola Saqa Nefar, Babol (Pirzad, 2012)

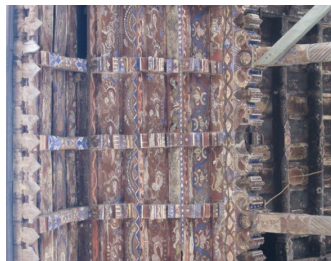


Figure 19. Floral motifs on the underside of the ceiling, Kebriya Kola Village, Babol (Pirzad, 2012)



Figure 20. Floral and geometrical motifs, Kaboud Kola Village, Babol (Pirzad, 2012)

Floral motifs

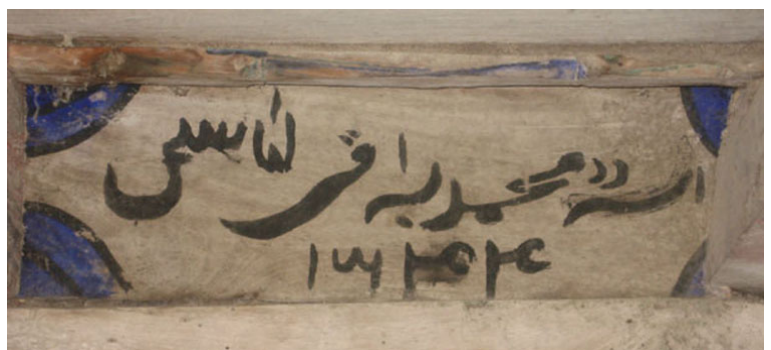
It is estimated that the patterns in the Saqa Nefars are clearly the floral decorations, which are more common than those in religious art. In Islamic art, floral ornaments are interpreted as being of religious importance because they express the idea of paradise. This must hold true, especially for the Saqa Nefars wall paintings, because the wall paintings belong to a religious place that signifies death. In this sense, the floral and closely connected geometrical ornaments are really expressions of Islamic identity (Figure 19). In addition, because of the location of these buildings the villagers are more inclined to use natural and floral motifs, which are more related to their culture and surroundings (Rahimzadeh, 2003, 39-47) (Figure 20).

Calligraphy

Local painters mostly used calligraphic elements (especially Nasta'liq, Shekaste Nasta'liq and Naskh) in various ways like religious poems and invocations, Quranic verses, and descriptive sentences. Sometimes religious poems were used as a major element, such as using the poems of Mohtasham Kashani on the top of paintings and mostly the invocations ya Hossein shahid, Ya Abolfazl (Figure 21) (Kuban, 2009, 8-20). In some cases, calligraphy lost the decorative aspect and was just used as an instructive element. In

Figure 21. Writing of poems and prayers by Nasta'liq handwriting, Oksar Village, Babolsar, Mazandaran (Pirzad, 2012)

Figure 22. Introducing characters by a special handwriting, Ghaemshahr (Pirzad, 2012)



this group, the writer was not necessarily a calligrapher or artist; he might simply be an ordinary literate person (Figure 22).

CONCLUSION

Although the Saqa Nefars with their great wooden construction, special geometrical dimensions, space proportions, and applications, could hardly be described as a small wooden religious place, the technology and decoration represented by them is certainly beautiful in its simplicity.

Saqa Nefars have their origin in a kind of vernacular architecture in the Mazandaran region, and are influenced by Shi'a Islam and the hero of the Karbala disaster, Abolfazl. However, there is a possibility that Nefars are just a kind of traditional architecture in Mazandaran, which are suited to its climate and date back to the pre-Islamic period. The location of these structures close to sources of water and their mythical decoration has reinforced the hypothesis that these sacred places date back to the Zoroastrian religion.

The architecture of the Saqa Nefars has undergone many changes and transitions due to the political, social and religious conditions. Among the changes in decoration and plan shape are the change from square and square rectangle shape into a stretched rectangle shape because of the function. The Saqa Nefars in any shape and plan form are still the symbols of religious and folkloric beliefs and the aesthetic views of the Mazandaran villagers. The main reason as to why this type of structure is still popular among people is the adaption of their application over the centuries from the pre-Islamic era until now, and also keeping their application as a place to release sadness.

Saqa Nefars are remote, and, to some extent, unknown architecture in the Mazandaran district, which need further attention. Thus, in the name of Iranian architectural heritage, it is hoped that any further decay of such historical constructions can be prevented by giving attention to the awareness and folklore beliefs.

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SAQA NEFARS: A HISTORICAL WOODEN STRUCTURE IN THE VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF IRAN

The vernacular buildings in Mazandaran, one of the northern states of Iran, which are called Saqa Nefar, can be construed as religious structures that are the outcome of the evolvement of construction techniques over thousands of years. Saqa Nefars optimised the use of materials, and were designed in accordance with the climatic considerations, the requisites of Shi'a Islam, and the cultural heritage of the people who live in this region. In this study, the type of traditional wooden buildings used as religious structures in Mazandaran are introduced and their features are discussed.

The study is based on documentation and descriptive analysis of the architectural and religious aspects of these wooden constructions in respect of their classification. In addition, the application of certain techniques in respect of the existing environmental parameters in the design of these buildings is taken into consideration. Dependent upon the availability of the information and access to the remaining structures, the author chose some historical sites to determine the current condition of the buildings and their exact functions based on observational studies.

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SAGA NEFAR: İRANIN YÖRESEL MİMARİSİNE AİT TARİHİ AHŞAP YAPILAR

İran'ın kuzeyinde yer alan Mazandaran bölgesinde Saga Nefar olarak bilinen yöresel binalar, dini yapılar olarak değerlendirilebilir. Binlerce yıl boyunca biriken yapım tekniklerini barındıran Saga Nefar binaları malzeme miktarlarını en uygun ölçülere çekerek ve bölgesel iklim koşullarını göze alarak, Şii İslam gereksinimlerini ve bölgede yaşayan insanların kültürel mirasını temsil etmektedir. Bu çalışmada Mazandaran'daki dini yapılarda kullanılan geleneksel ahşap binaların türleri tanıtmakta ve bu binaların özellikleri tartışılmaktadır. Bu çalışma sözü edilen ahşap yapıların mimari ve dini boyutlarını göz önünde bulundurarak belgeleme ve çözümleme yoluyla bu binaları sınıflandırmaktadır. Ayrıca, belirli tekniklerin tasarım ve yapım aşamalarındaki kullanımı, çevre parametreleri açısından incelenmektedir. Mevcut binaların bilgi erişim ve kullanılabilirliğine bağlı olarak seçilen yerlerdeki tarihi yapıların şimdiki durumu ve işlevleri gözlemsel çalışma tekniği ile değerlendirilmektedir.

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