The Palace of Blessing and Grace

Discovering spiritual symbolism in the Court of Lions at the Alhambra in Spain

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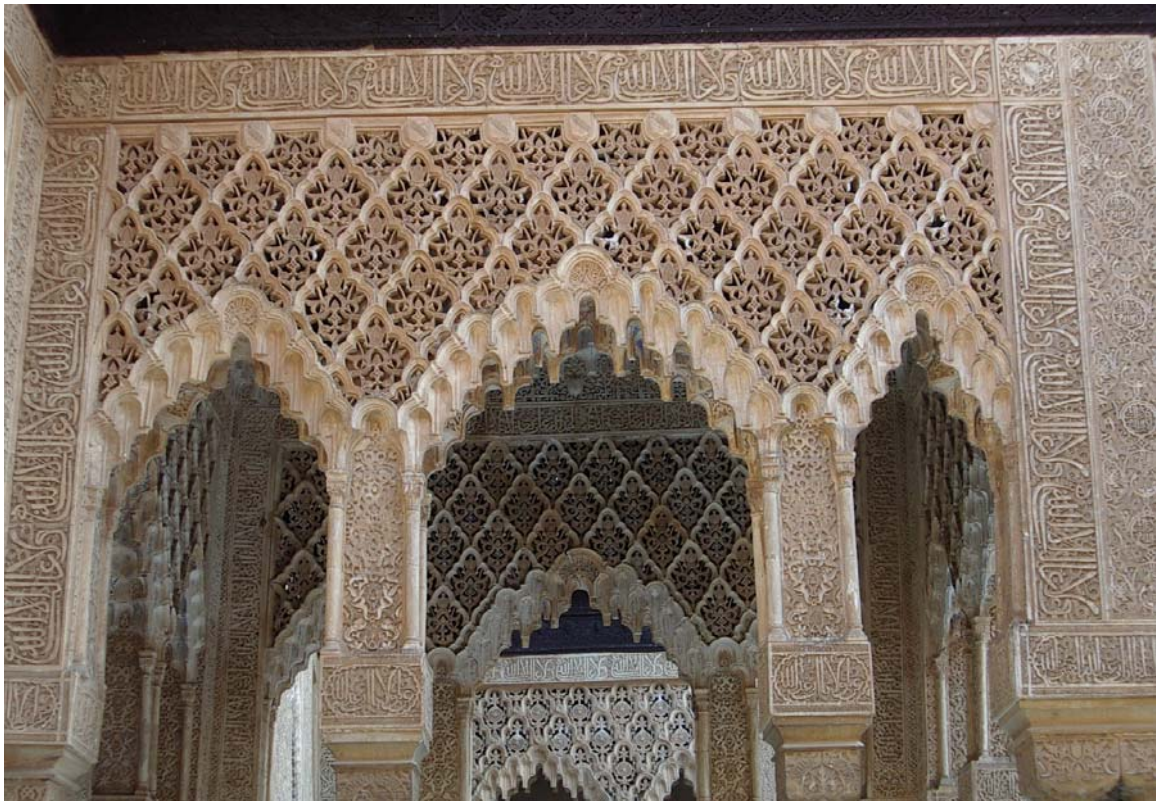
A delightful fragrance rides the spray scattered by the great fountain. The courtyard's visitors are cooled and refreshed by the zephyr laced with roses, jasmine and herbs. Defying the day's relentless heat, the chilly water flows unimpeded to the fountain through channels reaching the melting snows of the distant Sierra Nevada. The flowing water nurtures this courtyard and the other royal palaces built atop a promontory looking out over a wide fertile valley. From the ancient city below, the formidable walls of the royal enclave appear majestic and forbidding. Few from the town have seen the luxurious beauty hidden within the palaces above, but the palaces' renown reaches far beyond the snows of these mountains. Across the reaches of Europe and through the various lands of North Africa and the Near East, stories are told of the Alhambra's unmatched splendor and elegance.

The Court of Lions

The fountain is at the center of a rectangular garden-courtyard quartered by water channels forming a large cross. The channels drain small fountains whispering nearby in the royal halls at the north and south sides of the courtyard, and smaller pools to the east and west of it under two stunning pavilions. The delicate pavilions startle the senses. There is a felicitous harmony in the overall impression of the courtyard. It is an austerity celebrating an abundance of life and joy. Water flows gently from the smaller pools through the marble channels toward the central fountain. Here the main jet's silver spray falls into a massive basin that nurtures twelve water-spewing lion statues. The courtyard is bordered by covered walkways that connect the royal chambers. These and the cupolas of the delicate pavilions are supported by fine marble pillars that appear suspended from the arches they support. Their Moorish horseshoe arches are substantial but do not seem massive. The fine geometrical perforations covering their surfaces suggest a lattice of cascading water and light. Graceful patterns of light and shadow invade the obscurity of the chambers at each side of the courtyard.



"No Victor but God," the famous slogan of the Nasrids, can be found all over the palaces in the same cursive calligraphy visible at the top and side borders of these arches.

All of the surfaces are covered with intricate designs and several styles of calligraphy. The carved plaster arches and wall designs were originally painted and, here and there, dressed in gold. There was also more color in what was then a thriving garden, fragrant and full of bird song, around the fountain in this courtyard. This palace, now called the Court of Lions, represents the epitome of Nasrid architecture and craftsmanship in Andalusia during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is perhaps the grandest artifact from an age of splendor that manifested at many levels of culture: the finest music, literature, science, medicine, and the many other arts and crafts that came together in Islamic Spain.

It is helpful to reflect on this full range of cultural expression when visiting the Alhambra palaces today. The poems on the walls express not only the sensibilities of that time. They remind us of the rich life beyond the responsibilities of government taking place at the royal court: the appreciation of poetry and music, conversations about metaphysics and astronomy, presentations on religion and mysticism.

The Nasrid rulers were well aware both of the splendid refinement of their court and the precariousness of this last foothold of Islamic power in Spain. Their own ancestors had been vassals of the Christian powers that had, with their help, conquered the Muslim domains of Sevilla and its surrounding territories. The Nasrids had somehow survived the endless threats as well as the frequent strife occurring within their own dynasty. They had also survived an outbreak of plague in the early fourteenth century. Careful alliances with their Christian neighbors and the support of the Marinids in Morocco secured their existence for a time. Perhaps it was with this sense of the ephemeral nature of things, that the dynasty adopted the slogan, "There is no conqueror but God!" [*La Ghalib illa Allah*] This phrase is repeated endlessly on the walls of the palace.

Even more striking is the invocation of the word *baraka* found in hundreds of places throughout the palaces. There are, in fact, whole walls covered with this word and its naturalistic emblems: the pinecone, acorn, leaf sprout, and seashell. *Baraka* means blessing or divine grace. Scholars and art historians have noted this word in the Sala de la Barca, the entry chamber to the Ambassador's Hall. Yet the word *baraka* is, in fact, far more ubiquitous in the Court of Lions where it ornaments arches, capitals, and some of the walls. The word has been carved in many striking forms of Kufic and cursive calligraphy. These are invariably accompanied by carvings of the pinecone and acorn, leaves and sprouts, flower buds and seashells. These are all ancient symbols of bounty and fertility as well as good fortune.

The word 'baraka' in mirrored Kufic calligraphy

This word, *baraka*, has an interesting range of meaning. It has been used to indicate the spirituality of certain saints of God as well as of sacred places. This spirituality is thought to be enlightening, protective, and nurturing. *Baraka* also refers to manifestations of spirit such as the abundance, bounty, and blessings of the good life. We often see this use of the word on Andalusian coins and other artifacts from the period. The Court of Lions was a retreat from the tiresome responsibilities of governing, a place for the intimacy of family and social life. What greater earthly blessing could there be than this reflection of Paradise, this home of the Sultan, the "shadow of God?"

Consider, for a moment, the importance that this concept of divine grace must have had in the minds of the palace designers that whole surfaces of walls and arches would have been covered with calligraphic representations of the word baraka, along with the pinecone and other seed and sprout forms emblematic of it. The word seems not only meant to be an invocation of blessing upon the royal inhabitants. It was and is a constant reminder of the beauty and joy found in God's manifestations of mercy. The pinecone, *baraka*'s most common emblem at the Alhambra, is an apt symbol of this aspect of God's merciful nature and creativity. It is the singular bearer of many seeds of life, each of which contains

The word 'baraka' in cursive calligraphy

all the potentials of each stage in the growth of a new life. The pinecone represents the principle of multiplicity within unity, as well as the unity which comprehends multiplicity.

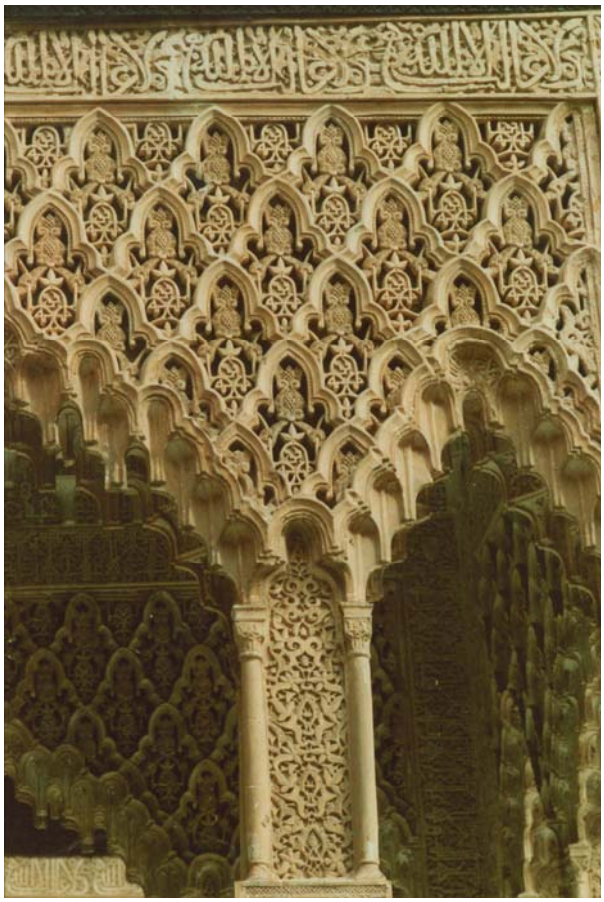
Many of the inscriptions[1] on the walls of the Alhambra palaces celebrate the rule of various sultans of the Nasrid dynasty. But as James Dickie notes, "A proper Muslim ruler never styled himself "king," which would be an encroachment on God's sovereignty, but only "sultan" (the [Arabic word] root s-l-t conveys the notion of delegated authority); He recognized that his power derived from the *Shari'a*, the divinely revealed law; indeed it was the application of this law that legitimized his rule."[2]

The world as a reflection or shadow of the Divine is an idea deeply rooted in Islamic thought. Tabi'at, nature, means an 'impression' from the spiritual world above. Like Judaism, Islam is fiercely unitarian in its conception of God as

[1] See "La Alhambra de Granada:Poder, Arte y Utopia," by Jose Miguel Puerta Vilchez, Cuadernos de la Alhambra, Vol. 23, Granada, 1987.

[2] James Dickie, "The Palaces of the Alhambra," pg. 139. From the book, Al-Andalus, The Art of Islamic Spain, edited by Jerrilynn D. Dodds. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1992.

unique and transcendent. Yet God is also thought to display His[3] beauty and complexity in this world. In the Qur'an, Allah frequently speaks of nature and its forces as symbols of spiritual realities. The Qur'anic description of paradise tells of a garden watered by fountains, rivers and pools. This is God's manifestation of mercy and peace upon those whose hearts are free from strife and opposition to the truth of their origin from, and their return to Him. The ordinary Muslim believer sees the garden as a symbol of the afterlife while the mystic sees the garden as a reflection of the spiritual relationship with God while yet alive. These mystics, the Sufis, were thought to be the true "shadows of God," or "luminous shadows[4] ," to quote the greatest Andalusian mystic, Ibn al-'Arabi. The great poets, artists, and calligraphers of that golden age were often members of Sufi fraternities whose spiritual journeys were recorded in the artistic media of the time, borrowing frequently from the allegorical references of the Qur'an.



A more enigmatic form of the word 'baraka' whose calligraphic elements can be discerned on page 4.

[3] Although Divinity, in Itself, is beyond such concepts of gender, the active aspect of God is identified in masculine terms in the Qur'an. The feminine side of Divinity is metaphysically considered, by mystics like Ibn 'Arabi, to be the Essence at one pole and Nature at the other.

[4] See the chapter Joseph in the Fusus al-Hikam of Ibn al-Arabi.

In the Qur'an, the human shadow of God is referred to as the 'representative,' or 'vicegerent' [*khalifah*] of Allah on earth, representing His divine will in the terrestrial domain. The sultans assigned this title to themselves in keeping with a tradition of rulership going back to King David who is called a vicegerent in the Qur'an. The heirs of Muhammad, whose rulers were subsequently called Caliphs, wielded worldly and spiritual authority over the believers of Islam. They bore the title of *Amir al-Mu'minin*, Commander of the Faithful. However, the first vicegerent mentioned in the Qur'an is none other than Adam, the prototypical human being. His qualification for the vicegerency is due, according to scripture, to his being loftier, in one sense, than even the angels because of his greater capacity for understanding the nature of God. The Qur'an says of him, "Allah taught him all of the Names." When the 'names' are referenced in the Qur'an, they usually indicate Allah's ninety-nine "Beautiful Names," as they are described. All educated Muslims are aware that these Names are God's divine Attributes or Qualities. Examples of these Names are "the Merciful," "the One," "the Irresistible," and "the Forgiving." It is the image of these Attributes, and not of the formless Divine Essence, that is revealed in the world. The true vicegerent of God, according to the Sufis, would be one who experiences and manifests all of these Names in his or her own consciousness. Such a person is a mirror for God to gaze upon His own qualities, or a comprehensive shadow of Himself within His creation. A poem by Ibn al-'Arabi on the nature of God's shadow, or reflection, helps to clarify this perspective:

She said, "I wonder at a lover who full of his own merit,
swaggers oddly through the flowers in a garden!"
I answered, "Don't be surprised at what You see!
You gaze upon Yourself in the mirror of a man[5]. "

This famous Andalusian mystic, in a commentary on his own poetry, wrote, "[The man in the poem] says, 'I serve as a mirror for You and You see Yourself, and not me, in those qualities of Yours that I have taken on, yet You see them in my human nature which has been clothed by them.[6] "

For the Sufi, the walled garden represents the sanctuary of the heart, the center of existential awareness in a human being. This heart is thought to be a mirror,

[5] My translation from the Tarjuman al-Ashwaq from the critical edition of the Arabic prepared by R. A. Nicholson and published with his translation and notes. Reprinted by the Theosophical Publishing House 1978.

[6] Ibid.

or showplace, of divine Self-manifestation. It is the refuge from Man's amnesia about his origin and high purpose. In the heart of the mystic, God might manifest His transcendental unity or His diversity of expression in the forms of images and symbols. The fountain represents God's oneness, His essential, unique determination and divine identity which has no partner. The word for essence in Arabic is *'ain*. This word *'ain* also means fountain, the water-source that sustains all life. There is, in many cultures, an ancient tradition about the fountain of eternal life, the fons vitae. It is also described as a fountain of eternal freshness or youth. For the Muslim, 'fountain' immediately invokes Qur'anic descriptions of paradise where underground rivers nourish a fountain called salsabil that is one of the delights of the dwellers of paradise.

The courtyard's fountain drains into a basin that provides water to twelve water-spewing lion statues that support it. The lion statues are thought by some scholars to have been brought to the Alhambra from the nearby residence of an eleventh century Jewish vizier. It is certainly true that this was not the first fountain with lions. There is even a poem by Ibn Gabirol extolling a majestic fountain with lions in eleventh-century Cordoba. Whatever the truth of their provenance, the lions represent, in this mystical exegesis, divine power manifesting in the world of multiplicity and diversity. The Court of Lions, as we now call this place, is evocative of the special relationship of God manifesting in the human heart. It should not therefore be surprising to find special language and symbolism in the structures that survive. Some of this symbolism was shared by Jewish and Christian mystics, whose religious stories are more or less retold in the Qur'an. It should be noted that there was a strong connection between Jewish and Muslim mystical expression during this period. It is thought that Joseph Ibn Nagrila, son of the Jewish vizier of the Muslim Granadan lords of the eleventh century, laid out the original gardens of the Alhambra palaces two centuries before the creation of the Court of Lions[7].

As mentioned, *'ain* also means 'essence' in Arabic. The word immediately evokes the idea of the unlimited Source of Existence, as well as its permeation of the forms in the created world. It may surprise the reader to learn that the word has yet a third meaning, that of 'eye.' Arabic is a remarkable language that is very given to multiple entendre. We now see combined in this one word, the concepts of essence, the life-source of being, and the perception, or awareness. This is the Essence/Fount of Being/Witnessing in the nature of God and in His

[7] Maria Rosa Menocal, The Ornament of the World. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, New York, London, 2002. Pg. 105.

reflection in the mystic's heart. Poets and mystics have a long tradition of making full use of the poly-suggestive nature of this language. Although the Arabs borrowed fountain and garden designs from Persian, Near Eastern and Mediterranean antecedents, these took on special meaning in imperial Arabian culture, both because of the well-known Qur'anic descriptions of Paradise as a garden with fountains and rivers, and because of the word associations already mentioned.

The pre-Islamic Arabs were, compared with their Persian and Roman neighbors, scientifically and technologically unsophisticated. The Andalusian Arabs, like the imperial Abbassids of Baghdad, became the synthesizers of the scientific, technological, philosophical, and aesthetic cultures of the ancient world. By Nasrid times, Islamic palace and garden design had reached their apogee at the Alhambra, even if these were not built on the expansive scale of classical imperial residences such as the Medinat al-Zahra near Cordoba. The Nasrids cultivated a refinement of the earlier forms and specialized in the evocation of intimacy in the smaller spaces they created. By intimacy is meant an immediate sense of connection and even a feeling of being absorbed into the existence of the surroundings. This psychological effect can be contrasted with the inspiring sense of awe and the uplifting awareness of one's insignificance evoked within many huge palaces and religious buildings all over the world.

The aesthetic of intimacy reaches its height of achievement at the Court of Lions in the stunning Hall of the Two Sisters and the Hall of the Abencerrajes at the north and south side of the fountain respectively. It is thought that these spaces were primarily used for musical performances and the recitation of poetry. The ceiling in the Hall of the Two Sisters is the most complex expression of the Persian architectural stalactite [*muqarnas*] construction in the world. James Dickie writes, "Upward of five thousand cells cascading downward produce in their disciplined descent domes within a dome, the most complex ceiling in the Muslim world and the apogee of Islamic art on the peninsula[8]. " On the walls of this hall are some lovely verses by Ibn Zamrak, the dynasty's finest poet. A poem there opens with the verse:

I am a garden adorned by Beauty.
Truly, a glance at my loveliness reveals my soul!

[8] James Dickie, "The Palaces of the Alhambra," pg. 146. From the book, Al-Andalus, The Art of Islamic Spain, edited by Jerrilynn D. Dodds. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1992.

What appears on the surface as worldly literature was often equally meant as praise of God and could even have been meant as an allusion to mystical experience. Poets often played on the multiple meaning of *'ain*. An example by Ibn Zamrak is in the Court of Lions complex where it can be found in the Mirador de Lindaraja. It reads:

In this garden I am an eye filled with delight
And the pupil of this eye is none other than our lord.[9]

Lord here is usually taken to mean the sultan, Muhammad V, who is thought to view the gardens from the Mirador. The reader should understand that there is a Sufi doctrine, quite current at that time, that it is actually God who looks through the pupil of the eye of any viewer, that it is actually God who is the ultimate seer in all seeing. Keeping that in mind, it is possible to understand the stanza in a different light and to take the meaning of 'lord' quite differently. The words used in the line, "*insan ul-'ain*" the "person in the eye," meaning the pupil, are precisely the words used by the Sufi gnostics when alluding to God's seeing through the eyes of the "true Human," the vicegerent[10].

Ineffable mystical experience cannot directly be described and must be referred to through metaphor and analogy. Much of the literature and art of this period was dedicated to this endeavor. This art seeks to communicate, through the senses and through the mind, that which is beyond the senses and the mind. It further communicates how that which is beyond the senses and the mind becomes clothed in the entities of the cosmos, and is revealed in the experience of the senses and the mind.

Ibn al-'Arabi captures this special use of art in another stanza of his poetry:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a
pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
and a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba
and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's
camels take, that is my religion and my faith. [11]

[9] James Dickie translation.

[10] See the chapter Adam in the Fusus al-Hikam by Ibn al-'Arabi for this doctrine and its language.
[11] The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq, translated by R. A. Nicholson and published with notes. Reprinted by the Theosophical Publishing House 1978.

Throughout Islamic history, mysticism had often been opposed by conventional religionists who could neither conceive of nor accept the existence of a direct personal confirmation of scriptural revelation. The Almohad, Marinid, and Nasrid clergy were usually opposed to the Sufis and the philosophers. Enigmatic reference to mystical experience has a long tradition in Islam where mystics were not infrequently put to death for claiming a direct experiential knowledge of God. It is not surprising that special languages would have evolved to veil the realities of mystical experience.

Mystical and cosmological symbolism, whether found in literature, art, or architecture, created a context for understanding and attuning oneself to the spiritual world. The Alhambra is often cited by art historians as an example of Islamic architectural symbolism because of the cosmological references evident in the ceiling of the Hall of the Ambassadors. It has been very credibly demonstrated that this ceiling depicts the cosmological hierarchy of the Throne of Allah set above the seven heavens of the created world[12] . The impact of the room's proportions, lighting and surface detail allow one to viscerally experience the message illustrated in the vaulted ceiling. One feels at once dwarfed, awed and protected under this walled heavenly dome. It is easy to imagine divine authority acting through the sultan whose throne once sat under this representation of the cosmic hierarchy.

A good deal of debate has taken place concerning the symbolism of this and other structures at the Alhambra. Yet the treasure trove of mystical symbolism and allusion hidden throughout these palaces has scarcely been tapped. The symbolic language must be known before the communication can be understood. One of the symbolic languages of the Sufis is a form of numerology generally called *abjad* in the Islamic world. Each letter of the alphabet is assigned a number, allowing words to have specific numerical assignations through the addition of their letter-numbers. In this manner, words and concepts with the same number totals can be identified with each other. The fundaments of this system, far from being esoteric, are to be found in any Arabic dictionary or grammar book[13].

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[12] The ceiling depicts the Qur'anic verse 67:3 and 5, "Blessed is He in whose hands is the sovereignty." " He created the seven heavens layered upon each other."

[13] See, for example, An Introduction to Koranic and Classical Arabic, pg 245, by W.M. Thackston, Iranbooks, 1994.

The use of *abjad* has a long history in Islamic Spain where it was employed in literature and art. Although commonly used in chronograms, talismans, and even magic, numerology was also used by mystics and metaphysicians to communicate the fundamental realities of existence and cosmology. We should remember that, at the time of the building of the Court of Lions during the reign of Muhammad V, there existed an unparalleled body of mystical and cosmological literature replete with number symbolism. The impact of Andalusian writers like Ibn al-'Arabi and Ibn Rushd in educated circles cannot be overemphasized. In fact, the impact of the Sufi Ibn al-'Arabi on mysticism was without precedence in the whole of the Islamic world where he is still called the "Greatest Teacher [*Shaikh al-Akbar*]." In his major work, the *Futuhat al-Makiyyah*, The Meccan Openings, he describes and makes use of numerology and other forms of number symbolism. Ibn al-Khatib, Muhammad V's brilliant minister who was also a lover of poetry, philosophy and mysticism, was eventually put to death in Fez, allegedly for heresy and being a supporter of philosophy and Sufism[14]. He was the statesman who tutored Muhammad V in his youth and who would have had a strong influence on all of the activities at the court. One of his famous books was the *Rawdat at-Ta'arif bi-l-Hubb ash-Sharif*,

Unusual eleven-pointed star employed in the Court of Lions arabesques. Twelve of these stars are found under each cupola at the east and west ends of the court.

[14] See the Encyclopedia of Medieval Iberia, ed. Michael Gerli. New York, Routledge, 2003. pgs. 416, 417.

'The Garden of Knowing the Noble Love." What these men had in common was the love of evocative symbolism which had the power to keep the mind attuned to its fundamental relationship with True Reality. It should not then come as a surprise to find that even numerology was employed in the Alhambra palaces where there is already so much symbolic language in evidence.

I will take just one out of many outstanding examples of the architectural usage of *abjad* that was employed at the Alhambra Palaces. This was constructed in the geometric designs on the underside of the cupolas within the pavilions at the east and west sides of the Court of Lions. These are wooden arabesques which have survived the centuries with very little decay thanks to the dry climate of the region. These semi-spherical arabesques have been designed with a very interesting geometry. Each cupola shelters twelve eleven-pointed stars connected to each other by minor star polygons. Muslim artists made wide use of star geometry but rarely of the more difficult eleven-pointed star arabesques. One must ask the question, "Why go to such trouble, especially under cupolas sheltering fountains and generally out of view?"

Mystically important truths are alluded to in this geometry. First, there is the most obvious symbolism of each eleven pointed star. The number eleven through numerical equivalence is synonymous with the Divine Self or Identity, called *Huwa*[15] in Arabic. *Huwa*, or *Hu*, is the Absolute Existence, whether conceived of as beyond the particularities of the created world or as the source and very existence of those particularities. This double aspect of True Reality can be conceived of as the 'Unity of the Essence' and Its other aspect called the 'Unity of the Names[16].' The Names of God and the multiplicity arising from them in the cosmos are only experienced as multiplicity in a consciousness that cannot apprehend their fundamental unity when mirrored in the cosmos, but only perceives their diversity of meaning as manifested in the forms. A subtlety in the symbolism of the divine Identity, *Huwa*, is that the number eleven results from the mirroring of the number one. The aesthetic appeal of monoformal symmetry, in which a mirrored singularity creates multiplicity, can be found expressing itself in many Islamic arts such as book cover design, medallion carpets, and also in architecture. In the Court of Lions, we see this symmetry highlighted by the

[15] h=5+w=6 giving a total of 11.
[16] See Ibn al-Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*, in the chapter on the Wisdom of Joseph, for an explication of this doctrine.

protrusion of the mirrored pavilions at the east and west ends of the courtyard. These, of course, contain virtually identical domes with the same unitarian symbolism.

Looking secondly at the arrangement of the stars, we see that they are arranged in three levels of four stars each. Forty-four, invoked at each level of four eleven-pointed stars, is numerically synonymous with the divine Unity, *al-Ahad*[17] . This divine Oneness of Being does not Itself become multiple through the appearance of the particularities of created existence any more than light becomes plural in the various colors and shadings in which it is manifested. The unity of God is, of course, a fundamental belief of Islam and a fundamental experience of all mystics. There also happen to be forty-four floral shapes decorating each eleven-pointed star[18] , numerologically forming the sentence in each of the stars, "He is the One, the Unique!" [*Huwa al-Ahad*].

One of the pavilions mirrored at the east and west ends of the courtyard sheltering domes ornamented with 11-pointed stars.

Lastly, and very importantly in the overall message of the cupolas, the totality of the twelve stars (each with eleven points giving an aggregate of 132 points) indicate the word *qalb*[19] , an Arabic word that has the double meaning of "heart" and "transformation." Heart, as earlier pointed out, might well be translated into contemporary English as "mind" or "consciousness." The particularities of

[17] a=1+l=30+a=1+H=8+d=4 giving a total of 44.

[18] See the close-up of the eleven-pointed star on page 11.

[19] q=100+l=30+b=2, giving a total of 132.

Pillars with the word 'baraka' at the Court of Lions

existence, whether experienced in the world or in the mind, are thought of as divine Self-manifestations conforming to noumenal potentials called "essences," *'ayan*. The potentials remain in a state of non-manifestation while Being is thought to manifest according to various characteristics of their latencies. These potentials, *'ayan*[20] , also have an *abjad* of 132. We can derive from the symbolism of the cupolas that the mystery of Divine Unity and the appearance of multiplicity at their most fundamental level can be experienced in the properly attuned heart, or consciousness, of the mystic.

Islamic mysticism is firmly grounded in the scripture of the Qur'an as well as in the divinely inspired sayings [*ahadith*] of the Prophet Muhammad. The cupolas artistically express the meaning of one famous saying where God announces, "My earth and My sky do not contain Me but the 'heart' of My faithful servant contains Me." In other words, "I am not known, neither as the Singular and transcendental Divinity nor as the Self-manifesting Divinity existentiating the limitless potentials of the noumena, except in My one mirror of the purified human heart-mind which is vast enough to comprise My own vastness."

It is in this citation that one can understand the Sufi conception of true Islam. This is an Islam which, according to its word-root meaning[21] , leads to a

[20] a=1+'ain=70+y=10+a=1+n=50, giving 132.
[21] From s+l+m come the meanings of surrender and wholeness.

surrender: a surrender of the personally constructed world-view of the instinct-dominated person to the unlimited and infinite Source of existence. Experientially this means the opening of a luminous existential vastness in the consciousness of the individual who has let go the defenses of the strife-ridden kingdom of the self. "No Conqueror but Allah," as the verse repeated on the walls throughout the palace reminds us. This meaning of Islam is the origin of the faith's earthly shadow, the Islam of submission to God's Word and ordinances, as Islam is more commonly understood. The abjadist sees a clear linkage in the concepts above in the happy coincidence that the word *Islam*[22] itself also has a numerology of 132. And if I may strain the reader's credulity, 132 is also the *abjad* equivalent for *Muhammad,* [23] the Prophet of Islam. He is considered the spiritual leader of the Sufi mystics. In this last instance, it is commonplace among abjadists to count the doubled 'm' in his name, an anomaly that aids in joining all of these concepts together . It is the "Muhammadan heart" that embraces the double aspects of Unity: God's transcendental Unity, beyond the multiplicity of creation and God's Unity of Being within the ever-changing diversity occurring at all levels of existence.

The foregoing is only a partial exegesis of the symbolism of these domes. The attuned reader could find many more spiritually evocative and metaphysically useful representations in their geometry, as well as in other areas of the palaces. These overlays of numerological and other symbolism are meant to broaden the impact we already receive directly from the aesthetics of this place. Why are we so moved by these palaces? What do we experience from the proportions and symmetries of this special courtyard?

The majestic fountain and the patterns of light in the shadows continue to delight us. The Court of Lions provides a glimpse into the rich life of the Nasrid monarchs who built and adorned the Alhambra palaces with the best of Islamic architectural and artistic expression. In the same period in far-away Khorasan, Muslim rulers of the Timurid era also brought together the best artists and poets of the day. Both have left us with artifacts that still bear witness to the beauty and complexity of Islamic culture. Both cultures especially treasured metaphysical and mystical writings and works of art which were esteemed by the rulers and the great thinkers of their day. Art and literature were then dominated by members of Sufi organizations in both regions. Part of the genius

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[22] a=1+s=60+l=30,+a=1+m+40, giving 132.

[23] m=40+h=8+m=40+m=40+d=4, giving 132. Doubled letters are not normally counted twice.

of this time was a result of the sharing and borrowing of ideas and symbols across time and culture. Hence, the most sophisticated example of the Persian stalactite dome is found in Spain at the Alhambra. Mystics and thinkers of the Timurid courts of Central Asia were, in the same period, busy preparing long commentaries on the writings of the Andalusian mystic, Shaikh Ibn al-'Arabi. These individuals, thousands of miles from each other, applied themselves to discovering the capacities of the human spirit and the meaning of life. They have, in art and literature, left behind their thoughts and visions concerning the true meaning of the human being. There has been extensive study of the literature from both regions, giving us a fairly clear sense of their ideas on cosmology and spirituality. People today are less familiar though with the possibility of expressing these insights in the realms of the visual and musical arts. Yet it is precisely in these presentations that metaphysical concepts can be absorbed by the non-linear, meta-analytical capacities of the mind and spirit. The survival of the Court of Lions gives us the opportunity to better understand this form of subtle communication.

APPENDIX

Sacred alphabetical numerology, the communication of mathematical relationships between philosophical and metaphysical concepts through the use of letter/number identity systems, is far older than Islamic Arabic culture. The origins of numerology are a bit unclear, but systems for its use were extent in ancient Phoenicia and Greece. In the Islamic world, there is evidence of sacred numerology appearing in the Qur'an itself. It is important to distinguish sacred numerology from the widespread use of numerology in the talismanic and magical arts, as well as in administrative documentation. Sacred numerology has been reserved primarily for the expression, instruction, and codification of metaphysical concepts, and their verification by mystics of the great spiritual traditions.

What, in the West, are now called Arabic numerals, were earlier imported from India into Arabia where alphabetical letters had also served as numbers, as was the case in other Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures. Prior to the introduction of Indian numbers, an Arab would automatically make numerological associations between letters and numbers, and it would be inevitable that important concepts and ideas would come to have number identities. Islamic culture has, from its inception, made use of numerology. Most educated readers of the great poetry in Arabic and Persian are still aware of this, at least to some extent. As a clear and simple example, for many poems containing numerological expression are deliberately quite obscure, here is a couplet from one of Hafez of Shiraz's ghazal's:

There is naught on my heart's tablet but the Friend's letter "A."
What can I do, as the Master has taught me no other letter.

The letter A [Alef in Arabic/Persian] is, in abjad, equivalent to the number 'one.' Hafez indicates that God alone is present in his heart, and that he experiences mystical oneness with God because his heart [consciousness] has been wiped clean of duality.

Numerology is very widely used in the mystical literature of Islam, along with allegorical and metaphorical language. All of these expressions, including the calligraphy itself, have a double intention of revealing and hiding the communication. This accords perfectly with the paradoxical reality of mystical

experience which has been variously described as “a bright midnight,” an “open secret,” an “obscurity hidden by its very obviousness,” etc…

Not all mystics make use of numerology. Moreover, some of the mystical orders of Sufism actually barred its use because of the inherent danger of obsessional thinking and inappropriate systematization taking over the minds of aspirants who struggle with the uncertainties of mystical experience.

Many mystics find themselves with an enhanced capacity for punning and for apprehending the connections between concepts and events that had not been evident prior to their spiritual transformations. Some of these mystics of the Islamic world have found the language of abjad useful for such associative

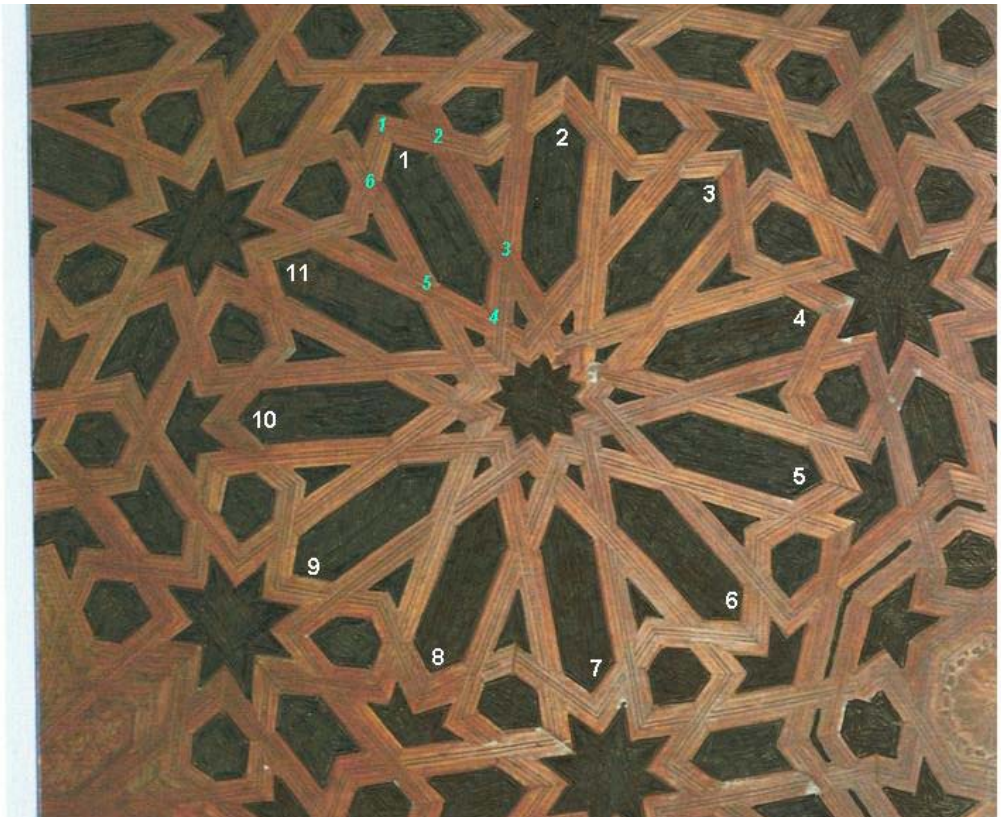

Diagram of the eleven-pointed star showing two ways of counting for abjad.

exploration and communication. Anyone without such an associative capacity may be unable to support or acknowledge the benefit, or even the existence, of such communication.

The example of numerology employed in the cupolas that I have explicated in this paper is quite straightforward and I propose, in this appendix, to give a bit more detail to help guide anyone interested in pursuing this topic.

I pointed out that through the use of a set of eleven-pointed stars, one could communicate certain metaphysically fundamental concepts about the nature of unity and multiplicity. I used the simplest *abjad* form, that of counting just the number of points of the star arabesques, and the number of floral forms contained by them. There is often a secondary form of counting used in geometrical *abjad* that can be applied to these arabesques which would yield additional metaphysical meaning. I will introduce just one example of this in order not to deny the earnest seeker an opportunity to further pursue the matter independently.

The reader will notice that in forming the eleven-pointed stars, hexagons make up the largest polygons of each star (see diagram on previous page). There are other important polygon shapes within each star, but let's just examine the larger hexagons that form the actual points of the stars. Each star has eleven of these. Each hexagon could be described as having six connected lines or six points of line intersection, either way giving the number six. Six times the eleven hexagons gives sixty-six, the *abjad* for Allah, God. This word not only means God in the general sense, but has a particular significance in Islamic mysticism of representing the Divine as both the formless Essence and the totality of the cosmos-engendering Divine Names explored in the essay. So the metaphysical communication about divine Unicity and multiplicity is further unveiled in yet this other layer of *abjad* communication.

"And He is the Guide."