

# Comparison and analysis of trees of life in Turkish and Metepec art of ceramics

## *(Comparação e análise de árvores da vida na arte cerâmica turca e de Metepec)*

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### Abstract

Ceramics is one of the most important materials that carry the traces of past. Kitchenware, architectural elements and religious forms that are made of ceramics carry the important traces of cultures, which they belong to. In this context, the art of ceramics is a field where symbolic statements exist as a mean of expression and it establishes an organic correlation between past and present. One of the most important of these forms that belongs to this expression is the 'tree of life'. The form of the tree of life differs stylistically and figuratively from culture to culture and it has great expressional richness. In this study, which was supported by Anadolu University as a scientific research project, the pattern of Metepec, which is the centre of ceramics in Mexico and still continues to produce pottery, and of Turkish art of ceramics were analysed and compared historically, stylistically and technically.

**Keywords:** tree of life, Metepec, ceramics, Turkish.

### Resumo

*A cerâmica é um dos materiais mais importantes que carregam os vestígios do passado. Utensílios de cozinha, elementos arquitetônicos e formas religiosas que são feitos de cerâmica conduzem traços importantes das culturas as quais eles pertencem. Neste contexto, a arte da cerâmica é um campo onde existem registros simbólicos como um meio de expressão e estabelece uma correlação orgânica entre passado e presente. Uma das mais importantes destas formas que pertence a esta expressão é a 'árvore da vida'. A forma da árvore da vida difere estilística e figurativamente de cultura para cultura e tem grande riqueza de expressão. Neste estudo, que foi apoiado pela Universidade Anadolu como um projeto de pesquisa científica, o padrão de Metepec, que é o centro de cerâmica no México e ainda continua a produzir cerâmica, e a arte cerâmica turca foram analisados e comparados histórica, estilística e tecnicamente.*

**Palavras-chave:** árvore da vida, Metepec, cerâmicas, turco.

## INTRODUCTION

The pattern of tree of life has been used both symbolically and decoratively from past to present. Within the extent of this research, when the symbolic meanings and forms of the tree of life are observed it is seen that it varies from culture to culture. Human beings have both communicated through symbolizing objects and concepts and produced works reflecting their emotions and thoughts via these symbols throughout the ages. These concrete values as a result of this symbolic expression bring past to present and light the way for the history of human beings.

The system of symbols that is to tell the beliefs and to interpret the events is also known as symbolism. One of the figures that is frequently used in symbolic expression is tree. The reason why tree has an important place in symbolic expression is that it is used to meet the basic needs such as shelter, nourishment and belief of people. "Almost

all societies have created myths and beliefs about the trees since the ancient times in fact, the tree has become a natural form that is spiritual, physical and symbolizes the holiness of the hereafter and life and it usually symbolizes godlikeness or a religious constitution" [1]. In this context, the tree has become one of the most important figures both in works of art and in the system of beliefs and the tree of life exists as a symbol of different cultures and beliefs. Another reason why the tree figure is accepted as sacred is that it is the symbol of dynamic life because it is a living creature, it sheds leaves, then it blossoms, it fructifies. People make a vow on trees; serve meal, plant the trees near graves or shrines, use trees in exorcisms or ward off evil spirit in ancient beliefs; plant trees before building a house and trees are accepted as the beginning of an ancestry. These are all the demonstrations of the tree's being sacred. In this research, trees of life in Turkish and Metepec art of ceramics were compared historically, stylistically and technically with examples of two cultures.

## MEXICAN HANDCRAFTS AND METEPEC TREE OF LIFE

Mexico has a diverse geography with its fertile valleys, tropical jungles and gulfs. This geography has been home to great civilizations such as Olmec, Maya, Teotihuacan, Toltec and Aztec since 1500 B.C. These people that live in Mexico were engaged in agriculture first, then they dealt with the trade of mineral richness such as jasper, obsidian and metal. Mexican folks who had high technology in ceramics, weaving and stonemasonry, took their place in history as one of the most important civilizations after they had started to use hieroglyphs of Maya in around 150 A.D. After Spain had invaded Mexico in 16<sup>th</sup> century, cultural interaction started between cultures. After Mexico had gain independence in 1821, Mexican Folk arts were in rise, interested by collectors and started to be displayed in museums in America in the period called Mexican Revolution that happened a hundred years after the independence. “Hand crafts as a part of every culture keep cultural values alive and play a role in protecting them, they also inform us about the way of livings, beliefs and economic opportunities of societies and have original, authentic and regional features” [2]. In this context, we can see that the Mexican hand crafts are under the effect of the Indian, Spanish communities and Indian-Spanish descendent community called ‘mestizo’ that compose its folk. A lot of themes and images of Mexican handcrafts reflect the effects of developments in Mexican history (Fig. 1). A lot of products in this field today are affected by the objects and designs of native folks such as Maya and Aztec.



Figure 1: Example of Mexican handcrafts, bead braided Huichol; Mexican Museum of Anthropology.

[Figura 1: Exemplo de artesanato mexicano, cordão trançado Huichol; Museu Mexicano de Antropologia.]

“Mexican hand crafts which we can call as Ancient American Native Arts are also wonderful and glamorous, composed of different cultures from which we can grab new

things at every moment. They are the richness of traditional hand crafts which shed light on today” [3]. Among the Mexican handcrafts which has a rich framework, pottery is one of the most popular and ancient field (Fig. 2). Mexican ceramics which is usually formed by using coil or moulding methods differs in the sense of form or ornaments according to the region they are produced. Metepec which is one of the most important centres of ceramics in Mexico continues to exist thanks to the originality of its ceramics.



Figure 2: Maya ceramics, terra sigillata; Mexican Museum of Anthropology.

[Figura 2: Cerâmica Maya, terra sigillata; Museu Mexicano de Antropologia.]

The most famous forms of Metepec pottery are ceramics trees called ‘Tree of life’ (*Arboles de la Vida*) which are fired at minimum temperatures and ornamented by using just one colour or lots of colours. These ceramics trees can be about a historical period or event, or it can describe the life of a person by carrying a symbolical meaning. Mexican native culture and Spanish culture come together in a great harmony in tree of life and it was produced as a chandelier at first. However, after the invasion of Spanish in Mexico ceramics trees, which combined with the Catholic symbols started to be used in religious ceremonies and in churches (Fig. 3).

There is a symbol of God on top of the traditional trees of life that are produced under the effect of Catholic belief. The story of creation is described by using figures like sun, moon, animals, Adam and Eve under the image of God. Apart from their being a religious symbol in time, Metepec trees of life are brought to the present by contemporary interpretations of patterns of the ceramists who break out of traditional style and reflect their style. The 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of Mesillas Family Adrian Gonzalez who met ceramics when he was just a kid continues to produce trees of life in his workshop with his son Michael (Fig. 4). It is possible to see the traces of colourful Mexican ceramics on the walls and everywhere in the building that he uses both as a workshop and a house. He uses the Father, the Son and the Holly Spirit figures in his trees of life, the patterns can vary with the order. Tiny figures



Figure 3: Tree of Life candelabrum with peacock; Mexican Museum of Anthropology.  
[Figura 3: Candelabro de Árvore da Vida com pavão; Museu Mexicano de Antropologia.]



Figure 5: Flower figure (a) and details (b) for assembly on the tree of life.  
[Figura 5: Figura de flor (a) e detalhes (b) para montagem sobre a árvore da vida.]



Figure 4: Metepec Tree of Life designed by Adrian Gonzalez Mesillas.  
[Figura 4: Árvore da Vida de Metepec projetado por Adrian Gonzalez Mesillas.]



Figure 6: Noah's Ark themed Tree of Life.  
[Figura 6: Árvore da Vida com tema de Arca de Noé.]

that are formed either with hand or mould by using red mud during production phase are threaded to a wire and assembled on the tree (Figs. 5 and 6). After assembling, tree of life is put on drying, and the biscuit firing is completed with open firing.

### TREE OF LIFE IN THE TURKISH CULTURE AND ITS EXPRESSION IN CERAMICS

The intended purposes and meaning of symbols and patterns differ from one culture, geography, and religious belief to the other. Tree of life plays a role to communicate in the Shaman culture, which is the origin of Turkish culture. Therefore, tree of life figure is often used in the places Shamanists live or on clothes they wear. According to some sources it is said that Shamanists believe that they were born from trees of life. The use of tree of life by Turkish tribes has continued after Shamanists. There are seven or nine branches or nicks as the symbol of the layers of the sky on the tree of life, which exists in the centre of the universe according to ancient Turkish religions. This figure is usually described as a beech tree, the branches or nicks are used to climb on the tree and to reach God (Fig. 7). The use of tree figure continued after the Turkish's acceptance of Islam. In the holy scripture of Islam, Koran, it is stated that the trees were created as the sign of divine grace and power; it is also drawn attention to the reality that a lot of living being cannot live without the trees (conveyed by [4]).

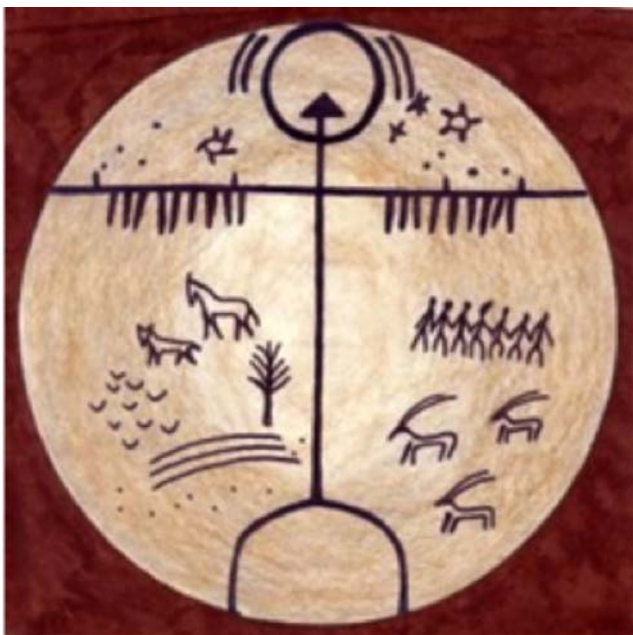


Figure 7: The tree of life on the figure of the shaman's drum [5].  
[Figura 7: A árvore da vida na figura de tambor xamânico [5].]

As it is stated by Bayram [6], tree of life symbolizes the universe, the heaven, the immortality, the abundance and ancestry in the Turkish art that develops under the effect of Islam. The tree figure that symbolizes different notions is described in different ways not just in a way. "We see the tree of life sometimes as Ailanthus (tree of heaven), as tree of Sidre or sometimes as the tree of knowledge in

Islam. Ailanthus and Sidre have a lot of meanings as the tree of life" [4]. The tree figure used in Turkish arts such as weaving, engraving, china was firstly used on its own (Fig. 8); however, it was combined with animal figures in Anatolian Seljuk arts.

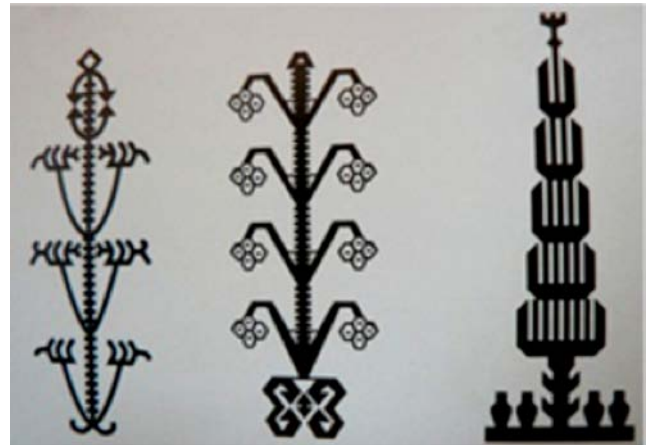


Figure 8: Stylized tree of life patterns in traditional Turkish arts [7].  
[Figura 8: Padrões de árvore da vida estilizados nas artes tradicionais turcas [7].]



Figure 9: Example of china tile in Kubad Abad Palace [9].  
[Figura 9: Exemplo de ladrilho cerâmico em Kubad Abad Palace [9].]

The tree of life pattern which was used in mosques, Moslem theological schools, palaces and handcrafts Seljuk and Ottoman arts has a rich and various expression. Like Oney [8] said, the figures of the tree of life like these in this rich expression of Anatolian Seljuk art can be categorized as: i) the tree of life represented on its own; ii) the tree of life surrounded by a pair of bird; iii) two headed eagle stood for a tree of life on an arabesque surface; iv) the tree of life represented as a whole and accompanied animals; v) symbolic explanation of the tree of life pattern (Figs. 9 to 11). When the pattern of the tree of life in Turkish art of ceramics is analysed, it is seen that it was used as an architectural element on china tiles in Seljuk art, as a decorative element on plates and functional three dimensional forms in Kutahya and Iznik chinas.

Within the context of this research supported by Anadolu



Figure 10: Pattern of tree in china plate made in Kütahya [7].  
 [Figura 10: Padrão de árvore em placa cerâmica produzida em Kütahya [7].]



Figure 11: Turkish bath tile (80 cm x 100 cm), contemporary work in china production studio in Kütahya [10].  
 [Figura 11: Azulejo de banho turco (80 cm x 100 cm), trabalho contemporâneo em ateliê de produção de cerâmica em Kütahya [10].]

Table I - Comparison between the trees of life in Metepec and Turkish art of ceramics.  
 [Tabela I - Comparação entre as árvores da vida na arte cerâmica turca e de Metepec.]

Trees of life in Metepec	Trees of life in Turkish art of ceramics
Religious depictions are under the effect of Christianity	Religious depictions are under the effect of Islam
Bring the traditional style into present	The traditional style is produced in traditional china workshops
There are original interpretations of contemporary Mexican ceramists. They continue to be produced	There are rare original interpretations of contemporary Turkish ceramists
Used in ceremonies	Not used in ceremonies
There are private designs for families and person	There are not private designs for families and person
There is a three-dimensional expression	There is a two-dimensional expression
There is a symbolic expression	There is a symbolic and stylized expression
The themes are death, life, plenitude, abundance, ancestry, and the life stories of individuals	The themes are death, life, plenitude, abundance, ancestry, but not the life stories of individuals
The colour scale is very wide	The colour scale is not very wide
There are unglazed statues	There is not any unglazed example
The accompanied human representations to the trees of life can be nude	The accompanied human representations to the trees of life are not nude
There are foods, drinks or fruits on the tree of life	There are branches, leaves and fruits on the trees, but not foods or drinks

University as a Scientific Research Project, the trees of life produced in the ceramics centre of Metepec and in Turkish art of ceramics were analysed by comparing them and the results shown in Table I were obtained.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The tree has been important for people since it meets essential requirements such as sheltering and nutrition. It, on

the other hand, with its organic and stylistic construction has a form that symbolizes the holy and life. Since it is an alive and productive plant, the tree has been transformed into different symbols by people because of the statuesque appearance. For instance, it takes its roots on the soil and reaches the sky with its branches; these symbolize the connection between life and death, it has also been thought as a way of reaching God. Its physical changing from season to season, blossoming and fruiting cause the tree figure to be identified with abundance and plenitude. Basically, the symbolized tree figure changes, in terms of the way of descriptions, according to the geographical and cultural characteristics and religious differences in time. Within the context of the research, the trees of life produced in the ceramics centre of Metepec and in Turkish art of ceramics were compared. The figure of tree symbolizes the death, life, abundance and the continuity of ancestry in both cultures. However, differences were observed in the stylistic explanation of it initially in terms of the effects of religious beliefs. These stylistic differences are also the demonstrations of the originality of cultures about their artistic applications. Another respect pointed out is that the tree of life has interpretations in Metepec ceramics produced by contemporary artists; however, it has traditional interpretations in the Turkish art of ceramics. In this context, the use of the tree of life reduces today both because of the technological developments and because of the decline in the bond to traditional. However, it is thought that the original interpretation of Turkish ceramists of the tree of life is going to increase the connection with the traditional and enrich the Turkish art of ceramics.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article has been written within the context of Scientific Research Project (1306E224) supported by Anadolu University.

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- (*Rec. 25/02/2016, Rev. 06/06/2016, Ac. 03/07/2016*)