

Original Research Article

Landscape as Symbolic Nature

Contemplation of the Representative Role of Natural Elements in the Formation of the Landscape of Kamu Village*

Hamideh Abarghouei Fard**

Ph.D candidate in landscape architecture, Faculty of Architecture, University of Tehran, Iran.

Parichehr Saboonchi

Ph.D candidate in landscape architecture, Faculty of Architecture, University of Tehran, Iran.

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Abstract | Landscape is a historical approach for experiencing and recognizing the world, and like cultural text and picture, it is capable of conveying the worldview of the people. Rural landscapes are known as both natural and cultural landscapes that represent the socialization of nature through the possession of a cultural and ethnic assembly. The landscape of Kamu village stems from the organization of the environment and natural components based on the shared beliefs, semantics, and values of the inhabitants. In this village, natural elements account for the communication and information tools that, in the form of cultural tenets, conduct concepts and definitions and exhibit the rural landscape as a single and figurative whole being with a transparent mechanism. This paper intends to examine the symbolic role of the environment and natural elements in the formation of the landscape of Kamu village and the ways in which this subject has been affected by the main semantics, dogmas, and definitions of residents, and stirs their knowledge of the environment and how to regulate and manage it. The methodology in the present research is qualitative and ethnographic. With the scientific approach and analysis of the semantics of ethnic landscape and landscape understanding, a conceptual model of symbolic landscape perception is expressed, and the role of natural elements in shaping the landscape of Kamu village is illuminated. Data collection at the stage of explaining theoretical grounds is of the library type, and at the stage of the case study, it is of the field type. The representative nature of the rural landscape is seen in the environment to the landscape, the natural components to the cultural figures, and the interactors to the cultural group developments. Beyond their functional role in a representative way, natural details refer to a blend of values and beliefs that promote the audience's comprehension of the rural environment, beyond collecting information from the physical environment, to the symbolic understanding of the landscape in the landscape of Kamu village. This subject is developed in the environment's answer to the material and semantic needs of the inhabitants: Satisfying the material needs, such as livelihood and shelter, relying on the narrative role of the landscape, has exhibited the potential of the natural setting. Further, responding to semantic needs, including social and aesthetic needs, relying on the poetic regard of the landscape, conveys the naturalistic beliefs of the residents.

Keywords | Rural Landscape, Symbolic Landscape, Symbol, Perception, Natural Elements, Kamu.

Introduction | The landscape is not merely the world we perceive. It has more pervasive notions and concepts than the generation, use, and harvesting of ground.

The landscape is a means of seeing the world that holds its history (Cosgrove, 1984). One way to recognize a landscape is by determining the stands of human groups that have defined the physical environment following their distinct ideas and values and have been engrossed

** Corresponding author: +989126998223, hamide.abarghouyi@gmail.com

in forming the landscape. Because people are intrinsically a seeker of sense, and their willful actions in association with the environment are ever directed at portraying their main theories and definitions of the self, others, and the world.

The landscape is a representation of a group's opinions, values, and representatives in association with the atmosphere (Glenna, 1996). It is not merely an elaborate system of environmental factors, such as air, water, soil, and so on. The landscape can be deemed an imaginative organization and a symbol (Drexler, 2005). A symbol is a social and communicative means that facilitates meaningfulness to the environment and data collection from it. As a community, we collectively designate symbols to things, beings, and conditions that encompass us. Ethnic gatherings, based on their distinct cultural elements, adopt various ways of giving definitions and symbolism in the face of the environment and its application, which are the factors that distinguish them as a whole culture and create a certain model of perspective. Knowing the cultural and representative objects of an ethnic group is useful in understanding their ethnic outlook.

The rural landscape entails the natural experience of human habitation, and their effort to strengthen their situation in the natural environment (Norberg-Schulz, 2008). Based on the necessities of living in the natural habitat, natural components perform the role of cultural and representative objects in the formation of the rural landscape, which leads to a profound understanding of the potential of the environment and ordering in it. In the village, the requirements of the ethnic organizations are satisfied in the form of actions based on giving sense to the natural ingredients, which transcend the association with the landscape to higher than the level of receiving and observing information, and it presents the platform for the perception of the village landscape as a symbolic whole. The present research attempts to answer the question, "How do natural components, with their semantic function, serve in the formation and understanding of the landscape as a symbolic whole?" and, "How have they altered the cultural-natural structure of the landscape in the case of the Kamu village?"

Methodology

Occasionally do experts tend to examine the landscape as a cultural or graphic symbol; particularly by assimilating a landscape to a coded text and interpreting its entirety (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988). With a systematic approach, this article attempts to explain the symbolic function of natural elements in the establishment of the rural landscape as a unified whole and human-environmental phenomenon. According to the objective of the research

to know the cultural aspects of the rural landscape, the methodology is qualitative and ethnographic, and for a more in-depth analysis, the case study method has been employed. Further, data collection is arranged in two ways: First, the collection of library data to describe the conceptual model of representative understanding of the rural landscape, and second, the field method and face-to-face inspection to polish the conclusions from the theoretical foundations from the landscape of Kamu village.

Hypothesis

To identify and control the natural environment and suffice their material and spiritual requirements, cultural groups evaluate natural elements and turn them into cultural figures. This converts the rural landscape of Kamu village into a natural-cultural entirety and improves the recognition and connection with the landscape from the level of data collection from the physical environment to the symbolic understanding level.

Theoretical principles

• Background of the ethnographic approach to landscapes

From the Ethnoecology¹ perspective, human comprehends nature from behind a curtain of thoughts and knowledge, and via symbols and images, manages the ground, the landscape, and nature. The Kosmos-Corpus-Praxis (K-C-P) space-time model presents a summary of nature's occupancy, which involves mindscape, knownscape, and technoscape. In this perspective, each element of the landscape can be thought of as an assortment of "knowledge-belief-practice" and units of cultural-social compositions that constitute the general idea of the landscape (Barrera-Bassols & Toledo, 2005, 11). Berkes (2001) asserts that the "knowledge-belief-practice" assortment is essential for joining nature with culture. The local knowledge of nature swells in the community and is transferred via cultural methods, like tales and narratives (Pilgrim, Smith & Pretty, 2007; Singh, Pretty & Pilgrim, 2010). This set involves observations and understandings in social memory that try to give sense to how the universe works. Communities work this collective intelligence to guide their actions toward the natural world (Berkes, 2001; Turner & Berkes, 2006). The (K-C-P) model presents the landscape as a cultural-natural arrangement that is the outcome of human interaction with the environment via three channels of opinions and semantics, knowledge, and management measures. In understanding the rural landscape, this model is important because villagers, as an ethnic group, mix the knowledge of their surroundings based on their specific mindsets, and involve in many sorts of natural

resource management. In the method of this significant interplay with the environment, a distinctive kind of landscape forms that the understanding and analysis of which depends on the symbolic role of the environment, and natural components.

• Symbolic interpretation and perception of landscapes

Similar to a “text”, it is feasible to interpret landscapes by reading parts that are arranged in a special arrangement, and we can translate them and discover the meanings they entail. Provided that the “symbolic” landscape represents the communication among people, and between people and their physical environment, the symbolic landscaperies can be recognized as representation of the particular values and goals of the people who build them (Thriff & Kitchin, 2009, 121-125). In experiencing a distinct landscape, we perceive and conceive it. At the level of perception, unlike the certainty of perception and imagination, the way is open for symbolism and reflection of more eminent semantics (Backhaus & Murungi, 2008). Nohl (1980, 2001) suggests four layers for landscape perception:

- Perceptual layer: Immediate unrestricted access to data about the outside world through the factors of vision, hearing, etc.
- Expressive layer: The blending of perceptual components with the viewer’s emotions and a level of cognitive-aesthetic recognition by assigning attributes to the landscape.
- Symptomatic layer: The reference of the physical elements of the landscape to something beyond themselves and the conversion of perception into a symbol or meaning that needs more data to interpret.
- Symbolic layer: The sense of the landscape as a whole, and the transformation of the content related to the symbols into ideas, imaginations, and utopian images in the viewer’s mind.

Perceptual and Symptomatic levels, relying on perceptual data and referring to the real landscape, help the narrative performance of the landscape. While the expressive and symbolic levels, by referring data to the viewer’s psyche, highlight its poetic performance (Aristoteles, 1976; Tangay, 1995). In the face of the landscape and its analysis, the more the parts and components benefit from the creators’ values and meanings, the smoother the path to the perception of the landscape as a symbolic whole, and exceeding the perceptual level.

• Symbol of cultural tools for the evolution of the environment and natural components

Tuan describes the symbol as a part that possesses the power to exhibit the “whole”. This notion excites a sequence of phenomena that are metaphorical (Tuan, 1974). Wagner considers symbolism a conscious and

skillful connection. The symbol can be considered a monitoring mechanism that regulates and controls the stream of data (Wagner, 1972). With a fundamental adaptive approach, humans support symbolic differences in distinguishing between internal adherence, among themselves, as a social entirety, and others (Rowntree & Conkey, 1980). Symbols are cultural and forthcoming means that, via information administration, bring order to human environmental science and how they communicate with the environment.

Symbols are a noticeable worldview of a cultural group (Tax, 1990, 280) and cultural-social phenomena and compositions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). They comprise a structure of mutual beliefs and values with variable and diverse surface impacts. People know and classify the social and natural environment in terms of overlooked internal symbols and meanings. In this way, they define the situations in which they find themselves (Blumer, 1990). Human endurance also depends on discovering the environment, and people often favor landscapes that hold “mystery” and “complexity.” In these landscapes, more knowledge is promised than is already unveiled (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1978). Hence, all landscapes possess weak or strong symbolic characters. The more the shared views are in a cultural group, the more the symbolic aspects are. As the cultural elements of society and the human “entirety”, symbols affect the development and perception of the landscape. The environment (whole) and the natural parts (components) both have a symbolic nature in this process (Fig. 1).

• Landscape, symbolic setting

All humans have an intrinsic association with nature based on their joint history as predators. Wilson termed this natural kinship “biophilia” or love for nature (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Goodin’s theory also reveals a cultural belief about the value of nature that correlates to people’s dependence on the local context and its reflection on people’s actions and behaviors toward the setting (Goodin, 1992). In a special cultural setting to indicate their self-definitions, people symbolically alter the natural surroundings. In this method, social, cultural, and natural environments are networked and become part of the mutual symbols and ideas of cultural groups. As the definition of a group of “self”, the core of what it means to be human, is re-discussed, so is the description and understanding of the environment. Therefore, landscapes are an echo of our cultural identities and are more on us than the natural setting (Greider & Garkovich, 1994). Further, a landscape can be considered a social outcome and a result of the joint development of a social group in nature (Graber, 1976). As the most natural and significant way of human occupancy throughout history, the rural landscape is a perfect illustration of human gratitude of

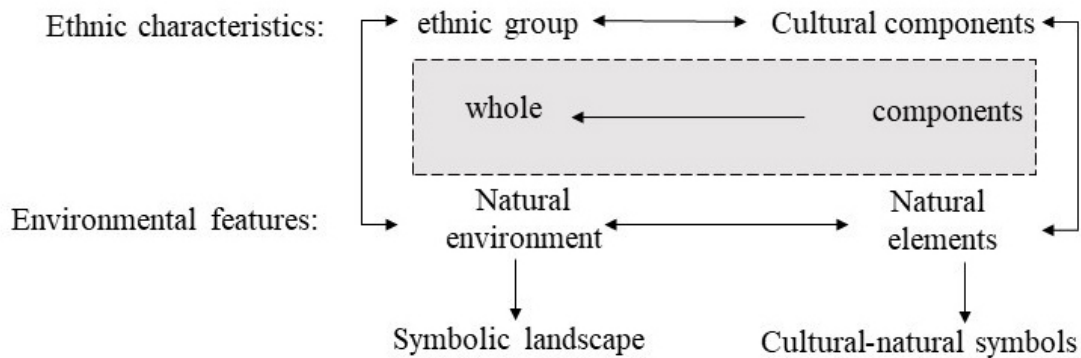


Fig. 1. The symbolic nature of the landscape in its elements and entirety. Source: Authors.

nature and the environment. The rural landscape is a symbolic landscape and the outcome of the alteration of the natural environment by ethnic groups that, together with satisfying their requirements from the natural context from natural context, viewpoint, insight, and a specific filter of socio-cultural and transcultural values, convert the natural setting into a symbolic landscape.

• Natural elements, cultural symbol

Nature and culture converge at various levels, and there is a two-sided feedback between cultural systems² and the environment (Maffi & Woodley, 2007). “Every culture creates its realm amidst the endless diversity of nature ... [nature] becomes social ... it is reconstructed ... [and] it becomes a material embodiment of the social structure” (Busch, 1989, 7). Therefore, the natural setting transforms via symbols and notions that form people’s relationships in the social world, becoming an alike context (Fine, 1991). Natural phenomena are also socio-cultural phenomena. They are made up of social

associations between members of a cultural group and their discrepancy over the definition of nature and the environment (Burch, 1971, 9). Insofar as humans are incessantly busy occupying natural phenomena, converting them into cultural objects, and reinterpreting them via cultural views (Bennett, 1976, 4).

Ethnic groups, in particular, recognize the natural setting as a whole (Stoffle & Evans, 1990), which has a symbolic arrangement with symbolic elements, like natural elements. The epitome of objects of nature, as strong spiritual and cultural symbols that are valued by society members, is one of the pros of local organizations (Pilgrim & Pretty, 2010). People adjust the natural parts of the encompassing environment in the form of semantic tenets and attribute their perspective to it. This subject directly contributes to their beliefs, lifestyle, understanding of the natural environment, and its management (Fig. 2). The symbolic function of natural components in the rural landscape arises from

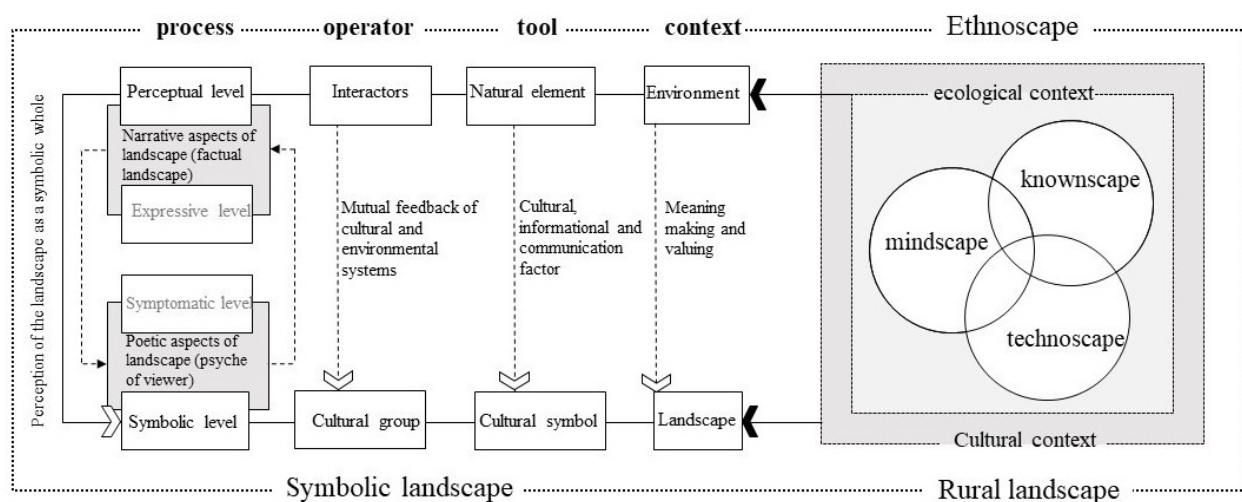


Fig. 2. Conceptual model of symbolic perception of rural landscape based on the semantic role of components and natural environment. Source: Authors.

the deliberate actions of human beings to adapt to the environment and to afford a range of material and spiritual requirements of the inhabitants.

- Material needs

The principal way to make the circumstances significant for people is by satisfying their primary demands (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Livelihood and having shelter is among the essential needs of human beings. In several parts of the world, belief in divine nature, parallel with livelihoods, has been the foundation for people's use of land and resources (Pilgrim et al., 2010, 197-198). Further, the landscape is formed in line with earnings means (Callicott & Nelson, 1998). At this idea, the village landscape, together with being natural, has spiritual benefits and exceptional results and meanings for past, present, and future generations (Jorgensen, 1984, 182-183). Furthermore, the provision of shelter and house in the form of durable institutions in connection with the potential of the natural environment has been done in multiple villages, providing the opportunity of the symbolic experience of the space. Some investigations have pointed to the quality of landscape visual components, namely rural structures, as a subset of rural environmental schemes (Tassinari & Torreggiani, 2006).

- Spiritual needs

In rural regions, the answer to semantic needs, such as social and aesthetic ones, is based on naturalistic beliefs. In many societies, social needs are met by sanctifying space and time in the form of rituals, elements, and ceremonial areas, and remembrance of natural elements such as plants, water, mountains, etc. (Eliade, 1993). Unique places, buildings, and spaces possess symbolic value. They serve as tokens that enable orientation in space and time (Coetier, 2002; Holtorf, 1998). Also, the tight connection between the concepts of beauty and naturalness has made natural elements the most prominent aesthetic features of the landscape (Greenbie, 1982). Furthermore, natural elements and their representations satisfy some of the aesthetic requirements of people.

Overall, material needs are frequently sufficed by relying on the potential of the natural setting and the narrative dimension of the landscape, and spiritual demands are addressed by relying on the naturalistic and poetic beliefs of the landscape.

Case study analysis: Symbolic landscape of Kamu village

Kamu village, known as the center of gravity of Iran, is on the southern slopes of the Karkas Heights, 85 km southwest of Kashan. According to archeological evidence, Kamu is one of the first areas in the early geological era to surface out of water. According to the

artifacts collected from the caves, this village is nearly two billion years old and is one of the first origins of mankind (Najafzadeh, 2017). Appraisal of pottery and pipes found in the Kamu and Chogan domain shows that it coincides with Sialk Hills. Having natural characteristics, such as being established at the foothill at an altitude of 2345 meters above sea level, has borne the creation of a natural environment and exceptional plant species in this area. Agricultural and horticultural staples, such as walnuts, almonds, grapes, different kinds of liqueurs, and the highest quality roses are among the benefits of Kamu village. An intimate association with nature as the principal bedrock of the life of the people of this village, including the consecration of the grape tree, holding ceremonies such as the Grape Festival, the Flower and Rosewater Festival, the Grape Juicing Ceremony, the Mirnoroz Tradition, and artifacts such as Kamu tablecloths with natural patterns and the sun motifs to decorate homes can be observed in several forms. Now, some of them are registered in the list of national monuments (Motavalli, 2018). In this village, nature and culture mix at various levels, some of which are addressed below.

• Plants

One of the livelihood sources affecting the configuration of the symbolic aspect of the landscape is the extraordinary plant elements (Sparks, Mizera, Wójtowicz & Tryjanowski, 2012) and food-based commercial demonstrations (Adema, 2006). The presence of fables, religious beliefs, and customs associated with plants highlights their supermaterial use in Iranian culture. Over time, some plants, namely grapes, have become semantic and symbolic components in Iranian culture beyond the material-livelihood function. Today, grapes are grown on approximately 100 hectares of land in this village. With 50 traditional rosewater workshops and two industrial plants, more than 70 % of the inhabitants of Kamu village work in the rosewater industry. In this village, two plant classes, namely grapes and roses, have obtained semantic value gradually. This roots in the archaic tenets of the Iranians³, and has a direct influence on the livelihood and prosperity of the village. Holding annual events and festivities, such as the Grape Festival⁴, Rosewater Festival, and Reincarnation of the Flowers Celebration, proves the importance of these plant elements in the culture of the inhabitants of these villages. This makes them sacred elements that, parallel with their livelihood and economic use, act as the "cultural symbol" of the village. Featuring the virtue and importance of these plants, the villagers produce a portion of their culture over time and consolidate and fortify their naturalistic culture and beliefs by holding ceremonial events annually (Fig. 3).

• Soil

In the spiritual horizon of man, symbols merge reality with sanctity. Symbolism adds extra value to objects and make them universal by utilizing an object or action (Eliade, 2013). One of the most elementary physical traits of the rural landscape is the materials used in its making. Although the application of eco-friendly materials is understandable and frequent in all parts of Iran, the use of red soil in this village, joined with the circular motifs, heightens the symbolic quality of the overall appearance and integrity of the spectacle of the village (Fig. 4).

• Sun

The integration between the tiny connected components in a broad space is necessary for the legibility of the landscape and improves the ability to relate the history of a place and its identity and overall value (Antrop, 2005). One of the factors affecting the aesthetic aspects of Kamu village is the application of round openings and sun-shaped motifs in the design of the constructions. In Iranian culture, “Mehr” is the god of light (Vermaseren, 1996). The color red and the motifs of the sun⁵ and the lion are symbols of the Mehr ritual (Avarzamani, 2019). Antique artifacts discovered in the mountains around the villages of Kamu and Chogan, the language, accent, and culture of their residents show the ancient history of the

region. The naming of the origin of the Kamu river as the “Spring of the Sun” further means the predominance of naturalistic beliefs and the rites of the Mehr religion in the village’s history. Although most Kamu residents are oblivious of the belief origins of the adornments, the adherence of the elders to the use of themes has led to the application of these motifs in contemporary new buildings. The pervasiveness of naturalistic dogmas in this village has remained in the form of physical embodiments, including the repetition of themes attributed to the Mehr religion, and has become a symbol of identity and aesthetic features in the spectacle of the village (Fig. 5).

• Water

The foremost source of the formation of Kamu village is the river “Kas Rud”. The influence of this river on the history and culture of the village is such that the name “Kamu” is acquired from it, meaning “Estuary” (Bahrami & Saboonchi, 2019). Other than the influence of the river on the village’s overall spatial design, the village center comprises a lord’s house, the Mirzakhon Tower, the Darband Mosque, and a spacious area for local events by the river. The center of the village, with its ceremony and civil function, is among the areas that are considered the semantic, social, and physical weight of the man-



Fig. 3. The grape plant is a cultural symbol with a monetizing use in a landscape in Kamu village. Photo: Ghazal Nikzad, 2019.



Fig. 4. Soil is the cause of the creation of a different and symbolic composition of Kamu village. Photo: Ghazal Nikzad, 2019.



Fig. 5. Sun motifs: Identity symbols with aesthetic application in the landscape of Kamu village. Photo: Ghazal Nikzad, 2019.

made setting. Due to the importance and symbolic value of water in the village, this place is situated by the river. There are stories from old times about the Darband Mosque that resemble fables. But their continuity over time determines the symbolic and semantic importance

of this structure for the inhabitants. One of these accounts is about the village mill, which does not exist today, but was recognized as the “Chappeh” (meaning reverse) mill. Stories have it that this mill would turn contrariwise in honor of the mosque (Fig. 6).

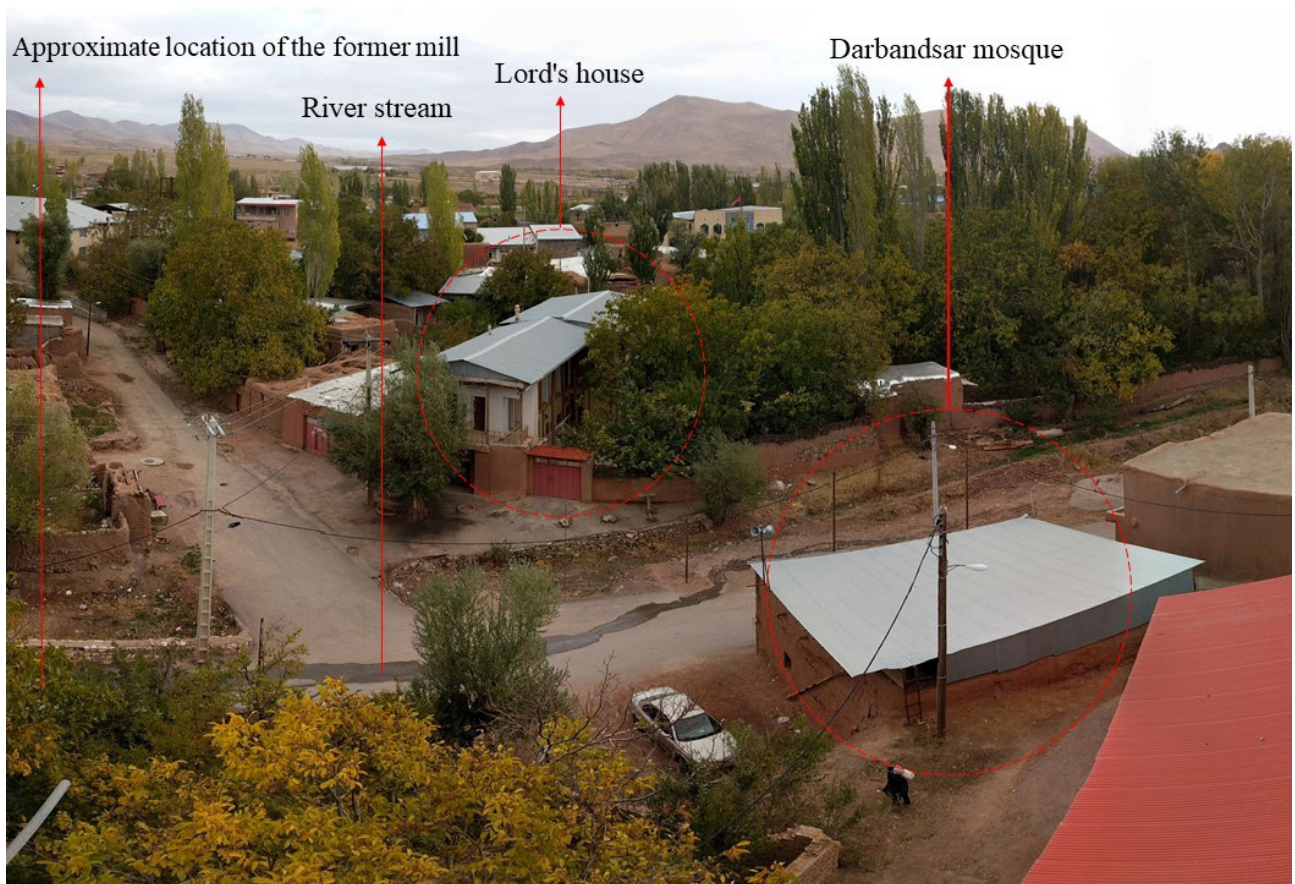


Fig. 6. The semantic role of water in the creation of the symbolic place and center of Kamu village, Photo by Ardalan Taiefeh Hosseini, 2019.

Conclusion

The rural landscape is the manifestation of the values and beliefs of an ethnic group in a natural setting. The metamorphosis from the magnificent natural environment to the landscape, as a unique entirety and relating to a particular culture, is based on the semantic function of natural ingredients and elements. In this process, the rural landscape as a whole, and its components have a symbolic order. The parts _the natural elements_ are affected by the cultural construction interceding between beliefs and awareness of the encompassing environment and affect the management and organization of the entirety: the environment. The process of occupation and socialization in the natural environment in the village of Kamu is inspired by the mindset of the inhabitants, like the naturalistic beliefs of the Mehr religion. Further, in a functional format and

by answering the human requirements, it has enabled the symbolic perception of the rural landscape (Table 1). The essential needs, including livelihood and security, are provided practically by praising unique natural elements, such as grapes, roses, and the red soil of the area, relying on natural and direct potentials. Secondary requirements, such as myth-making, social and aesthetic connections, and identity are met indirectly by expressing and emphasizing natural elements, like water and the sun. Thus, the natural components, as symbols of the culture and identity in a synergistic relationship, represent the culture of the residents. This fosters the process of landscape perception from the information collection level to the symbolic perception level, which is embraced and overlooked for the inhabitants and is a way for foreign spectators to obtain knowledge and interact with the village landscape and the culture of the occupants.

Table 1. Summarizing the symbolic role of natural components in the symbolic creation and perception of the landscape of Kamu village. Source: Authors

Perceptual order	Natural elements	Primary role	Symbolic role
• Narrative aspects of the landscape	Grape and rose	Livelihood	Cultural symbol
	Red soil	Shelter	Identity symbol
• Reference to the environment			
• Poetic aspects of the landscape	Sun	Aesthetics	Symbolic visual experience
• Reference to the audience	Water	Myth-making and social identity	Symbolic place

Endnotes

*This article is based on a field trip report, entitled: "The Tourism of Kamu Native Landscape" which was held in 2018 under the supervision of "Dr. Seyed Amir Mansouri", and funded by Nazar Research Center.

1. This methodology is a branch of anthropology that aims to scientifically describe the culture of individuals in society. This method has the characteristics of contextualism, qualitative phenomenological nature, and holistic perspective, and includes research on places where humans are naturally gathered (Barati, Davoudpour & Montazeri, 2013, 107-111).

2. Cultural systems value the knowledge, patterns, beliefs, values, norms, way of life, and social organization of human societies in different ways (Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Harmon, 2002). They are generally based on the way in which people interpret the world around them (Geertz, 1973).

3. In the opinion of the ancient Iranians, the grape is a symbol of hope, fertility, blessing and life power (Matin, 2013).

4. "Grape Festival" is one of the popular rituals that have been held in different parts of the country since the past (Vajeyab, n.d.). The cooking grape juice skill in Kamu has been registered in the list of intangible cultural heritage of the country and reveals the ritual role and semantic role of grape plant species in shaping the landscape of Kamu village (IMNA News Agency, 2018).

5. There is a meaningful thought about the sun in Iranian culture and art in the form of decorative and symbolic designs such as the sun and the shape of a circle, and it emphasizes the importance of the sun as a symbol of mercy and blessing in Iranian naturalistic beliefs from the past to the present (Mansouri, 2016).

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