



PERCEPTION AND REPRODUCTION OF SHI'ITE SYMBOLISM IN THE WEST

The vivid symbolism of Shi'ite Islam raises many questions. Prompted by political developments of the past years and decades, there is an increased awareness towards symbols of Shi'ite Islam also outside of Iran and outside of Shi'ite majority communities. Particularly in times of tension between Shi'ite and Sunni communities, Shi'ite symbols are reflected in the media, e.g. as an indicator of political and social upheavals. But also Ashura ceremonies and pilgrimages to Shi'a shrines receive a great deal of media attention. In the West, the symbols are perceived as a "strange" expression of a hitherto unknown form of religiosity or religious activism.

In addition, the pictorial visualisation specifically of Ashura - Imam Husayn's martyrdom - seems to be in sharp contrast with Islam's disapproval of human and animal images. While the general disapproval of creating images of living beings (plants excepted) can be found also in the classical Shi'ite legalistic scriptures, there are several interpretations why images, e.g. of the Imams' suffering, are so popular and therefore tolerated or accepted by Shi'ite scholars. Most interpretations seem to be based on quite modern arguments, e.g. that those images are not meant for worship and therefore permitted. Some scientists link the different approach to pictures in Shi'ism more to historical influences in Iranian culture (such as in pre-Islamic times, the depiction of life at royal courts, and later Chinese and partly Indian influences that resulted in the elaborate art of miniature painting, etc.)

However, similar influences – mostly from the Byzantines – can be traced also in predominantly Sunni Muslim countries. The most obvious difference between Sunni and Shi'i traditional painting is that the first abstains almost totally from depicting revered personalities such as prophets and their companions, while the latter does depict at least Imam Ali, Hussein's Ashura, and sometimes also earlier prophets.

Pictures in a Shi'ite context seem to express emotions and enthusiasm and play a role in social life. Shi'ite communities in the West define themselves with the same or similar symbols as can be found in their countries of origin. It is Iran - and to a certain extent Turkish Alevites - that exert the greatest influence on the symbolism used by Shi'ite minorities in the western world. In Europe, Shi'a communities have also joined inter-religious dialogue and are presenting their symbols in this context.

More research will be required to thoroughly analyse the phenomena of Shi'ite symbolism. In this paper I will try to discuss some aspects of Shi'ite religious expressions, by presenting some examples.

Liselotte ABID
Department of Near Eastern Studies- University of Vienna
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