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SEEING AND BELIEVING. ON PIETY IN IRANIAN SHI'ISM

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Review of Ingvild Flakerud's, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism*, (New York: Continuum, 2010).

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Ingvild Flakerud's book deepens issues of visual representations of prophets, saints, narratives related to them, as they are constructed culturally and historically, in popular Iranian Shi'ism. The author approaches their functions and coagulation effects in different rituals, tackling also issues of power relations, ideologies and religions, material and popular cultures, etc.

Currently a post-doctoral fellow at Uni Global, University of Bergen, Norway, Ingvild Flakerud has a broad area of research, related to Muslim Visual Culture, Shi'ism- gender and ritual performance-, visual research in religious studies. *Women, Gender and Ablution and Purification, Prayer, Fasting and Piety: Iran*, published in *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, volume V (2007), *Oh, My Heart is Sad. Is It Moharram, the Month of Zaynab. Aesthetics and Women's Mourning Ceremonies in Shiraz*, published in the volume *The Women of Karbala, Ritual Performances and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'ism*, edited by Kamran Scot Aghaie (2005), as well as the co-edited volume *Gender, Religion and Change in the Middle East. Two Hundred Years of History* (2005)- are just a part of Flakerud's publications. Known also as author of the ethnographic film *Standard Bearers of Hussein- Women Commemorating Karbala*, she is challenging now the readers with this book on Shia iconography.

The result of a field research, conducted between 1999 and 2003 in Iran, this study offers an internal understanding of Islamic iconographical representations and Muslim views on the role of them in different cultural contexts, especially rituals and devotional life.

Even if the "analysis of representation, reception and function of imageries in Iranian environments"¹ seems to be the main core of the whole volume, what we have in the end is an almost exhaustive analysis on Iranian Shia culture. Relevant issues such as: the life, relevant moments, functions of this religious community, its meanings and ways of configuration, social stratification, power and gender relations, ideology and religion, etc.- are all debated at different levels of the text. An entire cultural context is reconstructed through analyzing a particular phenomenon.

All these details and discussions are naturally introduced, being necessary in explaining the processes of representation, reception and function of imageries in Iranian environment. When assessing the level of representation, the author adds a very well documented research, regarding different images from Iranian Shi'ism, the mechanisms through which they have been created, according to certain cultural codes/rules.

Thus, the readers are familiarized with key aspects of this religious group. The analysis of various Imam Ali's polysemantic visual representations facilitates the introduction of historical data regarding Him and His place in a holy family, as Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law.

The period after 632, when Muhammad died, is approached by author, in the effort to put her focused on topics in a broader historical and

cultural context. Divergent points between Sunni, recognizing four men as Caliphs and Shia, accepting only Ali, are also presented. In the same frame, she mentions Sufism:

“The present three main Sufi orders in Iran are the Nurbakhshi, originating in the fifteenth century, Dhahabi, originating in the sixteenth century and Nimatulahi, originating in the fifteenth century”²

Then, deepening Shi'ism, Ingvild Flakerud focuses on the theology of imamate: according to it, Ali is considered the 1-st Imam, the transmitter of the word of God and God's guardian. All these details are necessary to understand well the iconography produced in the mentioned cultural context and compulsory for a public less exposed to the Muslim environment. Historical, cultural data, offered in a peculiar, interpretative way, concern, then, Ali's two sons, Hassan and Hussayn, their mother, Fatemeh-Muhammad's daughter- and The Twelve(rs)- the branch of Shi'ism, dominating in Iran.

Visual codes, related to Ali, are analyzed subsequently, in order to construct complex explanations of all images, visual and verbal narratives, associated to them. The impact of these images on a certain community of believers, their functions in rituals, performances etc- are, meanwhile, constantly debated ideas.

Imam Ali is described visually, sometimes as a humble person; he is also associated to splendor, spiritual authority; he is represented as warrior; the lion, the sword and the book are signs associated to him.

“In popular piety, Imam Ali is addressed as spiritual guide and consort and popular prayers are recited from his collection of prayers, the Nahj al-Balaghah. Imam Ali is commemorated at festivals honoring his birth, on the 13/th of Rajab, remembering his stabbing on the 19-th of Ramadan, mourning his death on the 21-st of Ramadan and celebrating Muhammad's designation of Ali as his successor at Ghadir Khummon Id-al Ghadir, on the 18-th of Dhu-al-Hijja. All events, except the stabbing, are commemorated on public holiday.”³

Levels of *imageries reception* and *function* in Iranian environment are also very well articulated in Ingvild Flakerud's book. Actually, they enlarge the analytical frame and bring new elements to be elucidated.

The individual interpretations of different images and visual narratives are always based, in this case, on a common knowledge on Shia hagiography and historical background. Thus, a subjective, personal, individual stage of “reading” an image or, generally, a visual challenge is

always biased and the “communal” ground of such an approach is to be considered.

The problem of a transformative role of seeing and visualization seems to be permanently assessed in this study. The Shia community of believers is involved in such a process and, through seeing an image, related to a holy personage or event, the individual (and communitarian) piety is strengthened.

It is also a modality in which the feeling of belonging to community is reiterated; it has a deep role in reinforcing social/cultural ties.

In brief, visual representations analyzed in this book on different levels (production/representation, reception, function) are all related to Iranian Shiism: portraits (Imam Ali; sometimes with sons Imam Hassan and Husayn and Abu-al-Fazl ak Abbas; with Prophet Muhhamad; in groups; accompanied by Fatemeh al Zahra; together with ten, sometimes eleven Imams) or visual narration (scenes in which Imam Ali brings bread to a poor family).

Sometimes, these images are, in the spirit of popular culture, on stickers, posters and popular decorative items.

As the author points out:

“The images discussed in the study belong to a culture of devotion which has developed a rich tradition of performative practices, such as, verbal narration in textual and oral form, singing, theatre and pantomime”⁴

This explains why images are sometimes associated with texts: rowzeh, stories about the saints, their lives and nowheh, elegies, related to *Karbala*.

Thus, the religious message is simultaneously transmitted visually and verbally, having a more complex effect, both on individual and communitarian stages, reinforcing piety, strengthening cultural ties.

All these issues are approached brilliantly in this book, put in an interdisciplinary frame, combining methods from various fields- anthropology, semiotics, reception theory, popular culture. The result is a deep research on Iranian iconography and, through it, on Iranian Shia culture, viewed diachronically and in synchrony, in permanent process of configuration and reconfiguration, creation and reiteration of meanings.

“The study of contemporary visual representation is therefore framed in a broader culture of piety and ritual practice. Such interdisciplinary approach is congruent with the modern study of iconography, which is methodologically and theoretically inspired by anthropology, semiotics and reception theory”.⁵

The book is structured in three main parts. The first one is entirely dedicated to *The Portrait of Imam Ali*. This is approached in an in depth manner, starting with its launch in mid-19-th century, until nowadays forms of representing Him, in various wall hangings and other items of visual popular culture: posters and paintings.

Visual representations constructed in a certain way, having also a particular interpretation, with a communal ground, are explained in a broader frame. They are produced as such, according to the way in which Imam Ali is perceived in Shia memory. The process of reception is also described in a historically, culturally profiled horizon. These explain why his images have specific functions in different rituals, accepted as such at the community level.

The details and interpretations regarding Shia memory, based on a very serious historical documentation, are doubled by very sensitive, analytical views, related to the processes of current production, reception and function of visual representations, having as key image- Imam Ali.

The same quite symmetrical approach is present in the second important part of the book. It develops the topic of *Battle of Karbala*. Known as one of the holiest cities for Shia Muslims, Karbala is related, in Shia collective memory, to Imam Husayn, his martyrdom and also his shrine. Therefore, the place is associated with rituals of commemoration, all analyzed in their functions by Ingvild Flakerud.

The event of Karbala battle produces narratives, loading it with sacred meanings. Visual representations with this focus appear in nineteenth century, simultaneously with Imam Ali's ones. The author chooses to focus on, especially, wall hangings on this moment with holy connotations and explains that peculiar ways of presenting and detailing it- are generated in a culture of commemoration.

Motifs related to Karbala Battle are sometimes reformulated, sometimes reiterated and this part of the book offers valid analyses of a certain pressure of and on an interpretive community. Issues related to both, representation and reception of Karbala in Color Posters are introduced and, at this level, the author uses suggestions from semiotics and reception theory, meanwhile proving a very deep understanding of the way in which cultural meaning are constructed and shared in a culture/community.

Through all these types of visual representations, Iranian Shia community is a vivid one, permanently negotiating and renegotiating cultural significances, demonstrating it is alive.

The last part of the book debates the meanings and functions of images in Ritual Space and, also, in the whole religious community. Through offering them as gifts, sacred and symbolic "goods", making them circulating among the community members, religious ties are symbolically reiterated, refilled with meanings and strengthened.

Images and visual narratives are active parts in rituals and, also, through them, their meanings are permanently reoffered to people, their reception is vivid. It is also clear that the inclusion of images in commemorative rituals is part of a permanent process of identity construction, reconstruction and representation of community itself.

Gender roles in ritual space are also topics of debate, offering a more complex view on the whole Shia culture.

All these approaches, profiled in the last part of the book, are more synchronically oriented, although the author has to make reference to different meanings that are results of historical, cultural accumulations. This way the dimension of past is to be considered permanently.

The topics of seeing, believing, piety in Iranian Shi'ism and all associated interrogations and answers are very well articulated in this book. The harmonious, sometimes symmetrical approaches offer a structured, deeply documented study. It combines successfully to axes of investigation, one constructed diachronically, the other one- in synchrony.

Starting with a clearly focused on research topic-visualizing belief and piety in Iranian Shi'ism- the author is analyzing, actually, an entire cultural context. This is viewed in its processes, developments, accumulations, in permanent negotiations of meanings. Relevant aspects of it are assessed with a complex, interdisciplinary methodology, inspired by semiotics, reception theory, anthropology, popular culture.

The way in which the author understands all these processes, with "internal eyes", very near the insiders' ones is also absolutely remarkable. Ingvild Flakerud's challenging study is a scientific accomplishment and I am deeply sure that, in the very near future, it is going to be part of different recomandable bibliographies of various fields.

Notes:

¹ Ingvild Flakerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism*, (New York: Continuum, 2010), XI.

² Flakerud, 36.

³ Flakerud, 36.

⁴ Flakerud, 6.

⁵ Flakerud, 7.