A Review of E.Szanto's PhD dissertation " Following Sayida Zaynab: Twelve Shi'ism in Contemporary Syria (2012)

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Abstract: The research under review is concerned with the concept of tradition as accepted and practiced at the shrine-town of Lady Zaynab in Syria through an ethnographical investigation. It analyzes of the ritual of mourning gathering by women at the shrine, the annual commemoration of Imam al-Ḥusayn in Muḥarram, and finally the spiritual healings and miracles associated with it. The study was, to some extent, based upon Talāl Asad's (1986) notion of ethnography of Islam and various iterations of Karbala emanating from Fischer's (1981) framework of the Karbala paradigm. The present review, seeks to analyze the major issues raised by the author and propound a critical reading of the text.

Key Words: Lady Zaynab; Syria; Shi'a, Muḥarram; Mourning gathering.

About the Author

Dr. Edith Szanto is currently an assistant professor at the American University of Iraq in Sulaymaniyah. She teaches

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lessons in Middle Eastern History, Western Civilization, Comparative World Religions, and Islam. Her research area is Islam in the modern Middle East. Szanto received her PhD in Religious Studies from University of Toronto in 2012. She stayed in Syria for three years as a Fulbrighter and busied herself with conducting research on popular Islamic practices, while simultaneously working for the UN. Her current project aims to investigate contemporary Islam in Kurdistan of Iraq. She has published in the *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, and the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

Introduction

Sayyida Zaynab, the elder sister of Imam al-Ḥusayn, is highly respected among the Shi'is all over the world for her participation in the episode of Karbala, cursing the Umayyad caliph in Damascus, and conveying the messages of Ashura to the world. The researcher, as an anthropologist, paid a visit to the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab and provided a detailed description of the history, traditions, and rituals of the Shi'is who reside at the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, to which the dissertation is dedicated.

After devoting one section of the first chapter to introducing the political, geographical, social, religious and ethnographical features of the inhabitants of Damascus as the city of Sayyida Zaynab's holy shrine, Dr. Edith Szanto scrutinized Shi'i women's rituals for mourning gatherings. Afterwards, she raised the subject of the Karbala Paradigm which was first coined by Fischer (1981), drawing an analogy between Shi'is practices in Muharram and those of Catholic Penitents' rituals.

Chapter two deals with seminaries of Shi'is in Damascus, their institutional changes, and their religious elites. Then, she recounted the institutional landscape of Sayyida Zaynab: the historical background, religious aid organizations, seminaries, and *Ḥusayniyyāhs*. After that, Szanto investigated multiple notions of learning which are set as premises in Shi'i seminary education.

In chapter three, Szanto first deployed an affective perspective in analyzing the mourning practices of Shi'i women,

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using two modes of affect: *aththara* and *thāra*. Second, the researcher explored how such mourning gatherings allow for affective modes of transmission among the pious Shi'is. The third concern of the chapter goes for the procedure for Shi'is women to become preachers or *mullayāt.* Finally, the chapter ends in a perusal of the pious media and their influence on the Shi'is.

Throughout the fourth chapter, Szanto discussed the Muharram practices among the Shi'is in detail and paid attention to the dispute between Shi'i scholars over the permission and appropriateness of some ritual practices i.e. self-flagellation processions like *tatbīr* or *zanjīr*. However, in the fifth chapter, Szanto raised the subject of spiritual healing and the practices conducted for such a purpose. Then, she turned to magic, its permissible forms, and its relationship with religion.

In the final chapter, the researcher concludes that the concept of tradition should be reconsidered and even updated in accordance to the concept of modernity. In addition, she raised an idea of tradition not being a necessity to become a better and more pious Muslim. Accordingly, Szanto concluded that an anthropology of Islam requires a perception of a chain of discourses connecting Shi'is to such fundamental texts (e.g. Qur'an) and influential individuals (e.g. the Infallible Imams).

A Critical Appraisal

Having addressed the main and general issues raised by the dissertation and introducing the whole work to the readers, it is appropriate to tackle the chief subjects and themes of the study. It seems that the predominant issue with which the dissertation has dealt with is the subject of tradition as it makes sense among Shi'is in Syria. The author holds that Shi'is primarily resort to the 'traditional' interpretation of Lady Zaynab's life. According to Szanto, the traditional interpretation of this great character refers to perception of what Lady Zaynab went through during and after the massacre of Karbala with an emotional emphasis on the grief and affliction she coped with. The 'authenticated' or 'modern' interpretation deems Sayyida Zaynab from the aspect of her resistance to Yazīd and the ascendancy of her words in her lament.

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Another key issue brought up by the author is the concept of 'affective piety' to observe the pious mourning practices for Sayyida Zaynab and the episode of Ashura. Szanto found that mourning and grief for Imam al-Ḥusayn turns a historical account into a "deeply affective kind of knowledge which makes particular demands upon Shi'is" (Szanto, 2012: 95). She states that remembering the sufferings of the Ahl al-Bayt, Shi'is tend to disregard their own calamities and misfortunes in life and ignore them in comparison to the afflictions that the Ahl al-Bayt went through.

As put forward above, the author reached the conclusion that tradition has to be modernized in accordance to contemporary concepts. It seems that using the following three justifications, Szanto has made such a claim: 1. The concept of tradition has been deployed rhetorically to claim legitimacy, 2. Referring to Talal Asad (1986) and William Graham (1993), she proposed the inter-subjective or rational aspects of tradition, and 3. She asserted that not all of the Islamic traditions culminate in the cultivation of piety.

To a large extent, the arguments propounded by the researcher appear to be supported by a wide range of evidence taken from the words or conducts of the Shi'is inhabiting in religious environments. However, it seems that Szanto's apprehension of Shi'is convictions is not as thorough and profound as it should be, or at least, some descriptions and information about Shi'is ethnography offered by her seem to be misinterpreted by the reader, and the result of such an inadequacy would be the deficient transfer of information which are discernable in some sections of the dissertation. An example of such a phenomenon goes for the author's assertion that Shi'is hold and sponsor mourning gatherings or *majālis* in order to bring about such events as marriage, graduation, and recovery. Although she has quoted this sentence from a local Shi'i woman, there exists the possibility that the local woman has skipped, either intentionally or unintentionally, the main and definite motivation for Shi'is to hold such gatherings which is primarily to commemorate the episode of Karbala and the passions of Sayyida Zaynab and Imam al-Ḥusayn, and at the second level their (i.e. the mourner's)

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ordinary and spiritual desires to be fulfilled. Such shortcomings may cause misinterpretation of the readers and lead them to the estimation that Shi'is hold mourning gatherings for the sake of their own desires rather than for honoring the Ahl al-Bayt plus remembering their afflictions.

Considering coherence and rhetorical organization, the text has the appearance of being in acceptable quality. The logical order has been kept throughout most of the passage, except for some shortcomings that make some statements illogical for the contradiction they connote in comparison to the true Shi'ism ideology.

Ultimately, this piece of work deserves to be considered noteworthy a source for familiarity with the traditions and convictions of contemporary Shi'is in Syria, due to its rich and detailed descriptions. It suggests new ways to discern Shi'is daily practices in regard to their religious beliefs. It is hoped that further investigations be rendered in this realm just as thorough as the current one, but in a more comprehensive framework.

Note: The current piece of work was composed under the request of *Safinah Journal of Islamic Studies*.

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