Reflections of Shi'a Islam Beliefs in Fatimid Arts (Case Study: Fatimid Textiles)

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Abstract

The art of textile production has enjoyed a special position in the Egyptian civilization since ancient times. This heritage of several thousand years has changed frequently with that of the changes of government, religion and politics. In the early years of the first century, Egypt was converted to Christianity. The impact that the Christian beliefs has left on the production of textiles of this period until around the seventeenth century, is known as Coptic art.

Following the conquest of Egypt by Muslims (642 CE / 21 AH), the art of this area was influenced by the Islamic thoughts of the Umayyads, followed by the Abbasids. Subsequent to every seizure, the Muslim rulers took advantage of arts and techniques of the occupied lands, but at the same time they applying their own principles and beliefs. Textiles were no different. During the Islamic era, textiles enjoyed a lofty position within the society both for their own sake and also as an important adjunct to religious rituals and also a precious commercial commodity (Harris, 1993: 71).

During the early years of Islam, artists were prohibited from reproducing images on living beings on textiles and thus, tiraz fabrics containing inscription patterns and no decorations became popular. However, upon the arrival of Fatimids in Africa and Egypt (969 BC / 359 AD), these countries became subjected to the influence of Shi'a Muslims' beliefs. They had taken their names (and, according to their own claims, their nicknames) from the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, and were of the opinion that the true line of the Imams or rulers had ceased with the demise of Islmail. Due to such belief, they were called 'the Ismailis'.

Following the domination of the Fatimids Shi'as over Egypt, apparently the differences in their beliefs as compared to their predecessor, the Abbasids, brought about changes in the appearance of the textiles of this era.

Although researches conducted on the textiles of this region have not specifically addressed this issue, yet the importance of textiles in political and cultural contexts has been highlighted in most cases. Emphasizing on this point, Baker says: "changes in tiraz textiles of this era can be regarded as rejection of political sovereignty" (Baker, 1385, 57).

Researchers such as Farideh Taleb-Pour and Abdollah Hemmati have studied the textiles and tiraz of Fatimid Egypt in their articles. This paper mainly intends to answer this questionthat whether any indication of impact of religion and faith of Fatimids' Shi'a ruler could be found on the textiles of the era and if positive, how these changes have been reflected within the textiles? In fact, this research aims to elucidate the political conflict resulting from the religious difference between the Shi'a Fatimids and the Sunni Abbasids. For this purpose, the article employs a descriptive-historical approach to study digital and written sources available on the Egyptian textiles before the Islamic era particularly the Coptic era in terms of motifs, themes and knitting techniques. The study further elucidates the historical and political aspects of the Fatimids reign in Egypt and finally deals with the Egyptian textiles of Abbasids and Fatimids rules to determine the differences in themes, designs, compositions and technical developments. Lastly, few examples of the works created during the Fatimid era have been examined in detail as for their motifs, colors, and compositions in order to find out the traces of impact of Shi'a thought on them. The results indicated that the change of government definitely resulted in the change of textiles, part of which could be directly associated with religious beliefs.

The most noticeable changes in the Fatimid textiles are the change in the caliphate's favorite color, visual concepts as well as the content of tiraz texts, which are in clear contradiction with the textiles of the preceding period, but at the same time, in line with the beliefs of the Shi'a religion. The application of white color and light is one of the most evident and most characteristic feature of the Fatimid textiles, which in addition to implying the purity of the caliphate against the Abbasids, was one

of the main mediums of declaring the change of government in that period. Another indication of the impression of religion on Fatimids is the availability of sample textiles that according to the contents of their inscriptions as well as the written documents were used as a grave cloth at the funeral, and this, although rooted in Egyptian culture, is one of the distinctions of Abbasids over Sunnis. Furthermore, by choosing Egypt as the capital of the government during this period, the textiles enjoyed the Caliphates attention and were thus produced with a better quality and value.

Keywords: Fatimid dynasty, Islamic Egypt, Fatimid textiles, Shi'a religion, textile motifs.

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