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Anthropological Study of Holy Objects in the Culture of People of Ilam (Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Subject of the present study is anthropological study of holy objects with emphasis on Ilam Province. The objective of this survey is to study the interrelationship between people and holy objects in the province of Ilam in order to have a deeper and more precise knowledge about the culture of this social unit. In this study, in addition to the identification and study of the holy objects, people's behavior towards them is also studied. Considering the conducted anthropological studies in this region and the applied methods, it seems that in Ilam Province, in addition to their individual functions, the holy objects have important social functions too. They have great powers in creating sense of correlation between individuals and also creating social connections.

Keywords: Anthropology, Holy objects, Culture, Ilam Province

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In the course of history, in his endless struggle and fight against nature and his efforts to overcome it, man has gained expansive material and spiritual achievements. These achievements have passed from generation to generation and have gradually led to improvement of his life. In this regard, all societies (even small and remote ones), have their own experiences, customs and traditions, as well as their own specific cultures in material (such as food, dress code, shelter) and also spiritual aspects. In the meantime, according to beliefs, myths and legends of every nation, the connective elements between these superior powers and man were different animals and objects which achieved their powers from those superior sources. Therefore, identification of human behavior with these animals, objects and natural phenomena leads to identification of their spiritual aspects i.e. beliefs, attitudes, and collective identities. In this regard, the holy objects are significantly important, because, by spread

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of urbanism and getting away from nature, they are the only remaining associates of man from the obsolete nature and from his ancestral life. These objects have received their holiness from the superior forces and have become mediators between man and these forces. In this way, they bring peace to him in this turbulent world. In addition to individual functions, these objects have expansive social functions too, which will be discussed later. In this survey, it is meant to study the relationship between man and holy objects, especially in order to get familiar with the target society in all aspects.

IMPORTANCE AND NECESSITY OF RESEARCH

In addition to traditional and religious richness of the culture in Ilam Province, due to existence of directing connection between religious and traditional cultures in this region, the holy objects are the most important tools for showing and representing the depth of religious and traditional beliefs of its people. In the studied field, these objects have reciprocal and bilateral relationships with people so much that only in interviews and during the study, one can understand the value of these objects for these people. Therefore, in such convenient conditions, people and environments should be valued and the influence of these objects in their culture should be studied; because there is no guarantee that in future, when these present generations will be replaced by coming generations, these relationships and connections will still exist or not.

MOST IMPORTANT OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Objective of this study is to present an anthropological perspective on the ways people deal with the holy objects in the cultural field of Ilam Province. In order to achieve this objective, the holy objects were studied as symbols of supernatural forces. Study of issues such as concepts of holy and non-holy, their association with objects, and man's behavior towards these objects in the society from past to present are considered as main objectives of this study.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Major Objectives

Objective of this study is to present an anthropological perspective on the ways people deal with the holy objects in the cultural field of Ilam Province. In order to achieve this objective, the holy objects were studied as symbols of supernatural forces. Study of issues such as concepts of holy and non-holy, their association with objects, and man's behavior towards these objects in the society from past to present are considered as main objectives of this study.

2. Minor Objectives

- a. What are the holy objects in general?
- b. What are the holy objects in Ilam Province?
- c. How and through what phenomena do these objects gain their holiness?
- d. How is the behavior of people towards these objects in the society?

MOTIVATION OF THE STUDY

With its multi-millennial historical background, Ilam Province has deep and stable cultural traditions a lot of which are still available –although intangibly- remaining from ancient eras. Unfortunately nowadays, under the invasion of new cultures, this deeply rooted culture is disappearing. Hence, one of the most important motivations of the researchers is to display part of this culture in connection with holy objects which have expansive functions in the daily lives of people in the target society i.e. Ilam Province.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Questions of the study in the order of appearance are as follows:

1. What are the concepts of holy and non-holy?
2. What are the holy objects?
3. How has the behavior of the people of Ilam been towards these objects in the history and how is it nowadays?
4. What functions have these objects had in the daily lives of the people of their region?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology presents criteria to identify the right works through a paradigmatic analysis. Research methodologies correspond to ontology and methods special to their own.(Mustafae, 2010)

Qualitative research methods are for helping the researcher to understand human behavior and social as well as cultural foundations in which people have been shaped. In the qualitative research, the objective is to understand phenomena from the viewpoint of participants in their special institutional and social bases. This objective gets ignored while quantifying data. Qualitative research could be positivist, interpretive or critical. Generally, according to the studied subject and the research objectives, every researcher selects a special method. In the

anthropological studies, the target society is selected as a small and limited society so that it can be handled easily. Therefore, in order to achieve his objectives, the researcher can penetrate into the society and interact with its people and discover their ways of life.

GENERAL INFORMATION ON THE CLIMATIC, GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL FEATURES OF THE STUDIED REGION

In its geographical and political expansion, Ilam includes 20150/243 km² which is almost 2/1 of the whole country area. This province is located on the western side of Zagros, between 40, 45 to 48, 03 eastern longitudes, and 32, 03 to 34, 02 northern latitude. The city of Ilam (the province center) is located in the northern side of the province, 745 km southeastwards from Tehran. On the south, it spreads to Khuzistan and Iraq, on the east, to Lorestan, on the north and northwest, to Kermanshah Province, and on the western side, it has 425 km of borders with Iraq. Natural borders of this province are 220 km long and 100 km wide. These borders reach Mount Ghalaja and Seimara River on the north, Doyraj River on the south, and Hamrin mountain chain in Iraq in the west (Geographical Organization of Armed Forces, 2007).

According to the state divisions in 2005, Ilam Province has 7 cities, 17 towns, 18 regions, 38 big villages and 1204 small villages out of which 754 villages are permanent and 451 villages are seasonal or have been evacuated. Until 1936, Ilam Province was known as Poshtekouh and was always ruled by governors. In early Qajarid period, this region came under the rule of Kurdistan states of Kermanshahan and Sarhad of Iraqin; and these states were altogether called Poshtekouh. In the state division of 1937, Ilam was under one of the six provinces of the country called Shomal Gharb Province. In this division, Ilam became one of the small cities of this province. In the time of Reza Shah, this region became a big city under the fifth province. As the city of Ilam, in this period, it included regions of Ilam, Abdanan, Mehran, Arkowazi, Dehloran, Chowar, Badreh and Saleh Abad. Eivan also became one of the cities of Kermanshahan Province (ibid).

HOLY OBJECTS

There are a lot of holy objects especially in non-monotheist religions. They have expansive scopes so much that they include even water, rock, etc.

Sun: the challenge of Abraham PBUH to the sun-worshippers shows holiness of sun, and according to Tyler's theory, religion was originated from worshipping sun. "The religion of Egyptians had been dominated by worshipping of sun".

Moon: “fertility of living things as fertility of plants correspond to moon...women’s monthly menstruation has definitely helped strengthen this belief that moon is the first husband of woman. Menstruation is considered as the reason of women’s and girls’ affairs with moon.” (Eliade, 1993, 70)

Water: beliefs in many religions and sects whose believers have concentrated on springs, rivers and streams correspond to multiplicity of religious attitudes towards water. Spread of these religions is, in the first place, because of the holy value given to water i.e. the generating element. Water is the ebullient spring and source of all being: “And We created from water every living thing.” (The Quran, Anbia: 30)

Baptism in Christianity, washing the body in Ganges River in Buddhism and water of Zam Zam for Muslims are examples of holiness of water.

Objects that belong to mosques, temples and pagodas: objects that are worshipped inside these holy places are considered holy because of belonging to these holy places; and the principle of generalizing holiness covers them too. Objects like pulpit, *mohr* of prayers, curtain of the *Kabaa*, *sajjada*, baptizing water, *wudu* water of saints, objects and clothes belonging to saints that are for show in public places or museums, stones, doors, instruments and kettledrum of servants (which are used for regulating coming and going of pilgrims) in the holy places are some examples of the holy objects. (Aaron, 2000, 394)

HOLINESS

The concept of “holiness” has always been one of the most applied concepts in human life. Human beings play considerable roles in the social interactions because of the holiness they regard for some issues like God or gods, times, places, objects and even individuals. If we look at the holy thing, especially with the taboos that have covered it, we will have a better understanding of its importance in social interactions. Therefore, dealing with theories related to holiness, origin of holiness, generalizing and transferring holiness and holy objects are remarkably important.

WHAT IS TOTEM?

“Totem is an animal or plant whose most important feature is its symbolic value for a social group. “Totem” is a holy thing which is looked upon with respect and is surrounded with different rituals. After giving the mentioned introduction, Dorkim defines religion in this way: “according to distinction between holy objects and symbols, religion is considered apart from the ordinary aspects of being -realm of non-holy things- therefore, religion distinguishes between holy and non-holy objects. Totem and things related to Totem in any way are holy, and the

ordinary aspects of the world are non-holy. As a holy entity, Totem includes divine values which distinguish it from other animals that can be hunted or consumed". In Dorkim's viewpoint, religion does not mean believing in the supernatural; since in some worldwide religions, there is no belief in God and in the supernatural; for example, Buddhism does not preach the belief in God. The nature of religion, according to Dorkim, is dividing the world into two groups of holy and non-holy entities. It seems that in this definition, religion has the role of divider: dividing objects into holy and non-holy; or in other words, distinction between heavenly and earthly phenomena, while religion is in the heavenly (a collection of things, beliefs and rituals) part. "Religion is a set of correlated beliefs and rituals related to the heavenly world." (Marefat Seasonal, issue 34)

ORIGIN OF TOTEM'S HOLINESS

According to Dorkim, Totem is holy because it is the symbol of a group or a society. Totem is the representative of values which are fundamentally important for the group or the society. The respect and gratitude given to Totem is in fact originated from the respect and gratitude given to the society by the group members. In otherworld's, heavenly objects, plants, animals, and people who, because of their connection with the heavenly objects, have become holy, are so because they are linked to the holy element of the "massive". Even the anonymous and unspecified force called Totem is taken from the society itself. Therefore, in reply to this question that "then what is the thing that really is worshipped and glorified in customs and rituals?" he believes that it is nothing but the "society"; although the society members are not aware of it. Customs and rituals that believers practice are for creating the sense of correlation and prioritizing social requirements and putting aside self-centered desires.

"Formalities get people further from issues related to non-holy social life and let them in the transcendent (and holy) realm in which the group members feel themselves connected to higher forces. These higher forces that are attributed to Totem or divine effects or gods are, in fact, explanations of the influence and effects of the public on individual". According to the ideas of Dorkim, the real holy and deity, and what is praised and held holy in customs, rituals and religious formalities is nothing but "society". (Eliade, 11, 1993)

ORIGIN OF THE HOLINESS OF SOCIETY

It was clarified that the origin of holiness of phenomena is society. Now this question is stated that if holiness of Totem is from society, what is the holiness of society from? Dorkim's answer is that: "society by itself is holy. Generally, there is no doubt that with the same influence it has on the minds, the society has all abilities to awaken the divine sense in all of them; because the society has the same relationship with its members as God

has with his believers”. According to Dorkim, society has goals which are never achieved unless we forget our personal interests. The society cannot resort to materialistic power and military force in order to achieve its goals, but has to call people to subdue through moral authority and creating sense of respect in them for itself. Society has its own specific nature and consequently, its own objectives; but because it cannot reach its goals unless with our mediation, with its full authority, it asks us for help. It wants us to forget our interests and be at its service, and in this way, every moment, we have to subdue to rules about manners and thoughts which we ourselves have created; rules that sometimes are contrary to our most fundamental instincts. If we subdue to the society, it is not because society has such an armed force that can overcome our resistance. Our submission to society is more than anything else because society is the subject of our real respect. (Eliade, 152, 2001)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Functionalism

The word “function” has a Latin origin and is one of the common words in European languages which has many meanings such as work, role, action or job, duty or service, and in social sciences, words such as use, benefit, purpose, motivation, tenor, aim and goal, need and results have come as equivalents of the word “function”. (Tabibi, 2001)

Functionalism, as a school of thought in anthropology, considers every social action and institution in its relation to the whole social body. The functional theory lays its foundation on two principles, collectivism or the principle of totalitarianism, and being beneficial or the principle of utilization. (Khanghah, 2003)

In this study and in an anthropological analysis of the holy objects in Ilam Province, we have tried to use the functional perspective; in other words, holy objects in the target society are elements of the studied culture. Therefore, the issue of holy objects has been considered as one of the cultural elements in relation to the topic of the subject.

FUNCTION OF THE HOLY OBJECTS IN ILAM PROVINCE

Culture and civilization of every generation is originated from customs and traditions of its ancestors and predecessors, and the socio-cultural foundation and beliefs of every nation have roots in beliefs and social issues of that country. Dealing with customs and rituals of predecessors and the present people can describe the cultural and social roots of different people and governments for the coming and the present generations. It can also revive their manners and attitudes.

In this regard, Ilam Province as one of the most important canons of civilization in Iran (considering the remaining works in Tappe Alikesh in Ilam Province and the works of Halilan) traditionally and religiously is one of the richest locations. In this regard, the holy objects play their own roles as parts of the culture. This function is either individual or social. We see the most important function of holy objects in the religious ceremonies of Ashura. In these ceremonies, the youth and the elderly people get themselves busy in doing social activities.

RESEARCH CONCLUSION

The present study titled “anthropological study of holy objects in Ilam Province” included very valuable results. As it was mentioned above, prior to this study, there has been no research conducted on holy objects in Ilam Province. Therefore, this study includes remarkable and valuable results.

Holy objects in Ilam Province have widespread functions. These functions include both personal and social aspects. These objects have gained their holiness in different ways: some of these objects have become holy or blessed because of a historical event; for example, the pieces of rocks and stones in a *ghadamgah* (where a saint has stepped) located 35 km from Ilam. Some other objects have become holy because of their special functions in religious customs and rituals, like flags and other objects used in Ashura rituals (figures 3, 4 and 5), some others have become holy because of their religious role, like *mohr*, *tasbih* (figure 7), and some others do not have religious foundation but are considered holy in the ethnic culture of the region (of course in these cases, usually a religious narrative or a religious excuse is also made up for the object) like *horz* and handmade jujus, or some objects which, because of urbanism, have disappeared nowadays and their images are identifiable on gravestones from the past.

These objects play very important roles in daily and social lives of people. Even in the modern world with the invasion of new and alien thoughts and beliefs to this region, these objects have strong but somehow hidden functions. By standing in the holy places, these objects absorb a lot of pilgrims from the province and the neighboring provinces every year. In addition to that, existence of countless other holy objects like *mohr* and *tasbih*, has widespread function in daily lives of people; especially *tasbih*, in this way that for many people especially elderly and middle aged people, it has become an entertaining and in the meantime a holy and useful object. There are also special behaviors regarding these objects. In this way that the form of behavior with these objects is absolutely different from the form of behavior with other –non-holy- objects; in this way that these people avoid placing these objects alongside other non-holy, especially unclean, objects, and nor do they place them in unclean places. In addition to that, for the people of this region, some objects are signs of respect to the

Prophet and Imams and signs of participation in ceremonies related to them. For example, on the days of Muharram, on all houses of this province including one-storied and two-storied houses or apartments, shops and other public places, flags of Imam Hussein are installed on the entrances or the roofs. This shows the support of the people living in those houses, shops and other places for Imam Hussein's movement and for events of Muharram. In these days, holy objects display their social functions very well. In this regard, we can mention green pieces of cloth distributed among mourners in mosques, *tekyehs* and other places of mourning ceremonies in these days (of course, apart from Muharram ceremonies, they are distributed among participants in other religious ceremonies). Some of other objects are holy cradles, water distribution places (made of metals and mud) which are especially placed in recent years on the roads to religious places. People use these objects by seeking blessing from them. As it was mentioned above, on the days of Muharram, holy objects display their most functions so much so that we can regard both social as well as individual functions for these objects. Other than the days of Muharram too, these objects keep their functions with full strength, in this way that in many cases, people gather around these objects to get blessing; for example, we can mention passing of *zarihs* of holy Imams from Ilam on their way to Iraq. In the meantime, people go to visit these *zarihs* for different reasons and give sums of money to their responsible people as vows or put the money in the cash boxes of these objects so that they can be blessed by fulfillment of their needs. Perhaps, for many of these holy objects in Ilam Province, more than the individual functions, we can regard social functions.

Eventually, holy objects have very high positions in the culture of Ilam Province. These objects are generally connected to ethnic culture on the one side and religious beliefs on the other side. Considering the anthropological studies in this region and the applied methods, it seems that the holy objects in Ilam Province, in addition to their individual functions, have a lot of social functions as well. They have high powers in creating sense of correlation between people and creating social connections.



Figure 1: the holy palm tree of Ashura in Ilam Province⁵



Figure 2: holy metal objects, symbols of the cut hand of Hazrat Abulfazl that are kept in Hazrat Payambar (PBUH) Mosque in Ilam Province⁶

⁵ Source: Mehr News Agency

⁶ Photo: author



Figure 3: *mohr* and *tasbih* in the ceremony of anonymous martyrs in Ilam Province, spring 2012⁷



Figure 4: whole view of a gravestone in Abdanan region of Ilam on which there are images of some holy objects.⁸

⁷ ibid

⁸ Source of photo: author

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