

**ALONG THE PATH OF MYSTIC INTERPRETATION:
SYMMETRY IN A MUSLIM CALLIGRAPHIC PLAQUE**

Frances Trix

Department of Anthropology, Wayne State University

Detroit, Michigan

frances.trix@mts.wayne.cc.edu

In Islamic societies the art of calligraphy has long been a prominent art form and a unifying cultural symbol. Both the sacredness of the word of the Qur'an, understood as the word of God, and the prohibition against idol worship, often interpreted as prohibition of pictorial or representative art, contributed to the elevation of the art of beautiful writing of Muslim scripture. Manuscripts of Qur'ans and pages of special *sura* or chapters of the Qur'an provide the best record of this twelve-hundred year old art form. There are as well examples of Islamic calligraphy on mosque walls and tombs, on metallic vases and trays, on ceramic tiles and plates, worked into amulets, woven into carpets, and appearing today even on sides of trucks. Another widespread setting of Islamic calligraphy is wall plaques found in mosques, *tekkes* or Sufi centers, and private homes.

Frequently the lines from scripture or phrases or Holy Names on the wall plaques are surrounded by multiple borders whose regular designs, forms of translational symmetry, contrast with the particular combination of straight and curving lines of the Arabic letters, and the balanced placement of diacritics in surrounding space. In the broader setting of Islamic art, forms of symmetry abound in the geometric patterns of mosque domes, latticework, metalwork, and carpets. Islamic calligraphy stands out all the more for its

non-geometric patterning. The calligraphic wall plaque that I analyze, however, is remarkable for the bilateral symmetry of its words, and for the importance this symmetry plays in both interpretation and countering of misinterpretation.

The wall plaque is written in the classic *thuluth* style, and probably dates from early 20th century Ottoman Turkey. Besides the three words rendered in calligraphy, there are representations of a headpiece, and an alabaster pendant, whose prominence on the plaque derives from symmetry-breaking, and an axe that reinforces the symmetry of the calligraphic words. These three items have ritual meaning for members of the Bektashi Order of Dervishes, and thereby identify the plaque as one that probably hung in the ritual room of a Bektashi tekke.

The Bektashi Order was one of the two main Sufi or Muslim mystic Orders of the Ottoman Empire, the other being the better known Mevlevi or "whirling dervish" Order. The Bektashis were founded in the thirteenth century in Anatolia and spread throughout the Ottoman Empire. In general the Sufi Orders allowed people a more personal expression of Islam through their poetry, chant, and ritual gatherings. Sufis saw themselves as Muslims who had gone beyond the basic tenets and practices of Islam to a deeper meaning. However their belief that movement toward God was desirable, and their loyalty to their mystic masters, through whose teaching and intercession this movement was possible, made them vulnerable to allegations of heresy by the Sunni Muslim Ottoman State. Non-Sufi Muslims often saw Sufis as lax in their fulfilling of religious law, or even idolatrous in their veneration for their teachers and for Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, who brought mystic understanding of Islam.

The tension of a mystic minority living in a largely non-mystic Muslim society exacerbated certain questions of representation. For example, there is the question of how to represent the mystic notion of the omnipresence of God without suggesting idol-like multiplicity. On the Bektashi wall plaque in question (see the reproduction at the end of the abstract), the bilateral symmetry in the calligraphic writing of the largest of the three words, the name "Ali," was interpreted by Baba Rexheb, a ninety-four year old Bektashi leader, to mean that "wherever you look, there you see Ali," that is the mystic sense of God. A description of this wall plaque in an authoritative work on the Bektashi Order (Birge, 1937) mentions merely the presence of the "Bektashi trinity" of Ali, Muhammad, and Hak (the Truth).

In the paper I refute the notion that the message of the wall plaque is reiteration of a Bektashi trinity. Crucial to the argument is interpretation of the bilateral symmetry of the name "Muhammad," and the bilateral symmetry and relative size of the word "haq." Briefly, Bektashis do not generally speak of seeing the Prophet Muhammad wherever they look, and if the word "haq" referred to the "Majesty of Truth," their usual phrase for God, it would not be of middling size, nor would it be repeated doubly as it is in bilateral form on both sides of the plaque. Rather, the message of the plaque is the Turkish sentence "Muhammad Ali haq(dir)." That is, "Muhammad Ali--representing the combined notion of prophethood and sainthood--is the truth." (In Turkish the copula "is" does not have to be stated.) The word "truth" is represented in bilateral symmetry on each side, echoing its eternal quality.

The source of this interpretation is Baba Rexheb, a Bektashi leader with whom I have studied for many years. The process of learning was more poignant for me in that Baba Rexheb is now legally blind, so when I brought the wall plaque to Baba at his Bektashi tekke, I had to describe it to him

verbally. This interaction allowed for comment on incorrect interpretations that he might not have stated had he seen it and explained it directly.

To contextualize the Bektashi wall plaque further, I compare it to a Mevlevi wall plaque of a similar period, one also remarkable for its bilateral symmetry. This contrast brings out differences in theology and emphasis, as well as providing occasion for explanation of the Bektashi ritual items on the plaque. Finally I discuss the serenity of the piece and the way the art holds a viewer, whether literate in Arabic and Bektashi understanding or not.

