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Insignias in Shi'a Ethos and Commemoration: An Anthropological Analysis of Symbolic Interpretation with Colors

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Abstract: *Shi'a is a popular sect of Muslims all over the world, and they have so many interesting signs and symbols in their culture; it is a need of the hour to explore and get in-depth knowledge about unique symbols which have remarkable latent meanings. This paper deals with the symbolic spiritual interpretation of colors in the Shi'a populace of the Chakwal. An Anthropological qualitative research technique was used to collect empirical data based on a native point of view. The main objectives of the research were to describe the explicit and implicit human cognitive positive & negative connotations of colors and significance of the colors in dresses, 'Alam and ritual performances in the daily life of Shi'a culture. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand, analyze the historical symbolic meaning of the colors and how socio-culturally people attached with black, red and green colors in the Shi'a community. .*

Key Words: Shia, Symbolism, Commemoration, Colors, Ritual, Alam

Introduction

In Anthropology, the essential thing is to share the outcomes of research when researchers explore the cultures. Reveal the truth expand the horizon of the world as the colors in different religions play a significantly significant role to maintain, publicize and strengthen different faiths, ideologies and doctrines. In addition, it plays a significant role

in a distinct recognition, acting as a binding force and reminding the followers of their commitment to their cults, sects or religions. Color is not the only representation of the devotion of followers, but it also portrays the meaningful expressive, ethical, and divine relationships of their followers with a particular faith.

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It is said from the objective point of view; there is no actual color exists in the environment. Only the diverse wavelengths make up light, which is captivated and reflected by all of the substance. The reflected light wave goes into the eye and propels signals to the brain; then, we are able to the vision of color. It is true that our minds create colors as an interpretation of sensations that are the result of our sentiments. In this universe, everything which is in the form of solid, fluid or gas, is always in changing mode; however, our brains don't find a very useful way of figure out the world. That's why we interpret what we have knowledge into concepts such as material, smell, sound, and color, which is easy for us to comprehend.

While describing the symbolism of the color of various cultures, it is important to provide information about the Shi'a beliefs and philosophy behind them. Colors in Shi'a culture have a multifaceted significance. It has innate, social, intellectual, psychological, legendary, political, linguistic and spiritual importance, which reflects belief, notions, manners, sentiments, ideas of the cult.

According to Cirlot, symbolic color has three sources of origin that support the firm background of the Shi'a culture.

- 1) The inbuilt features of each color, supposed intuitively as a purpose fact.
- 2) The relationship between a color and the social symbol is culturally linked with it.
- 3) The connection which basic, ancient logic observes (Cirlot 1973:53).

He states that modern psychologists and psychoanalysts give the third source the principal importance and consider the second linkage. The clarity of any color reflects in the purity of its symbolic meaning. The primary colors mirror manifest emotions; on the other

hand, the slight, secondary colors reflect more complicated, puzzled, complex concepts.

The important point is colors may have both positive and negative symbolism in different cultures. The researcher has sorted out that the black color has its own language in human traditions, which convey deeply rooted meanings and explanations in natives. Different religions have colors as symbols, which play a significantly evocative role to carry, publicize and strengthen different faiths, philosophies and doctrines.

Black Color

It is believed that the color black can be traced from Proto Indo-European origins through *bhleg*, which stands for burning and shine. The Old English *blæc* was analogous to the dark shade, Old High German *blah* (black). Understanding of black in different cultures is equally distinguishable since it is at a stark and equally opposite differentiation from white. Not only this, the symbol, Ying-Yang or Tao, which dates back to the Chinese philosophies, is also comprised of both black and white. Yin is the darker side of the swirl in contrast in contrast to the white.

Positive Connotations

Black is a complex symbol; in lack of light, it can be created easily. All cultures distinguish the opposition between black and white colors (Kenner 2006: 16). The black color is also a symbol of rebirth and resurrection (Fontanna 1994:670). It is the color of Saturn, a planet, which represents time in Greek traditions. The Hindu Kali is a black goddess, which symbolizes the light-dark and the continuation of life (Tresidder 1998: 26).

Negative Connotations

Black brings a lot of negative connotations in the world, many of them centred on fear and the unknown element of life in the Western world. Death and sorrow are symbolized in the West by black (Kenner 2000:16).

An Anthropologist Turner describes, black symbols are connected with evil, disease, and witchcraft and are often ritually neglected because it does not make things visible and is linked with loss and dirtiness.

1. Evilness or bad things
2. To lack fortune, cleanliness
3. To have sufferings or miseries
4. magic
5. Dark or dusk (Turner 1967: 71).

Black across Religions

There is no doubt that the black color has its magnitude in different religions. In Islam, black is a sanctified color ever since Kaaba has been raised and colored in a black cover. It is the holiest of all the sites for Muslims across the globe. The first instance that comes to the minds of the Muslims with the connotation of Black color is 'Ghilaaf-e-kaaba', which is annually changed in a symbolic fashion. Often the Muslims pray to Allah, mentioning the phrase, 'Kaali kamli walay', which refer to the lord of Kaaba, Allah, the Almighty. In the Buddhist tradition, black color has a connotation, like in *bhava chakra*, it is the symbol of *naraka lok* (people of the hell). In the same way among the Ndembu people (a tribe), and in the Buddhist custom, black color plays a major role, Shi'a also has a great association with black color. This color gives them an alliance, and they use to wear a black dress for the rest of the whole month of Muharram and at other events. This symbolizes great woe, pain and the ethos of sorrow, and Shi'a clearly

expresses their sentiments through black color. Buddhist monks wear orange mixed with the red or brown color dress during their worship duties. Similarly, in Hinduism, *swami* wears this color for their religious meditation, which represents flame and fire. It also symbolizes an endeavour to achieve a great religious saintly power or their efforts in part of restless nature to conquer inner peace and fulfilment through worship. So, we can say that this is their devotedly satisfactory color. Colors, therefore, play a special role in every religion and socio-cultural ritual allied to it.

Black the Color in Shia Culture

Black is an amazingly unique symbolic color, deeply rooted in the Shi'a faith, and its in-depth meaning is worry and is anxious. Black is a sacred color that can be interpreted as the religio-cultural identity of Shi'ism all over the world. It is the shade of mourning, death and remorse. The Shi'a believe that black represents sorrow and grief, death and mourning, which represents the onset of Muharram rituals. They wear black, which denote this color for the Shi's symbols such as *alam* and *azaadari*. A noteworthy element of black color is the most vital and necessary representation in Shi'a *majales* and procession culture, especially in Pakistan. It is a sacred religious symbol, a Holy color which is one of the crucial and fundamental symbols of the Shi'a ethnicity. Both men and women prefer to wear black color throughout the mourning rituals of Muharram, Safar and eight days of Rabi-ul-Awwal to mark the onset of the mourning Shi'a rituals.

Ethnic History of Black Color of Shi'a

In order to understand the concept of colors of Shi'a culture, it is necessary to know about their system of Shi'a philosophy. According to

Shi'a, black color is the symbol of *Ghazi Abbas salar* of Shi'a culture. Hazrat Abbas was the son of Imam Ali and half brother of Imam Hussain. Black color '*alam*' expresses the grief, regret and pain. It is believed that Hazrat Abbas was very innocent, have a great love for Imam Hussain and served their family with loyalty. After so many years still, Shi'a memorizes him with great respect; it is said that it's a matter of heartache that the grandson of the Holy Prophet and his family and followers had no access to even a single drop of water before their martyrdom. It is really painful for a human being not to take water near a river. All women and children were thirsty in the battle of Karbala. The only one, Imam Hazrat Abbas, who tried to bring water for them all in thunderbolt and his enemies martyred him in a brutal way, the sacrifice of Hazrat Abbas is not ordinary; his love as a companion will ever last.

Significance of Red Color

The Color red is not an ordinary color in human life; its importance varies in different cultures; red is deep in Anthropological interpretations and is especially one of the most imperative colors of Shi'a culture all over the world. The old English account suggests this color as *rēad*. Its Proto Indo-European connections suggest that it was denoted as *reudh*. *Rudhira* means blood or blood in the Sanskrit language. In English, the color 'red' is associated with blood bearing the same color ([Knowles 2003](#): 441). Sun is also associated with the red color due to its fierceness and heat as the sun. Therefore, red color symbolism is universally associated with fire and blood and aligns with the laws of nature ([Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996](#):792).

It is observed that red is a symbol of love, joy, happiness, passion, bold, blood, fire, anger,

danger, obstacles, battles in Arabic and English cultures. It also signifies the color of the sun, the symbol of energy and life force.

It is believed that red color was perhaps the first-ever used color by humans for body painting or art. The archaeological remains excavated from an African site, Pinnacle Point, were colored ochre made of an iron oxide drawing. They have been believed to date back around 170,000 to 40,000 years ago where red-stained artefacts hold a symbolic value ([Wrescher & Bolton 1980](#): 631).

The red color symbolizes extensive meals of followers, sufferers, trinity, the body of Christ and octave ([Bridgett 1883](#):537). In Indian traditions, red symbolizes courage, power and the start of a new life together.

The red color is described in the following symbolic analysis:

- In Christianity, it is interpreted as the color of the gorge (meal), as well as of the willing victims, and it acts as a symbol of the highest authority. This is also the color of basic clothes. With a combination of black colors, it symbolizes a nightmare and the devil. According to ancient Jewish traditions, the first man created by God named Adam is alive and red.
- This is a color of magic in folklore since ancient times; the fairy's top and the musician's cap have always been red. ([Baker 1974](#):43).
- Red color means kindness, trustworthiness. This is the color of blood and symbolizes both love, abhorrence and violence. This is the color of the struggle for existence, authority, flames and jeopardy.

As the color of blood, red is closely related to the symbol of caution, confrontation,

damage, sex, crime, and assassination. In ancient Egypt, Red color demoted barren land. It also depicted one of their harsh god Seth. It was believed that Seth had red eyes and hair. For ancient Romans, Red was a call for the military. Therefore, in their mythology, red symbolizes the lord of battle, the planet of Mars. ([Franklin 2002:216](#)). Red flags were associated with socialist revolutionaries. Red was linked with prostitutes who were found in red light areas.

History of Red Color in Shi'a Culture

It is noted that the red color in *'Alam* is the symbol of Imam Hussain, which is a representation of blood. The color red represents bloodshed in Shi'a philosophy. Blood of Imam Hussain, who was Imam Hussain, is the fifth *masoom* in the list, martyred by Yazid's army in the most tragic event of this world, Karbala. Imam Hussain was the son of Hazrat Bibi Fatima, Imam Ali and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad; he is famous for his great love for Islam and no doubt he gave the best example of the sacrifice as Ayoub, a historian, describes, it is believed that the God has chosen a thousand men for the protection of his religion, Islam. They will eventually support Mahdi. They are the ones who fought *Uhd* and *Badr* and then the ones who fought and died with Imam Hussain for this honour of Islam before the existence of the universe. ([Ayoub 1978:125](#)).

The bloodshed that was made by Yazid at Karbala is commemorated by Muslims and specifically Shias with great soberness every year across the globe. The red color used for the *alams* and *zuljanah* represents blood. After the martyrdom, the horses were blooded in red and the same was the case with the flags of the Imam's family. The red color, though used in a limit recalls the bloodshed of Karbala. This

color revives the memories of the followers of Hussain of the day and time. It takes them back to the 10th of Muharram, to that spacio-temporal zone every year when this martyrdom was taking place in the desert of Karbala. It revives their agony and pain and their helplessness in today's era and evokes the emotions of pain. They believe that this color red is a revolutionary color and incites the passion for justice and agony against the cruel in the contemporary era.

Green Color

According to the dictionary definitions, the word green is closely related to Middle English *grēne*, which is similar to Old English *grōwan* (to grow). Green colored is used to denote flora and fauna. Also there are certain minerals which are green in color, such as emerald and jade. They are often used as a reference by people to describe the color, green. Reptiles also bear shades of green therefore it is used as both positive and negative connotations in this world.

Positive Connotations

Universally, the most potent simile for green color is fauna since it reminds of greenery, lush green mountains, plants and soothing fertility. It is believed to give a wakeup call to a fresh new start of the day and leads to fertility and therefore reproduction and expansion. The color green generally connects you to forests and spring season. In China it refers to spring. In Celtic folklore, the green man is an important vegetation and god of fertility. In ancient Egypt, the green of the god Osiris symbolized rebirth and immortality ([Connor & Airey 2007:38](#)). In spiritual symbolism, is the most significant in the Islamic world, where it was the most sacred and favorite color of the Holy Prophet. The mausoleum of the Prophet

is marked by green color of “*Gumbad-e-Khazra*”. It symbolizes Madina, the resting place of the last Prophet (PBUH) for the entire Muslim community and hence revered with great sanctity. This green dome is the color of peace and calm for Muslims and the term is used in several ‘*naats*’; to praise the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in prose and poetry. The most fundamental green color symbolism was drawn from nature. Green color is in the world called grass, green land and heaven.

Negative Connotations

The negative connotation of the color green is believed to be the darker side of the natural world. Green marks for demise and jeopardy. There are several instances where this color is associated with the parahuman powers. The fear of cats amongst the ancient Egyptians, especially the ones having green eyes, was believed to impose fatality and punishment, especially for all those who were guilty of killing these creatures. The green color was signified in Medieval Europe with the evil spirit. It was believed that wearing this color could inflict pain and therefore would prove unlucky to the one who adorns green (Franklin 2002:111); it is therefore that the correspondence of green and jealousy have passed into a folk tradition in the origin of this belief (Othelo 1995:132).

Ethnic History of Green Color in Shi'a Culture

An important characteristic worth observing in Shi'a ideology pertaining to green color. It has a dual meaning, but generically, it denotes the death of Imam Hassan. According to the historical account, he was poisoned by his enemy. His contemporary, Mu'awiya, with the help of his wife Ja'dah, did that. The green color is a symbol of poison; that is why Shi'a integrate *alam* of green color with Imam

Hassan. Imam Hassan was the elder son of Imam Ali and the grandson of the Prophet. Apart from poison, the green color is also used by the Shia community to commemorate the death of Hazrat Qaim, the son of Hazrat Imam Hussain, at the advent of Karbala. Since green color denotes plant, the mehndi plant or the color of the ‘*henna*’. On shab-e-Aashoor, the eve of 10th Muharram, it is believed that the Nikah of Hazrat Qasim, the son of Imam Husain and bibi Kubra, the daughter of Imam Hussain, took place. In the Indo-Pak cultural context, the ritual of Mehndi, a day before the wedding is believed to be significant. Therefore, the Shia Muslims from this part of the world, commemorate 7th of Muharram with the Mehndi of Hazrat Qasim and Bibi Kubra that could never happen due to the biggest tragedy the humanity faced at the hands of Karbala as per Shia Mythology. This green color, therefore, has multiple connotations in Shia Islam; it commemorates the memory of this nikah that could never be celebrated by the Ahl-e-bait. Therefore the color green has a dichotomous meaning in Shia history; one represents poison, and the other represents an uncelebrated cultural event of Mehndi (which was supposed to occur on the eve of the nikah) where the green-coloured turned to red (Bloodshed of Ahl-e-bait in Karbala the next day).

The most suitable explanation of these colors is through a big event of the Islamic history that is when Imam Hussain was born, Hazrat Safia (daughter of Abdul Mutalib), Hazrat Asma (daughter of Umais) and Hazrat Um e Salma were present there. Prophet Muhammad asked Hazrat Safia to bring the newborn. Hazrat Asma brought him and Prophet took him in his arms and recited prayer in to his right ear and then placed the baby in his lap and wept. Hazrat Asma asked

Prophet anxiously, why are you crying? He replied, after me the foe party will martyr him and do not share with Bibi Fatima.

Once on the event of *eid ul Fitr* (the sacred annual festival on 1st Shawal in the Islamic year after the month of Ramazan), all the children were very happy wearing the new clothes. Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain were also in their young age. They said to their mother, Bibi Fatima (the daughter of the Holy Prophet), for new garments. The Holy Prophet was also sitting there. He prayed for them and two dresses came for them from the heaven. The notable point is that the colors of the suits were yellow and red. When the Holy Prophet saw the color of the dresses, he became very upset. Hazrat Fatima *bint e Rasool* asked the cause then Holy Prophet replied with great sorrow that the green dress for Imam Hassan which indicated the color of poison as he was later assassinated by Mu'awiya and was poisoned while the red dress for Imam Hussain which indicated the color of the blood or the battle as he was later martyred by Yazid in the battle of Karbala. So this was preplanned by the almighty Allah, but the reason was to test their patience and belief.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that colors have their own languages in Shi'a culture, which are vehicles to convey deep-rooted meanings and interpretations. In fact, there were many colored flags represented used by the faithful in different periods of Islamic history as a symbols of their unique identity, sovereignty ruler, and to get control over others. In fact, their self is very strong; they are sufficient to others, unable to get subjugation however want to vanquish others through their strong spiritual

powers, it's all because of their strong connection with the Holy personalities who give them strength to become a real one. White color is a symbol of peace and harmony; a flag named *al rayah*, red colored '*alam* symbol of the blood, yellow and green in color '*alam* symbol of the poison. The use of black *al uqab* still continued in the wars, and black dress in their routine of life gives them belief in the prime worth of this color. In a way, we can say that Shia Religio-cultural history surround around these three colors, Red, Green and black. All their Imams have been martyred either with poison or through martyrdom; therefore, either greened to marrydom or red in blood and ultimately leaving the Shi'a community mournful in black. To them, both green and red represent the fate of Imams in the way of Almighty, where open bloodshed could not be carried out by the tyrants, the imams were poisoned, where they could, they made sure the bloodshed either take place in a sanctified mosque of Kufa or a desert like Karbala, so that the heinous crime could be kept off sight from the rest of the world. Upon learning the reality, the mourners are dressed in black. So far as Shi'a have kept the memory of the sad events of *ehl e bait* alive and the use of these colors in their life with an ever-growing emotional intensity give them connectivity and self-identity. So the colors are expression of emotions of Shi'a. These colors are exemplary symbols of the emotional attachment with charismatic personalities which is clearly expressed in their culture in forms of daily life ritual performances, dresses and the flags on roof of their houses. In true meaning, this is something exceptional approach to express their altruistic deep love for *ehl e bait* and endeavour is to attain the highest ranks in the world and hereafter.

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