



EMĀMZĀDA I. FUNCTION AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE

EMĀMZĀDA

i. Function and devotional practice

In *Mafātīḥ al-janān* (p. 562), the best known contemporary manual of Shi'ite devotions, Shaikh 'Abbās Qomī (d. 1319 Š./1940) rhapsodically describes *emānzādas* as "sites where divine favor and blessing occur, where mercy and grace descend; they are a refuge for the distressed, a shelter for the despondent, a haven for the oppressed, and a place of consolation for weary hearts, and will ever remain so until resurrection." This listing of functions corresponds, no doubt, to the actual experience of Shi'ite believers in Persia, and it is therefore remarkable that no general injunction to visit *emānzādas* has been attributed to any of the Twelve Imams. There are, however, traditions concerning some of the most frequented *emānzādas*, which might be taken to imply the general advisability of the practice. Thus, Imam Ja'far al-Šādeq is said to have foretold the death and burial at Qom of Fāṭema Ma'šūma, daughter of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓem and to have promised paradise to all who should visit her tomb; Imams 'Alī al-Rezā and Moḥammad al-Taqī also placed great emphasis on the meritoriousness of such pilgrimage (Majlesī, *Behār* CII, pp. 265-67; idem, *Toḥfa*, pp. 418-20; Qomī, p. 562). Furthermore, when Imam 'Alī al-Naqī (or Imam Ḥasan al-'Askarī, according to Majlesī in *Behār* CII, p. 269) was informed by an inhabitant of Ray that he had just returned from a



pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Ḥosayn at Karbalā', he told him that he might equally well have visited the tomb of Shah 'Abd-al-'Azīm (q.v.), a descendant of Imam Ḥasan in the fourth generation, at Ray, thus saving himself the hardships of travel, an indication that considerations of distance might make it permissible to substitute an *emānzāda* for the shrine of an Imam as a goal of pilgrimage (Majlesī, *Toḥfa*, p. 421; Qomī, p. 565). This is confirmed by a recommendation from Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓem that those unable to visit the tombs of the Imams should make pilgrimage to "the righteous among our followers," a term that may be taken to include descendants of the Imams, in order to gain the same merit (Majlesī, *Toḥfa*, p. 422).

What is certain is that from the 5th/11th century onward, Shi'ite scholars granted recognition to pilgrimage to *emānzādas* as a valid form of devotion. Thus, Shaikh Mofīd (d. 413/1022) composed a text (*zīāra*) for recitation at the tombs of descendants of the imams, the wording of which suggests the devotional purpose of all such pilgrimage: "I have come to you as a pilgrim (*zā'eran*), entrusting you with my needs, as I entrust to you my religion, the outcome of my deeds, and all of my hopes until the end of my allotted span" (cited by Majlesī, *Behār* CII, p. 272, from the *Meṣbāḥ al-zā'er wa janāḥ al-mosāfer* of Sayyed 'Alī b. Ṭāwūs, d. 664/1265). By the 6th/12th century at the latest, pilgrimage to *emānzādas*, as well as to shrines of the Imams, had become so integral a part of Shi'ite devotional life that it attracted the attention of Sunnite polemicists, who accused the Shi'ites of being "tomb worshippers" (*gūrparast*) and of elevating such pilgrimage over the *ḥajj*. To this the response was given that the adornment of the Ka'ba and of the Prophet's mosque in Medina justified similar care being lavished on the shrines of the Imams and their descendants; that kissing the threshold of the shrines represented a mode of approaching God; and that at least some of the *emānzādas*, notably those in Qom and Qazvīn, were visited by Hanafites and Shafi'ites as well as by Shi'ites (Qazvīnī, pp. 576, 588-89). Comparable reproaches were made by Ebn Taymīya (d. 728/1328) with his characteristic acerbity; he accused the Shi'ites of falling into polytheism (*ṣerk*) through the veneration of their shrines (I, pp. 130-31).

It was but natural that such polemics should resurface when the Safavids imposed the profession of Shi'ism on most of Persia; it was in particular alleged that pilgrimage to the tomb of the founder of the family, Shaikh Ṣafī-Dīn (d. 735/1334), in Ardabīl, effectively classifiable as an *emānzāda* thanks to the forged imamite genealogy bestowed on him, was seen as more meritorious



than the *hajj* (Eberhard, p. 102). The degree to which the cult of the *emānzāda* was promoted by rulers and religious scholars of the Safavid period should not, however, be exaggerated. Most of the more important shrines had already existed for several centuries before the Safavid accession to power; such was the case with the tombs of Fāṭema Maʿsūma (Qomī, pp. 191 ff.); Shah ʿAbd-al-ʿAzīm and Sayyed Ḥamza, a son of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓem, at Ray; Solṭān-ʿAlī, a son of Imam Moḥammad al-Bāqer, near Kāšān; Abū ʿAbd-Allāh Ḥosayn, a son of Imam ʿAlī al-Rezā at Qazvīn; Faẓl and Solaymān, both sons of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓem, at Āva near Sāva; Qāsem b. Mūsā al-Kāẓem at Šūša, a village near Ḥella in Iraq (Qazvīnī, p. 588; Yāqūt, *Boldān*, Beirut, III, p. 372); and Aḥmad, popularly known as Šāh(-e) Čerāg, another son of Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓem, in Shiraz (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, I, p. 212). Further *emānzādas* were no doubt established, and certain cases of misidentification occurred: the tomb in Qazvīn of the Sufi Aḥmad Ġazālī (d. 520/1126) was transformed into the *Emānzāda* Aḥmad (Lambton, p. 1170) and that of a certain Abū Ḥāmed Tabrīzī near Sorḳāb became erroneously known as an *emānzāda* (Ebn al-Karbalāʾī, I, p. 176). There is, however, no reason to assume that a wholesale and deliberate appropriation of Sufi or other tombs took place. Ebn al-Karbalāʾī, an author by no means sympathetic to the Safavid enterprise, remarked that “the rank of descendants of the Imams is too elevated and lofty for their places of birth and burial to remain unknown” (p. 176), and the great Safavid scholar, Mollā Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesī (d. 1111/1700), despite the indiscriminate fervor often attributed to him, warned against the automatic validation of every tomb reputed to be an *emānzāda* (*Toḥfa*, p. 421; he cast doubt specifically on the tombs of ʿAlī b. Jaʿfar and Moḥammad b. Mūsā in Qom). Most important, the notion that the Safavids, drawing on precedents in Shiʿite tradition, sought to emphasize pilgrimage to shrines of the Imams and *emānzādas* to the detriment of the *hajj* (as suggested by, for example, Amir Arjomand, pp. 168-70) must be regarded as untenable. Traditions such as that attributed to Imam Jaʿfar al-Šādeq which extols the soil of Karbalāʾ as superior to the Kaʿba are anomalous (Ebn Qawlawayh, p. 267). Moreover, the repeated efforts of the Ottomans to restrict and isolate the flow of Persian pilgrims to Mecca (*hojjāj*) through their territories themselves bear witness to the tenacity with which Persian Shiʿites of the Safavid period sought to fulfill the obligation of *hajj* despite the dangers they frequently faced (Faroqhi, pp. 127, 134-39).

Majlesī’s role in the matter of *emānzāda* visitation was that of a codifier or at most an elaborator. After warning against the danger of false *emānzādas*, he specifies that the descendant of an Imam to whom pilgrimage is contemplated



should be of known moral probity and correct belief; excluded, therefore, would be individuals such as Ja'far al-Kaḏḏāb, a brother of Imam Ḥasan al-'Askarī who laid claim to the imamate, descendants of Imam Ḥasan who rose up in his name without authorization, and, by definition, all Zaydī *sayyeds* (*Beḥār* CII, pp. 273-75). No set text exists for recitation at an *emānzāda*; if the scholars have composed one for a specific shrine, that may be recited, failing which whatever prayer or recitation is made at the tomb of any believer will be entirely appropriate. If it is desired to accord the descendants of the Imams some special status, words may be used that enumerate their virtues and permit the believer to seek their intercession and that of their ancestors, for "to venerate them is to venerate the Imams" (Majlesī, *Beḥār* CII, p. 277; *Toḥfa*, p. 421). To these various prescriptions Shaikh 'Abbās Qomī (p. 562) adds that the devotee should acquaint himself with whatever is known of the life and pronouncements of the descendant of the Imam before embarking on pilgrimage to him.

In 1216/1801, adherents of the Wahhābī sect of Najd attacked and plundered the shrine of Imam Ḥosayn at Karbalā', claiming thereby to have destroyed a manifestation of polytheism (*šerk*), and when the conquest of the Ḥejāz by the Sa'ūdī family in 1343/1924 led to an imposition of Wahhābī doctrine across the Arabian peninsula, tombs of several of the Imams and their descendants in the Baqī' cemetery facing the Prophet's mosque in Medina were leveled to the ground. Despite the hostility thus displayed toward Shi'ism, a number of Persian writers came under the influence of Wahhabism and criticized, *inter alia*, the frequentation of *emānzādas*. Moḥammad-Ḥasan Šarī'at Sangalajī (d. 1362/1943), who imbibed Wahhābī ideas through the works of Salafī writers such as Moḥammad 'Abdoh (d. 1323/1905) and Rašīd Režā (d. 1354/1935) as well as witnessing first hand the acts of destruction wrought by the Wahhābīs in the Ḥejāz, proclaimed it impermissible to build tombs not level with the ground; to construct new shrines or to repair existing ones; to offer prayers at the shrines of the Imams and their descendants; or to regard them as intermediaries with God, for this would imply that God is an irascible sovereign who needs to be placated through recourse to His courtiers (pp. 138, 155-56). Similar views were advanced by 'Alī-Akbar Ḥakamīzāda in *Asrār-e hezār-sāla*, a pamphlet published in 1322 Š./1943, the same year as Sangalajī's work. Aḥmad Kasrawī (d. 1325 Š./1946), a thinker of somewhat different stamp from either Sangalajī or Ḥakamīzāda, made many of the same points in his polemic against Shi'ism, *Šī'agarī*, which also appeared in 1322 Š./1943. He criticized the practice of visiting the Emānzāda Dāwūd, located in what he



called “a filthy village” near Tehran, for the sake of having one’s prayers fulfilled, and the general belief that pilgrimage to *emānzādas* is a meritorious act (pp. 37, 60).

All three men were answered—Sangalajī and Ḥakamīzāda directly, Kasravī by unmistakable allusion—in *Kašf al-asrār* (1323 Š./1944), the earliest published work of Ayatollah Rūḥ-Allāh Komeynī (pp. 60-64). He dismissed as nonsensical the notion that the building of *emānzādas* or making pilgrimage to them constitutes *šerk* for, he asserted, not a single Twelver Shi’ite could be found who worships the personages buried there. Indeed, the adornment and frequentation of *emānzādas* fulfill the recommendation implied in the Qur’ān (“Whoever hold in honor the emblems of God acts from piety of the heart”; 22:32), for the building of splendid mosques and shrines makes manifest the abstract splendor of Islamic teachings. Justification for surmounting tombs with domes was also to be found in the Qur’ān, where mention is made of houses that “God has permitted to be raised high for His name to be mentioned therein” (24:36). Although the views of Kasrawī have retained a certain clientele down to the present, the criticisms advanced by him and his associates have had no measurable impact on the popularity of the *emānzāda* cult.

Recitations form the essence of pilgrimage to an *emānzāda*; it is no accident that the word *zīāra* denotes both the act of visitation and the words recited during it, especially in Arabic. Bodily expressions of devotion, especially the placing of the hands on the grille (*zarīḥ*) enclosing the tomb and circumambulation, with a pause at each corner of the tomb, are also permitted (Ḥorr ‘Āmelī, II, p. 81). In addition, the tying of votive rags or cloths and the deposit of gifts at *emānzādas* can be frequently observed even in contemporary Persia. Although *emānzādas* have always functioned primarily as places of pilgrimage, at least the most famous among them served as places of refuge (*bast*, q.v.) during both the Safavid and Qajar periods (Massé, *Croyances* II, p. 407). Many *emānzādas* are in addition the points of assembly and departure for the mourning processions during the first ten days of Moḥarram as well as the places where the associated paraphernalia are stored during the rest of the year.

Finally, it may be remarked that so ubiquitous in Persia is the phenomenon of the *emānzāda* that even in Sunnite regions of the country the tombs of Sufi saints are unthinkingly designated as such (personal observation, Ṭāleš, July 1994).



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