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SKETCHES ON THE RECEPTION OF THE POETRY OF SHAH ABDUL LATIF BHITAI IN GERMANY

On April 7, 2004, a memorable ceremony took place at Makli Graveyard, Thatta, Sindh: The erection of a tombstone adorned with an inscription of the verse of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689-1752)

"One Castle, a hundred thousand dorrs,
Windows without number-
Wherever I look, there the beloved confronts me"

(Sur Kalyan: Dastan Ist, Stanza No.20, Shah Jo Risalo: Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, as translated from Sindhi by Annemarie Schimmel)

This memorial commemorates the desire of the grand dame of German Oriental Studies Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003) to be buried there. As we can read in her autobiography (Morgenland und Abendland. Mein west-östliches Leben" (2002) it had been her ardent wish to rest there. During an early visit at Makli Hill she said to herself:

"Wäre es nicht schön, hier einstmals begraben zu werden?"
(Wouldn't it be nice to be buried here someday?) (p. 272)

Even one of her earlier books (1965) was entitled "Pakistan. Ein Schloss mit tausend Toren" ("Pakistan. A Castle with a thousand doors") which is - of course - the very same quote by Shah Abdul Latif. She was so impressed by this Sindhi poet! And as if to confirm her love for Shah Abdul Latif, she used this quote to begin this book in the same way someone else might write a dedication! And that was not all: Some pages of this book by Annemarie Schimmel (pp. 108 ff.) are reserved for a description of her visit in Bhit Shah and to the poet and mystic himself, too!

And for those who have their doubts or contemplate a lot on "coincidence", it might be added here that this book, published in 1965, already shows photographs of the Makli Graveyard (photographs 12 and 13, the grave of Mirza Jan Baba and a view of the graves on the northern side of the cemetery).

Ever since, Annemarie Schimmel had visited the grave of Shah Abdul Latif in Bhit Shah, whenever it was possible. Once she said that "the tomb is one of the most attractive shrines in the Islamic world. The building radiates serenity and peace." (Schimmel, 1985, p.552). In her autobiography named above she tells that in 1998 she became aware that the political situation in Sindh had become more quite. So she quickly went to Bhit Shah:

"zum ersten Mal konnte man wieder im Sindh reisen, der Provinz, die wir in den vorhergehenden Jahren wegen der ständigen Unruhen (...) nicht betreten durften. (...) Nun schien es ruhig. Ich genoss es, wieder einmal das liebe Heiligtum schah Abdul Latifs in Bhit Shah zu besuchen (...)" (p.321)

("For the first time one could travel again in Sindh, the province we were not allow to enter due to ongoing

quarrelling in the previous years (...). (...) Now everything seemed quite. I thoroughly enjoyed to once again visit the magnificent holy site of Shah Abdul Latif in Bhit Shah.") (P. 321, as translated by A. M. & T. S.)

And very quickly Annemarie Schimmel moved along in her autobiography to a description of a reading of contemporary Sindhi poetry in Hyderabad. A smart, direct and - in a way - logical link.

And sure enough, even the glance back to her childhood appears as a second thought of Shah Abdul Latif. In retrospect, she tells of the home of her parents:

"Wir besaßen Scherr's Geschichte der Weltliteratur, in der ich gern schmökerte. Heute wundere ich mich, dass in diesem erstmals 1885 erschienenen Werk die Namen von Shah Abdul Latif, dem Sindhi-Mystiker und von dem usbekischen Schaibani-Name erscheinen." (p. 34)

"One of our possessions was Geschichte der Weltliteratur (=History of World Literature) by Scherr, in which I loved to do some skipping and scanning. Today I am surprised to find the names of Shah Abdul Latif, the Sindhi mystic and of the Usbek Shaibani-Name in this book published for the first time in 1885." (p. 34, as translated by A. M. & T. S.)

So in a way the ceremony at Makli Graveyard is only the most recent symbol for the cultural relation between Germany and the famous Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai from Sindh who is said to have invented the Danbora (a variation of the Tamboura) and from whom the saying "Alif is Enough" is related. Yet he is best known for his beautiful, touching and spiritual "Risalo".

Annemarie Schimmel's relation to Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai culminated in the translation of his poetry in a book

called "Unendliche Suche" (Neverending Quest) in 1983. Besides that her face was turned to Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai more than once in numerous articles, anthologied, etc. On life and work of this great Sufi poet. With Annemarie Schimmel being one of the best known scholars in Germany, it is possible to obtain even some "works out of print" in public libraries or similar culture institutions.

But this means only taking up the thread again after 100 years when a German missionary by the name of Ernst Trumpp (1828-1885) was the first of his people to discover these mystical poems. Due to times and circumstances one must concede that he was religiously biased. Or as Annemarie Schimmel put it in a biographical essay on Trumpp:

"We may not agree with everything he has written, for he was a child of his century and, above all, a missionary. Some of his verdicts on Islamic cultural institutions must be understood from this point of view, and some of his theories must be rejected today."
(Schimmel, 1961, p.21)

But after all, it was a beginning, and it was a splendid one, for Ernst Trumpp "was in fact the first man to put together and publish, for the benefit of the world at large, the poems of Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit - the famous Shah Jo Risalo, which to Sindhi literature is what Shakespeare's Hamlet is to English and Goethe's Faust to German literature." (Mumtaz Hasan in Schimmel, 1961, p.5)

Therefore Trumpp's achievement is recognized and appreciated also by Sindhi scholars and writers, as Syed Ali Mohammad Rashdi says: "The manuscript of the Risalo was first published in the year 1866 by a German scholar, Dr. Ernst Trumpp, in Leipzig ... If he had not compiled and published the Risalo at the time he did, a good deal of Shah

Abdul Latif Bhitai's poetry would certainly have been lost. Dr. Trumpp was German and Sindhi is grateful to Germany on his account." (in Schimmel, 1961, p.6)

Ernst Trumpp not only published the Shah Jo Risalo, from it he also translated the "Sur Sorathi" and wrote several articles on Shah Abdul Latif and Sindhi language and poetry. In fact he felt a special sympathy for the Sindhi language, which is also mirrored in his later publications in other fields of Indian philology. And so Annemarie Schimmel concludes her biographical sketch with the words: "Ernst Trumpp has established for the first time spiritual relations between our country and the present Pakistan."

No wonder we can find many links of Ernst Trumpp to the Indian subcontinent. Due to his studies with Sindhi, Afghan and the Kafir language, Trumpp is seen as the founder of the philology of new Indian languages.

So there is quite a history leading from Trumpp to Schimmel. They are the two outstanding German scholars on this field of research. So here a word should be said to their very different character and style. Both had a similar amazing gift of learning foreign languages. But how different was their approach to their subject! As we already mentioned above, Trumpp's approach was strongly influenced by the fact that he was a child of his century and a Christian missionary. The Lutheran orthodoxy has always shown a contempt for mysticism, so with this background it is small wonder that Trumpp could not enjoy the blending of outward and inward meaning which is so a feature of mystical poetry in general and Oriental mystical lyrics in particular. But we must give him a credit for realizing himself that this may be a problem for a proper understanding of the verses of Shah Abdul Latif. In the introduction to the German translation of

the Sur Sorathi Trumpp wrote:

"For the sober mind of the European reader, the ambiguity of these compositions is, nevertheless, awkward because he never knows what to think of the meaning of a verse, whereas for the odd and crooked mind of the Oriental reader, these thought games form the greatest attraction. And he revels in them with pleasure. I have, indeed, often observed with amazement that my munshis could not stop praising certain verses which, to me, seemed very stale and threadbare - it is possible that this was due to my understanding ..." (Trumpp, 1863, intro.)

Schimmel depicted Trumpp's approach and character to the point:

"We may, perhaps, regret that Trumpp restricted his studies to purely linguistic subjects without entering the spirit, or the theology, of the religious literature he dealt with. However, he had bent himself to grammatical problems, and his main talent was the analytical dissection of idioms which nobody before him, and very few after him, have been able to learn. For him, poetry was a means for extracting grammatical rules and noting down obsolete words; grammar did not constitute a preparatory stage for the study of literature and poetry." (Schimmel, 1961, p.45)

What a difference to Annemarie Schimmel herself. To her the translation of mystical poetry was a labour of the heart. She always tried to communicate the real meaning of the poems also to Europe an readers, to bridge the cultural gap. In her explanations she gets poetical herself sometimes "The verses can be described best as sighs, as heartbeats of a longing soul." (Schimmel, 1985, p.557)

But we have to be grateful to both, Schimmel and Trumpp, for their work layed the foundation without which

further research would have been impossible.

At last it may be of historical interest that in 1970s the whole thing gained a political dimension during the very difficult times around 1977, when Annemarie Schimmel cited from Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai's Risalo in a letter to the Minister of Justice to hint at the ongoing turmoils (according to her autobiography named above, p.277f.):

"Like Mansur, all wish the gallows to embrace.

How many will you kill? How many will you efface?"

But as the times change and many things have happened since then, new avenues will open up. Further studies are desirable to strengthen mutual understanding between two prominent cultures.

Given these facts it might preety well be stated that a foundation for a future relationship and cultural exchange has been laid. During the 1980s, a small group of interested students experienced a first beginning of mystical and poetical studies of Shah Latif during lectures of the guest professor from Pakistan, Prof. Fateh Muhammad Malik, at South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University.

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