

Review: Die Fotografie im Osmanischen Reich

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Nimet Şeker. Die Fotografie im Osmanischen Reich. Ergon Verlag, Arbeitsmaterialien zum Orient, Band 21, 2009, ISBN 1436-8072, pp. 100 (14 plates)

Besides its value as an excellent introduction to the early history of photography in the Ottoman Empire, Nimet Şeker's book *Die Fotografie im Osmanischen Reich* provides the reader with valuable insights into Muslim debates about images and Islamic theology and the transformation of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th century. Even though it is possible to argue that the development of the art of photography clashed with the prohibition against images it is difficult to find a stark homogenous opposition against photography among the Ottomans. For example, in his analysis of fatwas from the 19th century Şeker demonstrates convincingly that the Muslim authorities often came to different conclusions. Without going into any theological details in this review, it is more plausible that local contexts and social factors were of greater importance than theological considerations. For example, in the Ottoman Empire the Sultans' and the power elite had no problems with miniature paintings and this acceptance was a positive driving force for the recognition of photography. Together with other technological innovations, new ideological and political influences, and a novel fashion, the introduction of the camera and the photography was part of a general modernisation of the Ottoman Empire. From this point of view the photography could be seen as an epitome of the western world, an understanding that also could be contrasted to the backward Orient.

In his thorough and well-documented study, Şeker gives the reader a first hand introduction to the early photographic studies that were established and opened in the Ottoman Empire in the middle of the 1850s. The first studios were set up by members of the non-Muslim minorities (e.g. Greeks, Armenians) in the European part of Istanbul in the quarters of Pera (Be-

yoğlu). According to Şeker's analysis – and I believe that he is correct – the absence of so-called Muslim photographers in this first phase has nothing to do with a religious hesitation to take photos. The members of the minority communities were better equipped to take up the new technology. They were often closely connected with the rest of Europe and several of the early photographers had learnt the necessary skills in Paris or Berlin and several of them had also backgrounds as painters or chemists. Even more importantly, their non-Muslim background was not a hindrance and the Sultan and the Muslim elite in Istanbul soon requested their skills. Even though I find Şeker's analysis plausible it seems to be unnecessary to make a sharp distinction between Muslims and non-Muslim photographers and the explanation for who took part or not seems to be more closely related to class and social belonging than religious identity. To make this distinction – that we partly find in Şeker's analysis – it would be necessary to say something about how we define a Muslim. Are we referring to a cultural/religious background, or are we referring to a person that follows current guidelines of Islam in the Ottoman Empire? The distinction between non-Muslim and Muslim photographers becomes even more blurred since several of the early non-Muslim photographers also converted to Islam. Should we still count them as non-Muslim photographers? However, this is only a minor critic and Şeker's analysis is mainly based on social and economical differences that prevailed in the society at the time.

In the final section of the book, Şeker links the discussion about photography to the question of self-identification and representation. As shown in many studies on photography and art, the early photographic studios soon realised that they could earn more money by selling images and pictures that meet the expectations of the visitors and travellers to the Orient. Hence, they started to produce and reinforce the Orientalist image of the Orient as something different from the West. At the same time it is also clear that the photography became immensely popular by the large audience in Istanbul and this was the rise of the so-called family photo albums.

Last but not least, the art of photography was also put to use at the end of the Ottoman Empire by the final Sultans' as a method for showing western states (and presumable money lenders and investors) how they have improved and modernized the empire. These documentary pictures were taken

with the aim to show a prosperous and modern state that lives up to the expectations of the west.

In sum Şeker's study of the early history of photography in the Ottoman Empire is an excellent book that is of great interest to all scholars of the history of religions, the social and economical culture of the Middle East, and media and communication studies.