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Shia rituals the impact of Shia rituals on Shia socio-political character

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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

SHIA RITUALS:
THE IMPACT OF SHIA RITUALS ON SHIA
SOCIO-POLITICAL CHARACTER

by

Rachid Elbadri

March 2009

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		*Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188*
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington DC 20503.		
1. AGENCY USE ONLY *(Leave blank)*	**2. REPORT DATE** March 2009	**3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED** Master's Thesis
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Shia Rituals: The Impact of Shia Rituals on Shia Socio-Political Character		**5. FUNDING NUMBERS**
6. AUTHOR Rachid Elbadri		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000		**8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER**
9. SPONSORING /MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A		**10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER**
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.		
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.		**12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE**

13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)

This thesis argues that Ashura rituals do not represent the embodiment of a culture of death; they represent a spiritual awakening, strengthening faith by condensing and intensifying religious events, unifying and empowering the Shia identity. Secondly, it argues that Ashura rituals are not merely rituals of lamentation or a source of salvation and redemption, but represent an inspiring force with dynamic principles used as a popular platform to effect changes in the socio-political sphere.

This research probes into the historical evolution in form and content of Ashura rituals. It reveals three major stages Ashura rituals that have passed through.

This research uses a model derived from Emile Durkheim's social ritual theory to explain how rituals transform knowledge into belief and membership into belonging. It reveals how Ashura rituals are constructed, embraced, and evolved as well as how they are shaping Shia identity and communal sense. The discussion also centers around important Shia leaders who were instrumental in shifting the meanings of Ashura from the soteriological to the revolutionary meanings as well as leaders who have operationalized such meanings. It compares current ritual practice in Iran and Lebanon. Lastly, the research concludes by discussing the political implication of such shift.

14. SUBJECT TERMS Shia, Ashura rituals, Battle of Karbala, Shia Schism, *majalis al-ta'ziya*, *ziyarat Ashura*, *ziyarat arba'in*, *al-mawakib al-husayniyya*, *tashabih*, *zangeel*, *latm*, *qira'ah*, *qari or khateeb*, *niyahah*, Shia procession, self-flagellation, Emile Durkheim, Khomeini, Sistani, Motahhari		**15. NUMBER OF PAGES** 109
		16. PRICE CODE
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	**18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE** Unclassified	**19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT** Unclassified	**20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT** UU

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SHIA RITUALS: THE IMPACT OF SHIA RITUALS ON SHIA SOCIO-POLITICAL CHARACTER

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(MIDDLE EAST, SOUTH ASIA, SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA)

from the

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE

The martyrdom of Hussein and his companions at the Battle of Karbala and the Ashura rituals that ensued are at the heart of shaping Shia identity and communal sense. The Battle moral allegory has developed into a cultural fixation centered around Ashura rituals coloring all parts of Shia life, religious, social, and political. Some view these rituals from the spiritual, pietistic, and socio-political angles, for establishing powerful and long lasting moods and motivation among Shia, reinforcing their Shia communal sense. Others view them as primarily a culture of death and merely as rituals of lamentation for a source of salvation and redemption that is limited to ten days of breast-beating, self-flagellations, visitations to the Hussein tomb, public mourning processions, lamentation poetry, and theatrical representations of the battle of Karbala.[1] Are the Ashura rituals an embodiment of a culture of death? According to ritual theory, the Ashura rituals, like many other rituals, give people a consciousness of their membership in the group and convey the experience of social integration. For the Shia, such rituals represent social solidarity and are the glue that holds Shia society together.

This research will argue two major points concerning Ashura rituals. First, Ashura rituals do not represent the embodiment of a culture of death; instead, they represent a spiritual awakening, strengthening the faith of the people by condensing and intensifying religious events, which play a unifying and empowering role in the community by cementing Shia identity. Secondly, Ashura rituals are not just mere rituals of lamentation and a source of salvation and redemption, but they represent an inspiring force and dynamic principles for the constituents that can be used as a popular platform to reach the common Muslim masses to effect changes in the socio-political sphere.

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[1] Janet Afary, "Shi'i Narratives of Karbala and Christian Rites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the Culture of the Iranian Revolution, 1978-1979," *Radical History Review* 86, (2003): 7-35, 27; Lara Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25, no. 1 (2005): 135.

B. IMPORTANCE

The importance of this thesis is two-fold: First, it tries to assess common ideas surrounding Shia rituals, more specifically the culture of death misconception that is pervasive in many circles, media and scholarship. This is accomplished by emphasizing the spiritual and social dimensions of Shia rituals, as well as their impact on Shia unity and identity. The episode of Karbala became the stage on which the spirit of an *Imam*[2] of the *Ahl al-Bayt*[3] (family of the Prophet Muhammad) was put for display, not as a ritual of death observances, but as the symbol of human tragedy and the scene of love and loyalty, bravery and sacrifice, and belief and belonging.

Second, this research assesses other common ideas surrounding Shia rituals, and more specifically suggests that Ashura rituals are not just mere rituals of lamentation and a source of salvation and redemption. This is accomplished by emphasizing the inspiring force and dynamic principles rooted within Ashura rituals and how they are used as a popular platform to effect changes in the socio-political sphere. The arguments trace the historical evolution in content and form of Ashura rituals, discuss how the metaphors of Ashura, with their vibrant display, have been used historically by many Shia leaders, and show how these rituals and their meaning have changed over time noting the political and social contexts. The discussion stresses the later Ashura rituals fundamental reformulation that endorses the use of rituals as a convenient weapon against repressive regimes to awaken Muslim masses and revive in them the spirit of martyrdom inspired by the episode of Karbala.

In the conclusion is a discussion about the relevance of the findings for U.S. foreign policymakers vis-à-vis of Shia, taking account of the spiritual, social, and political importance of Ashura rituals to Shia populace.

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[2] Imam: The leader of an often small Islamic Community ("a village Imam"). Sometimes the title also is used to suggest an individual who stands at the pinnacle of the entire Shia Islamic community. In recent decades, the title has been applied by followers to Musa Sadr of Lebanon and Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran.

[3] Ahl al-Bayt is a phrase meaning People of the House, or family. In the Islamic tradition it refers to the household of Muhammad.

C.   LITTERATURE REVIEW

The roots of the Sunni-Shia schism are found in the crisis of succession that occurred after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. The Sunnis believe in the *caliphate* while the Shia believe in the *imamate.* Shia have traditionally believed that there was a chain of pious descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, beginning with his son-in-law Ali (d. 661 AD), who were meant to succeed him, one after the other, following his death[4]. The Shia consider these *imam*s to be infallible religious guides for humanity, although not Prophets, and also believe that devotion to the *imams* brings them closer to God.[5]

The Sunnis, on the other hand, have traditionally held that the *caliphs* were the legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad. The *caliphs* were selected according to a political process, rather than being explicitly selected by the Prophet himself. The Shia consider the *caliphs* to be usurpers of the authority of the *imams*.[6] This fundamental disagreement was compounded by later political divisions, which encouraged further divergence in political and legal systems, ritual practices, and theological doctrines.

The Battle of Karbala is the most important symbolic event for Shia. The battle serves as a religious model for behavior among Shia who are expected to struggle on the path to God, even if they face oppression and persecution from the Sunni rulers. The vast majority of distinctly Shia rituals are derived from the events that took place in the Battle of Karbala.

According to the surviving sources, Muslims living in southern Iraq pleaded with the Prophet's grandson Hussein, who lived in Western Arabia, to come and save them

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[4] Kamran S. Aghaie, "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition" *The Drama Review* 49, 4 (Winter 2005).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Martin S. Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 49.

from the tyrannical rule of the *caliph* Yazid.[7] Through their letters, they offered their support to him and asked him to claim his rightful position as the leader of the Muslim community.

In an empty desert named Karbala, located near the Euphrates River in Southern Iraq, Hussein and his followers, numbering, according to tradition, 72 men along with women and children, were surrounded by thousands of Yazid's troops. During the standoff that ensued Yazid's troops taunted and insulted Hussein and his followers, and refused them water and food, until Hussein openly pledged his allegiance to the *caliph*. Over the course of the first 10 days of the month of Muharram, Hussein pleaded for food and water for the children, but was absolutely firm in his rejection of Yazid. On the 10th day of the month of Muharram, Hussein's male supporters were killed one by one in combat, with Hussein being the last to be martyred. This 10th day of the month of Muharram is known as Ashura.[8]

After this battle and in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, Shia sentiments evolved into a wide variety of Shia strains, from which Twelver Shia emerged. It was also during this time that the foundation was laid for the rich tradition of Shia rituals.

Since the Battle of Karbala, five major rituals developed including the memorial services (*majalis al-ta'ziya*), the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala particularly on the occasion of the 10th day of the month of Muharram (Ashura) and the 40th day after the battle (*ziyarat Ashura and ziyarat arba'in*), the public mourning processions (*al-mawakib al-husayniyya*), the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play (*tashabih*), and the self-flagellation (*zangeel* and *tatbir*). Within these major rituals are other rituals, chest beating (*latm),* recitation of Karbala narratives (*qira'ah)* by a reciter *(qari or khateeb)*, and *niyahah* (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry).[9]

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[7] Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Āshūrā in Twelver Shī'ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 99.

[8] Ibid., 117.

[9] Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura," *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (November 1993).

All, or some, of these rituals are performed among different Shia communities worldwide during the Karbala commemorations. In fact, there are some Shia communities that have elaborated on these rituals and developed new ones altogether. Some examples of regional rituals not universal to all Shia are the use of the *zangeel* (swinging chains linked together at one end, used in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, India and Pakistan), chest beating while holding razor blades between the fingers (practiced among the Shia of South Asia), and *tatbir* (striking the skull with a sword, found in Iraq and Lebanon).[10]

These rituals play an important role in reinforcing Shia distinct identity and collective memory. They allow the mourner not only to weep over the suffering of Hussein, his companions, and his family but also to join the past with the present by linking Hussein's experience to that of the believer in his lifetime. Through theses rituals, the believer can also protest emotionally against contemporary injustice and oppression as he experiences it around himself.[11]

The development of the Ashura rituals and their evolution throughout history were influenced by the socio-political changes in the society. The memorial services and the visitation of Hussein's tomb were the oldest vehicles for invoking the memory of Karbala and reinforcing Shia collective memory. Whereas these two rituals were established in the formative period of Shia, when the Shia constituted a minority ruled by Sunni dynasties, the appearance of the public processions and the *tashabih* reflected the policies of Buyid and Safavid rulers who sought to elaborate the Ashura observances and use them to gain religious legitimacy in the process of Shia state formation.[12] The

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[10] Peter J. Chelkowski, "From the Sun-Scorched Desert of Iran to the Beaches of Trinidad: Ta'Ziyeh's Journey from Asia to the Caribbean." *TDR* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 156; Augustus R. Norton, "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 140.

[11] Muhammad Mahdi. Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Husayn: its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society* (Bury St. Edmunds, Great Britain: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1985), 213.

[12] Aghaie, "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition."

introduction of the ritual of self-flagellation by Turkoman tribes and Christian Armenians reflected the input of Shia converts, demonstrating the influence of Christian practices on Shia.[13]

Furthermore, Ashura rituals make Shia Islam a convenient state builder. This was true with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, with Iraqi self-determination in 2004-05, and in many ways with Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel and the group's potential future control of the Lebanese government given that Lebanese Shia represent a plurality of Lebanese population.

In Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini[14] understood profoundly the spirit of the Ashura movement and was angry that the so-called *ulama* and *khateeb* (reciters) had transformed its true spirit into a mere ritual of lamentation over the martyrdom of Hussein and his companions. He criticized and condemned these persons and rejuvenated the true spirit of Ashura among the Muslim masses, who were sincerely devoted to Muharram ceremonies.[15] He used Ashura rituals as effective weapons to propagate his revolutionary message based on the Islamic values of justice and truth. His ultimate secret of success was Ashura rituals. Had there been no such platform to reach the masses, he might have failed to achieve his goal of creating an Islamic state.

In Iraq, the ability of the Iraqi Shia political parties in 2004 and 2005 to mobilize the faithful in multiple electoral events is also emblematic of the Ashura rituals. The world says Iraq's Shia rally together under the guidance of their clerics despite individual political differences.[16] Much of the Iraqi experience, like the Iranian experience, was a result of public confidence in the authority of Shia clerics and lack of confidence in secular governance. Under Sistani's auspices and after, 1,400 years of Sunni hegemony in the region and literal subjugation of the Shia under Sunni rule, Hussein' spiritual heirs had established the first Shia led Arab nation in history by popular election.

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[13] Chelkowski, "From the Sun-Scorched Desert of Iran to the Beaches of Trinidad: Ta'Ziyeh's Journey from Asia to the Caribbean;" Norton, "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon."

[14] Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini: The father of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

[15] Ruhollah Khomeini, trans., and annotated by Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Iran: Mizan Press, 1981).

[16] Ahmed H. Al-Rahim, "The Sistani Factor," *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (July 2005): 50.

In Lebanon, the Lebanese group Hezbollah (Party of God), under the leadership of Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, has been using the Ashura ceremonies as an effective weapon to propagate its message. In chants at Ashura processions, mourners equate Hezbollah's modern-day enemies Israel and the United States with the dreadful Yazid. In Ashura rituals, Hezbollah lament not only Hussein martyrdom but its own guerrillas who died fighting in wars against Israel.

The United State found itself engaged politically, economically, and militarily, in a war within the Muslim world. A war that is ill defined, ill executed, and against an enemy that is ill recognized. The U.S. cannot afford to start a conflict with any Shia group or Shia state without understanding the essence of Shia identity and unity, a unity strongly tied to Shia remembrance of the Battle of Karbala and all its spiritual and socio-political dimensions.

D.   THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis begins with a brief description of the schism between Shia and Sunni, highlighting the political and legal systems, ritual practices, and theological doctrines. More importantly, this background chapter depicts the battle of Karbala from the historical and spiritual perspectives as seen by Shia historians and Shia piety.

In Chapter III, five major Ashura rituals are described including the memorial services (*majalis al-ta'ziya*), the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala particularly on the occasion of the 10th day of the month of Muharram (Ashura) and the 40th day after the battle (*ziyarat Ashura and ziyarat arba'in*), the public mourning processions (*al-mawakib al-husayniyya*), the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play (*tashabih*), and the self-flagellation (*zangeel and tatbir*). A description of other rituals ingrained with these major rituals will also be presented, such as chest beating (*latm),* recitation of Karbala narratives (*qira'ah)* by a reciter *(qari or khateeb)*, and *niyahah* (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry).[17] This depiction of Ashura rituals will be presented in the form currently practiced.

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[17] Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura."

In Chapter IV, a thorough depiction of the historical evolution in form and content of Ashura rituals are presented. It reveals three major stages Ashura rituals have passed through. The first stage began shortly after the Battle of Karbala (year 680 AD), and it continued until the fall of Baghdad at the hands of Hulagu. The second stage began at the time of the fall of Baghdad and continued through the Muslim dark ages until the modern period. The third and final stage was from the beginning of the modern period until the present.[18] Within these major stages, relevant dynasties that impacted the Ashura rituals are discussed: Umayyad, Abbasid, Buyids, Fatmids, Safavid, and Qajar, among others.

In Chapter V, Emile Durkheim's (1858-1917) social ritual theory is used to show the importance of Ashura rituals in group cohesion and solidarity by explaining how Ashura rituals are constructed, embraced, and evolved as well as how they are used by Shia as a way to reunite and to reconfirm common values shared between members of Shia societies. This analysis relies on Randall Collins model, which is derived from Durkheim's seminal theory of ritual presented in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. This model contains handful of elements considered prominent to Durkheim's theory in explaining how rituals transform knowledge into belief and membership into belonging.

Chapter VI discusses in detail how the contents of the third stage of the rites of remembrance developed, how Shia leaders have used them, and what their political implications for U.S. foreign policy are. The discussion revolves around important Shia leaders who were instrumental in shifting the meanings of Ashura from the soteriological to the revolutionary meanings as well as on the leaders who have operationalized such meanings. A discussion of how this new meaning has affected the practice of Ashura rituals in Iran and Lebanon is analyzed.

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[18] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society,* 161.

II.   HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A.   INTRODUCTION

The martyrdom of Hussein and his companions at Karbala was one of the defining turning points in Islamic history in shaping Shia identity and communal sense.[19] The events in Karbala marked a moment of increased fissure in the Muslim community, often pointed to by Shia Muslims today as the decisive root of Shia-Sunni separate identity.[20] This battle on the plain of Karbala was much more than the slaughter of a small band of pious loyalists who were faithful to the family of the Prophet by an overwhelming military force; it was also an ideological battle between a group of religiously devoted individuals and a militarily powerful political establishment, making Hussein the ultimate tragic-hero figure.

The martyrdom of Hussein cannot be properly understood if considered merely as an isolated event in the early history of the Muslim community. It must be placed, at least for the Shia community, as a powerful religious awakening rather than a mere historical event.

This background chapter will provide a brief description of the schism between Shia and Sunni with particular emphasis on the political and legal systems, ritual practices, and theological doctrines. More importantly, this chapter will also depict the battle of Karbala from the historical and spiritual perspectives as seen by Shia historians and Shia piety.

B.   SHIA

Islam, like most other religions, has always been characterized by a number of internal divisions. The major division in Islam is between the Sunni and the Shia.

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[19] Karbala is a city in Iraq, located about 100 km southwest of Baghdad.

[20] Aghaie, "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition."

According to the 2008 World Fact book,[21] published annually by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, Islam is the second largest religion in the world and among them Shia make up about 10-20% of the Muslim population. The majority of these Shia are called Twelver (*Ithna Asharis*, or Ja'farais), whose name derives from their belief that there were 12 *imams*, the last of whom has existed in a supernatural state of occultation from 874 AD to the present. Due to their predominance, they will be the primary concern of this research. Twelver Shia are concentrated mostly in Iran (89%), the Republic of Azerbaijan (75%), Iraq (60-65%), and also in Bahrain (70%). Although in Bahrain, the state is under Sunnite rule. In Lebanon, the Twelver constitutes more than 40%, the largest single religious group in that country. There are also large minorities in Kuwait (20%), Qatar (20%), Afghanistan (19%), Pakistan (20% of the total population, especially around Lahore), Tajikistan (5%), and India. Twelver Shia are also found in large numbers in Kashmir and the eastern oil producing Persian Gulf regions of Saudi Arabia, where they are the majority (11% of the Kingdom's total population).[22]

The term "Shia" conveys the meaning of followers, party, group, associates, partisans, or in a rather loose sense, "supporters." In this rather neutral sense, the word "Shia" occurs a number of times in the Quran. A few verses are cited below.[23]

> As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects (*shiya'an*), you have no part in them in the least: their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did (Al-An'am 6:159)

> Turn you back in repentance to Him, and fear Him: establish regular prayers, and be not you among those who join gods with Allah. Those who split up their religion, and become (mere) sects (Shiya'an), each party (hisbi) rejoicing in that which is with itself (Ar-rum 30:31-32).

> And most surely Abraham was among the Shia of him (i.e., Noah) (Quran 37:83).

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[21] CIA World Fact Book website http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/goes/ir.html (accessed January 27, 2009).

[22] Werner Ende, "Shi'ites in Arabia," *Encyclopedia Iranica* (June 2004).

[23] Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur'an,* Text and Translation (Kuala Lumpur, 2005); Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project website: http://www.alislam.org/encyclopedia/chapter1b/12.html (accessed March 1, 2009).

> And he (Moses) went into the city at a time when people (of the city) were not watching, so he found therein two men fighting, one being of his Shia and the other being his enemy, and the one who was of his Shia cried out to him for help against the one who was of his enemy (Quran 28:15).

The term "Shia" was a later usage as a particular designation for the followers of Ali, and thereby a distinct denomination within Islam. In the infant years of Islamic history, one could hardly speak of a Shia community in the strict sense. There were, at best, partisans for one or the other of the leading personalities: the party of Ali, as well as that of Uthman, the third "*caliph*" or "successor," and the Umayyad rulers after him. At this early time of Islam, there was very little that religiously separated the Shia and Sunni. Their separation was merely political; however, once the Shia political aspirations were more or less denied and the Muslim community transformed into an empire, a distinctly Arab empire, the Shia slowly began to withdraw from the larger political implications of their movement. It was at that point, particularly after the martyrdom of Hussein in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD, that Shia began to withdraw from society, particularly politically. They also began to become a distinct religious sect, and the schism began to widen.

C.   SUNNI-SHIA SCHISM

The roots of the Sunni-Shia schism are found in the crisis of succession that occurred after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. When the Prophet died in 632 AD, the community was relatively unprepared to deal with the consequences of who should be rightfully named the successor to Muhammad's leadership of the Islamic faithful. The Shia believe the rightful successor was Ali, and the succession should have continued through the family line of Muhammad. The Sunnis believe that the Prophet's successor should be chosen through *Ijma'*[24] among the Companions of the Prophet and the succession should not be limited to *Ahl al-Bayt*.[25]

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[24] *Ijma'* is an Arabic term referring ideally to the consensus of the *ummah* (the community of Muslims, or followers of Islam). Technically, it is "the unanimous doctrine and opinion of the recognized religious authorities at any given time."

[25] Ahl al-Bayt is a phrase meaning People of the House, or family. In the Islamic tradition, it refers to the household of Muhammad.

During this time of crisis three of the Prophet's closest companions, Umar, Abu Bakr, and Abu Ubaydah, who were from the Prophet's tribe Quraysh and who had migrated with him to Yathrib (Medina) during his migration (*hijra*) from Mecca in 622 AD, stated that the successor should be from Quraysh. Umar raised Abu Bakr's hand in a public gathering and declared him Muhammad's successor.[26] Those present who were mostly from Medina accepted this and thus the institution of the *caliphate* came into being. Some wanted Ali, but Ali was not as popular as Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr ruled only for three years and shortly before he passed away, he appointed Umar as the second *caliph* in 634 AD. Umar ruled for ten years before he was assassinated. He left a process of how to choose the next *caliph* based on a previously appointed committee of notables to select the third *caliph*. They selected Uthman, who was killed in 656 AD by a disgruntled mob unhappy with his policies.[27] Following Uthman's death, Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, assumed the position of *caliph*. Many of Ali's supporters believed that the Prophet before his death, selected Ali as his successor on more than one occasion, For example, they believed that shortly before his death and following his final pilgrimage to Mecca, the Prophet gave a speech, at a place called Ghadir Khum, in which he raised Ali's hand and said to the people as follows:[28]

> Do you not acknowledge that I have a greater claim on each of the believers than they have on themselves?" and they replied: "Yes!" And he took Ali's hand and said: "Of whomsoever I am Lord (*Mawla*), then Ali is also his Lord. O God! Be thou the supporter of whoever supports Ali and the enemy of whoever opposes him.

Within the few short years of Ali's rule, the *caliphate* was racked by two civil wars emanating from two opposition movements. Ali was first challenged by a coalition headed by Muhammad's widow, Aisha (the daughter of Abu Bakr), and later on he was challenged by the forces of Muawiyah, the governor of Syria and a relative of Uthman. As the head of the state, Ali insisted that prosecuting the killers of Uthman was his prerogative. His opponents insisted that he should deliver the killers to them. First, Ali

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[26] Aghaie, "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition."

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

crushed a triumvirate led by Aisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet. The "Battle of the Camel," so named because it took place around the camel on which Aisha was mounted, marked the first time a *caliph* had led his army against another Muslim army.[29] No sooner had Ali put down this rebellion, he was faced with another military challenge that had more long-range significance from the powerful general Muawiyah, governor of Syria. Securely established in Damascus with a strong army, Muawiyah, the nephew of Uthman, had refused to step down and accept Ali's appointment of a replacement. In 657 AD*,* at Siffin (in modern-day Syria), Ali led his army against his rebellious governor. The conflict resulted in a stalemate, and eventually, an arbitrated settlement.[30] This unsatisfactory outcome yielded two results that would have lasting effects. A splinter group of Alids (Shia of Ali), the Kharijites or "seceders," broke with Ali for having failed to subdue Muawiyah; Muawiyah walked away from Siffin and continued to govern Syria, extending his rule to Egypt as well. When Kharijites murdered Ali in 661 AD*,* Muawiyah (reigned 661-680 AD) laid claim to the *caliphate* and ushered in the Umayyad era (661-750 AD). Muawiyah and his successors were particularly hostile toward Ali's descendants and their supporters. It was in this environment of tension, distrust, and conflict along with the crisis resulting from the death of Muawiyah and the accession to the throne of his unpopular son, Yazid, that the Battle of Karbala took place in 680 AD. Chart 1, describes the early *Caliphate* succession.

Prior to the battle of Karbala, there was very little religiously that separated Shia and Sunni. The separation was merely political and focused on the question of leadership. However, after the Battle of Karbala and throughout centuries, further divergence in political and legal systems, ritual practices, and theological doctrines began to crystallize.

In regards to the political and legal systems, the fundamental difference between the two factions is the Sunni belief in the *caliphate,* as opposed to the Shia belief in the *Imamate.* The *caliph* was the selected and elected successor of the Prophet. He succeeded to political and military leadership but not to Muhammad's religious authority. By

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[29] Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of Muhammad: Islam's First Century and the Origins of the Sunni-Shia Split* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2007), 297.

[30] Ibid., 306-309.

contrast, for the Shia, leadership of the Muslim community is vested in the *Imam* who though not a Prophet, is the divinely inspired, sinless, infallible, religio-political leader of the community.[31] Shia believe that devotion to the *Imams* brings them closer to God. The *Imam* must be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali, the first *Imam*. He is both political leader and religious guide, the final authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law. Sunni Islam on the other hand, came to place final religious authority in interpreting Islam in the consensus (*ijma'*) or collective judgment of the community (the consensus of the *ulama),* the Shia believe in continued divine guidance through their divinely inspired guide, the *Imam* and consider the *caliphs* to be usurpers of the authority of the *Imams*.[32]

In present prevailing Twelver Shia thought, a Shia scholar, who is recognized by his peers as sufficiently leaned in the law, bears the title of *Mujtahid*, one qualified to engage in *Ijtihad*, or the exercise of independent reasoning in applying the law to specific issues at hand, whether personal or public. Few Shia are considered educated enough in the legal and spiritual tradition to attempt *Ijtihad*; anyone lacking such expertise is required to follow the rulings of a living jurist, a *Mujtahid*, as his *marja al-taqlid* or "Source or reference of Emulation."[33] In Twelver Shia, Marja is in practice the third highest authority on religion and law, right after the Prophet and the *Imams*.

On the ritual realm, one of the aspects of devotional practice that continues to cause rupture between Sunni and Shia up to the present day is the Shia Ashura ritual. The tragic death of Hussein and his relatives and companions in the battle of Karbala on the tenth day (Ashura) of the Islamic lunar month of Muharram is, until this day, commemorated annually throughout the Shia world. Since the Battle of Karbala, there developed five major rituals including the memorial services (*majalis al-ta'ziya*), the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala particularly on the occasion of the 10th day of the month of Muharram (Ashura) and the 40th day after the battle (*ziyarat Ashura and ziyarat*

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[31] David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 8-9.

[32] Ibid., 8-9.

[33] Ibid., 7.

arba'in), the public mourning processions (*al-mawakib al-husayniyya*), the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play (*tashabih*), and the self-flagellation (*zangeel and tatbir*). Ingrained within these major rituals are other rituals such as, chest beating (*latm),* recitation of Karbala narratives (*qira'ah)* by a reciter *(qari or khateeb)*, and *niyahah* (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry).[34] The Sunnis take offense to these rituals because in some localities they are used to debase the first three *caliphs*, Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman whom the Shia consider not the legitimate successors of the Prophet. For Sunni, however, all four *caliphs* including Ali are considered the Rightly-Guided *Caliphs* (Al-Khulafa-ur-Rashidun). Furthermore, Wahhabi branch of Sunni consider the visitation of Hussein's tomb and other *Imams* as *shirk* or idolatry and view those who practice such rituals as heretics.

Regarding the theological doctrines, Twelver Shia do not differ significantly in the tenets and prescriptions that are part of the Sunni "five pillars of Islam," such as daily ritual prayer and fasting. However, they do categorize them by dividing them into *Usul al-Din*, "Roots of Religion" or matters of belief, and *Furu al-Din*, "Branches of Religion" or "legal" matter as shown in Table 1.[35]

All these important and key distinctions between Sunni and Shia began to crystallize after the battle of Karbala. The battle is considered by Shia theology as the key event shaping all subsequent Shia history. Mahmoud Ayoub stated: [36]

> The martyrdom of *Imam* Hussein has been regarded by the *Shia* community as a cosmic event around which the entire history of the world, prior as well as subsequent to it, revolves.

In many ways, it is the most important symbolic event for Shia, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad because it is the ultimate exemplar of the Sunnite-Shia conflict and it is the decisive root of their separate identity.

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[34] Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura."

[35] Christoph Marcinkowski, "Twelver Shi'ite Islam: Conceptual and Practical Aspects," *Singapore: Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies*, Nanyang Technological University, 2006.

[36] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Āshūrā in Twelver Shī'ism,* 141.

D.   BATTLE OF KARBALA

Although historians have treated Hussein's martyrdom with varying degrees of objectivity, this event has never been regarded by Muslims, especially Shia as a mere historical event. The events of Karbala will be depicted from both the historical and spiritual angle.

1.   Historical Point of View

Prominent historians have written many different accounts of the events of Karbala. The concern here is not with the historical accuracy of the narratives that profess to recount the details of this battle. The purpose of retelling the historical point of view is to depict what the Shia has considered to be the "correct" representations of this event.

The most commonly accepted narratives of the Battle of Karbala begin with the Prophet's grandson Hussein receiving various letters from Muslims living in southern Iraq asking him to come to their assistance and rid them of the tyrannical rule of the *caliph* Yazid. The Prophet's grandson Hussein, who at the time lived in Mecca after his flight from Medina, received various letters from Muslims living in Kufa. These letters urged him to lead the Kufans into revolt against Yazid and assured him of their loyalty and allegiance.[37]

Kufa was a unique place, and the Kufans a peculiar people. When Ali became the forth *caliph* he shifted his capital from Medina to Kufa, and ever since that city became the home of those who claimed partisanship of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. At the time of Muawiyah's death, Kufa was still very strongly pro Alid. Thus, when the opportunity arose to battle Yazid, the Kufans, who still regarded themselves as the Shia (supporters) of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, turned to Hussein to lead them. Just as Yazid's father, Muawiyah, faced Hussein's father, Ali, in battle two decades earlier, Hussein and Yazid were rival contenders for leadership of the Muslim community.

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[37] Husain S. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam* (Librairie du Liban, Bierut, 1979), 177-180.

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Imam Hussein left Mecca for Kufa with all his family including his little children counting on the support of the Kufans. According to most sources, his entourage had a small group of relatives and followers capable of fighting. His fighting men consisted of thirty-two horsemen and forty-foot soldiers. Other authorities fix the number at forty-five horsemen and one hundred foot soldiers.[38]

Hussein arrived in an empty desert named Karbala, located near the Euphrates River in Southern Iraq on Thursday the second of Muharram in the year of 680 AD. The Governor of Kufa, Ibn Zayd, under the orders of Yazid sent four thousand men to intercept Hussein and his followers.[39] Ibn Zayd's men arrived on the third of Muharram under the command of Umar Ibn Saad and prevented Hussein and his followers from reaching the river. Ibn Saad, who was a Qurayshi, the son of one of the Prophet's companion, Saad b. Abi Waqqas, was trying to persuade the governor of Kufa to find some peaceful means to avoid shedding the blood of the grandson of the Prophet, but his requests were all in vain. Yazid was getting impatient with this delay. He kept pressuring Ibn Zayd to bring the matter to a quick conclusion. Umar Ibn Saad stationed a force of five hundred cavalry on the road to the river, and for three days before the massacre on the tenth of Muharram, Hussein and his companions suffered terribly from thirst. Even under such brutal conditions, Hussein refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid.[40]

Fear of being let down by Ibn Saad, Ibn Zayd decided to prod him to finish the job by sending another commander named Shamir Ibn Dhul Jawshan (commonly written as Shimr) with the orders that if Ibn Saad feels any restraint in dealing with Hussein, Shamir should depose him and take charge to end the matter quickly and effectively. Ibn Saad got the message. He did not want to lose his command neither the accompanying awards.[41]

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[38] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Āshūrā in Twelver Shī'ism*, 105; Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shia* Islam, 189.

[39] Ibid., 109.

[40] Ibid., 110.

[41] Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam*, 188.

Soon after receiving these new orders on the evening of the ninth of Muharram, Ibn Saad delivered a final ultimatum to Hussein. Hussein asked for a day's respite, which was granted. At this point Hussein assembled his relatives and supporters and delivered a speech. This speech is unanimously reported in the events of the night of Ashura by the sources through different authorities, and it proves a useful tool in understanding Hussein's thinking. He said:[42]

> I give praise to God who has honored us with the Prophethood, has taught us the Quran, and favored us with His religion ….I know of no worthier companions than mine; may God reward you with all the best of His reward. I think tomorrow our end will come… I ask you all to leave me alone and to go away to safety. I free you from your responsibilities for me, and I do not hold you back. Night will provide you a cover; use it as a steed…You may take my children with you to safe their lives.

Hussein supporters refused to leave their beloved leader behind. They showed an unshakable loyalty and supported him wholeheartedly and enthusiastically despite the crippling thirst and their looming death. They spent their last night praying, reciting the Quran, and worshiping God.

On the morning of Ashura, the day of the massacre, Hussein went out of the camp and saw Umar Ibn Saad mobilizing his troops to start the hostility. He stared at the intimidating army, and as large as it was *Imam* Hussein showed no signs of compromise. *Imam* Hussein raised his hands in prayer:[43]

> O God, you are my only Trust in every calamity; you are my only hope in every hardship; you are the only promise in the anxiety and distress in which hearts become weak and (human) actions becomes slight, in which one is deserted and forsaken by his own friends, and in which the enemies take malicious pleasure and rejoice at his misfortunes. O God, I submit myself to You; my complaint is to You alone against my enemies, and to You alone is my desire and request. Who else other than you can relieve me from grief (sic). You alone are the custodian of every blessing and the Master of every excellent and the last resort for every desire.

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[42] Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam*, 188.

[43] Ibid., 189.

The decisive battle finally took place in which each and every male member in Hussein's small entourage was martyred fighting in the battlefield with the exception of one of Hussein sons, Ali (Zin Al-Abidin) who was seriously ill and did not take part in the fighting. He was spared when Zaynab, Hussein's sister covered him under her arms and Ibn Saad protected him from Shamir's sword.[44] Hussein was left alone, one man against thousands. He took them on, fighting them bravely, and kept fighting, receiving many wounds in the process. Thousands of enemy fighters were surrounding him but none dared to move toward him to deliver the final blow. Finally, it was Shamir who advanced with a small group of soldiers, but even he did not dare to deliver the final blow on Hussein. At last, the son of Ali rose and threw himself on the Umayyads. Attacked from every side, Hussein finally fell face down on the ground just in front of his tent and was beheaded while the women and children watched the dreadful scene.[45] The tragic day has since been known as Ashura, the tenth of the month of Muharram.

After the battle of Karbala, all the male members of Hussein were beheaded and all their heads, including Hussein's, were taken as trophies to Yazid in Damascus, while the female members of the party were taken captive along with Hussein's son, Ali. As the women were carried away to Kufa, they passed the corpses of the dead, still lying on the sand. Zaynab cried out in lamentation:[46]

> O my Muhammad, on you the angels of heaven prayed. Behold Hussein naked under the sky, soiled with his blood and dismembered. O my Muhammad, your daughters are captives, and your male descendants lying dead blown about by the wind.

2.   Pietistic Point of View

The above historical events surrounding the battle of Karbala are clear and well documented; however, their pietistic interpretation may not always be as clear. The battle of Karbala soon became the event of central significance to the entire Shia theology. Its

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[44] Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam*, 192.

[45] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Āshūrā in Twelver Shī'ism*, 119.

[46] Ibid.

details became highly elaborated upon and surrounded with numerous non-historical embellishments. While any academic historian of Shia will present the details of this history, it is only the event as seen through the eye of the believer or Shia piety that can give it the spiritual dimension felt by the Shia.

The battle of Karbala is considered by Shia piety to be as important in the religion's history of Muslims as the battle of Badr.[47] It is believed that the martyrs of Badr are favored by God and were supported by host of angels. Those same angels came to Hussein on his way from Medina to Mecca and offered to lend him supports, as God had commanded them. However, he told them to witness his death and guard his tomb until the coming of the Mahdi (the Twelve *Imam*).[48]

Shia piety also believes that God is supposed to have chosen one thousand men who would protect His religion from the beginning of the world until its end. Three hundred and thirteen men accompanied and defended Talut,[49] Three hundred and thirteen men fought in Badr, and at the end of time, it is believed that three hundred and thirteen men will support the Mahdi. That leaves only sixty-one men; these were the companions of Hussein. Thus, God chose the men who fought and died with Hussein for this honor before the creation of the world. They faced death but God protected them against pain as he did the martyrs of Badr.[50]

Shia piety has viewed the Battle of Karbala as a divinely preordained event. It believes that Hussein knew beforehand that his opposition would be futile. It also

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[47] The Battle of Badr was fought in 624 CE in the Hejaz of western Arabia, was a key battle in the early days of Islam and a turning point in Muhammad's struggle with his opponents among the Quraysh in Mecca. It is one of the few battles specifically mentioned in the Muslim holy book, the Quran.

[48] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Āshūrā in Twelver Shī'ism*, 124.

[49] Talut marched with his soldiers to confront Jalut (Goliath), the small force of Talut including Dawud. Jalut's army was larger than Talut's but was able to win as mentioned in the Quran (Al-Baqarah 2:251).

[50] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Āshūrā in Twelver Shī'ism*, 125.

believes that Hussein's defeat in Karbala was not the result of a fluke or some lapse on his part as a military leader, had he wanted, he could have avoided entrapment outside Kufa.

If Hussein's foreknowledge is preordained, the entire meaning of the event changes. Instead of being a failed military coup inspired by a desire to seize power and rectify political wrongs, the event becomes a moral play whose primary intent is to demonstrate a higher truth. By advancing to certain defeat, Hussein was testifying to his followers that their cause was one so important and vital to merit their dying for it.[51] Furthermore, his voluntary death was not simply a demonstration for the benefit of his contemporaries, but rather presented further proof for all future generations of what exactly the Prophet Muhammad's teachings meant for Muslims: piety is more important than temporal power, and only a just ruler is a Muslim one. Karbala casts a shadow forward in time: those today that choose to come together as a Shia to honor the *Imams* will be tested and suffer prosecution for their loyalty just as were the companions of Hussein. Thus God underscores the pivotal importance of Karbala by patterning world events in every age, past, present, and future, so as to conform with events of the seventh century.

The tragedy of Karbala, which was in the words of Ayatollah Khomeini the symbol of blood's triumph-the blood of the martyrs-over the sword, transformed not only the history of Shia but also human history forever. Khomeini viewed the battle of Karbala not as limited to any particular period of time but a continuing struggle in the "Eternal Now."[52]

In one of Khomeini's statements delivered in Qom on the first night of Muharram, he stated:[53]

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[51] Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Āshūrā in Twelver Shī'ism*, 121-123.

[52] Sayid Wahid Akhtar, "Karbala: An Enduring Paradigm of Islamic Revivalism," *Al-Tawhid* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1996).

[53] Jafariyanews website, http://www.jafariyanews.com/oct2k2/4_marajeazadari.htm (accessed May 10, 2008).

…From among the factors of integrity of Muslim nation in general and Shia school of thought in particular the great and most important factor is incident of Karbala of the grandson of Prophet. It is a fact that the son of Zahra has got the religion insured forever. Brother of Zaynab has got Islam insured with his deed. He has given protection to Islam from all aspects. The uprising and the movement that you (*Imam* Hussein) initiated and the battle in which he himself was martyred but overthrew Umayyad concepts, the protection of this battle, movement and uprising is necessary. If we want to make our state and its freedom permanent then we have to protect this secret…

Shia believes that freedom is at the core of *Imam* Hussein's message. The *Imam* fought for freedom of all humanity. He fought against hunger, poverty, tyranny, exploitation and injustice. He knowingly chose death because it was the Will of God. In his speech delivered before his journey to Iraq, he spoke of his choice in the following words:[54]

O God, You know that we did not seek, in what we have done, acquisition of power, or ephemeral possessions. Rather, we seek to manifest the truths of Your religion and establish righteousness in Your lands, so that the wronged among Your servants may be vindicated, and that men may abide by the duties (*fara'id*), laws (*sunan*) and Your ordinances (*ahkam*).

E.   SUMMARY

The purpose of the above description of the schism between Sunni and Shia is not meant to provide all the dissimilarities between the two sects, but rather to touch on the main contentious points while focusing on the political and legal systems, ritual practices, and theological doctrines.

Though minor details may differ between Shia historians, the above account is a fairly representative story of the death of Hussein and its surrounding circumstances as well as a fair depiction of the pietistic sentiment felt by the Shia piety. Most importantly, nearly all versions of the Battle of Karbala share the strikingly similar characteristics in telling of the bravery and piety of Hussein and his followers, the betrayal of his sworn supporters in Kufa, the immoral brutality of Hussein's enemies and their disdain for the

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54 Akhtar, "Karbala: An Enduring Paradigm of Islamic Revivalism."

family of the Prophet and his followers, and most importantly, the belief of the divinely preordained outcome of the battle with Hussein's foreknowledge of his demise and the demise of his followers. These characteristics, which have been abstracted, amplified, and cherished by Shia since 680 AD have given Shia its distinct personality.

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III.   ASHURA RITUAL DESCRIPTIONS

A.   INTRODUCTION

The collective memory of the tragedy of Karbala, combined with later historical, political, and ideological trends in the Muslim world, has produced and shaped the rituals associated with Shiism today. *Al-ta'ziya*,[55] as the Ashura rituals are generally called, have evolved from a rudimentary practice of few pious Shia spontaneously gathering to lament the loss of their beloved *Imam* through oral depiction of the Karbala tragedy and visits to the *Imam*'s Shrine into a very vibrant and colorful practice which have become the most extraordinary acts of devotion in the Islamic world.[56]

In this chapter, the five major Ashura rituals will be described including the memorial services (*majalis al-ta'ziya*), the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala particularly on the occasion of the 10th day of the month of Muharram and the 40th day after the battle (*ziyarat Ashura and ziyarat arba'in*), the public mourning processions (*al-mawakib al-husayniyya*), the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play (*tashabih*), and the self-flagellations (*zangeel and tatbir*). A description of other rituals ingrained with these major rituals will also be presented, such as chest beating (*latm*), recitation of Karbala narratives (*qira'ah*) by a reciter *(qari or khateeb)*, and *niyahah* (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry).[57]

This depiction of Ashura rituals will be presented in the form that they are currently practiced. A historical study and evolution of Ashura ritual will be addressed in the next chapter and will concentrate on the form and content.

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[55] *Taziyeh* means literally "mourning," the expression of condolence. For the Shiite sect of Islam, it has a further meaning: lamentation for martyred imams, or leaders of the faith. In particular, taziyeh means mourning for Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The third definition of *Taziyeh* concerns the *tashabih,* or passion play that is performed in Shiite communities on *Ashura.*

[56] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society,* 140-142.

[57] Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura," 161.

1.   Majalis Al-ta'ziya

The term *majlis* (plural *majalis*) in a strict sense means a meeting, a session, or a gathering. In reference to *al-ta'ziya*, *majlis* means a gathering to mourn *Imam* Hussein.[58]

The *majalis al-ta'ziya*, as currently held, take place during the first ten days of the month of Muharram. These mourning gathering rituals start in the evening and last late into the night. They are mostly held in congregation halls known as *Husainiyyat*, but can also be held in private homes large enough to accommodate sizeable groups. They are usually designated for male mourners, but in some areas, female *Husainiyyat* also exist. During the *majalis*, mourners go through exhaustive emotional fluctuations as they listen to the tragic recitation of Karbala narratives (*qira'ah)* by a reciter *(qari or khateeb).* In many cases, these reciters are professional paid orators specializing in the art of reciting and are masters of spawning grief among the mourners.[59]

During the first ten days of Muharram, the Karbala narratives are recited based on the chronological order of the events that took place during the first ten days of Muharram in 680 AD, leaving the beheading of Hussein narrative as the last and the most painful climax of the Karbala tragedy.[60]

While the narratives are recited, they are interrupted by *niyahah* (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry) at specific climactic moments. This rhythmic poetry is in the form of classical stanza, occasionally recited but often wailed. The *niyahah* is accompanied by *latm* (chest beating) and has a rhythmic hypnotizing effect, which focuses attention and facilitates a more intense weeping activity. The *niyahah* is, in turn, interrupted by the return to the narrative recitation also at the right emotional moments judged by the reciter before the mourners beat themselves or weep too heavily. This cycle between emotional crescendo of narrative recitation and physical crescendo of chest

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[58] Lara Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice."

[59] Ali J. Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 1 (2005).

[60] Ibid.

beating continues intermittently throughout the mourning gatherings until the account of the slaying of the Prophet's grandson, Hussein, marks the apex of the emotional grief.[61]

With the exception of the recitation of Karbala narratives by the reciter, which is specific to the *majalis al-ta'ziya*, all the other ingrained rituals including the chest beating (*latm*) and the *niyahah* are practiced during other major Ashura rituals. The *niyahah* and *latm* are practiced during the ceremonial march (*al-mawakib al-husayniyya)* that occurs on the tenth day of Muharram and on the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala on the fortieth day after the battle (*arba'in)* commemorations.

2. Ziyarat Ashura and Ziyarat Arba'in

The visitation of Hussein's tomb on the tenth of Muharram and on the occasion of the fortieth day after the battle of Karbala are considered one of the major Ashura rituals, strengthening the spiritual ties between Shia and their beloved Hussein. Karbala is considered the site for such a ritualistic pilgrimage since it is the site where Hussein was beheaded.

As currently practiced, the visitation of Hussein's tomb follows prescribed directives. These directives involve the recitation of specific sanctified text in a precise manner and at specific points within Hussein's shrine. The Mourner goes through ritualized motions and sayings that are to be performed first at the entrance of the shrine, then at the foot of Hussein's grave, and finally at the head of his grave. These ritualized motions and sayings within the major visitation ritual are very elaborate and precise, elevating the *ziyarat Ashura* and *ziyarat arba'in* rituals almost into the level of fundamental prayer such as *Salat*. The mourner first must stand in front of the shrine, recite a precisely defined oration, and then enter the shrine. Once inside the shrine and when the mourner is ready to offer supplication, he or she must first rise to an upright standing posture, face the direction of Karbala, and bow the head in humility and recite

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[61] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala."

the prescribed text. For those unable to make the pilgrimage to Karbala due to financial or health reasons, reciting the specific sanctified text is viewed as an acceptable alternative for actual presence at Karbala.[62]

3.   Al-Mawakib al-Husayniyya

One of the most visible rituals practiced by the Shia is the public mourning processions (*Al-mawakib al-husayniyya*). The mourning processions are displayed in main streets in villages and cities allowing everyone to actively participate and are held mostly on the 10th of Muharram and on the *arba'in*. The size of the procession can be anywhere from several dozen to several thousand men and boys parading the streets holding banners and carrying models of the mausoleum of their martyrdom, Hussein and his followers. Numerous more men, women, and children follow behind, flanking both sides of the procession.[63]

The models of Hussein mausoleums are meticulously built with passion and love in mind for Hussein. They vary in size, but must be light enough to be carried or wheeled in the procession. The glittering mausoleums are adorned with lights and draped with black cloth to symbolize mourning and green cloth, the color of virtue and of the Garden of Paradise, to represent the family of the Prophet.

In elaborate processions, good and evil characters from the Karbala narratives are displayed with traditional customs of the old time. Horses and camels are decorated and used by the characters of the narratives. The marchers carry banners, flags, and floats, singing dirges and laments, all interspersed, sometimes with shirtless men. Leading the procession is a chanter who recites elegy over an electrically powered loudspeaker that is pulled in a wagon along with a generator. In front of the processions, there are usually large and heavy banners, such as the *alam*, in addition to black flags adorning religious phrases. Accompanying the marchers are Drummers and youths playing tambourines,

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[62] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala."

[63] Kamran S. Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 149.

filling the air with passion, and beating basic rhythms in coordination with the lead chanter.[64] The devoted followers march with a deliberate tempo to a slow and strong beat. The *niyahah, latm,* and in many cases self-flagellation are performed within the procession.

4.   Tashabih

The narratives of the Battle of Karbala have not only been used in the form of mourning recitation during the m*ajalis al-ta'ziya,* but have also been reenacted in the form of theatrical rituals embellished with tragically graphic details. The *Tashabih,* as it is called, is a dramatic recreation, often entirely in verse, of selected scenes of the events of Karbala. Furthermore, it is not merely an exercise in religious narration, but a performance that meshes educational schemes with a theatrical boost to visualize the passion of *Imam* Hussein for a lay audience. In this, they learn the virtues of *Imam* Hussein's life, notions of right and wrong and the power of heavenly justice.

The *Tashabih* usually consists of large casts of professional and amateur actors, a director, a staging area, elaborate costumes, and props are utilized with viewers sitting passively as spectators lamenting the passion play. It is considered expensive to stage and must have financial backing by either the state, wealthy individuals, or organizations such as the guilds or neighborhood associations.[65]

The most elaborate *Tashabih* are performed in dedicated structures called *takyeh* by professional actors performing elaborately realistic scenes utilizing time-accurate costumes, caparisoned camels and horses with Yazid's in yellow and Hussein's in green, and the music of trumpets and kettle drums. The play opens with Hussein and his followers traveling through the desert of Karbala to Kufa, and ends with the emotional massacre of Hussein and his followers. During the play, the audience is often passive; however, they do cry, shout, and chant when necessary.[66]

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[64] Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, 149.

[65] Ibid., 21.

[66] Ibid., 23.

Variants of the *Tashabih* rituals are also performed in popular processions or any open space. These plays are usually performed by amateur actors from the neighborhood using ill-decorated scenes and rely mostly on the verbal skills rather than the physical acting skills of the actors.[67]

5. Self-flagellation

Self-flagellation is one of the most controversial and the most conspicuous Ashura rituals, and it has been the source of fear and hostility toward Shia, especially from the Sunni sect. This ritual practice is viewed even within many Shia religious circles as an anathema.[68] However, for some Shia believers, it is viewed as another way of expressing grief and experiencing the pain inflicted on their beloved *Imam* during the Battle of Karbala.

Self-flagellation is usually held on the eight, ninth, and tenth of the month of Muharram and is performed in a group liturgical setting usually during the public mourning procession (*Al-mawakib al-husayniyya*) rather than in private by a single individual. When it is performed during the public mourning procession, it is performed to the rhythmic beat of the drums with the self-flagellating mourners in unison synchronizing their strike on self.

Self-flagellations are most often practiced by young men, and over time, the different forms of self-flagellations have become so complex that the act has evolved into part art and part sport. One can even find vendors selling different self-flagellation instruments and enthusiast discussing different techniques.

Many different types of self-flagellation are performed depending on the type of instruments used and the location of the cut in the body. Naked razor blades and hand size wooden discs with nail studs are used to inflict lacerations on the chest; *zangeel* (metal chains) with or without blades are used to inflict lacerations on the back, and *tatbir* in which knives and short swords are used to inflict lacerations on the head. The most

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[67] Peter J. Chelkowski, "Time Out of Memory: Ta'ziyeh, the Total Drama.." *TDR* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2005).

[68] Werner Ende, "The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shiite Ulama," *Der Islam* 55, no. 1 (1978).

widely used form of self-flagellation is cutting with a naked razor blade. This is performed by inserting the razor blade between the fingers of the right hand. With an open palm and stiffened fingers, the mourner beats his breast allowing the cutting edge of the blade to lacerate his chest with each stroke. These practices vary from one country to another. The *zangeel* is another self-flagellation instrument used for lacerating the back. It consists of a scourge or flail with chains connecting four to five six-inch metal blades to a wooden handle. With legs apart, the mourner lifts his left hand high into the air, and the *zangeel* is held in the right hand. He swings the flail horizontally at his chest so that the blade lacerates his exposed back. The movement accompanies the rhythm of the reciter's chanting and the drums. It is also possible to use the *zangeel* without blades in order to lessen the intensity of the lacerations on the back. A mourner can also use knives or short swords to lacerate the scalp and forehead. Once blood flow is induced from the lacerations, the mourner wraps his head with a long white bandage and wears it throughout Ashura.[69]

6.   Latm

Latm is a ritual that involves mourners beating their chest with their hands only. It is less controversial than self-flagellation and more widely practiced. *Latm* is similar to self-flagellation in regard to being performed in a group liturgical setting rather than in private by a single individual. It is performed in time to a rhythm determined by the chanting of a lamentation poem, and is ingrained within other major Ashura rituals performed during the m*ajalis al-ta'ziya* and mourning procession (*Al-mawakib al-husayniyya*).

The style of the *latm* performed often varies depending on the group sponsoring the act. Styles can range from the very simple and least physically exhaustive, often performed by middle aged and elderly mourners, which involves the mourner simply striking his breast over the heart with the open palm of the right hand to the most physically demanding form of *latm* which consist of the mourner raising both hands over

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[69] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala."

the head and dropping them forcefully, striking the chest with both hands. Young men due to the physical strength required to pound the chest with enough force to create a percussion that can echo for long distances often practice this form of *latm*.[70] There are also styles of *latm* that are more choreographed and performed by large groups of mourners. During this practice, the mourners line up side-by-side in two parallel lines, and with a left hand on the hip of the man to his left, each mourner strikes his chest with his right hand in time to the chanted *niyahah*. In unity with the rhythm, the mourners step together, taking a pace to the front, and then one to the back, ending with all of them bending forward in unison while beating their chests.[71]

The varying styles of *latm* offer each group of mourners the opportunity to identify and characterize both itself and other groups. Oftentimes, there is a very competitive spirit between different groups of mourners who strive to prove which group can mourn more intensely than the other. Such competitiveness can sometimes lead to quarrels between members of different groups.

B.   SUMMARY

The above description of the Ashura rituals currently practiced among world Shia communities focuses on the main Ashura rituals as well as the ingrained rituals that often occur within the main rituals. The attempt in this section is to describe the different forms of rituals. There are obviously differences based among different ethnic groups, different social groups, different communities, and even within the same communities. These difference, however, are superficial and do not change the form of ritual described above.

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[70] David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community*, 109-114; Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice."

[71] Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim* Community, 109-114.

IV.   HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ASHURA RITUALS

A.   INTRODUCTION

Since their early inception, the Ashura rituals have evolved and passed through various stages until they reached the present form and content in which they are held today. It is believed that from their institution to the present, Ashura rituals have passed through three major stages, represented by the historical and cultural epochs through which the Muslims in general, and the Shia in particular, have lived. These three major stages can be divided into smaller stages representing the prevailing dynasties and their impact on the development and propagation of Ashura rituals.[72]

The three major stages share similar fixed elements of the rites of remembrance but differ in the form and content of these rites. These fixed elements are present in all three major stages and consist of the story of the Karbala massacre as discussed on the previous chapter and the criticism of the authorities when reason for that criticism exists.

In this chapter, a thorough depiction of the three major stages will be presented. The first stage began shortly after the Battle of Karbala in year 680 AD, and it continued until the fall of Baghdad at the hands of Hulagu. The second stage began at the fall of Baghdad and continued through the Muslim dark ages until the modern period. The third and final stage was from the beginnings of the modern period until the present.[73] Within these major stages, relevant dynasties that impacted the Ashura rituals, such as Umayyad, Abbasid, Buyids, Fatmids, Safavid, and Qajar will be discussed.

1.   First Stage

The first stage of Ashura ritual started shortly after the Battle of Karbala (year 680 AD) and it continued until the fall of Baghdad at the hands of Hulagu. In this stage, the fixed elements, namely the account of the tragedy and criticism of authorities during the

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[72] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 161.

[73] Ibid., 148-149.

Umayyad and the Abbasid period, were not performed in the open fear of prosecution. After the Abbasids, the rites of remembrance were held in public and the criticism of the Umayyad and Abbasids took place openly without arising any opposition from the actual authorities. This criticism, however, was devoid of any political content.

During this stage, the form of Ashura rituals acquired a fixed time and became a cultural activity. This stage connected time with memory of the massacre of Hussein. The first ten days of the lunar month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic year, became etched in posterity as the times all Shia must lament and if possible make pilgrimages to Hussein's grave in Karbala. In this early stage, the rite of remembrance began in the form of simple conversations about what transpired in the Battle of Karbala. Then the conversations transformed into a story that was reported or a poem that was recited, and then there arose a written text of the account of the death of Hussein. At the end of this stage a form began to emerge in which poetry and prose were integrated.[74] Prose tells the story of the tragedy in the spirit of giving an account of history and virtues and with only a limited amount of emotional expressions. Poetry colors the story and endows it with a sad, tragic artistic quality.

During this stage, the content of the rituals was more focused on the details and historical background of the tragedy, matter associated with the succession to the Prophet, and the policies that were followed during the reign of Uthman (third *caliph*) and the Umayyad Empire. This stage also began to focus on the virtues and the outstanding position of the *Imams* of the Holy Family as well as focus on their sufferings and the suffering of other Shia.[75]

During this stage, four major dynasties impacted the development of the rites of remembrance of Hussein.

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[74] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 177.

[75] Ibid., 176.

a.   *Umayyad Period*

The Umayyad period represents the embryonic phase in the historical development of the Ashura rituals. This period held witness to the Battle of Karbala and the inception of Ashura rituals budding from the first known visit to Hussein's grave and the subsequent establishment of the annual commemoration of Hussein's death.

Soon after the Battle of Karbala, local people probably performed the earliest manifestation of grief for Hussein and his followers in the form of mourning gathering. This was alluded to by some references describing the first visit to Hussein and his fallen followers' graves by the surviving and returning prisoners of Hussein's camp. The references indicate that when the prisoners of Hussein's camp returned from Yazid's court at Damascus, they stopped in Karbala on their way to Medina to pay their respects at the grave of Hussein. They reached the site forty days after the battle and were surprised to see that people were already gathering to mourn Hussein. It was reported that during this first visit to Hussein's grave, Zaynab, Hussein's sister, who was among the prisoners, had given a speech praising Hussein and cursing his killers. Zaynab also recited a heartfelt oration that moved even the Umayyad troops to tears.[76] This first visit is considered by Shia as the root of many Ashura rituals. It represents the first reference in the literature to any type of group gathering to mourn Hussein's death. It represents the basis for the forty-day pilgrimage rituals currently known as *arba'in* commemorations. Furthermore, this first visit along with Zaynab's speech represents a precedent for *majalis al-ta'ziya* and for the origin of what would become *rawzeh khwani*. Moreover, during this first visit, there were accounts of women mourning by beating their chest (*latm*) and wailing, which were and are still natural emotional reactions among mourners of this region. This sort of chest beating (*latm*) is believed to be the precursor for the highly ritualized rhythmic chest beating rituals practiced today.[77]

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[76] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala."

[77] Ibid.

The first references of the accounts of the annual commemoration of Hussein's death were attributed to the *tawwabun*. The *tawwabun* were a group of people most of whom were Kufans who said to have been deeply regretful that they were unable to present support to Hussein at Karbala. They gathered at the site of Hussein's grave and together they mourned his death and the fact that they were not there to die alongside him. The *tawwabun* also composed and recited poetry that praised Hussein, and all the while agreed to reunite in the future to avenge his death against the Umayyad forces, which they eventually did years later.[78]

These accounts of the *tawwabun,* meeting on the annual anniversary of Hussein's death in Karbala marks the earliest evidence of annual commemoration. The *ziyarah* (ritual grave visitation), developed more fully in the Abbasid period. It later became a highly ritualized aspect of the Muharram commemoration ceremonies. Its historical and literary roots were in *tawwabun*. Furthermore, it was also the first evidence of the beginning of the *niyahah*, or poetic lamentation rituals.

During this early period of Ashura rituals, birth and development witnessed during the reign of the Umayyads, rituals practices were relatively private among the small Shia communities. These small Shia communities were prosecuted by the antagonistic and politically dominant Umayyads who tried to erase their heinous crime by instituting a special festival holiday on the day of Ashura that is still practiced in many Muslim countries such as Morocco. Despite such attempt of neutralizing the commemoration of Hussein's death, the *majalis* were held in the home of the Shia *imam* (religious leader) or other influential Shia figures. These private annual gatherings during Ashura were successful in keeping the memory of Hussein alive not only in form but also in content through oral transmission of accounts of the battle, the events leading up to it, and its aftermath**.**

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[78] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala."

b.   *Abbasid Period*

The Karbala narratives were used by the politically savvy Abbasids to incite revolution and the overthrow of the Umayyad Empire. The Early Abbasid rulers found it useful to bestow their patronage on the rites of Ashura. They understood that Karbala narrative had rebellious antigovernment connotations and they used it to their advantage. By their early reign, the memorial services such as m*ajalis* were no longer confined to only private homes concealed from the public, but rather began to be held in public mosques.[79] This initial support by the early Abbasid rulers resulted in a plethora of literary accounts documenting the oral transmissions that were safeguarded by Shia during the Umayyad period. It also resulted in the popularity of Ashura public rituals such as the pilgrimage ritual to Karbala (*ziyarah*), which resulted in the expansion of Karbala pilgrimage economy, in the dramatic increase of visiting pilgrims, and in the popularity of Hussein and the Battle of Karbala among both Shia and Sunni communities.[80]

By the ninth century, the Abbasid, who were in full control of the empire, felt threatened by Hussein symbolism and turned against Hussein's commemoration rituals. Abbasid *caliph* al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61 AD) destroyed the shrine of Hussein, razed Karbala, and banned visitation of the site on pain of death.[81] This act of vandalism is proof to the extent that the ritualistic visitation of Hussein's shrine had developed. It is also a possible indication that by then, *ziyarah* had already developed into a much more ritualized act than simply visiting a grave. This act also shows the popularity of Hussein among all Muslim, Shia or Sunni. In fact, historical accounts of the events at the Battle of Karbala and its aftermath are transcribed in the earliest Sunni sources by Sunni narrators

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[79] Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura," 163.

[80] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," 83.

[81] Ibid., 82.

who depicted the Battle of Karbala in the same perspectives as early Shia narrators. Sunni, however, did not hold the importance of the battle of Karbala in the same level as Shia, who saw it as central to their identity.[82]

c.   Buyid Period

During the tenth century, the Abbasid *caliph* saw his authority decline and became a leader with no temporal power within the state. The Buyids, a local Shia dynasty in Western Iran, took control of Iraq and Iran. While accepting the titular authority of the Abbasid *caliph* in Baghdad, the Buyid rulers assumed effective control of the state. This provided the rites of remembrance of Hussein a fertile ground and freedom to evolve and be expressed openly in public. Among the important Buyid rulers who played a major role in strengthening Shia solidarity and legitimizing the Ashura practices was Muizz al-Dawlah Ibn Buwayh. It was under his reign that the first historical reference to a public procession was documented. Ibn al-Kathir, a famous 14th century Arab historian recounts:[83]

> On the tenth of Muharram of this year (963 AD/352 AH), Mu'izz al-Dawlah Ibn Buyeh, may God disgrace him, ordered that the markets be closed, and that the women should wear coarse woolen hair cloth, and that they should go into the markets with their faces uncovered and their hair disheveled, beating their faces and wailing over Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib. The people of the *Suunah* could not prevent this spectacle because of the large numbers of the Shia and because of their increasing prominence, and because the Sultan was on their side.

The accounts of Ibn al-Kathir also show the increased tensions and violence between Sunni and Shia during these public processions as he stated in one of his accounts:[84]

> On the tenth of Muharram this year the Shia celebrated the mourning of Hussein as they did the year before. The Shia and Sunnis fought violently among each other on this day, and much property was looted.

[82] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," 84.

[83] Aghaie, "The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyeh Tradition," 45.

[84] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," 84.

Such violence continued until the end of the Buyid dynasty and the arrival of the Saljuqs dynasty in 1055 AD. During the Buyids period, these public processions began to incorporate acts of breast beating (*Latm*), which were originally reserved to mourning the lost of love one or to grave visits.[85]

d.   *Fatimid Period*

During the tenth century, the Fatimids also had challenged and reduced the temporal power of the Abbasid *caliph*. They were a Shia dynasty that ruled over varying areas of the Maghreb, Egypt, Sicily, and the Levant from 909 to 1171 AD. They were not as successful as the Buyids in their introduction and development of Shia commemoration rituals. They attempted for several years to enforce the adherence to Shia commemorations rituals such as public procession but resistance by the overwhelming Sunni majority was immense. Historical references indicate that al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, a Fatimid leader, had sponsored public processions that included some of his military units. The mourners passed by the shrines of Kulthum and Nafisah reciting dirges and mourning for Hussein's death. The Sunni populace, however, did not commemorate Hussein's death and continued to conduct business as usual on the day of Ashura. This caused tensions between the small Shia community and the Sunni populace, which led to bloodshed. It was reported that on the day of Ashura in 1005 AD, a Shia was physically attacked and decapitated by a mob of Sunni in Cairo.[86]

With growing tensions between Sunni and Shia, the Fatimids decided to cancel public processions, and the Ashura rituals became events of simply mourning and reciting poetry in the mosques, which was amenable to Sunni participation.

e.   *Hamdanid Period*

The Hamdanid is another Shia dynasty that developed during the decline of the Abbasid Empire. It came to power in northern Iraq in 944 AD and eventually

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[85] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," 81.

[86] Ibid., 85.

extended its power to Syria and Mosul. They had temporarily contributed to the development of Shiism. Aleppo became a center for Shia jurisprudence just as it became a destination for Shia men of culture, scholars, and poets.[87] Conditions in the Hamdanid resemble the conditions in the Fatimid control land. As with the Fatimids, the Hamdanid's Ashura commemorations in Aleppo consisted of no more than simply mourning and reciting of poetry, far different from the Ashura commemorations performed by the Buyids.

By the end of this stage, the favorable political situation in Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and other locations gave the rites of remembrance for Hussein a golden opportunity to become widespread. They became public under the protection of the state on most occasions. By the tenth century, mourning commemorations in Baghdad, Aleppo, and Cairo were held in mosques or in special places built especially for these observances called *Husayniyyat*. By the end of this stage, the memorial services and the visitation of Hussein's tomb, which were the oldest vehicles for invoking the memory of Karbala, developed a high degree of formalization. The services incorporated acts of wailing and lamentation (*niyahah*), and were sometimes led by a poet or another person (*qari or khateeb*) whose function was to chant elegies and to read traditions and stories on the sufferings of the *imams* from the martyrdom (*maqatil*) literature, which was developing at that time. It is also quite likely that the evolution of formalized chest beating (*latm*) rituals to the rhythm of recited poetry can be traced to this stage.

2.   Second Stage

The second stage began at the time of the fall of Baghdad and continued through the Muslim dark ages until the modern period. In this stage, the rites of remembrance preserved the fixed elements, namely the account of the tragedy and the criticism of the authorities. The criticism of the Umayyads and Abbasids was direct, as they no longer had any existence in the political life of Iraq, Iran, or other Islamic countries. Yet this clear direct criticism was merely words without any real content. It was a theoretical

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[87] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 70.

criticism of something, which no longer existed. At this stage, the memory of Hussein had lost its political and social importance in alleviating the suffering of Shia living under despotic rulers and became solely concerned with the Hereafter.[88]

The Ashura rituals, the days of memorial for celebrating the rites, the first ten days of Muharram and the fortieth day after the battle of Karbala, became permanent and more structured. People leading the rituals such as wailing chanters, reciters, and storytellers became more devoted to the ritual practices, more specialized, and more numerous. In this stage, *latm*, which was believed to be a custom introduced to the commemoration rituals by the Buyids as cited above, became a firm element in some of the rites of remembrance.[89]

In Ashura rituals, the objective language used during the first stage to depict the details and historical background of the tragedy was compromised and became emotionally laden. It gave away to emotional contents whose intention was to arouse the mind and the emotions of the people attending the rituals of remembrance. The narration of events became particularly tolerant in accepting accounts that lack historical accuracy. Even the events that can be historically proven became more embellished. For example, there was an assertion that the Abbasid *Caliph*, al-Mutawakkil, continued to plough up the grave of Hussein for two decades; however, al-Mutawakkil served as *Caliph* for only fifteen years. Furthermore, the contents of Ashura rituals were no longer referring only to the life and martyrdom of Hussein. The contents expanded to include a discussion of the lives, virtues, and tragedies of the other *Imams*.[90]

Many attributed the changes in the content of Ashura rituals to the dark time the Muslim world had suffered during this period. The Muslim world had seen political disintegration, economic backwardness, civil wars, famines and plagues. Many Muslims believed that such misery was God's test and must be accepted. As a result of this resignation and acceptance of this misery, the memory of Hussein became an activity

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[88] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 181.

[89] Ibid., 183.

[90] Ibid., 185-186.

concerned with death rather than life. It became an event concerned with bringing benefit to man in the grave rather than an incentive to make him change his miserable life. The story of the Battle of Karbala and Hussein's martyrdom was meant to be a sacred verbal activity one recited in order to enter paradise. A great example was given by Sheikh al-Turayhi in his work, al-Muntakhab, where he illustrated the attitude towards remembering Hussein. He stated: [91]

> My brothers, you desire the noble mansion of Paradise and great reward. Then perpetuate your grief, your sadness and your sorrow for them. …By my life, nothing is more efficacious to attain great reward and remove dread punishment than the performance of the ritual of grieves and making tears flow because of the treachery and desertion done to the Holy Family at that time.

Performing the Ashura rituals such as weeping, beating one's chest, and even cursing the Umayyad became purely an activity concerned with the afterlife rather than a tool used to renounce the political implications of the Umayyad policy. The Shia men had begun to perform the rituals in remembrance for Hussein for the sake of storing their acts of piety.

As far as poetry, the first stage of poetry also evolved from its primary focus on the Battle of Karbala into poetry of lamentation, more concerned about generating extreme weeping and deep sorrow in the heart of the participants than about historical events. The new poetry also began to focus on the virtue of the Holy Family, praising the *Imams* and their love ones. By the second stage this poetry became basic material in the rites of remembrance.[92]

The rites of remembrance in this stage were subject to persecution and restrictions in nearly every part of the Islamic world. The Ayyubids who were Sunni overthrew the Shia Fatimids in Egypt and spread their power to Syria, northern Iraq, and other areas such as Mecca and Hejaz. Sectarian fanaticism against the Shia received government protection, which enabled persecution of Shia activities and especially the Ashura rituals.

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[91] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 189.

[92] Ibid., 185.

For this reason, these activities were restricted to the sacred shrines in Iraq or where the rites of remembrance could be held in secret. The only area at this time that the rites of remembrance publicly flourished was in Iran after the Safavids came to power. In Iran Shiism became strong.[93]

a. Safavid Period

A major development in Shia rituals occurred with the establishment of the Safavid dynasty, which ruled Persia, a territory largely encompassing the modern state of Iran, from 1501 to 1722 AD. The Safavids established the greatest Iranian empire since the Islamic conquest of Persia and institutionalized the Twelver (*Ithna Asharis*, or Ja'farais) school of Shia Islam as the official religion of their empire, marking one of the most important turning points in the history of Islam and of Ashura rituals. There was a mass conversion of Iranians to Shiism in the sixteenth century. The rulers made fairly liberal use of Shia symbols and rituals to define and legitimize their rule and to differentiate between their state and their Sunni rivals and its threats-Uzbeks in the east and the Ottomans in the west.[94] This new improved hagiographic depiction of Hussein gave birth to a number of new commemoration rituals. One example of such a ritual is the *tashabih,* which is not only a ritual for which a specific architectural structure had been developed as described in Chapter III, but it is also clearly a new fashioned ritual that had not existed in the earliest historical sources. The origin might have been the European Corpus Christi plays of the post Renaissance period, which reenacted various events in the passion of Christ culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection.[95] Other unprecedented rituals that did not exist in the early historical sources include the violent blood shedding rituals of self-flagellation. No one knows exactly when and where knives, swords, and chains were first used by Shia mourners to shed their blood in commemoration of Hussein's death. The earliest description of self-flagellation and

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[93] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 182.

[94] Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran, 11-12; Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, 3.

[95] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," 85.

blood shedding came from accounts of travelers. Evliya Chelebi, an Ottoman traveler who visited Tabriz in 1640 AD and attended the observances of the tenth of Muharram described the event:[96]

> The finest show is in the variegated tent of the khan, where all the great men of Tabriz are assembled, and where a Hymn on the death of Hussein is recited…The hearers listen sighing and lamenting, but when the reciter arrives at the passage where Hussein is killed by Shmir, a curtain opens behind him, and a severed head and trunk of a body, representing that of the *imam* when dead, is thrown on the ground, when there rises such an uproar of cries and lamentations that everybody loses his wits. At this moment some hundred men mingle in the crowd with razors, with which they cut the arms and breasts of all loving believers, who desire to shed their blood on this day in remembrance of the bloodshed by the *imam*; they make such deep incisions and scars, that the ground appears as if it was blooming with tulips. Some thousands brand the marks and names of Hassan and Hussein on their heads, arms, and breasts. They then carry Hussein's body away from the ground with much pomp, and finish the ceremony with great howlings.

Many attributed the origin of self-flagellations to Turkoman tribes and Christian Armenians who converted to Shiism in the 16th century during the Safavid period. These new converts shed their blood for Hussein the same way the Christian Catholics self-flagellated to mourn for the shedding of Christ's blood.[97]

Beside the new form of rituals introduced during the Safavids period such as *tashabih* and self-flagellation, a new genre of pious narratives appeared. It was based on an influential book titled *Rowzat al-shohada* (*The Garden of Martyrs*) composed by the popular religious orator, Hussein Vaiz Kashefi. His book became one of the main sources used in reciting the Karbala narratives due to its use of an innovative trend involving the fusion of various historical accounts, elegiac poems, theological tracts, and hagiographies into a composition of short narratives that combined to form a much larger narrative. Hussein Vaiz Kashefi's book also expressed a complex set of sanctified doctrines that stressed the bravery, piety, and sacrifice of Hussein and his followers at

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[96] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," 175.

[97] Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura," 178.

Karbala. Excerpts from the book also served as the basis for scripts that were used in *rowzeh Khani* (reading the rawzeh) sermons. These sermons eventually became one of the principal rituals of Shia throughout the world and bear the same name as Kashefi's book.[98]

The Safavid period was a very important period in the development of new Ashura rituals. To protect and distinguish themselves from their Sunni rivals, the Safavid advocated and supported a new model of Hussein that was not part of the earlier Shia theology. New commemoration rituals grew out of this new and improved hagiographic such as *tashabih*, self-flagellation*, and rowzeh Khani*. These rituals further developed and became part of the current Ashura rituals.

3. Third Stage

The third and final stage of the Ashura ritual evolution took place from the beginnings of the modern period, and it continued up to the present time. In this stage, the commemoration of Hussein's death has witnessed developments in form and content of very great importance.

In form, public performances of Ashura rituals have become more prevalent than in the past with increased security and freedom enjoyed by Shia in many of the communities in which they reside. In some areas, however, limitations have continued to be imposed on public commemoration rituals and the Shia are restricted to private rites of remembrance. In addition, the occasions for performing the rites of remembrance are no longer restricted to the first ten days of Ashura and to the day of *arba'in*, but have become more prevalent throughout the year. They are held on the day of the memorial of the Prophet's death, in memory of each of the eleven *Imams* and other important personalities from the Holy Family. These remembrances are referred to as "public rites of remembrance." During these remembrances, the preacher reviews the life of the person being remembered. He tells of the oppression and tyranny that was instituted against him or her, and he recites praiseful and lamenting poetry in honor of that person. The preacher

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[98] Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran,* 12.

concludes the rites of remembrance by mentioning *Imam* Hussein and parts of his struggle. Other types of remembrances referred to as "private rites of remembrance" are also held. They are held for personal reasons such as the celebration of a new house, the return from the pilgrimage to Mecca, and other private occasions. The person holding these private rites of remembrances seeks the blessings through remembering God, the Prophet, and the *Imams*.

Perhaps the most important shift in the evolution of Ashura rituals that have occurred during the third stage has been in the content of the rituals. This shift made the rites of remembrance for Hussein a very important force in the direction of society. The fixed elements, namely the account of the tragedy and criticism of the Umayyad, the Abbasid, and others who carried out unjust policies towards the Holy Family and their Shia have continued. However, during this stage, this criticism has become political, directed against existing political, social, and economical upheaval. The enemy can be external such as imperialism or internal such as pressure from local leaders. The subjects of discontent can be social injustice, political oppression, economic disparities, and any other contemporary social upheaval. This shift in the contents is believed to be due to the situation of the Muslim world during this stage, which has suffered bitter experiences from imperialism. The contents of the rites of remembrance, their political relevance, and how Shia leaders have used them during this stage will be discussed in detail in the last chapter of this research.

Besides the major political shift in the content of the Ashura rituals, the content also got rid of historically unreliable accounts and embellishments. It has become more historically accurate. In the sermons, preachers no longer present speculations of some writers as if they are historical fact. In addition, preachers began using a well-known technique in Arabic Poetry called "leading up" which involved the preacher beginning with a discussion of the current social affairs that deal with social fragmentation and moral deterioration caused by imitating the West and its material civilization. The

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preacher then transitions into a discussion on the virtue of Islam and a call for Muslims to strive to be good Muslims. These discussions lead up to his final topic, which is the story of the Hussein martyrdom in Karbala.[99]

During this stage, three major Shia governments, all in Iran, impacted the development of the rites of remembrance of Hussein. One of the three governments, the Islamic Republic of Iran, is still in power and is still shaping the Ashura rituals.

a.   Qajar Period

The Qajar dynasty is a Shia dynasty that ruled Iran from 1796 to 1925. To legitimize their rule, the Qajar Shahs sponsored and supported the Ashura rituals for a couple reasons. They wanted to encourage the Iranian spirit and have greater control over religions and clergy.

During their period, the *tashabih*, the theatrical reenactment of the Battle of Karbala developed during the Safavid period, reached its zenith under the Qajar. It became more than a straightforward reenactment of the events in the Battle of Karbala and transformed into a complex melodrama with literary and artistic additions. Separate plays were written about individual heroes, new characters were created, and existing ones were transformed. Huge theaters such as the *Takyeh Dowlat* in Tehran were built to hold large spectators.[100]

Self-flagellations that were introduced to Northern Iran during the Safavid period by Christians converts became wide spread throughout Iran and even made its way to Iraq by the nineteenth century.[101] Samuel Benjamin, the first U.S. official diplomatic envoy to Iran, described self-flagellation in his memoirs as follows:[102]

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[99] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 191.

[100] Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura," 172; Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran,* 22.

[101] Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), Chapter 4, 149.

[102] AhlulBayt Islamic Mission Website, http://www.aimislam.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=6437 (accessed February 5, 2009).

> I was in Tehran in 1884. Processions went through the streets showing severe emotion as never before. Suddenly, men wearing white clothes with knives presented themselves and passionately struck their heads with the knives. Blood flowed from the cuts they made and their knives until they were covered with blood.

Sheikh Mulla Darbandi (d. 1869), a controversial Shia jurist, exhorted people to experience pain. He urged weeping, lamentations, and self-flagellation. In his book *Asrar al-shahadah*, which is very controversial and has been rejected by current Shia jurists, he includes uncommon rituals, not to be found in other accepted Shia *Imam* writings.

b.   Pahlavi Period

The Pahlavi dynasty ruled Iran from the crowning of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925 to the overthrow of Reza Shah Pahlavi's son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Unlike the Qajar dynasty, who sponsored and supported Ashura rituals to legitimize their rule and control the Shia clergy, the Pahlavi shahs shunned Shia clergy and stopped the state sponsoring and supporting of Ashura rituals. They stopped using Ashura rituals as the primary means of promoting their religious legitimacy and maintaining bonds with their subjects. They virtually abandoned support for the *majalis*. Reza Shah viewed Ashura rituals as a threat to his secular agenda and to his rule and sought to eliminate them from public sphere. This lack of financial support from the state contributed significantly to the decline of the Ashura ritual practices in contrast to the Qajar period. The Ashura rituals became mainly supported by neighborhood organizations such as merchants, *ulama*, landowners, and different guilds. The practice was limited to temporary ritual sites that were located on private property.

This private support enabled the rituals to evolve on their own without state control. The emphasis in rituals shifted from sermons to lectures. Sermons, as the primary vehicle of expressions, however, were not displaced by lectures. These lectures began to place more emphasis on national and international issues and contributed significantly to national discourse. In 1963, Moharram, Khomeini repeatedly spoke against the government. His criticism of the governments among others included land

reform laws and women enfranchisements. In 1968, Mohammad Taqi Shariati another strong opponent of the Shah regime, spoke on "Role Models for Islamic Society."[103]

While the main theme of the sermons and lectures was religious piety or personal or community issues, political themes became woven into the sermons and lectures. As such sermons and lectures became a vehicle to inform the public about political issues.   This style of ritual became very prominent during the current government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

c.   Iran Islamic Republic

The revolutionary message of Hussein's movement that began late during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty has become the main language of the Ashura rituals in the current government of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The language has a more immediate and functional message, such as encouraging family planning, discouraging drug use, mobilizing the people for defense of the country, discouraging violations of *hijab* regulations, and so forth. The language is intended to encourage the believers to act in accordance with those ideals. Every year during the month of Muharram, at least one major ritual protest was usually organized by a coalition of groups and organizations devoted to the ideal of revolution.

The traditional Ashura rituals that tend to stress the abstract political aspect of the Hussein movement, along with religious ethics, social justice, and salvation are still practiced, but their importance to the government elites and revolutionary *ulama* is less. In fact, some form of Ashura rituals were banned such as the controversial ritual *tatbir*, in which mourners strike their heads with swords, producing blood and injuries.

B.   SUMMARY

The historical examination of the development of Ashura rituals over a period of twelve centuries and under the influence of many dynasties has revealed that these

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[103] Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran,* 73.

commemoration rituals have evolved in several distinct stages. They share similar fixed elements of Ashura rituals in the account of the tragedy and in the criticism of rulers, but the rituals differ in content and form at various times in history.

During the first stage that began shortly after the Battle of Karbala (year 680 AD) and continued until the fall of Baghdad at the hands of Hulagu, the form of Ashura rituals acquired a fixed calendar and started as conversations, then changed to a story telling or a poem reciting, and finally they became a written account of the death of Hussein. At the end of this era, poetry and prose were integrated. During this time, the content of the rituals were focused on the details and historical background of the tragedy. By the end of this stage, the virtues and sufferings of the *Imams* of the Holy Family were incorporated.

The Umayyad dynasty prevented any public gatherings and attempted to erase any memories of the Battle of Karbala. The memories of the battle and the accounts of the first visit in the *arba'in*, however, were kept alive in private or semiprivate circles largely through oral recitations recounting the battle. Many of the current forms of Ashura rituals were attributed to the first visit.

The Abbasid coming to power relied on the rebellious antigovernment connotations of the Karbala narratives, which popularized the commemoration of Hussein's death at Karbala among the mainstream Sunni community. This allowed the accounts previously restricted to oral transmission to be incorporated into the literary corpus, resulting in the incorporation of these largely Shia accounts into a plethora of mainstream Sunni literary and historical sources. In the waning period of Abbasid and during the Buyids, Fatimids, and Hamdanids, the rite of remembrance became widespread. This popularization allowed for the primitive expressions of grief to evolve into more ritualized ceremonies. During the Buyids dynasty, the once private gatherings became public marches and ritualized visitation of Hussein's shrine at Karbala. Public rituals such as the *ziyarah* grave visitations developed a high degree of formalization, and the recitation of the *ziyarah* text achieved almost liturgical status. It is also quite likely that the evolution of formalized chest beating (*latm*) rituals to the rhythm of recited poetry can be traced to this period.

During the second stage that began at the time of the fall of Baghdad and continued through the Muslim dark ages until the modern period, the form of the rites of remembrance became more fixed and more organized. Similarly, the different human elements involved in the rites of remembrance, including wailing chanters, reciters and storytellers became more numerous. In this stage, striking oneself became a firm element in some of the rites of remembrance. During this second stage, the content of the rituals became more embellished with lack of historical accuracy. Accounts that could not be historically proven were introduced to the body of the narrative to excite and elevate the spirit of the mourners. More importantly, the content of the Ashura rituals became more concerned with death rather than with life. Participating in Ashura rituals became an event that would bring benefit to mourners in the grave rather than serve as an incentive to make them change their miserable situation. The poetry of lamentation and poetry about virtue that began late in the first stage became basic material in the rites of remembrance by the second stage.

During this stage, the Safavid Shia scholars developed radical hagiographic characterizations of Hussein and Karbala in their literary sources to define and legitimize their rule and to differentiate between their state and their Sunni rivals and threats. They transformed some of the already formalized rituals into more extreme versions involving self-inflicted bloodshed, and they introduced new rituals altogether such as the *ta'ziyeh* passion play.[104]

During the third stage that began from the beginnings of the modern period until the present, security and freedom, which the Shia community has enjoyed in most places, have enabled the rites of remembrance to be performed publicly without fear of prohibition by the authorities or the populace. In addition, the occasions for performing the rites of remembrance have become more numerous and not restricted to the first ten days of Muharram or to the day of *arba'in*. They have expanded to a commemoration and remembrance of the Prophets, other Holy family members, and important Shia. Private rites of remembrances on the occasions of celebrating a new house, the return from the

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[104] Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala."

pilgrimage to Mecca, and other private occasions were also held. In term of content, the Ashura rituals narratives became used as a vehicle by political pundits to either support the ruling elites in the cases of Qajar dynasty and in the case of Islamic Republic of Iran or to criticize the ruling elites as in the case of the Pahlavi dynasty.

The language of the rites of remembrance is conveyed using sermons and lectures, which has become a vehicle to inform the public about political issues. There has also been more concern shown about the historical accuracy by eliminating historically unreliable accounts. The *tashabih* play, which reached its zenith during the rule of the Qajar, has decline and become a historical folklore. Some of the bloodletting rituals were outlawed in Iran and discouraged in other places.

V.   RITUAL THEORY AND SHIA COMMUNAL IDENTITY

A.   INTRODUCTION

Rituals have been defined generally as "repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presence."[105] They can serve many purposes including fulfillment of religious obligations or ideals, which is often seen in the practice of many world religions. Rituals can also serve to satisfy spiritual or emotional needs, cement social bonds, display respect or submission, state one's membership, obtain social acceptance or approval of a particular event, or sometimes simply to enjoy the ritual itself.[106]

Religious rituals, like Ashura rituals, are unique and more distinctive than secular rituals. They not only serve some of the above purposes, but they also play a significant role in creating and maintaining religions. Such a role enables religious rituals to be an even stronger in strengthening social bonds than secular rituals are. According to Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), "religious rituals are used by people to sacrilize the social structure and bonds of the community and to ensure the unconscious priority of communal identification."[107] Durkheim asserts that rituals transform knowledge into belief and membership into belonging. As periodic opportunities for the social group to assemble itself and project sacred images that actually represent the community occur, rituals are designed to arouse a passionate intensity and feelings of "effervescence," in which individuals experience something larger than themselves.[108]

In this chapter, Emile Durkheim's social ritual theory will be used to show the importance of Ashura rituals as they relate to group cohesion and solidarity by explaining

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[105] Evan M. Zuess, "Ritual" in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1987), v. 12, 405.

[106] Reference.com website, http://www.reference.com/browse/Ritual?jss=1 (accessed January 5, 2009).

[107] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspective and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24-26.

[108] Ibid., 24-26.

how Ashura rituals are constructed, embraced, and have evolved. More importantly, this chapter will illustrate how Ashura rituals are used by Shia as a way to reunite and reconfirm common values shared between members of Shia societies. This analysis will rely on Randall Collins's model, which is derived from Durkheim's seminal theory of ritual presented in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. This model contains a handful of elements considered prominent to Durkheim's theory in explaining how rituals transform knowledge into belief and membership into belonging. This model and its elements are depicted in Figure 1.[109]
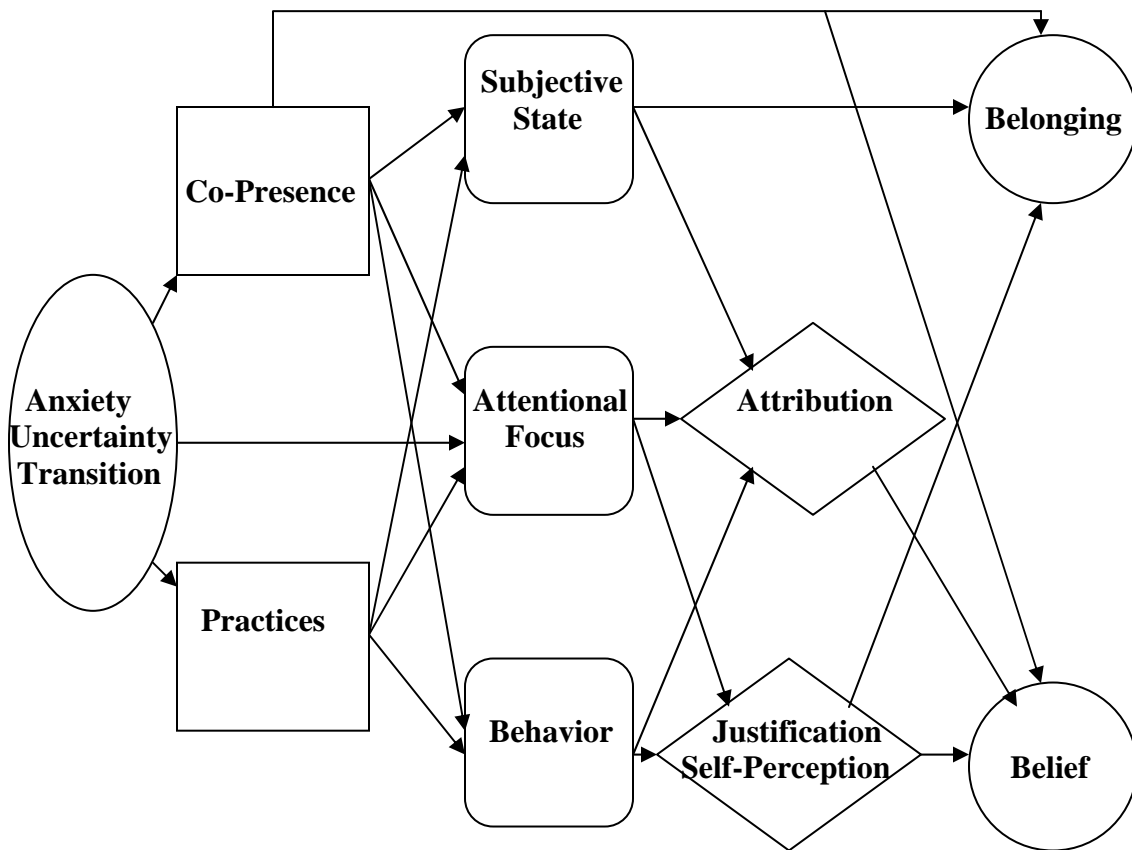

Figure 1.   Schematic Diagram of Ritual Theory

[109] Douglas A. Marshall, "Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice," *Sociological Theory* 20, no. 3 (November 2002).

B.   RITUAL MODEL

Before getting acquainted with the model, the chapter will first define what "belief" and "belonging" mean in this context. Here "beliefs" are not simply considered to be propositions that an individual psychologically holds to be true. In other words, beliefs are not merely knowledge of something, but rather a step beyond knowledge. They form the foundation of human constructed mental models and through beliefs, humans process, analyze, and make sense of new information. Beliefs are integral, unconditional, and secured against the doubts and challenges one faces in the society.[110]

"Belonging," too, is not just mere association in which an individual joins a group. Instead, belonging is a step beyond membership just as beliefs are a step beyond knowledge. Belonging involves internal factors such as attraction, identification, and cohesion that make the individual committed and desirous to join a group.

Considering the aforementioned definition of beliefs and belonging, this chapter will now discuss Randall Collins's ritual model. Figure 1 shows that belief and belonging are end products of many simultaneously interacting elements that often influence each other in both directions. The model begins with a fundamental event from which the rest of the elements are derived directly or indirectly. This fundamental event is an emotional state characterized by anxiety, uncertainty, and/or transition.

According to the model, this emotional state is a trigger for co-presence and practice, which are fundamental in creating beliefs and belongings. Co-presence refers to the spatio-temporal conditions under which humans can interact with each other.[111] Durkheim confirmed that under "great collective shock... social interactions become much more frequent and active ... individuals seek one another out and come together more."[112] The tragic death of a loved one is an example of such an emotional state that often triggers members of the surviving group to exhibit three major reactions to the

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[110] Marshall, "Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice."

[111] Massachusetts Institute of Technology website, http://reality.media.mit.edu/pdfs/Lawrence.pdf (accessed January 30, 2009).

[112] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press (1912) 1995), 212-213.

tragedy. These major reactions influence how the lost of a love one is remembered. The first reaction by the surviving members is the passionate urge to safeguard the memory of what happened and to make sure that the future generations do not forget the tragedy. The second reaction to the tragedy is the strong desire to make sense of the agonizing loss and to create meaning out of the tragedy, making sure that the love one did not die in vain and that his or her sacrifice must have a positive impact on the group. Finally, the members of the surviving group often exhibit a tremendous sense of guilt for not taking steps in preventing the tragedy and as such suffer from a sense of collective "survivors' guilt."[113]

The tragedy of Karbala is a great example of the tremendous angst and social insecurity that hit the Muslim world in general, and the Holy Family and their partisans in particular. The latter sought each other to safeguard the memory of Hussein, to make sense of the tragedy, and to address their collective guilt. This impulse to assemble is independent of any intention to engage in ritual practice, and even apart from the larger ritual process, but it has a profound influence over those assembled and in time lead to Ashura rituals.

1. Co-presence

As the model shows, co-presence is one of the two major building blocks for generating belief and a sense of belonging.

Durkheim states that it is in times of stress, uncertainty, and doubt that "with passion" we seek "the company of those who feel and think as we do."[114] When people seek each other during tragic events, they are not motivated by obtaining accurate information about the event but instead are motivated by reducing their uncertainty and preserving, even escalating, their belief.[115] The profound grief and extreme distress, which aroused at the aftermath of the Karbala tragedy, gave the people who knew about what happened an excuse for gathering together, a subject of conversation, and an

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[113] Valerie Saturen, "Divine Suffering in Shiism: Origins and Political Implications," *Iran Analysis Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (July-September 2005).

[114] Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans., Lewis Coser (New York: The Free Press, (1893) 1984), 48.

[115] Marshall, "Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice."

incentive to re-examine their attitudes and opinions and to review their position with regard to the whole system (*Caliphate* system). These gathering were spontaneous and were made up of small groups of Muslims, both followers of the Holy Family and others. They held meetings recounting the events in Karbala, criticizing the authorities that committed the unspeakable act, and more importantly, solidified their belief in the sacredness of *Imam* Hussein.[116]

In terms of belonging, co-presence plays an important role. Douglas Marshall stated:[117]

> Simple contact between individuals is a powerful source of liking and cohesion, playing as it does upon multiple mechanisms of attachment, including mere exposure, closeness, similarity, and mere categorization. Moreover, both the developmental and ethological evidence indicate that such proximity-attachment linkages have strong biological underpinnings.

The spontaneous gathering that occurred among Hussein sympathizers created a sense of cohesiveness, closeness, and likeness among the individuals of the group. These spontaneous meetings increased the bonds and sense of belonging among the members of the group. Later, these transformed into planned gatherings with the guidance of early *Imams* and brought about the core from which the rites of remembrance as an institution began and developed during the course of history. The increased social interactions among Hussein sympathizers caused the group to become different with clear boundaries separating it from the rest.

2. Practices

As the model shows, co-presence is one of the two major building blocks for generating belief and a sense of belonging to a group. The other building block is a practice or ritual.

When people come together in times of stress, uncertainty, and doubt, they not only come together to reinforce their beliefs and solidify their relationships and belonging

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[116] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 149.

[117] Marshall, "Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice."

but they also come together to get something done. In spite of any apparent differences, these people ultimately wind up participating in a combination of specific common practices that eventually become developed behaviors with the purpose to focus attention on the beliefs and belonging of the people in order to solidify their union.[118] In other words, practice also plays a role in reinforcing beliefs and strengthening belonging to the group, as is the case with co-presence.

Following the battle of Karbala, small groups of people began to gather spontaneously in Kufa, Medina, and stopping places en route from Karbala. These people began to develop feelings of responsibility for the loss, both because of their failure to die with Hussein on the battlefield and their belief that he had given his life on their behalf. During these spontaneous gatherings, members of the martyrs' surviving families would cultivate these guilt feelings and implant with them seeds of the public rites of remembrance as an institution. Those who remained faithful to the Holy Family began a series of common mourning practices beginning with the simple expression of condolence and developing into stories retelling the battle and its circumstances. These stories would be expressed through extreme emotion and cries for vengeance against the Umayyad. Considering poetry has traditionally been part of Arabic culture since before Islam, it is also not surprising that poets also began to join in these gatherings. The poets would lead lamentation (*niyahah*) sessions supporting *Imams* who provided the liturgical basis for this new manifestation popular piety.[119] This rudimentary ritual practice played a major role in reinforcing Shia belief and belonging and developed throughout the ages to become what it is today.

3.   Other Elements of the Model

Other elements of the model in Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of Ritual Theory that emanate from co-presence and practice are very important in enhancing belief and

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[118] Marshall, "Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice."

[119] Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, 152-153.

belonging. These elements are attention focus, subjectivity, and behavior. Under the influence of co-presence and practice, people become more task focused, see themselves as a unit and not as subject, and enact behaviors they may not otherwise do.

In Ashura, for example, people would not while alone inflect pain on themselves or discomfort by self-flagellating their backs and foreheads. They would not beat their breast forcibly and for an extended period. They would not weep for long hours if alone, and lastly they would not march for long distances to make pilgrimage without a group influences. The presence of other individuals jointly practicing the different Ashura rituals whether self-flagellating in harmony, weeping in harmony, *latm* in harmony, or marching in harmony helps each member in the group focus attention on the ritual by minimizing any outside interference and by inducing an altered subjective state allowing for behavior that would not occurred if the practice was done in isolation and only by an individual.

Co-presence and practice facilitate the Ashura rituals by improving one's performance, eliminating subjectivity, and allowing for the performance of peculiar behaviors. In other words, these elements that are derived from co-presence and practice facilitate the practice of rituals and solidify further Shia belief and belonging.

C.   SUMMARY

Collins model, which is derived from Durkheim's seminal theory of ritual, shows how rituals transform knowledge into belief and membership into belonging. It also shows how rituals are constructed, embraced, and evolved. The tragic event of Karbala and the Ashura rituals that ensued support this model and this theory. The tragedy of Karbala was a watershed event triggering the development of Ashura rituals. Through co-presence and practice and with the interaction of other elements mentioned above, the Ashura rituals have developed from early rudimentary rituals into full-fledged rituals.

Each Ashura ritual practice plays a vital role in reinforcing Shia identity and collective memory. The acts of weeping, *latm*, and self-flagellation, for example, solidify belief and belonging. They allow the believer to identify himself with Hussein's cause,

voice his regret physically and mentally for not being able to be with him in Karbala and help him win the battle, protest emotionally against injustice and oppression as he experiences it around himself, and amass Gods' rewards.[120]

The memorial services ((*majalis al-ta'ziya*), the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala particularly on the occasion of the 10th day of the month of Muharram (Ashura) and the 40th day after the battle (*ziyarat Ashura and ziyarat arba'in*), the public mourning processions (*al-mawakib al-husayniyya*), and the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play (*tashabih*) bring all Shia together as they have done throughout centuries to reinforce their belief and strengthen their sense of belonging with each other as a group, making them a separate body within a larger body of world Muslims with their own rituals, own theology, and own identity.

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[120] Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura."

VI.   CURRENT KARBALA NARRATIVE AND POLITICAL IMPLICATION

A.   INTRODUCTION

The historical evolution of Ashura rituals discussed in chapter IV shows how the rites of remembrance have evolved from a predominantly passivism content reflected in the first two stages of Ashura ritual evolution to a predominantly activism content reflected in the third stage. The content of the first two stages was characterized by the development of relatively distinct Shia identities and doctrines and the reinforcement of the sense of communal identity built around collective mourning and suffering. It was also characterized by the emphasis of individual religious experiences of mourning and regret, embodied through tears and blood. The third stage, on the other hand, was characterized by social and political activism in the face of political and social injustice.

This chapter will discuss how the contents of the third stage of the rites of remembrance developed and their political implications. The discussion will focus on important Shia leaders who were instrumental in shifting the meanings of Ashura from the soteriological to the revolutionary meanings. There will be mention of the leaders who have operationalized such meanings. A discussion of how the new meaning of the Karbala narrative has affected the practice of Ashura rituals in Iran and Lebanon in form and content will be analyzed.

B.   KARBALA NARRATIVE FUNDAMENTAL REFORMULATION

Prior to the third stage of Shia rituals' evolution, Karbala narratives tended to stress the soteriological dimension of the symbolism. This view did not, however, preclude the use of these narratives as a means for challenging the state, as was the case during many political crises and upheavals. A good example occurred during the toppling of the Umayyad from power by the Abbasid in 749-50 AD. The Abbasid leader, Abu Moslem, made use of popular sentiments against the Umayyads rulers by appealing to

popular sentiments for the family of the Prophet. The Abbasid claimed to be the progeny of Mohammad's uncle, Abbas, and as such, they depicted themselves as being more legitimate to lead the Muslim *Ummah* than others not related to the Holy Family.[121]

Such attempts of using the Karbala narratives to challenge the state were rare and were not based on fundamental shifts in the meaning of Ashura rituals but based on a political ploy to seize power.

The Karbala narratives were not fundamentally reformulated until the 1960s and the 1970s. This fundamental reformulation did not take place in a vacuum. The Muslim world had been suffering under the bitter experience of imperialism from "external" powers such as Britain, France, and Italy. After independence, has been suffering under the oppressive regimes from "internal" powers in the form of military dictators or self-imposed monarchies whose military and police's only function was to safeguard the interest of tyrant rulers and the interest of the same "external" powers whose shadow never departed. Under this reality, there were many political protests that took place prior to the 1960s-1970s shifting the meaning of Ashura rituals. In Iran for example, there were campaigns against the Baha'i religion in the nineteenth century, the Tobacco Rebellion of 1892, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, and the revolutionary activities of the 1960s and 1970s. Similar political protests occurred in Iraq against the British occupation, such as the 1920 Shia uprising against the British, which had the full support of Shia religious leaders. During this period, many Shia religious leaders were deported from Iraq Noteworthy is Sayyid Salih al-Hilli said to be the most effective preacher and *rawzeh khwan* in Iraq in his time.[122]

Ayatollah Salehi Najafabadi, a religious scholar who studied with Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1960s, was possibly the first person to attempt an alteration of the Karbala narrative. Najafabadi wrote *Shahid-e javid* (The Eternal Martyr) in 1968, in which he demystified the Karbala Paradigm in an effort to reinterpret it in a more

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[121] Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, 10.

[122] Ibid., 87-88.

politically activist arena.[123] He was very controversial among his peers since he had challenged the long held notions that the Battle of Karbala was a divinely preordained event and that Hussein knew beforehand that his opposition would be futile. He argued that Hussein was determined to seize power from the Umayyads and to take over the government itself. In addition, made the controversial assertion that Hussein had no prior knowledge of his imminent martyrdom, an opinion that violated the basic tenets of Shiism that view Hussein as being fully aware of the past, present, and future, as well as the events of Karbala. Najafabadi took these statements further in criticizing the long accepted view that Hussein's movement and sacrifice had the essential role of preserving true Islam for future generations, and even refuted the idea that the long-term effects of the massacre were in fact positive. Najafabadi said that the Umayyads were not damaged by the incident and Hussein accomplished nothing to expose corruption among the Umayyads because the corruption was already a well-known fact.[124]

In spite of Najafabadi's drastically converse opinions of the view of Karbala and the immense controversy he generated, his revision of the Karbala narrative marks the inception of a debate that began in the 1960s and continued through the 1990s. Numerous other ideologues, such as Ali Sharaiti, expanded upon Najafabadi's ideas, but none were as effectual as Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, who was able to find a compromising position that allowed Muslims to follow the innovative model of Karbala without infringing upon the fundamental tenets of Shiism.

Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, a very close companion of Ayatollah Khomein, was hailed as "the Ideologue of the Revolution." He presented a radically different view from Najafabadi. While Motahhari disagreed with more customarily accepted interpretations of the Karbala narrative, he did not outright refuse accounts as Najafabadi did. Instead, he wanted to make the traditional rituals of Muharram lamentation pertinent to modern social issues by describing the inner character that should motivate congregants who grieve Hussein. He stated: [125]

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[123] Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, 93.

[124] Ibid., 93-96.

[125] Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community*, 172.

A martyr creates the spirit of valor, and weeping for him means participation in his valor and in conformity with his longing for martyrdom…Another moral which the society should draw, is that whenever a situation demanding sacrifice, the people should have the feelings of a martyr and willingly follow his heroic example. Weeping for the martyr means association with his fervor, harmony with his spirit and conformity with his longing.

He believed that the movement and martyrdom of Hussein and his followers served four distinct functions: delegitimizing Yazid's rule, which can be extended to any Muslim leader deemed immoral and corrupt; responding to the calls of Kufans, which can be extended to responding to the calls of any oppressed Muslims; acting against the religious corruption of the Umayyads by promoting good and discouraging evil, which is an obligation incumbent upon all Muslims and can be extended through time; and lastly propagating and teaching the true meaning of Islam to the Muslims which also can be extended through time.[126] Unlike Najafabadi, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari did not infringe upon fundamental Shia Tenets sealed within the Karbala narrative such as the moral character and infallibility of the *Imam*, loyalty to the *Imam*, courage, honor, and a willingness to be martyred. However, he did instill the narrative with instant political bearing by positioning it within the outline of active political struggle to maintain justice and pure Islamic ideals. This new Karbala narrative has gained common approval among Iranian Shia as well as other Shia in Lebanon, Iraq, and other countries. It has also become part of the Ashura rituals content.

This fundamental reformulation of the Karbala narrative that has taken place during the third stage reflected the anger and aspirations of the people suffering under imperialism and its cronies who have been ruling the Muslim world. The final synthesis has created a narrative that serves both the old soteriological functions as well as the newly reformulated active and literal emulation of Hussein's movement. These two concepts are simultaneously present in any given context and are not mutually exclusive but represent two sides of the same Shia coin.[127]

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[126] Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, 109.

[127] Ibid., 111.

C.   KARBALA NARRATIVE OPERATIONALIZATION

The third stage of Ashura rituals evolution has created a new narrative with dualistic functions, the traditional soteriological function which provides an opportunity for spiritual redemption of Shia to gain salvation and admission to paradise and the new revolutionary function which uses Ashura rituals as a vehicle for expressing the current socioeconomic grievances of the population and mobilizing people for political action. Many infamous Shia leaders were able to operationalize this new Karbala narrative by weaving protest themes into the narratives of the ritual sermons, equating unjust leadership with Yazid and the revolutionaries with followers of Hussein. The operationalization of the Karbala narrative through Ashura rituals has had tremendous political implications that have been felt throughout the globe especially since the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

The most influential and effective Shia leader who made use of Ashura as a vehicle of social and political action and reconciled it with the spiritual and ritual view of the sufferings of Hussein is no other than *Imam* Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini was active in using Ashura rituals as a vehicle to promote opposition to the shah. In one of Khomeini's speech given on the occasion of Muharram, in November 23, 1987 titled "The Triumph of Blood Over the Sword," he stated:[128]

> With the approach of Muharram, we are about to begin the month of epic heroism and self-sacrifice-the month in which blood triumphed over the sword, the month in which truth condemned falsehood for all eternity and branded the mark of disgrace upon the forehead of all oppressors and satanic governments; the month that has taught successive generations throughout history the path of victory over the bayonet; the month that proves the superpowers may be defeated by the word of truth; the month in which the leader of the Muslims taught us how to struggle against all the tyrants of history, showed us how the clenched fists of those who seek

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[128] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (Iran: Mizan Press, 1981), 242.

freedom, desire independence, and proclaim the truth may triumph over tanks, machine guns, and the armies of Satan, how the word of truth may obliterated falsehood.

In another speech given on the occasion of *Arba'in* commemoration, in January 15, 1979, he stated:[129]

This year, the commemoration of the fortieth day after the anniversary of the *Imam*'s martyrdom has come in the midst of a whole series of fortieth day commemorations of the martyrdom of the followers of that great Islamic figure. It is as if the blood of our martyrs were the continuation of the blood of the martyrs of Karbala, and as if the commemoration of our brothers were the echo of the commemoration of those brave ones who fell at Karbala. Just as their pure blood brought to an end the tyrannical rule of Yazid, the blood of our martyrs has shattered the tyrannical monarchy of the Pahlavis.

Khomeini recreated and revived the spirit of Ashura through his messages against the despotic Pahlavi rule and the exploitive domination of alien powers over Muslims throughout the world. His interpretation of the true spirit of Karbala is in accordance with Mutahhari's well-accepted narratives. He believed that the battle of Karbala was not limited to any particular period of time but a continuing struggle in the "Eternal Now."[130]

Khomeini broke with the Shia tradition practiced during the first and second stage of Ashura rituals evolution that shied away from being associated with governments or most forms of politics. He openly participated in oppositional politics and eventually establishing a theocratic state. He challenged and dismissed the *ulama* and *rawzeh khwans* who had transformed the true spirit of Ashura into a simple lamentation ritual and using it as an ordinary means of their livelihoods. He revitalized the true essence of Ashura and used it as a weapon to promulgate his message based on the Islamic principles. Without such platform, Khomeini might not have succeeded in reaching the masses and in restoring true Islamic values thereby reviving the Muslim community.

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[129] Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, 249.

[130] Akhtar, "Karbala, an Enduring Paradigm of Islamic Revivalism."

In 1963, Khomeini encouraged a wide variety of oppositional activities to be carried out during the ritual season. More specifically, he worked very hard to coordinate a multicity opposition movement centered on Muharram rituals. He gave antigovernment speeches himself while encouraging others to do the same. He also exerted his influence to encourage ritual organizers to compose and use protest slogans and chants in their rituals.

In Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was instrumental in operationalizing the new Karbala narrative. In Iraq, it was Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani who brought otherwise feuding Shia factions together to form the united Iraqi Alliance, a strong Shia political alliance. Contrasting with Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic regime in Iran whose preferred means for political and social activism was through direct partaking in politics under the doctrine of "Governance of the Jurist," Ayatollah Sistani prefers the use of *fatwa* (edict concerning religious law) to persuade social and political changes rather than to hold office. While the approaches may differ, the strategies are the same in aiming to actively apply pressure in an effort to attain social and political changes. In the summer of 2003, Sistani issued a *fatwa* against the Coalitional Provisional Authority plan for the Iraqi constitution to be created by a constitutional drafting body, chosen by a selection process and not by direct elections. He stated in his fatwa:[131]

> Those forces have no jurisdiction whatsoever to appoint members of the Constitution preparation assembly. Also there is no guarantee either that this assembly will prepare a constitution that serves the best interests of the Iraqi people or express their national identity whose backbone is sound Islamic religion and noble social values. The said plan is unacceptable from the outset. First of all there must be a general election so that every Iraqi citizen - who is eligible to vote - can choose someone to represent him in a foundational Constitution preparation assembly. Then the drafted Constitution can be put to a referendum. All believers must insist on the accomplishment of this crucial matter and contribute to achieving it in the best way possible.

Ayatollah Sistani also uses the Ashura rituals and symbols to influence the masses. The 2004 election occurred among a milieu of Shia symbolism and religious

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[131] Noah Feldman, "The Democratic Fatwa: Islam and Democracy in the Realm of Constitutional Politics," *Oklahoma Law Review*, 58 no. 1 (Spring 2005).

feeling. Ayatollah Sistani and his lieutenants were actively involved in getting out the votes, especially Shia women. "Truly, women who go forth to the polling centers on election day are like Zaynab, who went forth to Karbala." These were the words attributed to Sistani and were adorned with Sistani's photograph to every election poster. By comparing Iraqi women to Zaynab, Sistani was encouraging them to challenge the terrorists and take up the struggle on behalf of justice, comparing them to Zaynab heroic struggle on the face of Yazid's army and court.[132] Under Sistani's auspices, the politically and culturally oppressed Iraq Shia organized themselves to become the dominant power bloc behind the writing of the new Iraqi constitution and election of a Shia dominated parliament.[133] After 1,400 years of Sunni hegemony in the region and literal subjugation of the Shia under Sunni rule, Hussein's spiritual heirs had established the first Shia led Arab nation in history by popular election.

In Lebanon, the Lebanese group Hezbollah,[134] under the leadership of Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, has also used the Ashura ceremonies as an effective means to propagate its message. During Ashura, the Shia group is not just remembering Hussein but also remembering its own guerrillas who died fighting in wars against Israel. Hezbollah use Ashura to rail against their domestic foes as well as against their regular targets: Israel and the United States. In chants at Ashura processions, mourners equate Hezbollah's modern-day enemies Israel and the United States with the dreadful Yazid.

A leading Hezbollah cleric Sayyed Hashem Safieddin said at the end of a politically charged Ashura sermon this year:[135]

> Let us return to the blood of Hussein, the blood of Karbala ... So we can be victorious, through our injustices and our rights. As we were victorious over the Zionist enemy….we will achieve subsequent victories for

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[132] Al-Rahim, "The Sistani Factor."

[133] Ibid.

[134] *Hizbollah:* Party of God (*Hizb*= party; *'Allah* =God or the God). A powerful political movement in Lebanon; there is also an Iraqi *Hizbollah*, which is much smaller and less significant. Other *Hizbollah* organizations exist either legally or illegally in a variety of Middle East countries.

[135] Tom Perry, "Hezbollah Draws on Ashura in Battle and Politics," In Reuter website, http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL29171445 (accessed December 10, 2008).

Lebanon and our Arab and Islamic nation," he told thousands dressed in black to mourn Hussein, whose death is also know as "The Victory of Blood over the Sword.

During the 2003 sermon commemorating the memorial of *Imam* Hussein' *arba'in*, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah stated:[136]

> The slogans of Karbala are the slogans of life in its entirety. . . . Living Ashura is standing against oppression. Such a stand should fill our hearts and minds each time we face the oppressors and arrogant powers, whether in Muslim countries or in the whole world. It is not living in a tragedy of tears and hitting ourselves with swords or chains . . . for swords should be raised against the enemy as we were taught by the *Imam* (a.s).

D.   SHIA COMMUNITIES COMPARISON

The effect of the new Karbala narrative on the current practice of Ashura rituals is very evident in the Shia communities of Iran and Lebanon. The following comparison of Ashura rituals in these two countries will be analyzed from a wider lens, discussing the differences and commonalities between these countries from the context of form and content and not from the context of variations in clothing, ritual devices, banners, rhythmic stanza, and so on. The latter is so immense and depends on ethnic differences, social class differences, and even differences among organizers within the same community.

1.   Lebanon

Lebanon is a small country, roughly 0.7 times the size of Connecticut[137] with a Shia population of roughly 1.4 million, about 40%, of the total population.[138] Lebanese Shia population is mostly concentrated in southern Lebanon. The area known as Jabal Amil is considered the Shia heartland and it extends from the wadis and hills of southern Lebanon to the southern Biqa valley. Jabal Amil was one of the major Shia center for

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[136] Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice."

[137] U.S. State Department website, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35833.htm (accessed January 30, 2009).

[138] Martin Walker, "The Revenge of the Shia," The Wilson Quarterly 30, no. 4 (Autumn 2006).

scholarship at least by the late 14th century. During the fifteen-century, many scholars from Jabal Amil, Iraq and Bahrain all assisted in the installation of Shia Islam in Safavid Persia (1502–1736).[139] This was well before the Persian cities of Mashhad, Shiraz, or Qom emerged as major centers of Shia scholarship.

Ashura rituals in Lebanon have been revolutionized in recent decades. Once a ritual focused on mourning, it now stresses Islamic activism. The activism role historically played by Hussein and his sister Zaynab has become the center theme of contemporary Ashura rituals. While Hussein and his sacrifice in blood continue to be the central piece of the rituals, his sister Zaynab and her sacrifice in sweat become as important especially for women mourners. This transformation was due to many important social, political, and religious factors. The Shia of Lebanon were marginalized in their own society, suffered tremendously in a series of conflicts, most notably the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon that ended in 2000 and the recent 2006 Israeli war on Hezbollah, the most powerful, most popular, and most respected Shia party in Lebanon. Religiously, there was a wide spread opposition among pious Shia Muslims to traditional forms of commemoration which contributed to the emergence of a new Ashura attitude that is more politically active and expressive, in contrast to a politically quiet Shia of the past. This activism theme is clearly evident by the changes that took place in Ashura rituals practices.

In the current Lebanese *majalis*, the sermons are typically long with a content that is characteristic of the third stage of Ashura ritual evolution. The sermons are more concerned with historical accuracy and less tolerant of unfounded exaggerations whose purpose is to heighten emotions and make people weep. The sermons' main goal is to convey religious, social, and political lessons of instruction about the newly determined authentic meanings of Karbala yet still link the history to the present. The lectures given in *majalis* became a sort of analytical tool used to make sense of the Karbala tragedy, to analyze major issues facing the Muslim world, and to emphasize the importance of activism.

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[139] Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: Norton, 2006), 66.

By far one of the importance shifts in the Ashura rituals is the emphasis on the women's role in society. This shift in the Shia Lebanese women's role is due to the reinterpretation of the historical behavior of Hussein' sister, Zaynab, during and following the events of Karbala. Zaynab was portrayed in the first and second stages of Ashura evolution as a woman lost in grief and wildly demonstrative of her misery over the dead and dying. The current depiction, however, emphasizes her courage, resilience, and strengths and credits her for safeguarding the history of Ashura for future generation.[140] This new depiction of Zaynab is understood to be a model for public activism and has given contemporary pious Shia women responsibility for public welfare equal that of men. A great example of Shia Lebanese women's participation is their role in the rebuilding process that has been taking place after the 2006 Israel war on Lebanon. The Shia women have had major roles in public community service activities providing health, food, and shelter for the needy.

The current Lebanese *masirat* have seen drastic changes since the reformulation of Karbala narratives. Perhaps the most noticeable change in the *masirat* has occurred in the style of *latm.* Traditionally, the *masirat* in the southern Lebanese town of Nabatieh, involved a scene of blood bath with mourners soaked on their own blood marching and self-flagellating on the rhythm of *niyahah*. As the new Karbala narratives took shape in Lebanon and grew in popularity, *latm* that involved the shedding of one's blood was criticized as un-Islamic because it involves purposely injuring oneself. Shia Religious Authority Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, who lives in southern Lebanon, previously issued a *fatwa*, discouraging Shia from practicing any rituals that can cause self-injury on the basis that such rituals violate religious law and portray Shia in a bad light in the eyes of non-Shia. Similarly, the Iranian leader, Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khamenei, issued a 1994 *fatwa* "condemning bloodshed during Muharram. He ruled that the Ashura rituals, as practiced in Nabatiyya and many other parts of the Shiite world, were not Islamic practices but secular traditions. Khamenei is accepted as the supreme Shiite leader by Hezbollah, which has embraced and promoted his perspective."[141]

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[140] Lara Deeb, "Lebanese Shia Women Temporality and Piety," ISIM Review, 18 (Autumn 2006).

[141] Norton, "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon."

Those mourners who still want to shed their blood were encouraged to donate blood to local blood banks; however, some are still not heeding the advice of the religious Shia clergy and prefer to self-flagellate in order to share their pain with the pain of their beloved *Imam*.

Another noticeable change in the Lebanese *masirat* is in the role of women. They are no longer mere spectators but constitute part of the processions. They are organized by age groups similar to the men and dressed in a traditional Muslim long dress with head covering. Unlike the men, the women do not perform *latm* but each group is led in chants, or *nadbat* (elegies), by a leader. Many of them carry pictures of their martyrs assumed to be their loved one killed during conflicts with their internal and external enemies. Other women in chains assume the role of the surviving women of the Battle of Karbala who were taken captive by *Caliph* Yazid's army and reenact the long and sorrowful march to Yazid's court.[142] This active participation by women is a testament to the true symbol and role that Zaynab had played during and after the tragedy of Karbala.

Perhaps one of the most distinctive processions throughout the Shia communities in the world is the one sponsored by Hezbollah, which takes place each year in several areas of Lebanon, including the southern suburbs of Beirut, Nabatieh, and Baalbek in the Beqaa. The uniqueness of these processions is its military style. The procession begins with large images and banners carried in a military manner by strong and well ordered young men. They are followed by large organized groups of men and boys dressed uniformly as scouts or entirely in black performing *latm* that does not involve blood. Floats depicting scenes related to Karbala or the Islamic Resistance follow behind. Some of these scenes might have the pictures of famous Hezbollah martyrs such as Imad Mughniyah, a Hezbollah military commander who was allegedly killed by Israel in a car bomb on February 13, 2008. Behind the floats are groups of high-ranking religious leaders and elected officials. Behind them, a well ordered groups of men and boys

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142 Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice."

marching, demonstrating solidarity with both the party and Hussein. Next come organized groups of girls and women follow by a general crowd of women with their children, all dressed in black expressing their solidarity.[143]

2. Iran

Iran is the second largest country in the Middle East, after Saudi Arabia. It is overwhelmingly Shia Muslim (about 89%), making it the world's most populous Shia nation. About 9% of the population is Sunni Muslim and the remaining 2% form small communities of Christians, Jews, Bahaians and Zoroastrians.[144]

As discussed in Chapter IV, Iran religious scholars were instrumental in reformulating and operationalizing the Karbala narratives. They were able to transform Ashura commemorations from a ritual focused on mourning to one highlighting Islamic activism, and this is very obvious if one looks at Iranian Ashura ritual practices.

In the current Lebanese *majalis*, the sermons begin by stressing the revolutionary message of Hussein's movement. They emphasize the abstract ideals of the Karbala Paradigm, followed by words intended to encourage the believers to act in accordance with those ideals. These sermons usually have two messages. One message deals with immediate goals such as encouraging people to vote, discouraging drug use, or mobilizing people for the defense of the country. The other message deals with long-term goals such as improving relations with non-Shia Muslims. Furthermore, many sermons do not only focus on honoring Hussein and his followers but also honoring the father of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, his sacrifices, and his achievements. These sermons are meant to keep alive the ideals of the revolution and put it on a similar religious pedestal as Hussein's revolution.

Similar to Lebanon, Iran also used Zaynab to challenge women's earlier role in the society. The Iranian style model not only challenges the passivism role of some women who only care for their household but also challenges the Western oriented model

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[143] Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice."

[144] CIA World Fact Book website, http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/goes/ir.html (accessed January 27, 2009).

of womanhood promoted by the Pahlavi regime, in which, women were allowed to remove their veil, dress as Westerners, work and compete side by side with men. Both these models were replaced by a new model based on the pious and revolutionary personalities of Zaynab.[145]

The Iranian *masirat* are also unique in their goals. Some *masirat* can be described as political rallies and are carried out in order to preserve the ideals of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. These *masirat* are usually very large and organized by a coalition of groups and organizations affiliated or sympathizing with the current Iranian regime. Many high-level government representatives attend these events such as Khamenei and other revolutionary adherents. However, the most common *masirat* with the various religious rituals imbedded in them and the banners associated with them tend to focus less on revolutionary ideals, imperialism, or the West but more on the soteriological aspect of the Battle of Karbala allowing the mourners to keep alive the memory of Hussein and to achieve salvation through devotion to the *Imams*. These *masirat* are not organized by the state or by political parties but by local associations such as neighborhood associations, corporatist associations, ethnic groups, professional associations, social networks, or families.[146] These *masirat* are similar to the one performed in Lebanon. *Niyahah*, chanting, and *latm* that do not cause self-injury are performed. Despite the banning on self-flagellation, many groups still perform such rituals out of the eyes of the state.

One interesting ritual practice not seen in Lebanon and other Shia communities emerged following the death of Khomeini in 1989. It consists of full mourning rituals, including sermons, lectures, procession, chants, *latm*, and more. These rituals are held each year during the nights of Muharram in honor of Khomeini to preserve his revolutionary message and they take place at the Khomeini's shrine complex in southwest of Tehran.[147]

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[145] Nina Cichocki, "Veils, Poems, Guns, and Martyrs: Four Themes of Muslim Women's Experiences in Shirin Neshat's Photographic Work," *Thirdspace: A Journal for Emerging Feminist Scholars* 4, no. 1 (November 2004).

[146] Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi's Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran, 146.

[147] Ibid., 139.

E.   POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The new dualistic functions of the Karbala narrative embraced by contemporary Shia, serve the traditional soteriological function, the revolutionary function, plus the strong Shia identity. These are embedded in the core of the Karbala narrative and shaped by Ashura rituals. These quintessential factors must be understood before formulating any U.S. foreign policies in Middle East.

The importance of improving relations between Shia and the United State is crucial to the U.S. national interest. As stated in Chapter I, Shia make up only about 10-20%[148] of the world Muslim population but their population size is higher in the Middle East region where they are mostly concentrated as shown in Map 1: Demographic Distribution Estimates.[149] They are a major component of the Middle East's strategic equation, playing major roles in the Iranian nuclear crisis, in the political and security stability of Iraq and Lebanon, and to some extent in many Sunni dominated areas such as the Gaza Strip, Afghanistan, and other countries in the Middle East region.

Furthermore, since the liberation of Iraq that allowed Iraqi Shia to reach the "forbidden power," Shia throughout the Middle East region have been mobilizing politically and demanding an equal representation in their own government. In Saudi Arabia, Shia represent 10 to 11% of the population and are mostly concentrated in an area where Saudi major repository oil reserves are located. Shia dominated regions had seen voter turnout twice as high as elsewhere in the Saudi 2005 municipal elections.[150] The belief by the Shia in the Iraqi mantra of "one man, one vote" is influencing events in Lebanon and Bahrain where the Shia represent close to 40% and 70%, respectively of the population.

Iraq liberation has not only politically encouraged Shia in the Middle East but also generated and cemented new cultural, economic, and political ties among Shia

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[148] CIA World Fact Book website, http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/goes/ir.html (accessed January 27, 2009).

[149] Christopher M. Blanchard, "Islam: Sunnis and Shiites," Congressional Research Service RS21745, December 11, 2006.

[150] Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, "The Shia Revival," *Military Review* (May-June 2007).

communities across the Middle East. Since the fall of the Iraqi regime, the new regime re-opened the gates of Shia pilgrimage to Najaf and other holy Shiite cities in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Shia pilgrims from all over the world are making the pilgrimage every year, creating transnational networks of seminaries, mosques, and clerics that tie Iraq to every other Shia community, including, most important, that of Iran. This increase in Shia political, economical, and social activisms is a testimony of their importance to the U.S. national interest.

With the major shifts in Shia political environment that was initiated by the Islamic Revolution of Iran and revived by the liberation of Iraqi Shia, U.S. policy makers must understand that traditional Shiism that has been a faith of submission and lamentation no longer exists. U.S. policy makers must understand that Shia who have been marginalized from power can no longer accept the status quo and are clamoring for greater rights and more political influence.

U.S. policy makers must understand that Shia are now supporting an ideology and a movement based on new Karbala narratives that equate unjust leadership with Yazid and the revolutionaries with followers of Hussein. Any action a Shia takes in his or her daily life and any action an internal or external government takes vis a vis Shia is reminiscent of the struggle of Yazid versus Hussein. With the emerging Shia revival, U.S. can no longer afford to be depicted as Yazid by supporting a policy that has been hostile to Shia.

F.   SUMMARY

For centuries, Shia maintained an apolitical way of life, politically detached from the center of powers. However, since the reformulation of the Karbala narrative, it appears that Shia stoic compliance with the status quo is no longer acceptable not only socially and politically but also religiously as illustrated in the new Karbala narrative. With new fundamental reformulation of Karbala narratives, the Shia have risen collectively to force a change to achieve distinctive religious and political goals envisioned in Shia Islam. This is very evident in Ashura rituals practices seen in many Shia communities, especially in Lebanon and Iran. This is not to say that the importance

of Ashura has changed; rather, the transformation involves the emphasis on both the revolutionary and the soteriological meanings of Ashura rituals. The soteriological theme characterizing early stages of Ashura evolution now shares priority with the revolutionary orientation characterizing the third and current stage of Ashura commemorations. The deep political implications that have been revived in the third stage of Ashura evolution have become an essential part of Shia political life. Any U.S. policy that disregards the current Shia fundamental thinking will pit the U.S. against the Shia of the world, as has been the case for decades.

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VII. CONCLUSION

The Battle of Karbala represents a watershed event in the schism between Sunni and Shia. For Shia, it epitomizes the bravery and piety of Hussein and his followers, the betrayal of his sworn supporters in Kufa, the immoral brutality of Hussein's enemies and their disdain for the family of the Prophet and his followers. Most importantly, it epitomizes the divinely preordained sacrifice that Hussein and his followers had given on behalf of Muslims and Islam.

The ensuing Ashura rituals that arose immediately after this tragedy were intended to safeguard this mythology. Each Ashura ritual whether memorial services, visitations of Hussein's tomb, public mourning processions, Passion Plays, self-flagellations, chest beating, or weeping plays a vital role in safeguarding this mythology. In doing so, it is reinforcing Shia identity and collective memory. As Emile Durkheim's theory and Randal's model demonstrated, through co-presence and practice, these rituals were able to bring all Shia together throughout centuries to reinforce their beliefs and strengthen their sense of belonging to each other as a group, making them a separate body within a larger body of world Muslims with their own rituals, own theology, and own identity. They allow the believer to transcend time and space by identifying himself with Hussein's cause, express his regret physically and mentally for not being with Hussein in the battle of Karbala, object emotionally against the injustice and oppression besieging him, and amass God's rewards. As such, Ashura rituals do not represent the embodiment of a culture of death in which the partisans of Ali are worshipping Hussein's death. Instead, they represent a sense of struggle of truth against falsehood, justice against injustice, and oppressed against oppressors.

Since their inception, these Ashura rituals were not fixed in time. They have evolved in form and content from early rudimentary rituals into full-fledged rituals. This evolution has passed through three major stages, represented by the historical and cultural epochs through which the Muslims in general and the Shia in particular have lived until they reached the present form and content of today. A closer look at the evolution of

Ashura rituals in form and content has shown that these rituals are not merely rituals of lamentation and a source of salvation and redemption, but they represent an inspiring force and dynamic principles that can be used as a popular platform to effect changes in the socio-political sphere.

During the first stage, the form of Ashura rituals acquired a fixed calendar and started as conversations, then changed to a story telling or a poem reciting, and finally they became a written account of the death of Hussein. At the end of this stage, poetry and prose were integrated. During the second stage, the form of the rites of remembrance became more fixed and more organized. Similarly, the different human elements involved in the rites of remembrance, including wailing chanters, reciters and storytellers became more numerous. In this stage, striking oneself became a firm element in some of the rites of remembrance. During the third stage, the occasions for performing the rites of remembrance have become more numerous and not restricted to the first ten days of Muharram or to the day of *arba'in* but have expanded to commemoration remembrance of the Prophets, other Holy family members, and important Shia. Private rites of remembrances on the occasions of celebrating a new house, the return from the pilgrimage to Mecca, and other private occasions were also held. The passion play, which reached its zenith during the rule of the Qajar, has decline and become historical folklore. Some of the bloodletting rituals were outlawed in Iran and discouraged in other places.

During the first stage, the content of the rituals focused on the details and historical background of the tragedy. Later the virtues and commendable position of the *Imams* of the Holy Family and their suffering were incorporated. During the second stage, the content of the rituals became more embellished and lacked historical accuracy. Accounts that could not be historically proven were introduced to the body of the narrative to excite and elevate the spirit of the mourners. More importantly, the content of the Ashura rituals became more concerned with death rather than with life. Participating in Ashura rituals became an incentive that would benefit mourners in the grave rather act as an incentive to make them change their poor current situations. The poetry of lamentation and poetry about virtue that began late in the first stage became basic material in the rites of remembrance by the second stage. During the third stage, there has

been a fundamental reformulation of Ashura rituals narrative that has created a new narrative with dualistic functions and serves both the soteriological functions as well as the active and literal emulation of Hussein's movement. The language of the rites of remembrance is conveyed using sermons and lectures form, which has become a vehicle to inform the public about political and social issues. There has also been more concern with historical accuracy eliminating historically unreliable accounts.

Many infamous Shia leaders were able to operationalize this new Karbala narrative by weaving protest themes into the narratives of the ritual sermons, equating unjust leadership with Yazid and the revolutionaries with followers of Hussein. These Shia leaders might differ in the tactics of how to use this new Ashura rituals narrative by either directly participating in politics under the doctrine of the "Governance of the Jurist" or indirectly influencing social and political changes through the use of *fatwa* instead of seeking to hold political office. The tactics might be different but the strategy is the same-seeking to actively exert pressure to achieve political and social changes.

U.S. policy toward Shia must realize and recognize the emerging Shia power from its religious sphere rooted in the new meaning of Karbala narrative. U.S. policy makers must understand that Shia are supporting an ideology and a movement that wish to achieve for them a more equal status within their own societies. Any U.S. policy must attempt to satisfy Shia demands for political representation equal to their size while pacify Sunni anger and alleviating Sunni anxiety. Anything less will depict the U.S. as Yazid as has been the case since the U.S. support of the Shah of Iran, U.S. support of Israeli wars against the Shia of Lebanon, and continues U.S. support of Sunni Arab leaders in oppressing Shia minorities. Building bridges with the region's Shia could become the one clear achievement of the U.S. in its current tortured involvement in the Middle East.

PROPHET MOHAMMED
(610-632 AD Chosen by God)

↓

ABU BAKR AS-SIDDIQ First *Caliph*
(632-634 AD appointed through consensus between the Meccans followers of
Muhammad who had emigrated with him in 622 AD (the *Muhajirun*, or "Emigrants") and
the Medinans who had become followers (the *Ansar*, or "Helpers"), First Rightly Guided
Caliph).

↓

UMAR IBN AL KHATTAB Second *Caliph*
(634-644 AD appointed by Abu Bakr, second Rightly Guided *Caliph*)

↓

UTHMAN IBN AFFAN Third *Caliph*
(644-656 AD appointed by a committee of six men established by Umar before his death,
third Rightly Guided *Caliph*)

↓

ALI IBN ABU TALIB Fourth *Caliph*
(656-661 AD appointed through consensus, fourth and final Rightly Guided *Caliph*, first
Shia *Imam*)

↓

MU'AWIYA IBN ABI SUFYAN Fifth *Caliph*
(661- 680 AD proclaimed himself a *Caliph* and first Umayyad monarch)

↓

YAZID IBN MU'AWIYA IBN ABI SUFYAN Sixth *Caliph*
(680- 683 AD Hereditary, second Umayyad monarch. Killed the third Shia *Imam* Hussein
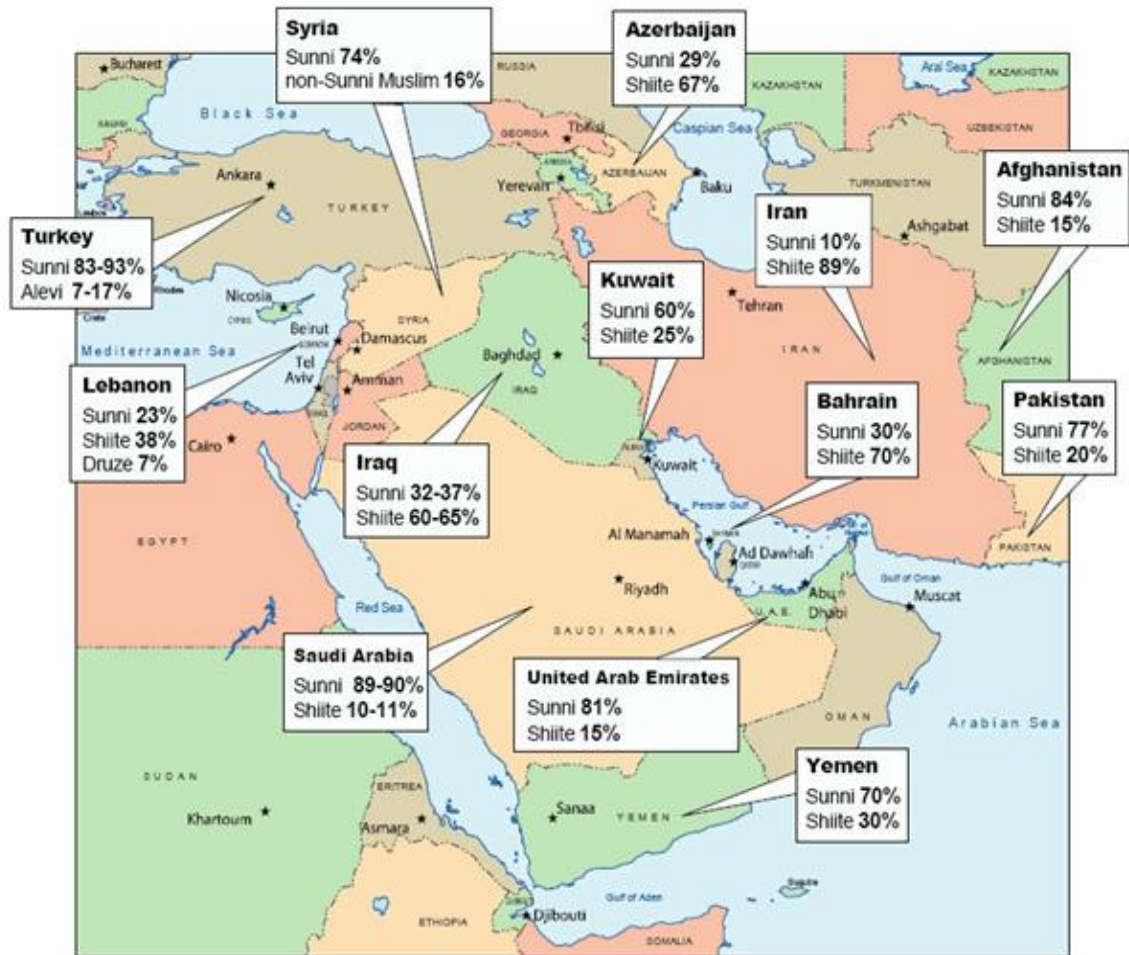son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet)

↓

Chart 1.   Early *Caliphate* Succession

Usul al-Din, "Roots of Religion"	*Furu al-Din*, "Branches of Religion"
Tawhid (Oneness)	*Salat* (Prayer)
Adl (Justice)	*Sawm* (fasting)
Nubuwwah (Prophethood)	*Hajj* (Pilgrimage)
Imamah (political and spiritual leadership)	*Zakat* (paying the poor-tax)
Ma'ad (Belief in the Afterlife, bodily Resurrection and the Day of Judgment)	*Kums* (the "Fifth," paying another tax to clerics)
	Jihad (literally "Struggle" for the sake of God)
	Al-Amr bi'-l-Ma'ruf (literally enforcing what is good)
	Al-Nahi 'an il-Munkar (literally forbidding what is evil)
	Tawalla (loving the family of the Prophet and their followers)
	Tabarra (dissociation oneself from the enemies of the family of the Prophets

Table 1.   Shia Theology Doctrine

Demographic Distribution Estimates

Syria
Sunni 74%
non-Sunni Muslim 16%

Azerbaijan
Sunni 29%
Shiite 67%

Afghanistan
Sunni 84%
Shiite 15%

Turkey
Sunni 83-93%
Alevi 7-17%

Iran
Sunni 10%
Shiite 89%

Kuwait
Sunni 60%
Shiite 25%

Lebanon
Sunni 23%
Shiite 38%
Druze 7%

Bahrain
Sunni 30%
Shiite 70%

Pakistan
Sunni 77%
Shiite 20%

Iraq
Sunni 32-37%
Shiite 60-65%

Saudi Arabia
Sunni 89-90%
Shiite 10-11%

United Arab Emirates
Sunni 81%
Shiite 15%

Yemen
Sunni 70%
Shiite 30%

Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (K. Yancey 2/02/04)

Map 1.   Demographic Distribution Estimates

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