



MOURNING RITUALS IN SHI'A ISLAM: FROM THE BATTLE OF KARBALA TO *TATBIR*

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In the last few years, the sectarian Sunni-Shi'a divide has been exploited both from inside and outside the Middle Eastern region to justify and provide a framework for the deep rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the respective proxies. On the other hand, many scholars and analysts have properly pointed out the geopolitical motivations behind this cleavage, with the aim of downsizing a doctrinal interpretation of the conflict. Indeed, the rivalry between these two Middle Eastern powers has rarely been played on the factual religious differences between Sunni and Shi'a doctrines. However interesting, the historic and ritual specificities of the two major Islamic branches do not actually represent a mainstream theme, and are not commonly dealt with. This was precisely one of the reasons leading us to delve into this issue; in particular, our interest prompted us to focus on a peculiar dimension of Shi'a Islam, namely its penchant for mourning rituals, whose origin can be traced back to the roots of Shi'ism.

Shi'a Islam is named after the partisans of 'Ali, cousin of Prophet Muhammad: the side of 'Ali (*Shi'a 'Ali*) supported him and his line



of descent as the true successors of the Prophet, as opposed to others among Muhammad's Companions, who did not belong to the '*Ahl al-bayt*', the House of the Prophet. Taking the power in 656 as the fourth caliph, 'Ali was killed in 661; he is considered by the Twelver Shi'a to be the first imam and the ancestor of the following eleven imams.

After his death, the power was taken over by Mu'awiya, the first exponent of the clan of the Umayyad, thus moving away the institution of the caliphate from the family of the Prophet. In 680, in Karbala (in current Iraq), Hussayn, son of 'Ali and third imam, was brutally killed in battle by the army of Yazid, son of Mu'awiya and new caliph.¹ His dramatic death turned Hussayn into a martyr - he is in fact called '*Sayyid al-shuhada*'², the Lord of martyrs -, whose deeds are remembered and celebrated every year during the month of Muharram, and namely on its tenth day, Ashura, the exact day when the battle of Karbala took place.

This short and simplistic historic recall was necessary to explain the paramount importance of the battle of Karbala in the construction of a common identity and collective memory for the Shi'a community, thus crafting a religious symbol out of suffering and martyrdom.³ Karbala represents the core of a common historiography and literature⁴, and until nowadays it is at the heart of a common narrative and rhetoric that can somehow be visually

¹ For a more detailed account of the battle of Karbala, please refer to the bibliography of this commentary.

² Cfr. S. Mervin, « Les larmes et le sang des chiites: corps et pratiques rituelles lors des célébrations de 'Āshūrā' (Liban, Syrie) », *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 113-114, November 2006, pp. 153-166, p. 156; Y. Nakash, « An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura », *Die Welt des Islams, New Series*, Vol. 33, N. 2, November 1993, pp. 161-181, p. 161.

³ Y. Nakash, « An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura », p. 161.

⁴ S. Mervin, « 'Ashūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India) » in F. Daftary, G. Miskinzoda, *The Study of Shi'i Islam : History, Theology and Law*, I. B. Tauris (Shi'i Heritage Series), The Institute of Ismaili Studies, pp. 507-528, 2013, p.510.



grasped even by looking up some key words on a web search engine.

This episode acquires the character of 'founding tragedy', seldom compared to the sacrifice of Jesus for Christianity. Indeed, Western scholars have often used the expression "*passion of Karbala*", analyzing Muharram rituals "*as a Shi'a genus of the passion play common in Christian Easter observances*"⁵. In this framework, the death of Hussayn is filled with various powerful meanings: first of all, it represents the ultimate defense of the Islamic faith and "*the greatest redemptive act in history*"⁶, but it is also the paradigm of self-sacrifice and of the fight against injustice and oppression.⁷

Throughout the centuries, the commemorations of the martyrdom of Karbala declined differently across the Shi'a communities according to local traditions and to the permissiveness of political regimes. Nevertheless, Mervin retraced the main comprehensive rituals performed annually by Shi'a communities during the month of Muharram: the visits to the holy shrine of Hussayn in Karbala, or in alternative to the shrines of other members of the *Ahl al-bayt*; the mourning gatherings, either public or private, where a precise recount of the tragedy takes place; the public processions, which may or not foresee practices of mortification; finally, the theatrical representations of the drama.⁸

While all the aforementioned rituals prove extremely interesting and rich of hints for analysis, we are mainly interested in addressing the practices of mortification as the ultimate expression of Shi'a

⁵ E. Szanto, « Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals », *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*, Vol. VI , No. 1, 2013, p. 76.

⁶ P. Chelkowski, « Shia Muslim Processional Performances », *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 29, N. 3, 1985, pp. 18-30, p. 19.

⁷ S. Mervin, « Les larmes et le sang des chiites : corps et pratiques rituelles lors des célébrations de 'Āshūrā' (Liban, Syrie) », p. 155.

⁸ Cfr. S. Mervin, « Les larmes et le sang des chiites : corps et pratiques rituelles lors des célébrations de 'Āshūrā' (Liban, Syrie) », p. 155; S. Mervin, « 'Ashūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India) », pp. 511-512.



grief for the death of Hussayn, as well as the regret for having abandoned him to his destiny. Besides breast-beating (*latm*) and face slapping, Ashura processions entail much more violent practices: as explained by Nakash, “*The use of instruments to shed blood added a violent aspect to the Muharram rites. The flagellants sought to reenact Husayn's martyrdom in Karbala by shedding their own blood. Watching this, and the occasional death of some of the flagellants, the audience would witness a ritual of death*”⁹. Among the different flagellation practices, *tatbir* has attracted our attention for its unusual character as well as for the debate sparked by its celebration.

Tatbir takes place on the day of Ashura in several Shi’a communities, although political authorities in different times and at different latitudes have until this day severely limited its practice, that is seldom interpreted as an uncontrolled and irrational manifestation of faith. This ritual consists of a scarification of the shaved scalp of the penitent through the use of a blade, with the aim of shedding blood in the name of Hussayn. The practitioners generally wear white robes, thus standing out in “*a sea of mourning Shi’a dressed in black*”¹⁰; their bloodstained clothes represent Hussayn’s shroud¹¹, thus well conveying the extent of personal and communal sharing of the martyr’s pain.

Far from being a well-accepted and homogenous practice in the Shi’a universe, *tatbir* is the cause of inner debates and prescriptions that either endorse and justify or, in the better-known cases, discourage and condemn this ritual. Among the most common arguments for its rejection, the fact that *tatbir* produces a deviant image of the Shi’a community that could easily mislead the international public into considering Shi’ism as a source of

⁹ Y. Nakash, « An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura », p. 174.

¹⁰ E. Szanto, « Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi’a Mourning Rituals », p. 86.

¹¹ S. Mervin, « Les larmes et le sang des chiites : corps et pratiques rituelles lors des célébrations de ‘Âshûrâ’ (Liban, Syrie) », p.162.



barbarism and savagery. Moreover, it is dismissed as a form of innovation (*bida'*)¹², and of self-harm (*idrar bi'l-nafs*), which is absolutely forbidden by Islam¹³.

In spite of being punishable by law, *tatbir* is still secretly practiced in Iran.¹⁴ Ali Khamenei, the highest authority (*Rahbar*) of the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1989, issued a fatwa against *tatbir* in 1994: "It is wrongful that some people hit themselves on the head with daggers to break blood. What are they in search of? How can this be considered an act of mourning? (...) We should not go along with actions that may introduce a small group of irrational, superstitious individuals to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to be represented as the bulwark of the noble Islamic society (...) The more I thought about it, the more I truly realized I cannot overlook my responsibility of informing our dear people on *Tatbir*, which is certainly an act of wrongdoing built upon heresy. Do not practice it, I do not approve."¹⁵

Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, follows the prescription of *marja'* Khamenei in his firm opposition to flagellation practices, organizing bloodless and orderly commemorations for Ashura and calling for the Party's movement to donate blood in order to celebrate the martyrdom of Hussayn in a more productive and constructive way.¹⁶ Nevertheless, *tatbir* is practiced within some of the Shi'a communities living in the country of the Cedars, namely in the South, in the city of Nabatieh: in 2016, about 50 000 celebrants

¹² Cfr. S. Mervin, « 'Ashūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India) », p. 525 ; W. Ende, « The Flagellations of Mu'arram and the Shiite Ulama », *Der Islam* 55, N. 1, 1978, pp. 20 -36, p. 22 ss.

¹³ Cfr. S. Mervin, « 'Ashūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India) », p. 525; S. Mervin, « Les larmes et le sang des chiïtes : corps et pratiques rituelles lors des célébrations de 'Āshūrā' (Liban, Syrie) », p.163 ss.

¹⁴ B. Hubbard, « Bloody and Belittled Shiite Ritual Draws Historic Parallels », *The New York Times*, November 2014

¹⁵ <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4209/Tatbir-is-a-wrongful-and-fabricated-tradition-Imam-Khamenei>

¹⁶ B. Hubbard, « Bloody and Belittled Shiite Ritual Draws Historic Parallels ».



gathered there to perform the ritual, with the consent of the Shi'a Amal movement¹⁷.

Tatbir is also practiced in Iraq, mainly and self-evidently in the city of Karbala; in Syria, until the outset of the civil war, the practice was largely and increasingly popular, especially in the shrine-town of Sayyidah Zaynab.¹⁸

Mervin observes how *"Blood drives are organized in the Middle East and within the Shi'a diaspora community as a rational substitute for the bloodshed that sully the image of the community. Some believers, however, combine the two practices, since they cannot resolve how to choose between what they consider to be two ways of getting closer to God, thanks to Husayn's intercession."*¹⁹ Indeed, in Shi'i beliefs, the mourning of Husayn will be rewarded by God at the Day of Judgment.²⁰

What is more, according to Newman, the participation to these rituals can also be a way to convey one's solidarity to the current tragedies touching Shi'a in the world.²¹ In this sense, it is also a way to express one's belonging to the Shi'a community, freely voicing one's identity after ages of repression.²²

In conclusion, far from being a simple religious ritual, *tatbir* is a multi-faceted phenomenon, so that it proves almost impossible to grasp its nature without understanding its political, psychosocial and anthropological implications.

¹⁷L. Porter, « A Shia act of piety or forbidden trend? The debate on self-inflicted wounds on Ashura », *Middle East Eye*, September 2016.

¹⁸ E. Szanto, « Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals », p. 76

¹⁹ S. Mervin, « 'Ashūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India) », p. 527.

²⁰ A.R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History - Updated Edition*, Princeton University Press, May 2014, p. 57

²¹ L. Porter, « A Shia act of piety or forbidden trend? The debate on self-inflicted wounds on Ashura ».

²² S. Mervin, « 'Ashūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India) », p. 525.



Moreover, dealing with the practice of *tatbir* is a really delicate task, and it cannot refrain from taking into account the debate and divide within the same Shi'a community about its legitimacy, thus avoiding its generalization as a 'Shi'a practice'. Nevertheless, with all due caution, it is truly interesting to analyze this phenomenon since it represents one of the most extreme representations of the mourning character and the rhetoric of martyrdom that characterize Shi'ism and distinguish it from Sunni Islam.

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