The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala

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Shi'i commemorations exemplify a peculiar phenomenon among world religions: in Shi'i Islam, one of the most important annual religious holidays is not a joyful celebration but a day of intense sorrow. During the holiest days of the year for a Shi'i Muslim, mourning rituals are used to commemorate the murder of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and his companions. Substantial research on these holy days has been published, but most of it focuses mainly on later developments in the evolution of the rituals,[1] their central role in Shi'i communal identity,[2] and the expressions of them in various communities in South Asia.[3] In the following article I examine the evolution of these mourning rituals developmentally, focusing primarily on the earliest periods in Islamic history and on the central Islamic lands in the vicinity of what is modern Iraq. I use classical Islamic literary sources to trace the historical origins of these mourning rituals, discover why they became so integral to the Shi'i community's belief system at such an early stage, and understand how these early developments set the stage for later transformations.[4]

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Just as the term *Sunni* has come to replace the more archaic *Sunnite* in the field of Middle Eastern studies, this article uses the proper Arabic relative adjective, *Shi'i*, when referring to the adherents of Shi'ism.

1. For an excellent overview of Shi'ism, see Heinz Halm, *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1997). For detailed studies on the later development of Shi'i rituals, see Jean Calmard, "Les rituels Shi'ites et le pouvoir: L'imposition du Shi'ism safavide: Eulogies et maledictions canoniques," in *Etudes Safavides*, ed. Jean Calmard (Paris: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1993), as well as his "Etudes sur la commemoration du Drame de Karbala dans l'Iran pre-safavide" (PhD diss., University of Paris III, 1975).

2. See Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islâm: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shî'ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

3. See David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), as well as his *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000). For the role of South Asian women in these rituals, see Mary Elaine Hegeland, "The Power Paradox in Women's *Majales*: Northwest Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23 (1988): 391–428.

4. The following sources, listed chronologically by death date of author/compiler, have been used in this article: Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul wa al-muluk*, vol. 5, ed. Muhammad Abu Fadl Ibrahim (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif bi Misr, 1968); Muhammad b. Ya'qub b. Ishaq al-Kulayni, *Al-usul al-Kafi*, vol. 1, ed. 'Ali Akbar al-Ghifari (Tehran: Maktabat al-Saduq, 1961); al-Muwaffaq b. Ahmad al-Khwarazmi, *Maqtal al-Husayn*, vol. 1, ed. Shaykh Muhammad al-Samawi (Qum: Maktabat al-Mufid, n.d.) and vol. 2 (Najaf: Matba'at al-Zahra', 1948); 'Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir, *Al-kamil fi al-tarikh*, vol. 4, ed. Muhammad Yusuf al-Daqqaq (Beirut: Dar Bayrut li al-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr, 1965); 'Ali b. Musa b. Muhammad Ibn Tawus, *Al-luhuf fi qutla al-tufuf* (Qum: Manshurat al-Maktabah al-Dawuri, n.d.); Taqi al-Din Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Maqrizi, *Kitab mawa'iz al-i'tibar bi dhikr al-khitat wa al-athar* (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthanna, 1970); Isma'il b. 'Umar Ibn Kathir, *Al-bidayah wa al-nihiyah* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma'arif, 1990); Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, vols. 44–45 (Tehran: Manshurat al-Maktabah al-Islamiyah, 1969).

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To understand why Shi'is participate in these rituals, one must first know what it is that they are mourning. Historical sources all agree that in the year 61 AH/680 CE, Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, refused to give his allegiance to Yazid b. Mu'awiyah, who was appointed heir to the caliphate by his father, Mu'awiyah. Many at the time believed this appointment to be illegitimate because none of the previous caliphs since the death of Muhammad were appointed by dynastic succession and all were at least nominally accepted by the majority of the Muslim population. Yazid's ascension represented the first instance of dynastic succession in Islam and established the Umayyad dynasty. Husayn and a small band of loyal followers protested this unprecedented and apparently un-Islamic claim to leadership by refusing to give their allegiance. As a result, Husayn, his seventy-two male followers, and their women and children were surrounded and besieged for three days on the desert sands of Karbala, near the banks of the Euphrates River. Deprived of water during the siege, Husayn and his band were attacked by at least 10,000 (and in some accounts, as many as 100,000) Umayyad soldiers. On the tenth day of the month of Muharram (a day now commonly referred to as Ashura), Husayn and the seventy-two men were dismembered and decapitated, and the women and children were taken prisoner. The battle was much more than the slaughter of a small band of pious loyalists faithful to the family of the Prophet by an overwhelming military force. It was also an ideological battle between a group of principled individuals and a militarily powerful political administration, making Husayn the ultimate tragic hero figure. Moreover, the fact that Husayn was already perceived to have been a holy figure and Yazid a corrupted and irreligious powermonger only adds to the battle's religio-political significance. Thus the events of the Battle of Karbala not only exemplify some of the most powerful and emotional aspects of drama and fiction, but their historicity only multiplies their significance for those Shi'i Muslims who identify themselves as Husayn's followers.

The development of depictions of the Battle of Karbala in the classical historical sources has already been studied in detail,[5] but this article attempts to use the classical Islamic sources to trace the roots of an elaborate range of mourning rituals that have developed over the past fourteen centuries. *Majalis*, *rawzeh khwani*, *niyahah*, *latm*,[6] and ceremonial processions are but a few examples, all or some of which are performed among different Shi'i communities worldwide during the Karbala commemorations. The Muharram *majalis* (gatherings) occur every evening beginning on the first night of the month of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) and lasting until the tenth night. These always include *rawzeh khwani* (recitation of Karbala narratives), during which an often hagiographically embellished version of the historical accounts is recited in dramatic and deeply emotional style. The recitation is interrupted at emotional moments by *niyahah* (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry), during which classical stanzas are recited or even wailed. The *niyahah* is accompanied by *latm* (chest beating) and has a rhythmic hypnotizing effect, until it itself is interrupted by the *rawzeh khwan* (reciter of the narrative) before the participants beat themselves too heavily. Narrative recitation then resumes, and the cycle between emotional peaks of narrative recitation and peaks of physical rapture continues intermittently throughout the *majlis* until the account of the killing and decapitation of Husayn marks the narrative's emotional climax. The crowd then participates in chest beating to the rhythmic lamentation poetry late into the night. Although the *rawzeh khwani* is a ritual specific to the context of the Muharram *majlis* gathering, the *niyahah* and *latm* are also practiced during the ceremonial march, which usually occurs on the tenth day of Muharram, after the noon hour. The ceremonial march and accompanying chest beating sometimes also occur during the *arba'in*

5. Ali J. Hussain, "A Developmental Analysis of Depictions of the Events of Karbala in Early Islamic History" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2001).

6. Different Shi'i communities have developed varying terminology. For example, *latm* is the Arabic term for chest beating, while in Persian it is referred to as *sineh-zani*, and *ma'tam* in Hindi-Urdu. The Persian terms *rawzeh-khwani* and *rawzeh-khwan* are, in Arabic, *qira'ah* and *qari'*, respectively. This article uses the terms most common in English-language literature focusing on the Shi'i communities of Iraq and Iran.

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celebrations in Iraq and Iran, and at other Shi'i religious occasions among Shi'is of South Asia.[7] In fact, Shi'i communities of South Asia have elaborated on these rituals and developed new ones altogether, and excellent studies on these communities' rituals have been published by David Pinault and others.[8] Moreover, there are some examples of regional rituals not universal to all Shi'is, such as the use of the *zanjir* (swinging chains linked together at one end, used in Iran), chest beating while holding razor blades between the fingers (practiced among the Shi'is of South Asia), and *tatbir* (striking the skull with a sword, found in Iraq and Lebanon).

Another ritual sometimes included in the ceremonies is the *ta'ziyeh*[9] dramatic reenactment of some of the events of Karbala. Unlike the other rituals, this one is optional and does not require active communal participation. Rather, it is a dramatic re-creation, often entirely in verse, of selected scenes of the events of Karbala viewed passively by the spectators. Interestingly enough, this performance is sometimes excluded from the ceremonies altogether, while many of the other rituals are considered an integral part of the Muharram commemorations. It is peculiar that most Western scholarship on Karbala and Husayn focuses on the *ta'ziyeh* performance, and rather than being written by historians of Islam, most of the work is by historians of world drama, cultural anthropologists, or sociologists intrigued by what they see as the (Shi'i) Muslim equivalent of the Christian passion play. This has resulted in a corpus of literature focusing on a single relatively minor Karbala-related ritual. Moreover, the scholarship that does exist on the other rituals may examine their role in establishing or reinforcing Shi'i communal identity,[10] but tends not to account for their historical development in significant detail, particularly in their earliest evolutionary phases.

The Earliest Phase

The Umayyad period marks the first phase in the historical development of these rituals. Although there are few extant literary sources from this period, the classical Islamic sources include accounts of reactions to the battle that seem to represent the origins of Shi'i rituals that were later to become integral to Karbala commemoration ceremonies. Some sources mention that, on the return from Yazid's court at Damascus back to Medina, the prisoners of Husayn's camp insisted on taking a route via Karbala once again, in order to pay their respects at the grave of Husayn.[11] They reportedly reached Karbala forty days after the battle and were surprised to see that people were already gathered there mourning Husayn. Husayn's sister, Zaynab, is then reported to have given a speech in which she praised her brother, cursed his killers, and recited such a moving oration that she brought even the Umayyad troops guarding the prisoners to tears. Whether Zaynab's oratory was real or a retrospective construction, these historical accounts appear to represent the first reference in the literature to any type of group gathering to mourn Husayn's death. It is quite clear that these accounts represent the historical roots of the forty-day postmortem commemoration ritual currently practiced by Shi'is and commonly referred to as the *arba'in*. Interestingly, at this early stage, no mention is made of poetry being recited or any highly formalized chest-beating rituals. Nevertheless, although the accounts appear to explain more than just the development of the forty-day *arba'in* commemorations, a historical precedent was set for commemoration in general (the roots of *majalis*), and Zaynab's speech appears to have established the practice of praising Husayn and vilifying his killer: the primitive origins of what would later become *rawzeh khwani*. Moreover, in the same sources

7. Whereas in the traditional Shi'ism of Iraq the official ritual marches are restricted to the Ashura and the *arba'in*, in other communities these rituals sometimes also occur at other times throughout the year. See Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*, chap. 9, on a Ladakhi Shi'i ritual determined by the zodiacal calendar.

8. See Pinault, *Shiites* and *Horse of Karbala*; and Hegeland, "Power Paradox in Women's *Majales*."

9. This word carries different meanings in different languages. While in Arabic it denotes commemorative mourning, this article uses the word in its Persian meaning (referring to dramatic re-creations of the events of Karbala), as does most of the English-language scholarship on this topic.

10. See Halm, *Shi'a Islam*; and Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islâm*.

11. Cf. Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul wa al-muluk*, 470; Khwarazmi, *Maqtal al-Husayn*, 2:39; Ibn al-Athir, *Al-kamil fi al-tarikh*, 87, all of which indicate that this mourning occurred on the way to Kufah, as the prisoners passed Husayn's decapitated corpse. Ibn Tawus, *Al-luhuf fi qutla al-tufuf*, 55, mentions the above account; another account on page 82 indicates the visitation of Husayn's grave on the way back from Damascus to Medina. This account also finds its way into Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, 45:146.

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that describe the prisoners' visitation of Husayn's grave site on their way home to Medina, references indicate that when the women saw the grave on the sands of Karbala they beat their chests and wailed.[12] As with the first references to grave visitation by Husayn's family, such reactions of grief as identified in the sources appear only natural and are even prevalent among mourners of various cultures throughout the region to this day. Although these accounts may have served as a nucleus for the later evolution of the ritual, it is clear that the *latm* in such references was no more than natural emotional reactions to the loss of a loved one or to the sight of the grave of a deceased family member and a far cry from the highly ritualized rhythmic chest-beating rituals that would develop later.

As far as an annual commemoration of Husayn's death is concerned, however, the first instance in the historical sources appears to be the accounts of the *tawwabun* (repenters).[13] Apparently, a number of Kufans and other individuals are portrayed as having regretted being unable to support Husayn at Karbala. These *tawwabun* gathered at Husayn's grave site on the first anniversary of his death, mourned his loss, regretted not fighting and dying alongside him, composed and recited poetry praising Husayn and cursing his killers, and agreed to reunite at a future time in order to attack Umayyad forces. Several years later they reportedly met at Karbala again, and, after praying to God and seeking forgiveness, four thousand of these *tawwabun* marched on to fight Umayyad troops at 'Ayn al-Wardah, on the Iraqi-Syrian border. Thus, whereas the first *arba'in* was the first historical instance of commemoration of the Battle of Karbala in general, these accounts of the *tawwabun* mark the earliest evidence of any commemoration specifically on the anniversary of Husayn's death. Moreover, not only do the *tawwabun* appear to have set the historical precedent for annual commemorations of the Battle of Karbala, but accounts of their composition of poetry specific to the anniversary also seem to be the first such references to the beginnings of the *niyahah*, or poetic lamentation rituals. In addition, examples such as these references to mourners visiting Husayn's grave site seem to be the historical-literary roots of what would later become a highly ritualized aspect of the Muharram commemoration ceremonies: the *ziyarah* (ritual grave visitation), which develops more fully in the Abbasid period.

Thus, accounts of the prisoners' return to Karbala appear to represent the historical roots of *majalis* commemorations in general, with Zaynab's speech being the first *rawzeh khwani* and the women's slapping their own faces as being the first *latm*. In addition, accounts of the *tawwabun* appear to represent the historical roots of commemorations of the anniversary of Husayn's death as in Muharram *majalis* today, as well as the introduction of poetic recitations specific to the occasion, as is the *niyahah* of today. Whereas the classical sources depict the practice of *latm* as a feminine reaction and the *niyahah* as a masculine one, the two were blended at some point and resulted in the rhythmic chest-beating rituals of today, the rhythm of which follows the meter of the poetry being recited. Interestingly, once established even in primitive form, these rituals appear to have reinforced each other. In fact, the preservation of the memory of Husayn and his battle during *majalis* commemorating the anniversary seems to have been the very medium that allowed for the evolution of highly ceremonial mourning rituals in the centuries after these initial primitive post-Karbala grieving rites.

In the early Umayyad period, such *majalis* appear to have been relatively small and private affairs among the Shi'i and 'Alid communities and often convened in the home of the Shi'i imam (religious leader) or another influential local figure.[14] Since the antagonistic and politically dominant Umayyads were eager to sweep the whole affair from public memory, their sentiments against the commemoration of Husayn's death seem to have prevented any possibility of public commemorations without

12. Cf. Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul wa al-muluk*, 470; Khwarazmi, *Maqtal al-Husayn*, 2:39; Ibn al-Athir, *Al-kamil fi al-tarik*, 87; Ibn Tawus, *Al-luhuf fi qutla al-tufuf*, 55, 82; Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, 45:146.

13. Tabari, *Tarikh al-rusul wa al-muluk*, 573–609.

14. Ibrahim al-Haydari, *Trajidiya Karbala: Susyulujiya al-khitab al-Shi'i* (London: Dar al-Saqi, 1999), 52.

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inciting a government purge. Moreover, there appear to have been efforts on the part of the Umayyad dynasty to actually neutralize the commemoration of Ashura by the Muslim populace. Historical sources even indicate that during the reign of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (r. 65–86/685–705), the general al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf al-Thaqafi went so far as to institute a special festive holiday on the day of Ashura.[15] It is quite likely that al-Hajjaj's deliberate institution of a festive celebration on the exact anniversary of Husayn's gruesome killing and decapitation only a few years earlier was a deliberate attempt to counteract what had by then become an increasingly disturbing trend: annual gatherings mourning the killing of Husayn and his family at the hands of the Umayyads. These annual gatherings during Ashura appear to have kept the memory of Husayn alive not only in terms of commemorating the anniversary of his battle and subsequent death but also by perpetuating the oral transmission of accounts of the battle, the events leading up to it, and its aftermath. Considering the Umayyads' antipathy toward any remembrance of Husayn and the Umayyads' repression of 'Alid movements, the lack of documented written accounts of the battle in this period is completely understandable. Moreover, that the few Umayyad historical sources that do exist involve only the history of the Prophet[16] seems to indicate Umayyad attempts at self-legitimation, whereby Umayyads reinforced their own piety by stressing the life of the Prophet and simultaneously averted focus from the internecine confrontations that occurred after his death. The Umayyads' repression of Karbala commemoration and the inability of interested parties to "publish" literary accounts limited the narrators of those accounts to oral transmissions, and the ban on public commemorations of the anniversary of Husayn's death made small, private gatherings the ideal venue for such oral recitations. Ironically, while successfully excluding accounts of the battle from the literary corpus and preventing public commemorations, the Ummayyads' attempts to erase the memory of Husayn and his battle may have actually encouraged the establishment of both the annual *majalis* gatherings and the oral recitation of the Karbala narratives. Thus, Umayyad suppression of literary accounts of Karbala and the development of public rituals actually provided fertile ground for the evolution of more private rituals such as *majalis* gatherings and the associated rituals such as *rawzeh khwani*, *niyahah*, and *latm*.

The Popularization of Karbala and the Development of Shi'i Ritual

By contrast, the Abbasids' own promotion of Husayn and Karbala in their anti-Umayyad polemics during and after their revolution (132/750) against the Umayyad dynasty resulted not only in a plethora of literary accounts documenting the oral transmissions of the earlier period but also in a dramatic surge in the evolution of public rituals such as the *ziyarah*, or grave visitation. The historical sources indicate that Husayn's grave site was by the third/ninth century so popular and, apparently, the commemoration of his battle and death so moving to the masses of visitors that the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61) destroyed the shrine of Husayn, razed Karbala, and banned visitation of the site on pain of death.[17] Though we have only a few textual references to this in the historical sources, the lack of elaboration in Abbasid-era texts actually speaks volumes. This is particularly startling, since much of the corpus of early Islamic sources was authored or compiled in third/ninth century Abbasid Baghdad. As such, the significance of this act on the part of the Abbasid caliph cannot be overlooked. On one level, it shows the extent to which ritual visitation of Husayn's shrine at Karbala had developed by that time, a possible indication that *ziyarah* was by then already fully developed. On another level, it seems to indicate the above-mentioned discrepancy that developed in the different points of view between the Abbasids and the 'Alids with regard to Karbala.

15. Al-Maqrizi notes that the Ayyubids reinstituted this festive practice in a deliberate attempt to replace the Fatimid commemoration of Ashura as a day of mourning; see al-Maqrizi, *Kitab mawa'iz al-i'tibar*, 1:490.

16. Fred M. Donner, "The Problem of Early Arabic Historiography in Syria," in *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of Bilad al-Sham*, ed. Muhammad 'Adnan Bakhit (Amman: n.p., 1987), 1–25.

17. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Karbala"; Ibn al-Athir, *Al-kamil fi al-tarikh*, 4:375.

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Although the Abbasids interpreted Husayn's battle at Karbala as an anti-Umayyad battle, the destruction of Husayn's shrine and subsequent ban on visitation indicate that the commemoration rituals had by then likely acquired rebellious antigovernment connotations that were just as threatening to the new Abbasid dynasty as they were formerly to the Umayyads.

Also, on yet another level, such references to the Abbasid caliph's destruction of Husayn's shrine may also indicate the beginnings of architectural developments that can be traced back to Karbala. Although the precise nature of the shrine's architecture during the reign of al-Mutawakkil remains unclear, some sort of structure was there that he could destroy. Even more important, it seems that Husayn's grave site and the structure subsequently built there naturally led to an eventual population of the area, as with numerous historical examples of shrine and city formation in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic Near East. Evidence has shown that visitation by pilgrims and various other economic and demographic factors often creates an environment that allows the shrine site, however small, to develop into a small village and then continue to expand until it becomes a shrine-city.[18] Among the many such factors are the wide array of products and services that develop around a shrine to cater to the visiting pilgrims, including food service, lodging, transportation, souvenirs, and even loitering beggars hoping to capitalize on the piety of visiting pilgrims. Naturally, as the number of visitors grows, the economy revolving around the shrine likewise expands, and the rituals associated with visiting the shrine also develop and evolve. The increased economic activity around the shrine and the expansion of the shrine-city as a whole also lead to an inevitable expansion of the shrine itself. The shrine site increases in grandeur and acquires numerous annexes, possibly including a madrassa (school), library, *musafirkhaneh* (guesthouse for visitors), and sometimes even a hospital. This latter phenomenon of associating healing powers with the saint of the shrine is among the most interesting factors deserving further study. It appears to be related to the development of the concept of *shafa'ah* (intercession with God), which was often sought from Husayn by later Shi'is.[19] Moreover, aside from the antigovernment political aspect of the rise of Karbala as an urban center, the rise of the city's socioeconomic influence may have also posed a threat to Mutawakkil's new capital at Samarra'.[20] Clearly, the evolution of Karbala as a shrine-city, the expansion of its pilgrimage economy, and the influx of visiting pilgrims are all factors that together provide fertile ground for the evolution of highly ritualized grave visitation rites such as *ziyarah*.

Even aside from such architectural and demographic developments at Karbala, the classical sources clearly indicate that the simple acts of visitation initiated in the Umayyad period and popularized in the early Abbasid period had by the later Abbasid period developed into something much more ritualized than mere visitation of a grave. This is corroborated by the textual evidence in Kulayni's (d. 329/941) *al-Kafi* (the earliest major work of Shi'i hadith traditions), which includes instructions for a much more formulaic ritual that involved the recitation of a specific, almost liturgical text, in a specific manner, with highly ritualized motions and sayings to be uttered at the entrance to Husayn's shrine, then at the foot of his grave, and finally at the head of his grave. Thus visiting Husayn's shrine had by Kulayni's era developed into an elaborate ritual of not only symbolic physical movements but also a precisely defined oration to be recited exactly as prescribed. The combination of literal oration, physical positioning in relation to Husayn's grave, and the symbolism of gestures and recitation show that the ritual had thus almost achieved the status

18. See J. R. Cole, "Indian Money and the Shi'ite Shrine Cities of Iraq, 1786–1850," *Middle Eastern Studies* 22 (1986): 461–80; D. M. Donaldson, "The Shrine Colleges of Meshed," *Muslim World* 16 (1926): 72–78; R. D. McChesney, *Waqf in Central Asia: Four Hundred Years in the History of a Muslim Shrine, 1480–1885* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

19. See Majlisi's section on *shafā'ah*, 8:29–63, as well as David Pinault, "Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession," *History of Religions* 38 (1999): 285–305; and Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*, 132, 157–80.

20. See T. M. al-Amid, *The 'Abbasid Architecture of Samarra' in the Reigns of Both al-Mu'tasim and al-Mutawakkil* (Baghdad: n.p., 1973); Directorate General of Antiquities, *Bab al-Ghaybah (Door of Disparition) at Samarra'* (Baghdad: Government Press, 1940); J. M. Rogers, "Samarra', A Study in Medieval Town Planning," *The Islamic City: A Colloquium*, ed. A. Hourani and S. M. Stern (Oxford: Cassirer, 1970), 119–56.

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of a liturgical prayer.[21] In fact, the formalization and ritualization of the *ziyarah* visitation actually seem to have allowed for the recitation of the text itself to evolve as a separate ritual altogether. As a result, the recitation has developed a high degree of ritualization, including certain aspects such as rising to an upright standing posture before reciting the text, facing in the direction of Karbala (as Mecca is faced in prayers), and bowing the head in humility throughout the recitation. Today, some of those who are physically or financially unable to perform the actual pilgrimage view recitation of the text as a satisfactory alternative for actual presence at Karbala.

Other historical references to Shi'i commemoration rituals along with corroborating evidence in the classical sources also indicate a shift in perceptions of Husayn and Karbala. Among these are the first historical references to public mourning ceremonies and commemoration processions. Just as the early 'Abbasids used the Karbala narratives as part of their rhetoric against the Umayyads, the heightened level of honor and respect afforded Husayn among both Shi'i and Sunni communities easily spread into mainstream Sunni literary sources of this period. In fact, the historical accounts of the events of the Battle of Karbala and its aftermath are transmitted in the earliest Sunni sources by Sunni narrators whose viewpoints are more than just mildly sympathetic to the plight of Husayn and his followers. They are practically identical to the early Shi'i perspectives on the battle. However, despite the Sunni community's readiness to incorporate pro-'Alid and pro-Husayn narrative accounts into the literary corpus, the new public commemoration rituals marking Karbala as the central symbol of Shi'i identity were not so welcomed by the dominant Sunni culture. The first historical reference to a public procession on the day of Ashura appears in the entry for the year 352/963 in Ibn Kathir's *Al-bidayah wa al-nihayah*. Ibn Kathir indicates that

> on the tenth of Muharram of this year, 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 Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib. The people of the *Sunnah* could not prevent this spectacle because of the large numbers of the Shi'is and because of their increasing prominence, and because the Sultan was on their side.[22]

For the next year Ibn Kathir includes an entry stating, "On the tenth of Muharram this year the Shi'is celebrated the '*aza*' (mourning) of Husayn as they did the year before. The Shi'is and Sunnis fought violently among each other on this day, and much property was looted." Over the next several years, similar entries for the Muharram ceremonies appear, with the author making note of increasing tensions and violence until the end of the Buyid regime and the rise of the Saljuqs. Ten years later, he includes a remarkable entry describing the Muharram procession for that year, which he describes as a "despicable innovation." It seems that the religious symbolism of Karbala began to have an effect on even the Sunnis of Baghdad, such that they began to adopt a set of religious symbols of their own, resulting in a twisted historical re-creation of the early civil wars. In his entry for the year 363/973 Ibn Kathir states,

> In this year on Ashura, the despicable innovation was celebrated according to the custom of the Shi'is. A great riot broke out between the Sunnis and the Shi'is, both parties being of little intelligence. A group of Sunnis placed a woman on a camel and called her 'A'ishah, and someone took the name Talhah, and someone took the name Zubayr, and they said "We are going out to fight the followers of 'Ali!" Many people on both sides were killed.[23]

This is not only a remarkable historical reference indicating the level to which the Ashura procession had developed under the Buyids

21. For details, see Kulayni's chapter on *ziyarah*.

22. Ibn Kathir, *Al-bidayah wa al-nihiyah*, 11:243.

23. Ibid., 11:253. This is clearly a reference to the Battle of the Camel (36/656), one of the civil wars in which 'A'ishah, Talhah, and Zubayr led troops against Husayn's father, 'Ali.

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but also an indication of its use as a symbol of the Shi'is' communal identity as distinct from that of the Sunnis. Moreover, this particular reference shows how such developments made the Sunni community defensive of its own identity and also reveals an increasingly dangerous dichotomy of symbolic representation with lethal consequences.

Unlike the apparent mass appeal found in references to the Shi'i rituals in Iraq, the Fatimids were not as successful in their introduction of Shi'i commemoration rituals in Cairo.[24] Historical references indicate that in the year 363/973 al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah sponsored a large procession, including some infantry and cavalry units that passed by the shrines of Kulthum and Nafisah reciting dirges and mourning Husayn's death. Their subsequent march to the market, breaking articles of merchandise and cursing those who conducted business on the day of Ashura, nearly led to rioting and bloodshed.[25] Soon thereafter, Sunni groups became violent toward the Shi'is at the local shrines on Ashura. In the year 396/1005 tensions in Cairo on that day were such that a Shi'i was physically attacked and decapitated. Afterward, the official Fatimid Ashura commemorations in Cairo consisted of no more than simply mourning and reciting poetry in the mosques, which was more amenable to Sunni participation.[26] In both cases the majority Sunni community condoned and sometimes even participated in honoring and mourning Husayn, but it did not participate in or even tolerate the public rituals developed in commemoration of Ashura and the symbolism of Shi'i communal identity that pervaded it.

Bloodshedding Rituals and Other Recent Developments

The Sunni community's willingness, and even eagerness, to incorporate Husayn and his battle into its religious history and its simultaneous abhorrence of the commemoration rituals associated with Husayn appear to have led to the next phase in the evolution of these rituals. The very fact that the rituals had become central to Shi'i communal identity, combined with Husayn's integral role as the focus of the commemoration rituals, made the Sunni community's adoption of Husayn problematic for the dominant construction of Shi'i identity. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from the Sunnis that had by the post-Buyid era adopted Husayn as one of the closest and most respected companions of the Prophet, the Shi'i *ulama* (scholarly class) in the Safavid period adopted and endorsed an extremely hagiographic perception of Husayn in their literary sources. This is evident in Majlisi's *Bihar al-anwar*, not only in the references to Karbala, but throughout the source in its numerous hagiographic accounts of Husayn performing miracles such as curing the sick, causing dismembered limbs to regrow, and causing infant children to speak. Some are even reminiscent of New Testament accounts of Jesus, including curing the blind, healing lepers, and even reviving the dead.[27] Such accounts in later Shi'i sources such as Majlisi's point clearly to the development of extremely hagiographic depictions of Husayn aimed at "reclaiming" a Husayn who was appropriated by the Sunni majority. In addition, a number of new commemoration rituals both grew out of this new and improved hagiographic depiction of Husayn in the literary sources and also perpetuated and fostered it. One example of just such a ritual is the *shabih*, or *ta'ziyeh* dramatic re-creation of the events of the Battle of Karbala. It is not only a ritual for which a specific architectural structure had been developed,[28] but it is also clearly a ritual completely unattested to in the earliest historical sources. The practice appears to have originated in Safavid Iran, and it is a ritual that had achieved, almost from its inception, tremendous mass appeal among the common classes, and that is perhaps why the Safavid dynasty and its *ulama* were so keen to encourage it. Numerous European travelers have noted this, including Sir Lewis Pelly, who noted

24. For general information, see Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), chap. 4, on the New Year's ceremony, and chap. 6, on the Ghadir Khumm ceremonial.

25. Taqi al-Din, *Kitab mawa'iz al-i'tibar*, 1:429–30.

26. Ibid., 1:431.

27. Majlisi has devoted an entire chapter to this theme. See Majlisi, *Bihar al-anwar*, 44:180–82, 184, 198, 270.

28. S. R. Petersen, "The Ta'ziyeh and Related Arts," in *Ta'ziyeh, Ritual, and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 64–84; Mohammad A. Faique, *A Complete Study of Persian Drama: 1906–1995* (Delhi: Nice Books, 1999).

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that "if the success of a drama is to be measured by the effects which it produces upon the people for whom it is composed, or upon the audiences before whom it is presented, no play has ever surpassed the tragedy known in the Mussulman world as that of Hasan and Husain [*sic*]."[29] Perhaps its origins and subsequent popularity in Iran can be explained by the literary and dramatic history of pre-Islamic Iran. Ehsan Yarshater has identified several well-known tragedies in the Iranian dramatic tradition that exhibit characteristics remarkably parallel to the *ta'ziyeh* dramatic performances. One is "The Memorial of Zarer," a work that can be traced back from Middle Persian through the Sassanian period to an ancient Parthian original.[30] A second is the famous ancient Persian legend of Siyavush.[31] Yarshater indicates quite clearly that

> the ritual mourning festivals of the Ta'ziyeh type have clear precedents in pre-Islamic Persia. The passion of Siyavush bears too close a resemblance to the Ta'ziyeh of the Imam [Husayn] in ritual, imagery, and emotive underpinnings to be ignored in an explanation of the emergence of the genre. Whereas Zarer's elegiac epic may be considered Zoroastrian in conception, the funerary rites of Siyavush pre-date the Zoroastrian reform and belong, like many other old practices and beliefs, to the pagan traditions of Eastern Iran.[32]

Not surprisingly, the practice was severely criticized by leading (non-Safavid) Shi'i *ulama* scholars, citing the impropriety of personification of the Shi'i imam Husayn, the indecency of men dressing as women to perform the roles of Husayn's womenfolk, and the fact that the acting troupes were more popular among the audience than the moral message of Karbala itself. Nevertheless, the widespread popularity of the performances eventually led less powerful scholars to buckle under the pressure of the populace.[33] More powerful scholars who might have had the credibility to enforce their rulings saw the potential for such ritual commemoration performances in reinforcing the new Shi'i communal identity and manipulated it to suit what they saw as their own interests and the interests of a stronger, more popular Shi'i community defined and driven by powerful Karbala symbolism and imagery.[34]

Other recently developed rituals similar to the *shabih* performances both in their lack of any precedent in the early historical sources and in the controversy among Shi'i scholars over their legality include the violent blood-shedding rituals of *tatbir* (repeatedly striking one's skull with a sharp sword) and *zanjir* (striking one's chest and back with swinging chains, with or without sharp blades attached). Although we have shown that *latm* has a historical basis for its later ritual development, nowhere in the early historical sources does self-inflicted bloodshed ever appear. Interestingly, despite the fact that Kulayni includes an entire chapter on *ziyarah* (grave visitation ritual), he does not even mention the chest-beating rituals, which indicates that the highly ritualized chest beating must have been a later phenomenon. Based on this, the blood-shedding rituals also must have been developed later than Kulayni (d. 329/929). Even according to elder Shi'i scholars of the modern era, the rituals of self-flagellation with swords, knives, and chains were introduced to the shrine-cities in the early nineteenth century by non-Arab participants in the annual commemoration ceremonies, notably Persians and Qizilbash Turks.[35] As with the legal controversy over the dramatic theatrical personification of Husayn, notable Shi'i scholars such as Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (d. 1371/1952) decreed the illegality of inflicting bodily harm and

29. Sir Lewis Pelly, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husayn*, vol. 1 (London: Allen, 1879), preface.

30. Ehsan Yarshater, "Ta'ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rites in Iran," in Petersen, "Ta'ziyeh and Related Arts," 89.

31. Petersen, "Ta'ziyeh and Related Arts," 93.

32. Ibid.

33. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 156–57.

34. Modern analyses of the *ta'ziyeh* plays supports this view. William Beeman, in his "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'ziyeh," indicates that the plays had no other purpose than to "strengthen the faith of the people by condensing and intensifying religious events in such a manner that the heart-rending juices of the play are extracted and trickled drop by drop onto the palates of the expectant spectators" (Petersen, "Ta'ziyeh and Related Arts," 23). Also, because there is no new information presented at the performances and because the audience is already familiar with the plot, it is clear that the performances are not designed to do anything but "reinforce for the members of the audience in a particularly effective manner the important aspects of their cultural, ideological, and religious tradition" (ibid., 29).

35. Nakash, *Shi'is of Iraq*, 148.

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shedding one's own blood in Husayn's name. To support that position he noted the late introduction of the blood-shedding rituals to the annual commemoration ceremonies in the shrine-cities and quoted great ayatollahs of the past, such as Muhammad Hasan Shirazi (d. 1312–13/1895), who decreed that the ritual was a sin. Muhsin al-Amin himself was quoted as saying, "Only laymen observed the ritual, imposing their will on the *ulama* who were too weak to prevent the spread of the practice."[36] As with other unconventional and legally controversial innovated rituals, powerful members of the *ulama* class who saw the opportunity to reinforce the memory and symbolism of Husayn's blood and to gain popular support for the new Shi'ism legalized the innovated blood-shedding rituals and encouraged them in the interests of their own religiopolitical agenda.[37]

Another similar example of such an innovated ritual encouraged and perpetuated by the Safavid-era Shi'i *ulama* is the ritual of corpse transport and the subsequent traffic in corpses that had a major economic impact on both the Ottoman and the Safavid empires.[38] At some point in the early period Shi'is began transporting the corpses of their dead for burial at Najaf, Karbala, and other shrine-cities. An explosion of corpse trafficking reached levels unprecedented in history after the mass conversion of Iranians to Shi'ism in the sixteenth century, and the traffic peaked "in the late nineteenth century and became an integral part of a whole set of rituals, visitations, and religious practices that helped ensure the welfare of Najaf and Karbala, as well as their ties with their hinterland and other parts of the Shi'i world."[39] In fact, the shrine-cities of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and his son Husayn were so popular and so many corpses were transferred there that "much of the recently built areas of the two cities were on old cemeteries that sank with time."[40] As with previous examples of scholarly opposition to rituals with no historical basis, Shi'i scholars such as Hibat al-Din Shahristani (d. 1386/1967) criticized corpse transport to Karbala, charging that it was a newly innovated ritual with no basis of support among the practices of the Shi'i imams and that its proponents relied on weak traditions and ignored the many stipulations and restrictions specified in their own sources.[41] Similar to previous examples of scholarly opposition by an isolated minority of intellectuals, massive popular support for the innovated ritual and manipulation of popular sentiments by politically savvy members of the *ulama* class led to the perpetuation and continuation of the newly introduced rituals. As Catherine Bell has noted in her work on rituals,

> Ritualized activities can be taken as traditional within a very short time; they can also be very flexibly appropriated; they may be practiced more or less faithfully despite strong reservations about every aspect of them. . . . Effective ritual need not be uncontested or invulnerable to political manipulation and trendy commercialization.[42]

Thus, despite the lack of historical evidence supporting such newly popularized rituals such as the dramatic re-creation of the events of the Battle of Karbala, the blood-shedding rituals, and the corpse transport ritual, and despite the historical, intellectual, and legal arguments against them, proponents of these rituals apparently saw the potential of perpetuating the centrality of the symbolism of rituals commemorating the battle, the shedding of Husayn's blood, and the visitation of his corpse, in propagating and perpetuating a new Shi'i identity. Furthermore, once these popular rituals achieved religious legitimacy by way of support from among the *ulama* class, they entered annual Shi'i

36. Ibid., 156.

37. More recently, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran has issued a fatwa (decree) against the public performance of these blood-shedding rituals. See Sayyid 'Ali Khamenei, *'Ashura bayyinat-i rahbar-i mu'azzam-i inqilab-i islami wa istifta'at-iayyat-i 'uzam piramun 'azadari-yi 'ashura* (Qum: Daftar-I Tablighat-I Islami-yi Hawzah-yi 'Ilmiyah, 1944), p. 22.

38. The popularity of this ritual resulted in the imposition of corpse import taxes, duties, tariffs, and license and other service charges by the Ottomans, who controlled the shrine cities, and similar export taxes, licenses, and other fees levied by the Safavids. Also, once the Safavids saw the economic potential of the Iraqi shrine cities, they began vigorously promoting the shrine of the sixth Shi'i imam, Rida, at Mashhad (Iran), in an attempt to prevent the drain of financial resources out of the empire and into the hands of their archenemies, the Ottomans.

39. Nakash, *Shi'is of Iraq*, 187.

40. Ibid., 188.

41. Ibid., 194.

42. Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 252.

practice and literally became tradition. Such examples make clear the illusory nature of certain traditions because "rituals tend to present themselves as unchanging, time-honored customs of an enduring community. Even when no such claims are explicitly made within or outside the rite, a variety of cultural dynamics tend to make us take it for granted that rituals are old in some way."[43] This illusion only served these members of the Shi'i *ulama* class even further, for once they actively supported and legitimized the newly introduced rituals, they had become part of Shi'i identity. To reject them was to reject the entire faith, and, indeed, to this day, they, along with the other Karbala commemoration rituals, are the essential medium by which Shi'i self-definition (via the Karbala folk narrative) is transmitted intergenerationally.

Conclusion

My examination of the classical Islamic sources has revealed that these commemoration rituals have evolved in several distinct stages. During the Umayyad period immediately following the Battle of Karbala, the dominant Umayyad government's antipathy toward commemorating the event prevented both public gatherings and "publication" of the oral accounts in the written record. The memory of the battle was kept alive in private or semiprivate circles largely through oral recitations recounting the battle. Although these annual gatherings themselves became ritual, there is no evidence that the chest or face beating at this early stage was anything more than a natural expression of intense grief. The next stage in the development of these rituals is marked by the Abbasids' use of the Karbala theme as part of the political platform legitimizing their revolution against the Umayyads, which allowed the commemoration of Husayn's death at Karbala to be popularized among the mainstream Sunni community. This popularization allowed the accounts formerly restricted to oral transmission to be incorporated into the literary corpus, resulting in the incorporation of these largely Shi'i and 'Alid accounts into a plethora of mainstream Sunni literary and historical sources. Post-Abbasid popularization also allowed for the primitive expressions of grief to evolve into more ritualized ceremonies and for the formerly private gatherings to develop into public marches and ritualized visitation of Husayn's shrine at Karbala. By this period, 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 rituals to the rhythm of recited poetry can also be traced to this period. Then, the adoption of Husayn by the early Sunni community eventually led Shi'i scholars to develop radically hagiographic characterizations of Husayn and Karbala in their literary sources, while some of the already formalized rituals developed into more extreme versions involving self-inflicted bloodshed, and new rituals such as the *ta'ziyeh* dramatic performance were developed. These literary depictions, blood shedding, and other rituals, firmly entrenched in the Shi'i community by the Safavid period, were considered heretical by the majority Sunni community, resulting in the polarization of the two communities even to this day.

43. Ibid., 210.

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