

ETERNAL PERFORMANCE
TA'ZIYEH AND OTHER SHIITE RITUALS

EDITED BY PETER J. CHEŁKOWSKI

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Peripheral Ta'ziyeh: The Transformation of Ta'ziyeh

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TIME OUT OF MEMORY:
TA'ZIYEH, THE TOTAL DRAMA¹

by Peter J. Chelkowski

The dramatic form known as the passion play is often associated exclusively with Western, and specifically, Christian theatrical tradition. However, one of the most highly developed and powerful examples of this genre is, in fact, the *ta'ziyeh*—the passion play of the Shiite Muslims performed in Iran, and recently adapted in South Lebanon—which recounts the tragedy of Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. It is the only serious drama ever developed in the Islamic world, except for contemporary theatre, which was introduced into Islamic countries along with other Western influences in the mid-nineteenth century. In an extraordinary development, the Lincoln Center Summer Festival 2002 included three *ta'ziyehs*, performed in July by Iran's foremost actors. The production was staged for only the third time in a Western country, after receiving critical acclaim and playing to packed houses in Avignon and Paris in France, and in Parma, Italy. It was later staged again in Italy in July 2003 in an innovative, interactive format that mixed videos of a *ta'ziyeh* audience in Iran with a live performance in an abandoned factory in Rome. The famous film director, Abbas Kiarostami, arranged this spectacle.

The tragedy reenacts the death of Hussein and his male children and companions in a brutal massacre on the plain of Karbala (about 60 miles south/southwest of modern day Baghdad), in the year 680 CE, year 61 of the Muslim calendar. Hussein's murder was the outcome of a protracted power struggle for control of the nascent Muslim community following the death of Prophet Muhammad. Two factions arose with competing views on the process for determining the new head of the community, or *caliph*. The Sunnites believed that the caliph should be elected according to ancient Arabian tribal tradition, while the Shiites advocated for the descendants of

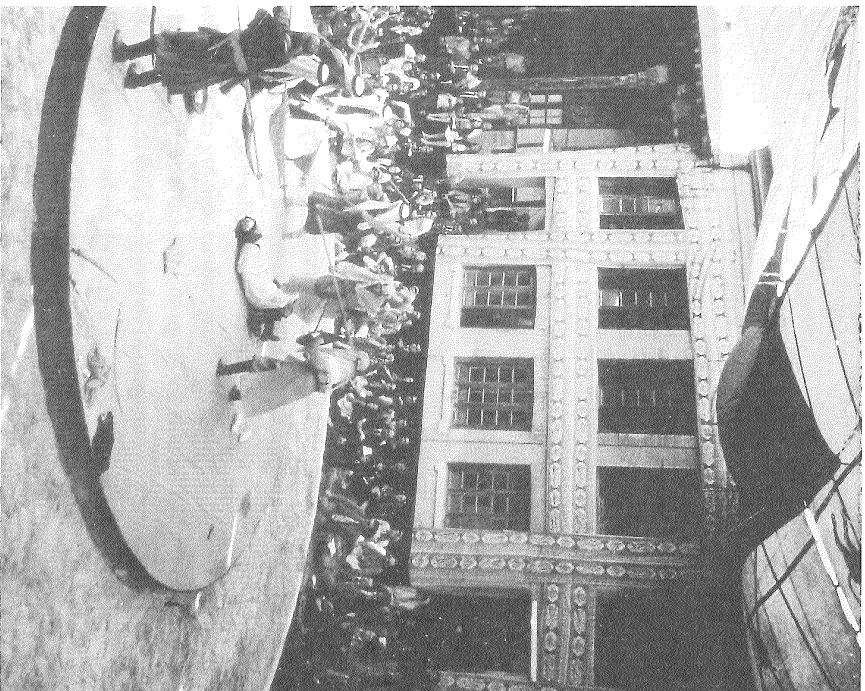


PLATE 1: The two severed hands of Abbas, Imam Hussein's standard bearer, are still visible on the central stage. He is pounded by the enemy but still he sings: 'In the midst of this tumult and confusion I hope only to get a glimpse of Hussein's face once more. O Hussein, lonely am I. May I be your sacrifice, you are so kind and generous.' Shiraz Art Festival, August 1976. Photograph by Peter J. Chelkowski.

Prophet Muhammad—through his daughter Fatemeh Zahra—called Imams, who they claimed possessed a divine right to authority in both spiritual and temporal matters. Hussein became the head of the Shiites after religio-political opponents assassinated his father and elder brother. His refusal to swear allegiance to Yazid, the Sunni caliph in Damascus, made it necessary for Hussein to leave Medina and seek refuge in Mecca. Eventually with his family and a group of supporters, he set out for Kufa, a city in southern Iraq where he had numerous partisans.

On the journey to Kufa, Hussein and his party were ambushed by Yazid's troops and forced to swear an oath of allegiance to the Sunni leader as the price of their freedom. Tradition has it that this took place on the first day of the month of Muharram. For 10 days, Hussein's company was cut off from water in the scorching desert of Karbala and subjected to physical and psychological pressure. Despite the knowledge that his supporters in Kufa had abandoned him after being terrorized by Yazid's army, Hussein refused to take the oath. On the 10th day, known as *Ashura*, after an intense battle, all the male members but Hussein's 22-year-old son, Zain'l Abedin, who was ill and being nursed by the women in their tents, were savagely killed. Their heads were cut off and taken as trophies to Yazid in Damascus, while the female members of the party were taken hostage. The battle at Karbala and its aftermath precipitated the definitive schism of the Sunni and Shiite Islamic branches.

The slaughter at Karbala came to be considered by the Shiites as the ultimate example of sacrifice, the pinnacle of human suffering. The month of Muharram became the month of mourning, when Shiites all over the world commemorate Hussein's sacrifice in stationary and ambulatory rituals of unequaled intensity. It was from these ritual observances that *ta'zieh*, which literally means 'to mourn' or 'to console', arose as a dramatic form. Once Shiite Islam was officially recognized as Iran's state religion in the early sixteenth century, royal patronage ensured that the Muharram festival observances would assume a central position in the cultural and religious identity of the country, and the festival became a unifying force for the nation. When the stationary and ambulatory aspects of the ritual merged in the mid-eighteenth century, *ta'zieh* was born as a distinct type of music drama. (Some Iranian scholars believe that the fusion of the stationary and ambulatory rituals took place at the end of the seventeenth century.) According to Sir Lewis Pelly: 'If the success of a drama is to be measured by

the effect which it produces upon the people for whom it is composed, or upon the audience before whom it is represented, no play has ever surpassed the tragedy known in the Mussulman world as that of Hasan and Husain' (Pelly 1879 [I]: III).²

Like Western passion plays, ta'ziyeh dramas were originally performed outdoors at crossroads and other public places where large audiences could gather. Performances later took place in the courtyards of inns and private homes, but eventually unique structures called *takiyeh* or *husseiniyeh* were constructed by individual towns for the staging of the plays. Community cooperation was encouraged in the building and decoration of the takiyeh whether the funds for the enterprise were provided by a wealthy, public-minded benefactor or by contributions from the citizens of a particular town or district. The takiyeh varied in seating capacity from intimate structures able to accommodate a few dozen people to large buildings capable of holding 1,000 spectators or more. Often the takiyeh were temporary, erected especially for the observance of the Muharram festival. During the festival period, the takiyeh were lavishly decorated with the prized personal possessions of the local community, such as rare and costly imported goods like mirrors and chandeliers. Refreshments were prepared by women and served to the spectators by the children of well-to-do families. Takiyeh Dawlat, the Royal Theatre in Tehran, was the most famous of all the ta'ziyeh performance spaces. Built in the 1870s by Nasser al-Din Shah, the Royal Theatre's sumptuous magnificence surpassed that of Europe's greatest opera houses in the opinion of many Western visitors.

In contrast to the richness of the takiyeh's decorations, ta'ziyeh stage decor and props are quite stark. All takiyeh, regardless of their size, are constructed as theatres-in-the-round to intensify the dynamic between actors and audience: the spectators are literally surrounded by the action and often become physical participants in the play; in unwallled takiyeh, it is not unusual for combat scenes to occur behind the audience.

The main drama occurs on a raised, curtainless platform in the centre of a building or courtyard. Subplots and battles take place in a sand-covered ring around the stage. Actors frequently jump off the stage into this space to mark the passage of time or a journey, and scene changes are indicated when a performer circles the platform. If there are auxiliary stages that extend into the audience, they serve as settings for scenes of special signifi-



PLATE 2: Ta'ziyeh has had an impact on paintings, both on canvas and on walls. See, for example, Muhammad Mudaber's *Ashura*, painted in the late 1960s. In the lower corner, the horse of Hussein is visible. In the foreground, the body of Hussein is surrounded by veiled women in front of their tents. Behind the tents, the 72 bodies of his companions are exposed. Photographed in Tehran, 1976. Courtesy of Peter J. Chelkowski.



PLATE 3: Mural depicting the final scene of the battle of Karbala with Shemr cutting off the head of Hussein. Imamzadeh Shah Zaid, Isfahan, second half of the nineteenth century. Courtesy of Peter J. Chelkowski.

cance. Corridors running from the stage through the seating area serve as passageways for troops, messengers and animals. The starkness of the stage represents the barrenness of the desert plain at Karbala. Props are few and largely symbolic: the Euphrates River is denoted by a basin of water; a tree branch indicates a grove of palms. More utilitarian props such as chairs or bedding and cooking utensils are carried onstage by the actors or even by members of the audience.

Costumes are also meant to be representational. Although fabulously elegant stage attire was common at the Royal Theatre during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah (1848–96), there was no attempt to make the actors' garments historically accurate. The main goal of costume design was to help the spectators identify a character and his nature by his clothing. This practice has continued over time with certain characters adopting the prevailing fashions of the day for their particular roles. Thus, an actor in Nasser al-Din Shah's era playing a Western ambassador wore a frock coat—the standard diplomatic outfit of the nineteenth century; after World War II, the same ambassador may be depicted wearing a British military uniform. Performers in women's parts wear baggy black garments that cover them from head to toe. Since female roles are played by men, the voluminous robes and veils also provide concealment. Additional clues to a character's identity can be discerned through various accessories: sometimes a learned man wears reading glasses, while a villain appears in sunglasses (reflecting perhaps the worldwide influence of American gangster films). Colour symbolism further helps the audience to recognize different dramatic personalities and situations. When a white cloth is put on a protagonist's shoulders or he dons a white shirt, it is understood that the white symbolizes a shroud and he will soon sacrifice his life and be killed.

An even more obvious indication of a character's disposition is found in the way that he delivers his lines. In the ta'zیه, protagonists sing their parts and antagonists recite theirs. Dressed in red to symbolize blood and oppression, the villains often purposely overact by shrieking their lines in harsh unpleasant voices. By contrast, the heroes sing their parts in the classical Persian modes³ and clothe themselves in the green colour of the garden paradise. Traditionally, actors were chosen for their physical attributes. Protagonists playing Hussein, for example, were expected to be tall with broad shoulders and fine beards. This could and did cause casting problems, however, since a fine singing voice was necessary to complement the

pleasing physique of a hero. Young boys with good vocal skills who began by playing girl's roles in the ta'ziyeh often assumed the parts of young men after their voices changed. If a young actor did not attain the stature deemed compatible with a heroic part or if his voice retained a feminine quality, he would continue to play female characters.

Singers are accompanied by a variety of drums, trumpets, flutes and cymbals. An orchestra can be quite substantial or consist of just a few musicians, depending upon the financial resources or theatrical experience of the troupe. Drum music announces that the troupe has arrived and the drama is about to begin. It may be repeated several times, particularly if the audience needs more time to assemble. Once the spectators have gathered, a *fanfare* is played while the actors file into the performance area in procession. This is followed by a short overture to set the mood for the play about to be performed. The drama opens with the *pish-khani*, or prologue, which is sung by the chorus and presents a summary of the plot. During the *pish-khani*, everybody sings, including the antagonists. Usually the chorus gathers in the main performance space, but it occasionally divides into two groups on either side of this area and sings alternate lines in antiphony (call and response). Throughout the play, programmatic instrumental music alternates.

According to many Western and Iranian scholars of music, it is thanks to the ta'ziyeh that much of the classical Persian repertoire has survived (see Massoudieh 1367; Khaleqi N.D.). But just as Western influences are evident in ta'ziyeh costumes, they are also prominent in the musical elements of the drama. During the zenith of the ta'ziyeh in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the first Polytechnic College, Darul-funun, was founded in Iran and staffed by foreign instructors. The curriculum consisted largely of military subjects, including band music. Eventually, quite a number of these military marches found their way into the repertory of the ta'ziyeh theatres.

It is the responsibility of the ta'ziyeh director (called in the past *munim-buka*, the 'conjurer of tears', now called *ta'ziyeh gerdan*) to supervise the music and assemble an orchestra. In addition, he acts as the producer, stage manager, prompter, PR man and financial director. He is truly a 'Renaissance man' of the theatre, supervising not only the drama itself, but also making the necessary arrangements with the local authorities and accounting for the financial returns. Always onstage during a performance, dressed

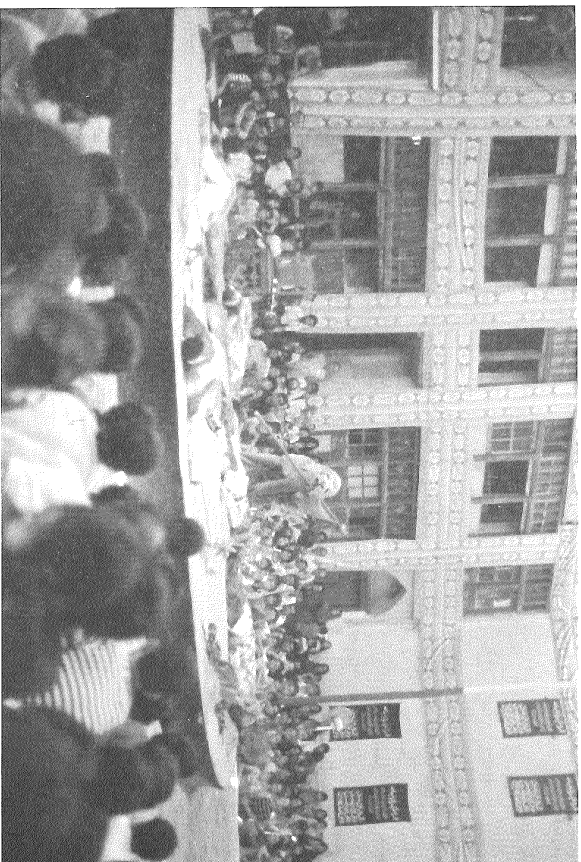


PLATE 4: The final scene of the battle of Karbala on stage. The lion guards the bodies of the martyrs strewn across the stage. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by Peter J. Chelkowski.



PLATE 5: In the 1870s, the Takieh Dowlat was erected in Tehran in the Royal Compound. Its walls, canvas ceiling and circular stage were copied in takieh and husseiniyeh all over the country, Tehran, 1976. After Kemal al-Mulk's paintings; photograph by Peter J. Chelkowski.

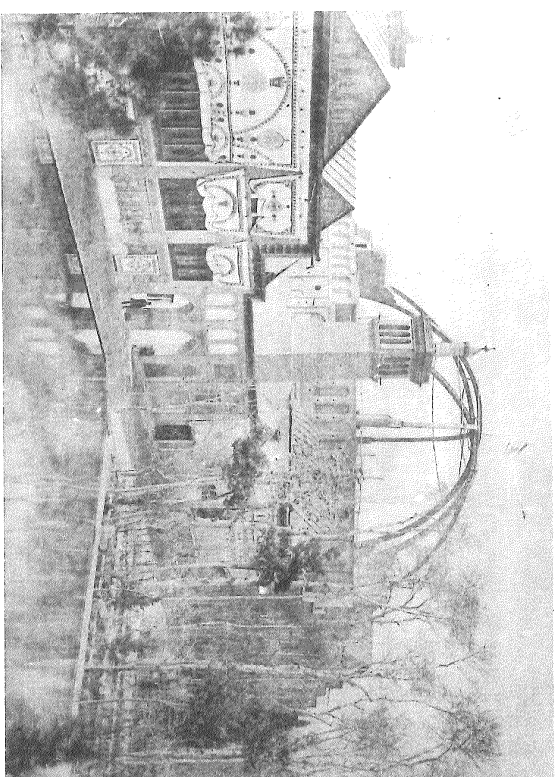


PLATE 6: Takieh Dowlat exterior, Tehran. Photograph courtesy of Reza Khaki.

in black, the director makes sure that the production runs smoothly and oversees the interaction of actors, musicians and audience. His ubiquitous presence is not distracting to the spectators as he is seen as an integral part of the ta'ziyeh drama. In his role as prompter, he cues actors and helps children and inexperienced players with their lines.

In the past, actors read their lines from crib sheets held in their palms, indicating that they were merely role-carriers with no personal connections to the characters they portrayed. Today most performers learn their roles by heart (if they don't, they refrain from conspicuously referring to their notes). While traditionally the director was responsible for eliciting strong emotions of grief and sadness from the audience by the manner in which the production was staged, it is today more incumbent on the actors to provide a cathartic experience for the spectators. Influenced heavily by the realistic acting of modern film and television, ta'ziyeh actors no longer distance themselves from the characters they are playing, but throw themselves wholeheartedly into their roles. Often the performers identify so strongly with their parts that they are swept away by their situations. In turn, the audience is caught up in an atmosphere of potent and sincere emotions.

The plays devoted to the tragedy at Karbala and its surrounding events form the core of the ta'ziyeh repertory. Although the massacre of Hussein and his followers historically took place in one day on the 10th of Muharram, the battle is divided into many different episodes performed on separate days. The only fixed day and play in the Muharram repertory is the martyrdom of Hussein on the 10th, or Ashura; others can be performed in varying sequence. Usually, the cycle begins on the first day of Muharram with a play commemorating the death of Hussein's emissary to Kufa (near Karbala), Muslim bin Aqil. This is followed by a daily progression of plays, each devoted to the martyrdom of various members of Hussein's family or his companions. In these dramas, a hero takes on the entire enemy force unassisted while the remaining protagonists gather on the central stage to reflect on their fate and deliver comments of philosophical and religious nature. Each play contributes to the gradually increasing emotional buildup anticipating the supreme sacrifice of Hussein, the 'Prince of Martyrs'. Hussein's death does not always conclude the essential ta'ziyeh repertory. Performances may continue after Ashura to depict the sorrowful destiny of the female members of Hussein's family who were taken as captives to Damascus.

New plays that depicted the sacrifices of Shiite martyrs before and after Karbala were added to the ta'ziyeh fold over time. Based on the Quran, *hadith* (stories about the life, deeds and actions of the Prophet), legends and current events, these productions provided an excuse to extend ta'ziyeh dramas throughout the year. Even these non-Muharram plays, however, retain a connection to the tragedy at Karbala through a dramatic device known as *guniz*, or digression. Within a particular play, the *guniz* may be a direct verbal reference to Hussein's martyrdom or a brief scene depicting an aspect of his tragedy, or both. Through the *guniz*, all ta'ziyeh drama expands beyond spatial and time constraints to merge the past and present into one unifying moment of intensity that allows the spectators to be simultaneously in the performance space and at Karbala.

The number of ta'ziyeh works is vast, with new productions and local variations of established dramas constantly being added to the canon. The Cernulli collection at the Vatican Library contains over 1,055 ta'ziyeh manuscripts. It is important to note that ta'ziyeh scripts are rarely intended for reading, but solely for performing. Each part is written out on loose narrow sheets of paper, which the actor can hold in the palm of his hand. The theatrical context of the script, in conjunction with setting, costumes, action and musical and verbal elements, provides a standard for judging its value.

There is an amateur Muharram ta'ziyeh tradition that exists alongside the tradition of the professional ta'ziyeh dramatic companies. Typically, a production of this kind is organized by a former professional ta'ziyeh actor who brings together the residents of a district to perform for purely religious reasons. The dramatization of the death of Hussein gives the participants an opportunity to exhibit their own sorrows and desires as an expression of their faith within an archetypal setting. Professional ta'ziyeh productions today are usually commercial enterprises—fundamental social and political changes in Iran during the twentieth century abolished the practice of artistic patronage on the individual and communal level that had flourished in the past. In the 1930s, restrictions imposed by the government forced ta'ziyeh performances to move from towns to rural areas. At present, professional troupes are often family-run businesses that move from place to place every two weeks performing a different play every day and occasionally giving performances both in the afternoon and evening.



PLATE 7 (*above*): Processional ta'ziyeh featuring Shemr clad in a red costume—the colour of the villains—on horseback. Mehriz, 1976. Photograph by K. Bayegan.

PLATE 8 (*below*): In the pish-khani, the synopsis of the play is sung by the entire chorus, both protagonists and antagonists. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August, 1976. Photograph by Peter J. Chelkowski.



PLATE 9: A modernized float on a flatbed truck is a mobile stage for a Karbala scene in this processional ta'ziyeh. Mehriz, 1996. Photograph courtesy of J. Chazbanpour.

In the last 50 years or so, Europeans and Americans have travelled to Asia to experience the bond between actor and audience that is one of the hallmarks of the Eastern dramatic tradition. The most common destinations were India and the Far East, but in the late 1960s, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski discovered ta'ziyeh. Brook in particular was profoundly impacted by the dramatic possibilities of the Persian form. He explained:

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of 400 villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under the tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw Hussein in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre form became truth (1979: 52).

Brook proved that Iranian dramatic conventions and cultural themes could be effectively transposed to the Western stage with his successful adaptation in 1979 of a twelfth-century mystical tract, *The Conference of the Birds*, into a theatrical play.

Jerzy Grotowski also borrowed from the ta'ziyeh tradition to fuse dramatic action with ritual as a means of uniting actor and audience. However, his productions with the Laboratory Theatre carefully controlled the dynamic between the players and the spectators by imposing limits on space, audience size and seating placement. Ta'ziyeh, in contrast, actively retains a fundamental principle of intimacy without placing any constraints on the size of the performance space or the number of spectators. This is *le théâtre total*. In the words of Samuel Benjamin, the first American envoy to Iran, 'Ta'ziyeh is an interesting exhibition of the dramatic genius of the Persian race' (1887: 382).

Notes

- 1 This article was first published in *The Drama Review* 49(4) (T188) (Winter 2005): 15–27.
- 2 Lewis Pelly's *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain* (1879) contains translations of 37 ta'ziyeh plays into a beautifully ornate Victorian English.
- 3 See the article in this volume by Stephen Blum, 'Compelling Reasons to Sing: The Music of Ta'ziyeh'. [Ed.]

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THE TA'ZIEH OF THE MARTYRDOM OF HUSSEIN¹

translated and with an introduction by
Rebecca Ansary Peltys

The *ta'zieh* plays are somewhat similar to the mystery cycle plays of medieval Europe in that authorship is corporate and anonymous. Thus, many communities all over Iran possess a cycle of plays from which to select when circumstances allow performances during the month of Muharram. Clearly, the most important play from any community's cycle is *The Martyrdom of Hussein*, since his martyrdom is the central focus for the entire mourning ritual. This play is always performed on the 10th day of the month of Muharram—the historic date of Hussein's slaughter.

Regardless of when the texts were collected or from what community, the plays that deal with the martyrdom of Hussein share many similar segments of action. All versions stress Hussein's utter desolation. This is accomplished in several ways. The most emotional way is to include scenes that deal with the slaughter of his infant son and little nephew—the only males left in his family. Another way is to include scenes in which other weak and defenseless persons offer to enter the field of battle in a vain attempt to replace strong champions already slain. Along these same lines, some plays include a scene in which the women travelling with Hussein are forced to take on duties usually relegated to men. Another series of scenes focuses on two kinds of temptations Hussein must face. Each time Hussein bids farewell to a female relative, he has to fight against the natural urge to remain alive to protect her from captivity. Each time a powerful being arrives to offer assistance, Hussein has to fight against the natural urge to restore the balance of unequal odds. In each case, Hussein overcomes the temptation and chooses martyrdom. Thus, flexibility and fluidity are part of the dramatic tradition.

In its traditional state, the script for a play consists of acting sides—little strips of paper containing only the lines and cue words of a single character. The acting sides are accompanied by a key that provides the chronological order of the speeches. These stand as a 'recipe' for performance. A complete play in chronological order is called a *jung*.

The Martyrdom of Hussein offered here was translated from Persian and is from the collection belonging to the city of Khou, a small oasis in the centre of the Kavir desert (Honari 1974). Although it is not certain when the ta'ziyeh tradition developed in Khou, records show that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century this city possessed 60 plays that were performed at the rate of one ta'ziyeh per day until the end of the month following Muharram. As a result of a local quarrel between two brothers in 1933, the entire collection was destroyed by fire. Fortunately, copies of six plays were in the possession of other Khou citizens and thus escaped destruction. These scattered texts (in the form of actors' sides) were gathered in 1965, recopied onto fresh pieces of paper and placed in the care of those responsible for producing the annual performances. Five of the extant texts were edited by Morreza Honari and published in 1974 as *Taziyyeh Dar Khou*.

Although the Khou version of *The Martyrdom of Hussein* includes most of the segments of action typical of this play, each segment tends to be lengthy. Due to the constraints of space, therefore, at times, a segment of action from another version has been used instead (it is quite common in the ta'ziyeh tradition to mix parts of one manuscript with another). This version is part of a collection gathered by Alexander Chodzko, cited as the first European scholar to work on Persian folklore (Calnard 1992). Born in Poland, he completed his studies in Oriental languages in St Petersburg in 1830 after revolutionary activity forced him to leave his native land. His expertise in Arabic, Persian and Turkish earned him a position with the Russian diplomatic corps and he was sent to Persia. There, he served as translator and interpreter to the Russian missions in Tabriz and Tehran, as well as consul at Rasht. By the time Chodzko left Persia in 1840, he had collected a great variety of manuscripts, among which was a collection of 33 ta'ziyeh plays purchased from the director of the court theatre in Tehran. Four years later, Chodzko, now settled in Paris, resigned from the Russian diplomatic service and eventually donated his collection of manuscripts to Bibliothèque Nationale. In 1976, Zahra Eghal, assisted by

Muhammad Jafar Majjub, edited a publication of six plays from the Chodzko collection under the title *Jung-i-Shahadat* (1976).

THE MARTYRDOM OF HUSSEIN FROM TA'ZIYEH DAR KHOUR

Cast of Characters (in order of appearance)

Shemr	the cruellest of the commanders opposed to Hussein
Ibn Sad	the commander of the forces opposed to Hussein
Zainab	sister of Hussein and Hassan
Hussein	son of Ali and Fatemeh, grandson of Prophet Muhammad
Archangel Gabriel	
Rabab	(also called Laila) Hussein's wife and mother of his infant son, Ali Asghar
Harmela	one of the villains opposing Hussein
Sultan Qais	king of India
Vizier	prime minister to the king
Abdulla	young nephew of Hussein, son of Hassan

SHEM: I address you, O Ibn Sad of the blessed countenance,² we have slaughtered the pious household in this desert. There is no one left except for Ali's Hussein. All have been martyred with poniard and sword. It is now the turn of that light of this world and the next world. It is necessary that he should die from dagger and spear; that his household and children be captured and all the pigeons of his harem be bound up. We will go joyfully before Ubaid and Ibn Ziyad³ and gladden their hearts by the slaughter of the son of Fatemeh.

IBN SAD: Tell me, what remedy should I create, O cursed one full of flames and chaos? How could my heart give acceptance to the slaughter of Hussein? Let that which we have done in this desert of sorrow and calamity be enough. It is enough that I have become black-faced on the Day of Judgement. It is enough that Abbas⁴ was malevolently martyred. It is enough that his Ali Akbar⁵ was cast down from his feet; Qasem,⁶ the bridegroom, reddened his palm with blood [rather than henna]. The

foundation of the house of Faith has been destroyed by your oppression. What more do you want from the life of sorrowful Hussein? What more do you want from that broken-hearted one without supporters?

SHEMR: Understand without a doubt, O Ibn Sad of the blessed nature, that you must gird yourself for the slaughter of Hussein. If you don't have the stomach for the slaughter of Hussein, go back to Kufa and I will replace you as commander.

IBN SAD: May your tongue be cut out, O treacherous dog! What kind of things are you saying, O tyrant? What knowledge came for the slaughter of Hussein? What explicit command exists for the dispute with Hussein? Is not Hussein the candle in the night of Ahmad [Muhammad]? Is not Hussein the rose bush in the garden of Muhammad? Is not Fatemeh, the best of women, his mother? Is not Gabriel the comber of the hair on his head? In obedience to the order of Ubaid, son of Ziyad, it is not possible to cast eternity vainly into the wind. You did not turn away from the vengeful path so that we could have made peace with the king of the Faith, O unscrupulous and ill-fated one. Peace could replace the formation of battle and insurrection; he could return to Medina with thoughts of pleasure.

[...]

SHEMR: O chaste ones of Hussein, tell Hussein to come outside, so that the heart's desire for his slaughter may erode for an instant.

ZAINAB: My Hussein is asleep, O infidel full of commotion and mischief. I fear you may wake him—softer, softer. Hussein is asleep, O infidel full of commotion and chaos. For the sake of the Rasul [Prophet Muhammad] of the east and west, softer, softer.

SHEMR: I address you, O daughter of the Rasul of God, the Prophet of God. Go and tell Ali's Hussein, 'O chief, you must face your death in this situation.' Tell him that now is not the time for sleeping. I will take you to Damascus presently in desolate desolation. All the people of your harem will become dejected and thin.

ZAINAB: The issue of Ali Murteza [an epithet] is in sleep, O unscrupulous one. Don't shout, for God's sake, softer, softer. I will inform him of your conversation now, O cursed one. Allow me to wake him up, softer, softer. O brother, Shemr came to me, wake up. I will be dyed in indigo at your death. I am disabled, wake up. The army of the enemy has

arrived. O king bereft of army and aid. We are even now surrounded by the army, wake up.

HUSSEIN: I dreamt I was in a meadow. Why didn't you leave me in peace? There were houris and gardens and castles; why didn't you leave me? My grandfather, the best of men, was standing there on one side. On the other side was my father, Ali Murteza; why didn't you leave me? My mother wore black clothes and sat in mourning. She was lamenting for the sake of someone; why didn't you leave me? My grandfather was saying that Hussein would be killed. Zainab would become the captive of the antagonists; why didn't you leave me?

ZAINAB: You were asleep, O brother. Shemr was just here. He said, 'I will take Zainab to Damascus in woe and keening.' My heart is sad and afraid from the events of ancient fate. I am afraid, O dear brother, that I will be dejected and captive.⁸

Innam Hussein comes out of the encampment and speaks to the army of the infidels who are standing close to the encampment.⁹

HUSSEIN: Tell Ibn Sad, who is less than a dog, that one of the lineage of the cupbearer of the Kawsar [a river in paradise] asks for him.

IBN SAD: Hussein, O prince of Medina, king of the throne of the two worlds, what is your request to the repulsive, reckless tribe, tell me?

HUSSEIN: I am the glorified smoke of God, powerful one in the presence of Gabriel. I am the possessor of accomplishments such as reason and love and have no desire for Kufa and Damascus. If it were a question of land and kingdom, it is ours from the fish to the moon [meaning the entire world]. Have mercy on me now, as my heart is bleeding at your hand. All of you get out of my way, so I may take these vulnerable people and relatives and, with bleeding heart, exit from the land of the Arabs.

Ibn Sad, who has been facing Hussein, now speaks.

IBN SAD: O lord, of what virtue to me the miracle of the Quran? What effect would it have if you were to read me the whole Quran? Listen to me and give your allegiance by the directive of Ubaidulla. Yazid is lord this day from Arabia to the dust of Tawran [Transoxania].

HUSSEIN: At last, have some pity on my wretched self, pity. For this unfortunate king, pity, pity! Even though I could take Arabia and half of the Tartar land, I am the wretched one of this region today. Even though I could take retribution for the 100 acts of malevolence against me, I am

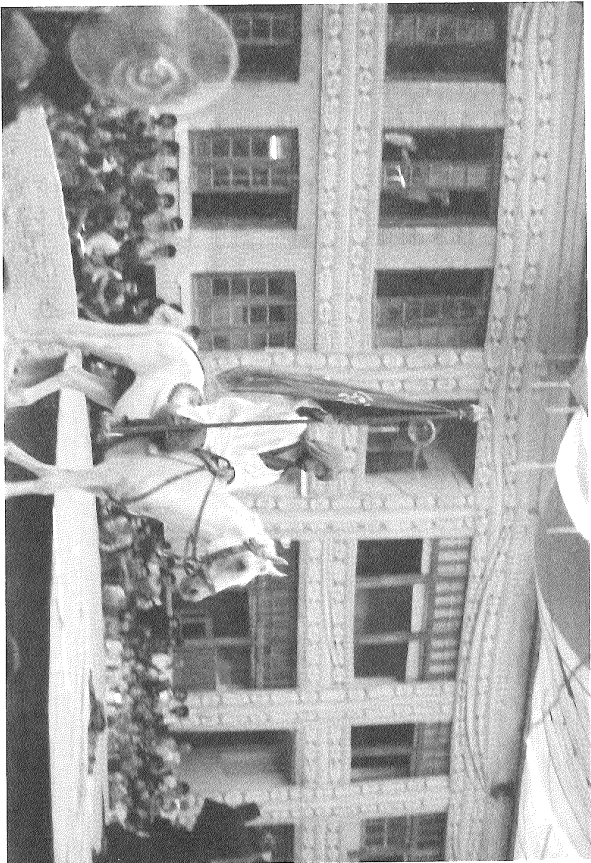


PLATE 10: Hussein, dressed in the white shroud, on horseback carrying a green banner on the way to the battlefield. On the stage, bereft, his sister Zainab bids final farewell. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by William Shpall.

at your disposal today. The children have been dry-mouthed for three days and nights, O cursed ones.

IBN SAD: Have no thoughts of water from the malicious and the rebellious.

No one will give you water in this land.

HUSSEIN: O oppressor, tyrant, rejected and unscrupulous one, give me a respite to take farewell from the holy family.

IBN SAD: Permission granted, O ruler of the dry-mouthed. Take farewell of your harem with weeping eyes.

Imam Hussein returns to the holy family and Ibn Sad and Shenn return to their army base. The Imam addresses his household.

HUSSEIN: Greetings to you, O holy family of the Prophet. O Zainab, O Kulsum, O Ruqiyeh and O Rabab, my greetings to you.

ZAINAB: Brother dear, may I be ransomed for your pearl-bearing, blood-gushing eyes. You bring news of your approaching death to your dejected sister with every breath.

HUSSEIN (*to Zainab*): Bring an old set of clothes to me, sister, so that no one in this assembled army may covet it.

ZAINAB: You must wear jasmine clothes, O my flower. Where is it customary that you should put on old clothes? You are the king of Hijaz [Western Arabia] and it is customary that you should wear silk of Yemen like a king of Yemen. My heart aches for your request to wear old clothes. What is the reason for putting old clothes on your body?

HUSSEIN: The one by the name of Shennr will be malevolent to me today. He will sever my head with the merciless poniard. This old garment will ward off the heat of the desert from my body to some extent. Shennr, who might take new garments from my body, may repent from such an act at the sight of this garment.¹⁰

Zainab gives the garment into Hussein's hands. It is a full-length white garment on the surface of which small and large red stains have been placed. As Hussein puts it on, Zainab sings:¹¹

ZAINAB: O Hussein, may Zainab die so she may not see your death. O brother dear, congratulations on your garment! Either remove that garment from your body, dear brother, or place me alive in the grave, dear brother. (*She continues in another tune.*)¹² Walk for a bit, so I may gaze at your stature and pick one flower from your moon of a face. Have mercy on my state, brother dear. My wings are broken, brother dear.

[...]

[Hussein and Zainab lament together as he asks her to care for his orphans and describes the signs of his death to come.]

HUSSEIN: Rise up from your place, Zainab, as it is not the time for weeping and supplication. Your Hussein is alone and friendless. It is time for you to assist him. In your compassion, serve me and bring my battle implements to me. Ask them to bring Zuljenah [his horse] before me, lovingly.

ZAINAB: Where is the standard bearer of your soldiers now, O king of the depleted force? Who will bring Zuljenah to you? Where is your murdered Ali Akbar, who suffered an untimely death, so that he may hold your stirrup, in rue, with boiling heart? Where is Qasem to hold your saddle cover in his arms with rue?

HUSSEIN: Keening for the passage of time, which does not stand firm for an instant. Where is the loyalty of fate that one cannot rely on it? You [God] once assigned Gabriel as caretaker of Hussein's saddle cover; now Hussein has no one to hold his stirrup at the time of mounting.

Imam Hussein puts on his shroud. The shroud is a piece of white cloth about two metres in length and one and a half metre in width with a hole in the centre for the head and neck. When it is worn, half of it lays in front and half in back. It is also spotted with crimson paint to represent blood. Hussein takes up his sword and puts on his boots. As he is doing so, Zainab sings:

ZAINAB: Hussein, brother of Zainab, has no assistant or friend. His sorrows are numberless and he has no one to commiserate with him. He is keening from his kinless state. Why should he not keen? He has no Ali Akbar or famous Abbas. Should I go to hold Hussein's stirrup, or should I take his elbow? My torn heart cannot endure two loads. Hussein, you go in front and we will fall into ranks behind you, so that Ibn Sad cannot say that Hussein has no soldiers.

(Addressing the harem) At this moment, women of the harem, all courageously rank yourself with military discipline to spite the spiteful enemy. My sister, Kulsum, you come to my side. Laila [Rabab], you place yourself at my right. You also bend the neck to obedience, O bride. At the time of virtuous battle, take Zulfeqar [Ali's famous sword]. Ruqiyeh dear, say your prayers, as your prayers will be granted since you are so young and your heart burns more fiercely in the flames. Hassan's orphans, loosen

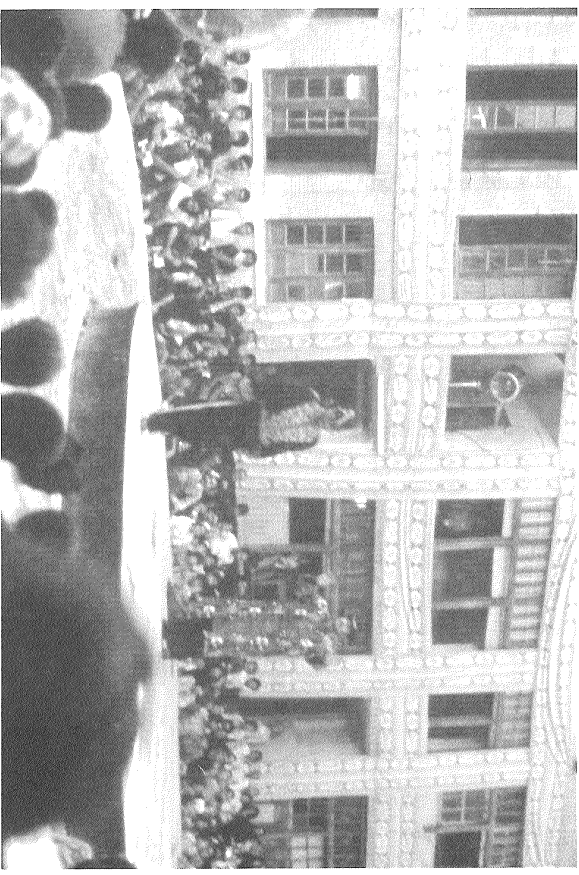
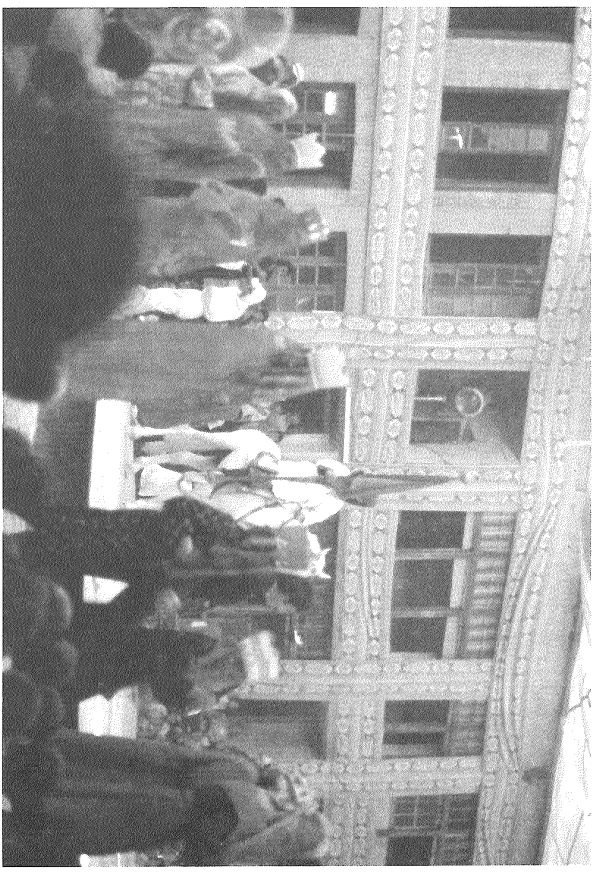


PLATE 11 (*above*): On the way to the battlefield, Hussein is intercepted by angelic forces who try to persuade him to let them take his place in combat. But he is adamant that he must fight. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by Peter J. Chelkowski.

PLATE 12 (*below*): A Christian ambassador, dressed in official nineteenth-century diplomatic attire, offers Hussein his help. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by William Shpall.

your hair and say a prayer for kindness. O God, may no sister in the world see her brother's death with wet eyes. There is not a single one to befriend us. Who has ever seen a woman become the holder of reins!

GABRIEL:¹³ O Hussein, may 100 Gabriels be ransomed to you! At the order of Glorious God, I and all the angels have arrived at the desert of calamity from the highest throne of God, so we may hold your stirrup, O emperor of the Faith. Take the bridle of Zuljenah's head, Mikhail. Take Hussein's stirrup in your palm, Sarafil. Come and mount, O light of the eyes of the Prophet, as I take your elbow with wet eyes. Place your foot on the mountain of martyrdom with heart and soul. The hours of paradise are waiting for your footsteps. There is a brass bowl in the hands of the cupbearer of the Kawсар that is full of pure water for you.

IMAM: You have gladdened my heart by God's graciousness, O Gabriel. May you receive good reward at the hand of Glorious God. Go now, in immediate haste, to the Court of Justice. Say that Ali's Hussein has made a request: 'O Deity. Behold, O Creator, how I, for the sake of Your command, willingly place my foot on the mountain of martyrdom. In this land of calamity, my head is at the edge of reckless Shemr's dagger in an eager and accepting manner. Since the command is Your command, I bow before it. I have placed my head in the snare of acceptance, submissively. By my blood, O Almighty and Merciful God, forgive the community of believers of my grandfather on the Day of Resurrection.'

GABRIEL: May I be your ransom, O light of the eye of the two worlds, the emperor of two worlds, your excellency, Imam Hussein. Don't be concerned for your Shiites, Hussein. Because of this, they will enter paradise in countless numbers.¹⁴

[. . .]

[Hussein's 23-year-old son, Sujad, wishes to fight but he is so ill that he barely recognizes his own father. Hussein reminds Sujad that his duty is to survive the battle and carry on as the Imam. Following this, four persons offer to fight and each is martyred in turn: Habib, an old retainer. Abis, Shawzab, and two young sons of Zainab. A Dervish arrives to offer his bowl of water to the afflicted camp. Hussein refuses this gift and miraculously changes the water to gold. The Dervish offers to fight but flees in terror when faced with the enemy. Hussein's little daughter, Sukaina clings to her father as he bids her farewell. Zainab laments as Hussein bids her farewell.]

In the encampment, Zainab and Rabab stand over the cradle of Ali Asghar. He is a baby of one or two months, a son to whom mother and father are dedicated.

RABAB AND ZAINAB: My little child, hushaby, hushaby. One who has not drunk of my milk, hushaby, hushaby. The playmate of Sukaina, whom I brought from Medina, O my baby without peer, the comfort of my life, hushaby, hushaby. O my baby without milk. Baby who has not drunk of my milk. Your cradle has become your grave. The arrow of calamity has become your nourishment. The comfort of my life, hushaby, hushaby. My sweet-tongued one, hushaby, hushaby.

RABAB (*the mother of Ali Asghar rocks the cradle and speaks*): My little one, why are you wailing? My indigent one, why are you weeping? You rend my breast with your nails. I don't know; I don't know if there is any milk left in my breast, O glowing flower, so that I might stake your thirst with the milk of my life. O Zainab, for what purpose have you come to the cradle? You don't sleep in your restlessness. Where is your Abbās to bring you water? (*Takes Ali Asghar to Hussein*) Dear one of her excellency, Zahra, behold the state of Ali Asghar. Ali Asghar has fainted from excess of weeping for water. Take him and consider his wounded state. Request some water for him from that malevolent tribe.

HUSSEIN: O Zainab, Um Laila came to me on this plain and was wailing from her heart—in woe, in uproar and loud wailing.

ZAINAB: Brother dear, Ali Asghar has fainted from thirst. Laila beats her head for her defenseless baby. O weary-hearted Laila, bring Ali Asghar's swaddling clothes before the sovereign of the sky, that master of slaves.

At this point they bring on a camel. Imam Hussein mounts the camel, takes Ali Asghar, holds him up in his arms and addresses the infidels.

HUSSEIN: O troops of Kufa and Damascus, all come before me. Bestow a gentle balm to the wound of my bruised body. You recognize what you see. Don't leave it in thirst. Since this baby has no fault, and cannot enter into combat with these soldiers, make him happy with a drop or two of your water. He cannot even cry 'woe' from being so disappointed of heart. Give him a haven, as he has no protection.

HAMELA (*performed by the same person who represents Shemr*,¹⁵ *Hameela steps forward, takes bow and arrow in hand*): Hussein, O issue of Zahra, you are the king seated upon the throne. Don't seek a drop of water from the repulsive and reckless tribe. Behold the calamity-arousing arrow which

is in my bow, for it will spurt pitiful poison upon the throat of your Asghar.

He loosens the arrow in the direction of Ali Asghar and Ali Asghar's swaddling clothes become bloody. Hussein takes the baby in his arms.

MAM: O God, You, who are cognizant of all piety and treachery, [are aware] that my child is no less than the foal of Saleh.¹⁶ You tortured the Jews for the sake of the foal of Saleh. [Now] burn all the non-Muslims in the flames of Your anger.

ZAINAB (*Coming before Hussein*): Hussein, Zainab is boiling in sorrow from the sacrifice of his heart. Brother dear, why is Ali Asghar sleeping in your arms?

HUSSEIN: Come sister, come out of the tent and behold with both wet eyes. Behold Ali Asghar drinks water from the pool of Kawсар.

ZAINAB (*takes the child into her arms*): Brother dear, why did they not show some mercy in friendship? The blood of my heart flows forever from my two eyes. Take this baby from me and bury him in friendship. He will rest now in love and loyalty.

HUSSEIN (*takes the child*): O my God, the foal of Saleh is not higher in rank to You than my Ali Asghar. Since You wished it thus, may he be ransomed to You, as well as my head, my body, my Asghar and my Akbar. *Imam Hussein dismounts from the camel and lays the baby on the ground. He digs a grave with his sword. At this time, he replaces the baby with a dummy and the baby is taken away. Hussein prays over the baby and lays him to rest within the grave. As he begins to throw dirt on the baby's face, Rabab hurries in from the tent.*

RABAB: Don't lay the bricks of the tomb until I arrive and take a last look at the face of Asghar. Alas, Asghar's throat, this suckling baby, is ripped to pieces by the arrow of tyranny. May the most exalted God give us justice from this malevolence-seeking, tyrannical tribe, as they have tyrannically killed the crown of my head: both my Ali's, great and small [Akbar and Asghar]. My dearest, light of my eyes, when you get to heavenly paradise, take my pleas before your grandmother, her excellency, Zahra.

Hussein buries the swaddled dummy of the baby.

[...]

[A messenger arrives with letters from Hussein's daughter in Medina. (The Khour version started with a scene in which Fatemeh, Hussein's daughter, gives the messenger the letters.) Following this, Zafar, King of the Jimn, offers his army to aid Hussein. Hussein thanks Zafar but refuses the offer. Hussein points out that although he could single-handedly crush his enemies, he accepts his impending martyrdom.]

Hussein asks Ibn Sad to come to the centre of the arena and they engage in question and answer.

HUSSEIN: Come for a moment, alone, before me, O evil Ibn Sad.

IBN SAD: What balm do you apply to my bruised heart in your kindness, O king?

HUSSEIN: The purpose of my coming at this moment is to ask for a drop of water.

IBN SAD: Know that water is out of the question for you on this plain.

HUSSEIN: How long do you intend to keep my miserable self in thirst?

IBN SAD: Until evil Yazid becomes grateful for my endeavours.

HUSSEIN: Why should Yazid be grateful to you, tell me, O ignorant one?

IBN SAD: If I cut your head from your body, Yazid will be pleased with me.

HUSSEIN: What reward will you receive if you take him my head?

IBN SAD: In exchange for your pure head, I will govern in Rayy.

HUSSEIN: Don't be deceived by Rayy, as you will not eat its wheat.

IBN SAD: If there is no wheat, my heart will easily be satisfied with barley.

HUSSEIN: What is the purpose of killing Hussein for a piece of barley?

IBN SAD: To prevent you from possessing a post in Iraq or Arabia.

HUSSEIN: I withdraw from Iraq and Arabia and turn my face to the land of the Franks.

IBN SAD: Don't struggle in vain, as I will not allow you to go to the land of the Franks.

HUSSEIN: I withdraw from Iraq, so open the way for me to go to Ethiopia.

IBN SAD: Impossible, this is impossible, as you yourself are well cognizant.

HUSSEIN: Tell me, what have I done? In sincerity, did I engage in a pure or in a polluted course?

IBN SAD: You must drink from the cup of death which is full to the brim.

HUSSEIN (*raising his head*): O God, You are compassionate! O God, You are merciful! I have reached the end of my arguments with these ones who have lost the way on this plain. Ali, mighty one of the universe, O mighty Wali of God, behold! Your Hussein is alone in combat with all these foes.

[...]

The battle between Hussein, Ibn Sad and Shemr begins. While the battle is raging, Sultan Qais, king of India, and his Vizier enter onto the stage of the ta'zieh. They are clothed in gorgeous and ornamented clothes and are holding guns and swords.

SULTAN QAIS: O Vizier, I have fast become very sorrowful today.

VIZIER: Yes, I, like your excellency, feel uneasy.

SULTAN QAIS: Vizier, I have fast become very depressed today.

VIZIER: Yes, I also am struggling with my destiny in this manner.

SULTAN QAIS: Vizier, do you have any idea what day of the week it is or what month?

VIZIER: Yes, it is the month of Muharram, Friday, Ashura [the 10th day].

SULTAN QAIS: During each month of Muharram, I become very depressed.

VIZIER: Yes, I also become weary of life in this way.

SULTAN QAIS: Vizier, do you know how long it has been since the *Hijra*¹⁸ of the Seal [Muhammad, the last prophet]?

VIZIER: Ninety-two years have passed since the *Hijra* of that prince of the world.¹⁹

SULTAN QAIS: Vizier, I am very afraid that the Faith will fall under a severe illness.

VIZIER: What is your fear for the Faith, direct me, O lord?

SULTAN QAIS: I fear that my master, Hussein, son of Ali, may come to some injury.

VIZIER: Don't speak of misfortune as the words may bring the same to pass.

SULTAN QAIS: I fear for Hussein, O God, don't render me hopeless.

VIZIER: I am very frightened by all your words regarding Hussein.

SULTAN QAIS: O God, protect Hussein from sorrow and suffering.

VIZIER: What is your fright, what is your fear that you run so anxiously toward the wilderness?

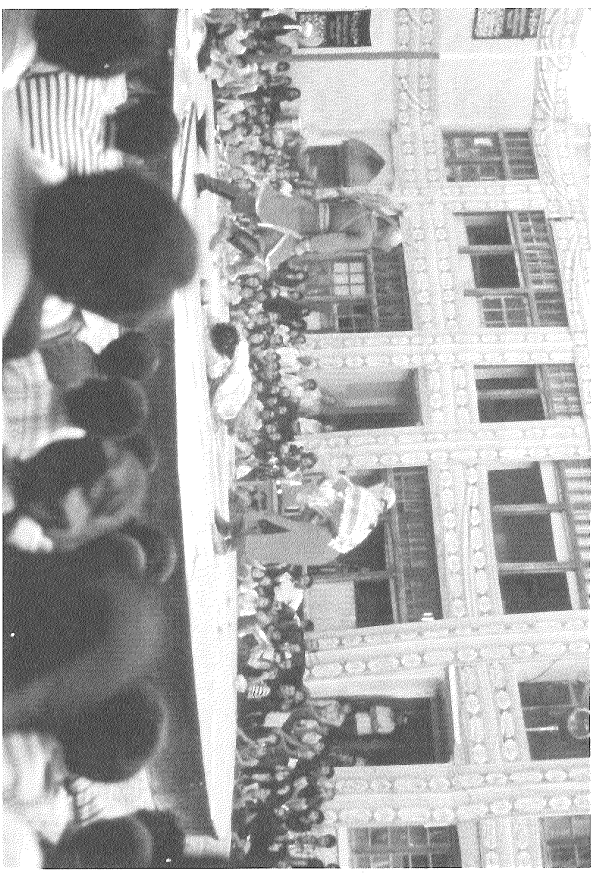


PLATE 13. His shroud already bloodied, Hussein is kicked by Shemr, the arch villain. Hussein/eh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by William Shpall.

At this moment, a lion appears. This is portrayed by an actor wearing a costume made of yellow cloth and carefully constructed to represent a lion.

SULTAN QAS: O Vizier, behold a fierce lion comes from the thicket.

VIZIER: By God's Muhammad, you yourself are a lion. Why are you afraid of a lion?

SULTAN QAS: Give me a bunch of arrows, so I may weary him of his life.²⁰

VIZIER: Gird your will to aim the arrow and conquer the lion. *(At this moment, the lion, saying 'Ali, Ali', attacks them.)*

SULTAN QAS: Vizier, the lion has turned and is after our lives.

VIZIER: Tell your God, O king, to save you from this disaster.

SULTAN QAS: Vizier, if you have any new incantations, bring them to mind.

VIZIER: There is no escape unless Hussein comes to your aid.

SULTAN QAS: Hussein, O lord of the good, king, aid me, aid me.

VIZIER: Hussein, O king of the oppressed, king, aid me, aid me.

At this moment, Imam Hussein leaves the field of battle with his bloody shroud and sword. He goes to befriend Sultan Qas.

HUSSEIN: Here am I, O beloved one. I have just arrived. I raised a sigh of woe from my heart for your dejected wails. I come, O wounded friend, I come. I come, with many wounds, I come. I come to aid you at this time. Since you are a friend, I respond to your lamentations. O lion, did not my father repeatedly tell you in minute detail that all those who place their love with us are forbidden for all the wild animals?

At this point, the lion circles Hussein and kisses his feet.

SULTAN QAS: Hussein, you are the source of power for the community of believers, O one of Mustafa [Muhammad] lineage.

HUSSEIN: I am he, yes, O lord. What is your aim; what is your request?

SULTAN QAS: Come to India and leave the calamity-filled Karbala behind.

HUSSEIN: What would be the profit of remaining here after the youthful

Akbar?

SULTAN QAS: Hussein's request has only to be uttered to be obeyed.

HUSSEIN: Return to India and be my mourner for a 10-day period.²¹

Sultan Qas, his Vizier, and the lion leave the arena. It should appear that this scene took place in India and that Imam Hussein went there in response to the plea of Sultan Qas who was a Shiite. The battle begins and Hussein continues.

[. . .]²²

O master of Zulfiqar, the time for aid has come! O father of the seven and four, the time for aid has come. O conqueror of Nahravan and victor of Khaibar,²³ until the time when I forfeit my life, the time for aid has come. All those [in the audience] who are the special Shiite of Ali, raise the cry of 'Hail Ali' from the heart. All who are members of the community of believers of the grandfather of Hussein, raise the cry of 'Hail Hussein' from the heart.

IBN SAD: O troops, Hussein is standing in the arena. Separate into four groups and surround him from all four sides. Strike that lord with arrow, spear and vengeful stones. Throw the light of the eye of the Prophet to the ground. To gain the acceptance of tyrannical and treacherous Yazid, take revenge on the life of that kinless king. All who strive now will enjoy the fruits of status and post.

The wails of 'Allah, Akbar' from Imam Hussein and the running of Shemr and Ibn Sad, the movement of the swords and the exciting sounds of the drums all serve to create tension. After a while, Hussein falls to the ground. The mourning commemoration [this play] reaches its climax. Imam Hussein gathers the dust under his head and, as Ibn Sad and Shemr attack him, he speaks.

HUSSEIN: O dust of Karbala, befriend me. Since my mother is not here, mother me. O dust of Karbala, be a balm to my head. I am dejected and defenseless for the sake of my father's Shiites.

[. . .]

[Zainab rushes out to the battlefield and laments Hussein's condition.]

IBN SAD *(bringing out his poniard)*: Who from among the commanders of this army will take this poniard and go to the slaughter ground and sever the head of the king of the martyrs from his body, so I may receive the reward from Yazid?

SHEMR: O lord, give the cutting poniard to me.²⁴ I will sever the head of this king of the dry-mouthed ones. I, who do not possess a speck of Muslim feeling in me, will strike with my boots at the chest that holds the standard of God.

At this moment, Abdullah, the son of Imam Hassan, who is a little boy, runs from the encampment to the arena.

ABDULLA: God, what do I see in the gallows of the universe? What profit comes from the malevolence of the foe. Perhaps they have thrown my

uncle, Hussein, onto the dust of the arena from his seat on the horse's saddle. O aunt, gaze at this wilderness which has turned into the plain of Resurrection by the malice of the foe. One oppressor hits his side with a stone. One infidel shuts out his life with a dagger. (*He sits in Hussein's lap*) Greetings, O flower of the true garden, O dear uncle, may this dejected and miserable one be ransomed to you.

HUSSEIN: Uncle's dearest, why have you come to this place at this time? Arrows fall like rain from this tribe; why did you come? The wound of Akbar is on my heart; you have come to light my eyes. Don't preen; may I be your ransom? You have come on the [final] journey.

ABDULLA: Dear uncle, I have come to greet the martyr. I have come from the veiled place to kiss your feet. I have come to be beheaded on your lap, to be killed and ransomed for Ali Akbar. I will go to the Prophet and complain of his community of believers. I will narrate the beheading [as in 'beheading'] of Abbas to Haidar [Ali].

SHEMR: Who are you, O child of the auspicious countenance, that you make a stream of blood flow from the sea of your eyes?

ABDULLA: Why do you ask my name, O result of the repulsive? I am an orphan child, Abdulla by name.

SHEMR: O orphan, I have no fear of shedding blood. I have cast 1,000 orphans like you into the dust.

ABDULLA: O you who are in haste to slaughter me, may all your hopes be unfulfilled after my slaughter. How long will you remain ignorant of the Day of Accounting? I am thirsty; thirsty for a drop of water.

Shemr pulls Abdulla away from Hussein's lap and slaughters him. Zainab tries to pull Shemr and Ibn Sadi away from Hussein.

ZAINAB: Give me a moment's respite to pull Hussein's feet toward the *qibla*²⁵ and gaze my fill of Hussein's beauteous face at his moment of dying. Finally, this dry-mouthed one has seen the wound of a brother, the wound of Abbas; the mourning of youthful Akbar also seen. Hold on a moment, so my sorrowful self can come above his head and loyally bind his wet eyes at the moment of death. Don't hit this wounded breast with your booted foot. Don't stab this wounded throat with the vengeful poniard.

HUSSEIN: Return to the tent, my miserable sister, so you will not see me thus under the poniard. I am on the slaughter ground near the corpse of Ali

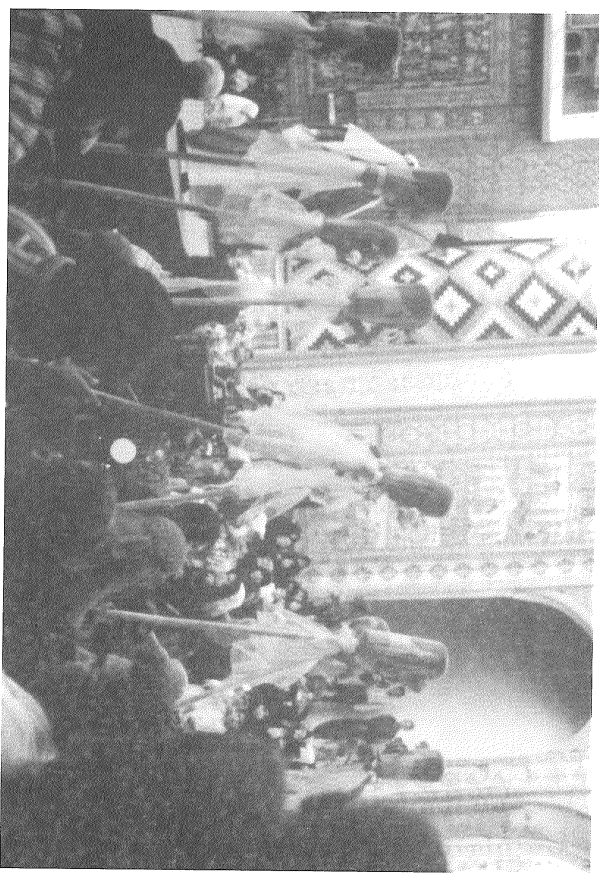


PLATE 14: This scene depicts the captivity on the way to Damascus in the *Ta'zieh of Bazar-e Sham*. The poles are wrapped in green fabric to represent the heads of the martyrs. Taktyeh Muaven al Mulk in Kiermanshah, 1999. Photograph by Peter Anthony Chelkowski.

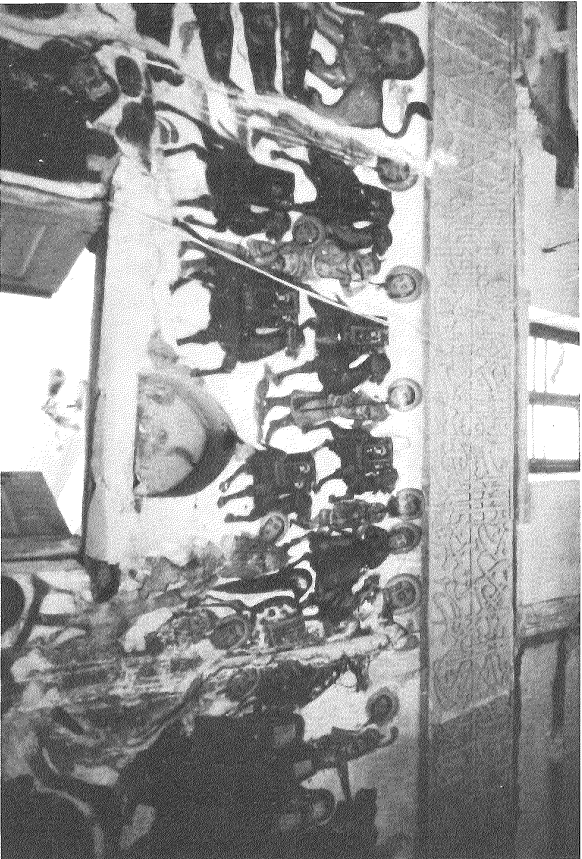


PLATE 15: Realistic mural of the captives on the way to Damascus. The decapitated heads of the martyrs are carried on spikes. Imamzadeh Shah Zaid, Isfahan, second half of the nineteenth century. Courtesy of Peter J. Chelkowski.

Akbar. You go to the tent to be near my Zainl Abedin [Sujad]. Your destiny and mine was set thus from eternity without beginning: you would be a captive and I would sit in blood.

SHEMR (*comes above Hussein's head*): O Hussein, say your *shahada*,²⁶ O Hussein, as I will sever your head, O Hussein. I strike the first blow to bloody the heart of Zahra. I will make Ali's eye an Oxus River with my second blow. The third blow will blast a hole in the heart of the dejected Mustafa. With the fourth blow, I will melt the body and life of Mujtaba. I will make Sukaina an orphan with the fifth blow. The world will be cast into fright and terror with the sixth blow. The seventh and eighth blow will destroy the world. I will roast the hearts of the Shites with the ninth blow. I will strike the tenth blow and bloody the heart with the eleventh blow. I will make the houris and jinn and angels insane by this. I strike the final blow and finish Hussein's business. I raise his light-filled head on the point of a spear and Greetings!²⁷

Notes

- 1 This article was first published in *The Drama Review* 49(4) (T188) (Winter 2005): 28–41.
- 2 It is very unusual for the villains in these plays to refer to each other with such positive epithets.
- 3 Ubaidulla Ibn (son of) Ziyad was the governor of Kufa who sent the army against Hussein. He did so at the order of Yazid, whose caliphate Hussein was opposing. The 'and' is probably an editorial error or the second name should be Yazid rather than Ibn Ziyad.
- 4 Hussein's half-brother and standard bearer.
- 5 Hussein's 18-year-old son.
- 6 Hussein's 16-year-old nephew whose marriage to Hussein's daughter takes place in Karbala prior to his martyrdom.
- 7 Two short speeches of Shemr and Ibn Sad have been cut here.
- 8 This is the end of the Chodzko version.
- 9 The stage directions have been added by Morteza Honari.
- 10 In the Pelly Collection, scene 23, 'Martyrdom of Husain', Hussein introduces a note of mystery and secrecy when he asks Zainab to bring him this garment. Later in the same scene, Hussein meets a Dervish who is on the verge of losing his faith because it seems to him that God has been rewarding the

sinfult with riches while punishing the righteous with calamity. Hussein explains that he accepts the suffering willingly in order to win the position of redeemer (Pelly, 1970, vol. 2: 96–8).

11 A portion of Zainab's lament has been deleted here.

12 Ta'ziyeh performances are accompanied by music and all the victims sing their lines while the villains shout their speeches.

13 Since many versions include the arrival of Archangel Gabriel at this point in order to emphasize Hussein's stature as well as his power to avoid martyrdom had he so desired, this segment from the Chodzko version has been included.

14 This is the end of the Chodzko segment.

15 In some versions, the character of Shemr slaughters the baby himself. The editor of this play may have decided to be historically accurate in identifying the killer as Hammela, yet assigning the role to the same actor who portrays Shemr.

16 According to a footnote in the dissertation of Mehrangiz Hatami Farahnakianpoor, 'A Survey of Dramatic Activity in Iran from 1850 to 1950', from Brigham Young in 1977, this was a special camel which produced enough milk to feed half of a tribe. Some in this tribe became greedy and killed the camel's foal, hoping to get more milk. The camel's milk dried up completely and the camel laid a curse on the tribe. Apparently, this curse ultimately destroyed the entire tribe (1977: 128).

17 One solo lament by Zainab and one solo lament by Hussein have been cut here.

18 The migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622, marking the start of the Muslim calendar.

19 Ninety-two years after the Hijra would put this scene in 714; Hussein was martyred in 680. It is possible that the poets wished to indicate that Hussein transported himself in time as well as space to aid the Sultan of India.

20 I am not sure why Sultan Qais resorts to bow and arrow since the stage directions described these two characters as entering with guns and swords.

21 It is strange that Hussein should advise Sultan Qais to 'return' to India when the stage directions that follow this scene make it clear that it is Hussein who has travelled to India rather than the other way around.

22 Hussein's solo lament on his lonely state has been cut here.

23 These references are to his father, Ali.

24 Other versions often have a segment in which several different persons are dispatched to deliver the deathblow to Hussein before Shemr finally gets the assignment. Some are too frightened to face Hussein and repent. Others

are turned away by Hussein for not bearing the correct signs of his fated killer.

25 The direction to which all Muslims turn when they pray: Mecca.

26 The Muslim creed, which states, 'I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.' The Shiites add, 'And Ali is His Wali.'

27 Typically, the ta'ziyeh of Hussein ends with the arrival of the lion from the scene of Sultan Qais. This lion arranges the corpses as it laments silently.

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THE ORIGINS OF THE SUNNITE-SHIITE DIVIDE AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE TA'ZIYEH TRADITION¹

by Kamran Scot Aghaie

Islam, like most other religions, has always been characterized by a number of internal divisions. The major division in Islam is between the Sunnites and the Shiites. Today, Sunnites make up approximately 85–90 per cent of Muslims in the world, while Shiites constitute approximately 10–15 per cent. Approximately half of the Shiites live in Iran with smaller concentrations found in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Eastern Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Afghanistan and parts of South Asia. In most of these countries the Shiites have little or no influence in the government. The only explicitly Shiite government is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was established during the revolutionary upheaval in 1978–79. However, a small Alawi Shiite minority also dominates the Syrian government, and Zaydi Shiites are included in the Yemeni state as well. The largest group of Shiites is the so-called Twelvers (Ithna Asharis or Imamis), whose name derives from their belief that there were 12 imams, the last of whom has existed in a supernatural or metaphysical state of occultation from 874 CE to the present. Since we are primarily concerned here with the ta'ziyeh tradition, which is associated mainly with the Twelver Shiites of Iran, I will focus on this strain of Shiism.²

The roots of the Sunni–Shiite schism are found in the crisis of succession that occurred after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. One of the key distinctions between the two factions is the Sunni belief in the *caliphate*, as opposed to the Shiite belief in the *imamate*. Shiites have traditionally believed that there was a chain of pious descendants of Prophet Muhammad, beginning with his son-in-law Ali (d. 661), who were meant to succeed him, one after the other, following his death. Shiites consider these

imams to be infallible religious guides for humanity, although not prophets. Shiites believe that devotion to the imams brings them closer to God.³

Sunnites, on the other hand, have traditionally held that the caliphs were the legitimate successors to Prophet Muhammad. The caliphs were selected according to political processes rather than being explicitly selected by the Prophet himself. Shiites consider the caliphs to be usurpers of the authority of the imams. This fundamental disagreement was compounded by later political divisions, which encouraged further divergence in political and legal systems, ritual practices and theological doctrines. Despite their differing views, the relations between Sunnites and Shiites have varied dramatically throughout history, ranging from open conflict or hostility to acceptance and rapprochement.⁴

The disputes surrounding the succession to Prophet Muhammad precipitated the fundamental schism between Sunnites and Shiites. When the Prophet died in 632, the community was relatively unprepared to deal with the consequences. During this time of crisis Umar raised Abu Bakr's hand in a public gathering and declared him Muhammad's successor. Those present accepted this and thus the institution of the caliphate came into being.⁵ In 634, shortly before Abu Bakr passed away, he appointed Umar as the second caliph, and Umar in turn appointed a committee of notables to select the third caliph. They selected Uthman, who was killed in 656 by a disgruntled mob unhappy with his policies. Upon his death Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, assumed the position of caliph. Many of Ali's supporters asserted that the Prophet had left instructions that Ali should succeed him following his death. One typical example is said to have occurred at a place on the way from Mecca to Medina called Ghadir Khum, following Muhammad's final pilgrimage to Mecca, a few months before his death. According to numerous accounts:

And then he [Muhammad] took Ali by the hand and said to the people:

'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 [Ma'ula], then Ali is also his Lord. O God! Be thou the supporter of whoever supports Ali and the enemy of whoever opposes him' (in Jafri 1978: 15).

Tensions were dramatically worsened by events that unfolded once Ali assumed the position of caliph in 656. The Prophet's wife Aishah challenged Ali's authority in the Battle of the Camel, so named because the fighting took place around a camel on which Aishah rode. No sooner had Ali put down this rebellion, then he was faced with another military challenge from the powerful military general Muawiyah, governor of Syria, which resulted in a stalemate, and, eventually, an arbitrated settlement. This unsatisfactory outcome turned a small group of Ali's supporters against him. These rebels, who were referred to as Khawarij, condemned Ali for failing to decisively crush Muawiyah's rebellion, and denounced him as caliph. Although Ali defeated the Khawarij, one of their adherents assassinated him in 661. Ironically, this set the stage for Muawiyah to assume the office of caliph, thus ending the period of the 'rightly guided' caliphs, and establishing the Umayyad Caliphate, one of three early Muslim empires, which lasted for a century.

The Umayyad period is critically important in understanding the schism that developed between the Sunnites and Shiites, because Ali's descendants, especially his sons Hassan and Hussein, were increasingly perceived by opposition groups as the ideal rivals of the Umayyad Caliphs. Muawiyah and his successors, therefore, were particularly hostile toward these supporters of Ali and his sons (called *Alids*). It was routine for the Umayyads to condemn or persecute the *Alids*. 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.

The Battle of Karbala is the ultimate climax of this dizzying series of conflicts, battles and debates. In many ways it is also the most important symbolic event for Shiites, after the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632, because it is the ultimate exemplar of the Sunni–Shiite conflict. The battle serves as a religious model for behaviour among Shiites who are expected to struggle in the path of God, even if they face oppression and persecution from the Sunni rulers. It is no surprise, therefore, that the vast majority of distinctly Shiite rituals are derived from the events that took place during the Battle of Karbala.

According to the surviving sources, the Prophet's grandson Hussein, who lived in Western Arabia, received various letters from Muslims living

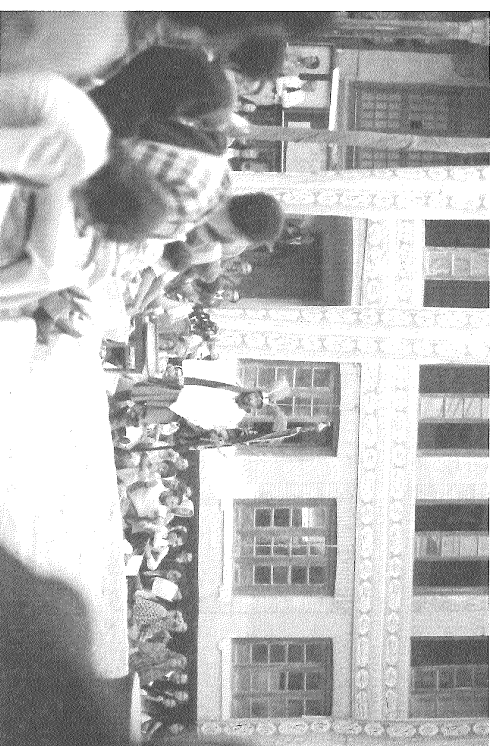


PLATE 16: Abbas, the standard bearer of Hussein, reaches the Euphrates River, represented by a basin of water. He sings one of the best 'arias' in the ta'zīyeh repertoire, an ode to the river. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by William Shpall.

in southern Iraq asking him to come to their assistance and rid them of the tyrannical rule of the caliph Yazid. 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. Yazid was portrayed as morally corrupt, religiously impious and politically oppressive. Hussein, on the other hand, was represented as pious, just and capable.

Hussein reportedly responded to this call by sending representatives to Iraq to confirm the support of the local population for his rule (Howard 1990). Yazid, in turn sent spies and soldiers to capture or execute anyone who expressed support for Hussein. After hearing of this, Hussein travelled to Iraq with most of his immediate family members and a few close supporters. Yazid, in turn, sent his troops to intercept Hussein and his followers. 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. Hussein pleaded for food and water for the children, but was absolutely firm in his rejection of Yazid. Over the course of the first 10 days of the month of Muharram, Hussein's male supporters were killed one by one in combat, with Hussein being the last to be martyred on the 10th day, known as Ashura.

After brutally massacring the men, Yazid's troops stormed the camp where the women and children were staying, taking captives and setting the tents on fire. Those who survived the battle were then taken in chains to Yazid's court in Damascus. Their captivity is understood by Shiites to be a horrible ordeal of injustice and humiliation, especially considering that they were direct descendants and relatives of Prophet Muhammad. Hussein's sister, Zainab, publicly challenged and condemned Yazid. In this typical Shiite account, Zainab addresses Yazid, saying:

You are not a human being, you are not human, you are an oppressor who inherited bloodthirsty oppression from your father! [...] Even though my heart is wounded, and wearied, and my tears are flowing [because of the massacre of Karbala], surely very soon the day of God's punishment will come and everyone will be subjected to God's justice, and this is sufficient for us. [...] If fate has brought me here to face you, this was not something that I wished to happen. But now that it is so, I count you as small and I reproach you [...] (Eshtehardi 1997: 26–8; translation mine).

Even setting aside the eventual Sunni–Shiite split, the Muslim community was deeply traumatized by the Battle of Karbala. The slaughter called to mind earlier traumatic events, such as the Battle of the Camel and the Battle of Siffin, in which pious and respected Muslims fought on both sides. Following the Battle of Karbala, opposition groups routinely used the tragedy of Karbala as a rallying cry. Some of these movements were explicitly Shiite while others were simply hostile toward the Umayyads and looked favourably upon the family of the Prophet. In fact, the Abbasids, who by 750 had overthrown the Umayyads and established a new caliphate, called the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), made very extensive use of the Battle of Karbala to gain popular support during their initial rebellion.

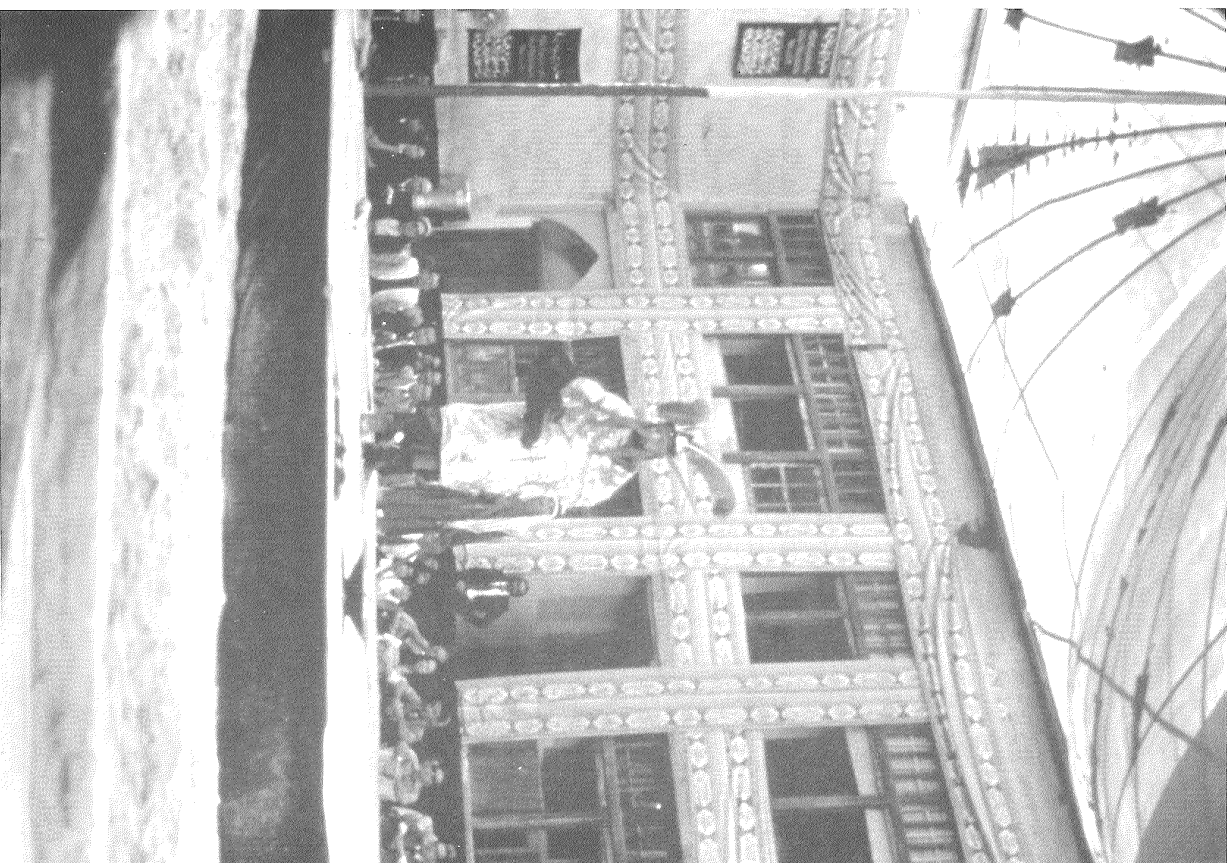


PLATE 17: As Abbas attempts to bring water back to the encampment, he is attacked by the enemy forces, losing first one arm and then the other. His shroud becomes more red than white. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by William Shpall.

However, once they came to power, they ruled over their empire as a Sunniite dynasty for the next five centuries.

Shiism had come into being during the chaotic political environment of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, at which point Alid sentiments evolved into a wide variety of heterodox Shiite strains, from which Orthodox Twelver Shiism emerged. The rulers' rejection of these Shiite tendencies eventually culminated in the emergence of what we now call Orthodox Sunniite Islam. In other words, Sunnism emerged largely as a response to Shiism and other heterodox movements of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. It was also during this time that the foundations were laid for the rich tradition of Shiite rituals. Following the Battle of Karbala, elegies were composed and recited for the martyrs. The following is a short excerpt from one of these:

Now listen to the story of the martyrdom and how they deprived Hussein of water; and when he was fighting on the plain of Kerbela how they behaved meanly and unjustly. They cut off the head of a descendant of the prophet in that fiery land! But the Imam lives, his foot in the stirrup and mounted upon his horse! He will not be killed! [...] The angels in heaven bewailed their deaths and have wept so copiously that water was flowing from the leaves of the trees and plants. Then you must weep for a while; for after this tragedy of Ta'fi, laughter is unlawful. (Sahib Ibn Abbad in Bakrash 1979: 97)⁶

By the time the Buyids, a local Shii dynasty in southern Iran, took control of the central Abbasid lands, pious elegies had evolved into ritual performances. In 963, Muizz al-Dawlah, a Shiite ruler from southern Iran, relied on public displays of Shiite ideals to promote his religious legitimacy and to strengthen the sense of Shiite solidarity in and around Baghdad. The famous fourteenth-century Arab historian Ibn al-Kathir recounts:

On the tenth of Muharram of this year [AH 352], Muizz ad-Dawla Ibn Buwayh, may God disgrace him, ordered that the markets be closed, and that the women should wear coarse woollen hair cloth, and that they should go into the markets with their faces uncovered/unveiled and their hair disheveled, beating their faces and wailing over Hussein Ibn Abi Talib. The people of the Sunna could not prevent this spectacle because of the Shia's large numbers and

their increasing power (*zuhur*), and because the sultan was on their side (in Eshtehardi 1997: 26–8).

Shiite rituals continued to evolve somewhat sporadically over the centuries in isolated communities, and under the patronage of regional Shiite nobles or rulers. Then, in the sixteenth century the Safavid dynasty established a massive Shiite state centred on the Iranian Plateau, and worked systematically to enhance their religious legitimacy by promoting explicitly Shiite rites. This was a watershed event for Orthodox Shiism. It was in this environment from 1501 to 1502 CE that the popular religious orator, Hussein Vaiz Kashifi, composed his seminal work, *Rawzat al-shuhada* (The Garden of Martyrs, 1962; see Bakrash 1979: 97). While there were countless earlier historical accounts and pious elegies, this book represents a new trend involving the synthesis of various historical accounts, elegiac poems, theological tracts and hagiographies into a chain of short narratives that together formed a much larger narrative. This book also articulated a complex set of canonized doctrines, which stressed the courage, piety and sacrifice of Hussein and his followers at Karbala.

This new genre of pious narratives was read aloud in religious gatherings and evolved into mourning rituals called *rawzeh khani*, which roughly translates as 'reading the *rawzeh*' (i.e. reading the book, *Rawzat al-shuhada*). The *rawzeh khani* was (and still is) a ritual in which a sermon was given based on *Rawzat al-shuhada* or some similar text, with a great deal of improvisation on the part of a specially trained speaker or orator. The objective of the speaker was to move the audience to tears through his recitation of the tragic details of the Battle of Karbala (Mazzaoui 1979: 231). This type of mourning ritual has been viewed by Shiites as a means of achieving salvation by developing the spiritual equivalent of empathy and sympathy for the martyrs. This belief is illustrated by the often-repeated quotation, 'Anyone who cries for Hussein or causes someone to cry for Hussein shall go directly to paradise' (Calmard 1979: 122).

By the Qajar period (1796–1925) the *rawzeh khani* had evolved into a much more elaborate ritual called *shabih khani* or *ta'ziyeh khani*. The *ta'ziyeh*, an elaborate theatrical performance of the Karbala story based on the same narratives used in the *rawzeh khani*, involved a large cast of professional and amateur actors, a director, a staging area, costumes and props. The Qajars were great sponsors of these rituals, and social and religious status

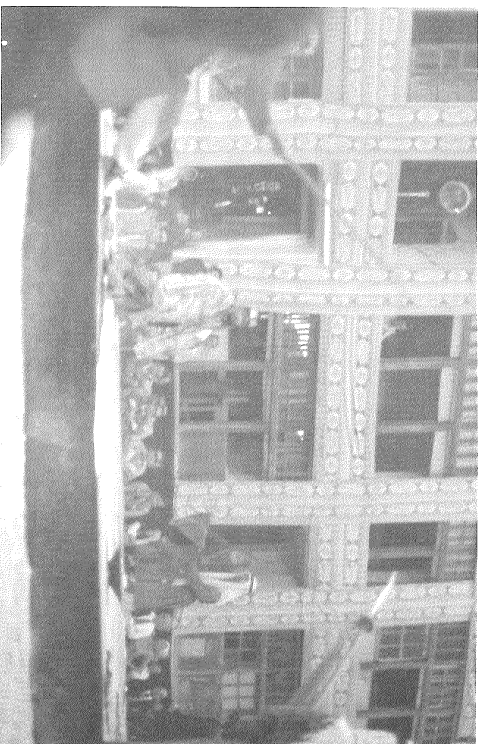


PLATE 18: Abbas in the final moments before his death, still trying to fight off his foes. Husseiniyeh Mushir, Shiraz, August 1976. Photograph by William Shpall.

among the elites were based partly on their ability to sponsor such events on a large scale. These rituals, which were also patronized by a variety of social groups organized around guild, neighbourhood, tribe or ethnicity, also reinforced a variety of social identities (Calnard 1979: 122).⁷ This ritual reached its greatest popularity during the late Qajar period, after which it entered a relative decline until it became much less common in the large cities in the 1930s and 1940s. However, ta'ziyehs continued to exist in Iran on a smaller scale throughout the twentieth century, especially in traditional sectors of cities and in rural areas.

The ta'ziyeh ritual is the culmination of centuries of sectarian development, beginning with the crisis of succession to Prophet Muhammad in 632, which in turn led to a series of political and military conflicts. By far the most significant conflict was the Battle of Karbala, in which Hussein and his supporters were martyred. The collective memory of Karbala, combined with later historical, political and ideological trends, produced the rituals associated with Shiism, such as the ta'ziyeh, which is arguably the most distinctive ritual of Orthodox Twelver Shiism in Iran.

Notes

- 1 This article was first published in *The Drama Review* 49(4) (T188) (Winter 2005): 42–47.
- 2 Shiism has numerous divisions, such as the Ismailis, Zaydis, Alawis and Ithna Asharis. The roots of the divisions between different strains of Shiism can be found in the historical development of Shiism in the centuries after Prophet Muhammad's death. The distinctions between these different branches of Shiism consist of different legal systems, ritual practices and theological doctrines. More specifically, these different Shiite groups have historically disagreed among themselves regarding the identity, nature and sequence of the imams.
- 3 For a more detailed discussion, see Momen (1985).
- 4 For a detailed discussion of the crisis of succession, see Madelung (1997).
- 5 For an Orthodox Shiite perspective on the succession struggle, see Tabatabai (1977).
- 6 Sahib Ibn Abbād was a prominent poet from the Buyid era.
- 7 *Rawzeh khans* were usually men, although occasionally female orators gave the sermon in private rawzeh khans attended exclusively by women.

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ACTING STYLES AND ACTOR TRAINING IN TA'ZIYEH¹

by William O. Beeman and Mohammad B. Chaffari

Ta'ziyeh inhabits a broad space in the performance traditions of the world. It straddles the line between great art and traditional theatre and verges on ritual. Like many Asian theatrical traditions, there are no training manuals and no schools of instruction for *ta'ziyeh* performers. That such a grandly impressive tradition could emerge from an informal training system is surprising. Insofar as it is possible to speak of *ta'ziyeh* training, such an assessment must be made ethnographically by witnessing troupes and talking to individual performers.

The authors have been working with *ta'ziyeh* performers over a span of more than 30 years—in villages, in urban areas, at national festivals and specially staged performances in venues that are not typical for this genre, such as enclosed theatrical spaces in Iran as well as in Europe and North America. In particular, Mohammad B. Chaffari has produced more performances of *ta'ziyeh* for nontraditional audiences than any other artist, and has not only researched the topic but also worked directly with many troupes and individual performers.

Although there are more than 250 known *ta'ziyeh* dramas, with subjects ranging from the tragic to the comic, the most popular centre on the passion of Imam Hussein, grandson of Prophet Muhammad. These dramas are essentially the story of a multigenerational family and its enemies. There are male and female characters, all played by men, and the performers are of all ages, from infancy to senescence. In addition, a whole range of both realistic and fantastic figures are represented throughout the dramas.²

A PROFESSION NOBLE AND IGNOBLE

Being a *ta'ziyeh* performer is both a noble and an ignoble profession. The term for a *ta'ziyeh* performer is *ta'ziyeh khan* (*ta'ziyeh* 'singer' or 'reader'—

the Persian word is the same for both actions). The *ta'ziyeh* performer chooses his profession, and must do so with a degree of care. The excitement of performing and the devotion to the art that may attract a young person is tempered later in life by the fact that performers in Iran may be denigrated, even if performing noble or heroic works of art such as *ta'ziyeh*.

The social opprobrium that attaches to musical performance and acting in general among the most conservative Muslims lends a slight taint to the performers of *ta'ziyeh*, although this is mitigated by the fact that so much of *ta'ziyeh* performance deals with the sacred subject of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. Even so, performers may have to endure occasional quizzical inquiries from friends and relatives about their activities. The ambiguities involved in performing essentially guarantee that *ta'ziyeh* is an activity that young people engage in because they belong to a family or community that supports and approves of it, or even encourages it.

SKILL SETS

There are a number of specific skill sets that distinguish *ta'ziyeh* performers from all other theatrical genres, partly as a result of the structure of the genre. Since *ta'ziyeh* is performed exclusively by men, so must all the skills required of performers be sited in the male body. Middle-age men can take heart from *ta'ziyeh* because roles like Imam Hussein are not for young people. A performer of Imam Hussein will be in his fifties or even older when he graduates to this part.

The performance traditionally takes place in a large arena in the round, although the performing area may be variously configured. Audiences in some populated areas typically run into the thousands, and so the performance skills of *ta'ziyeh* performers must be extraordinary, since they traditionally perform without amplification. Those performers who sing (the protagonists) must be able to project their voices in spaces as large as the grandest opera houses in the West. Those who declaim (the antagonists) must be able to do the same. The arena is large, and there is much fighting, running and athletic movement. Performers must be able to do these things and still sing and speak their lines. Finally, the most complete *ta'ziyeh* performances involve the use of animals, particularly horses. Therefore, performers must be able to sing, declaim, fight and act on horseback (or camelback).

Regarding dramatic material, *ta'ziyeh* encompasses tragic, comic, romantic, narrative and declamatory material. The same character may be

asked to portray this entire range, with the caveat that antipathetic and comic characters almost never sing, and, because of the general practice of role specialization, rarely play heroic figures after they reach adulthood. Ta'ziyeh is highly stylized in every regard. Acting styles are exaggerated. The heroic characters sing their roles, engaging in the melismatic embellishments and extreme vocal range of Persian classical music traditions, while using broad gestures and bodily attitudes. The villainous characters declaim with similarly broad ranges of vocal pitch. The most effective performers use the stylization in a clean and restrained fashion. Gestures are not overused; vocal lines are clean. When simulated weeping is called for, this is used in a limited manner. Pathos is the aim of the best ta'ziyeh depiction; bathos is not.

The greatest challenge in such a broadly realized acting style is artistic balance. One might say that the purpose of all live performance is to have an emotional effect on the audience. However, the rhetorical aim of ta'ziyeh is to affect the audience emotionally in a manner that might be considered extreme by the standards of Euro-American spoken drama. In the tragedies surrounding the Karbala cycle, if the audience is not openly weeping at strategic points, the rhetorical purpose of the drama will have failed. Therefore, the performers must carry the weight of this task, and have skills equal to this aim.³

Paradoxically, too much exaggeration in the acting style will lessen the intended effect of the drama. The most evocative acting allows the spectator to inhabit the space between the actor and the role with his or her own thoughts and emotions. Therefore, the simplest style is nearly always the most effective, even if it is broadly drawn with large vocal and physical gestures. The finest actors achieve maximum effect from minimal materials.

The humorous characters must likewise lighten the action, and not lapse into cheap clowning, while still carrying the drama forward. The humour in ta'ziyeh is most often tragicomic, and therefore extreme clowning veers too far from the delicate line shading into tragedy. The funniest characters are frequently those who are self-important or overconfident. Playing these characters with a sense of sincere belief in their commitment to their own mistaken self-view achieves precisely the right tone. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are some ta'ziyehs that are primarily humorous, and in this case the comedy is exaggerated, very-

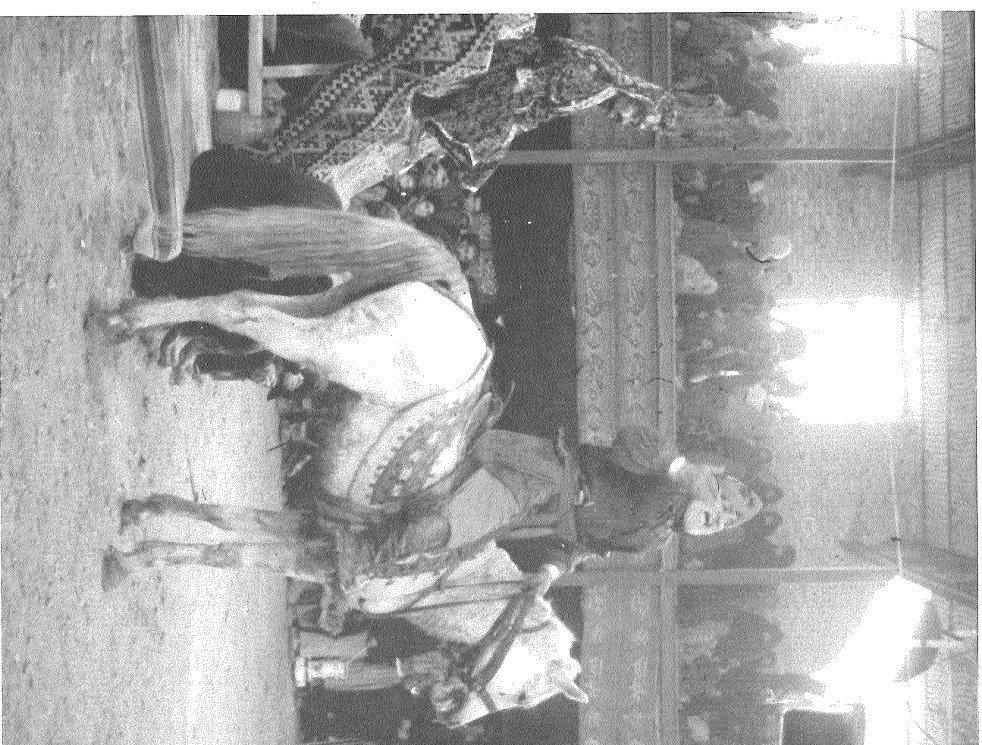


PLATE 20. Shenn and Yazid in a husseiniyeh. Habbabad near Isfahan. Photograph by William O. Beeman.

ing on the kind of improvisatory clowning seen in another Iranian traditional theatre form, the improvisatory comic form, *nu-houzi*.

Since ta'ziyeh performance is expandable and contractible at will, it is 'emergent'—to borrow Richard Bauman's term (1975)⁴—with additional material added or cut 'on the fly' by performers who have the knowledge and resources to do so. The ability to gauge the emotional state of the audience is an important skill. In the Lincoln Center performances,⁵ the ta'ziyeh performers were at a disadvantage because they didn't have any idea what the audience would be like or how it would react. Consequently, it took a directorial hand to limit the actors' penchant for adding extra material to particularly poignant scenes. Ghaffari had to explain to the actors that an American audience, who didn't know the language, would get bored, and might even leave the performance if there was too much singing. This excessive musical material can inhibit the progression of the plot, and it is the momentum of the story line that ultimately keeps the audience engaged.

On the surface it hardly seems possible that ta'ziyeh is as powerful as it is purported to be: the actors carry their parts around in their hands; they engage in no extraordinary histrionics; there is no conscious attempt to produce dramatic tension or build to a climax; they regularly break character and remain in full view of the audience while drinking tea, chatting with their fellows, etc. These facts will not be extraordinary to students of Asian theatre (or to students of Brecht), but they are usually somewhat surprising for persons whose experience is limited to the most conventional Western drama. Nevertheless, even when the language of the ta'ziyeh performance is not well understood, the power of the theatre form usually is able to reach even the most unfamiliar foreign observer. Part of the reason is the ability of the performers to draw the attention of the audience to selected aspects of their performance through vocal and physical gesture (Beeman 1979, 1981a, b).

In this regard, ta'ziyeh stands somewhere between theatre and ritual (cf. Turner 1969, 1974; Schechner 1979b). Performers are completely trained, highly skilled and committed to the aesthetics of their performance. On the other hand, their theatrical work is embedded in community events that serve an essential social purpose in the lives of the people, which is more than optional or voluntary. It should also be emphasized that ta'ziyeh performers are hired for each performance.⁶ One ta'ziyeh perform-

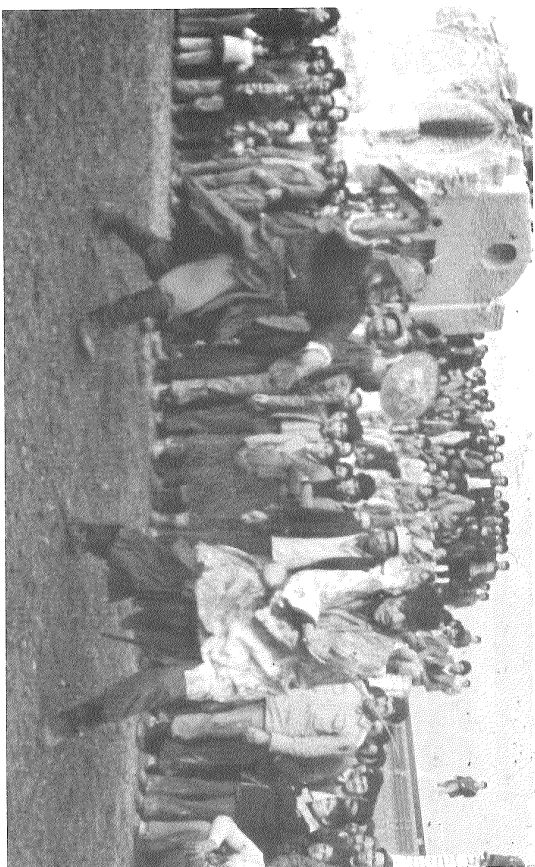


PLATE 21: Shehr and Abbas battling one another. Habbabad near Isfahan. Photograph by William O. Beeman.

ance may cost a considerable amount in Iran today. The performance must be engaging and entertaining to ensure continued community support, but it may also enjoy a certain charitable lack of rigorous aesthetic critique on the part of spectators for the sake of the role it plays in the life of the community. The performers, however, know when they have been effective and when they have not.

It should be noted that ta'ziyeh is not the exclusive purview of Shiite believers as either spectators or performers. Indeed, foreign guests of all religious persuasions can often be seen weeping openly, as was noted by international journalists at the 1976 Festival of Arts in Shiraz, when 10 performances were staged in a traditional setting, and more recently in Paris and in the Lincoln Center performances of 2002. For the historical record it should be noted that researchers Paul Ward English and Peter J. Chelkowski have claimed that they participated in ta'ziyeh performances during the course of their research (and there may be others), taking the role of the foreign ambassador who converts to Islam and is himself martyred upon confrontation with the tribulations of Hussein.

ACTOR EDUCATION

Virtually all ta'ziyeh performers are trained from childhood. Many are educated by their relatives, who themselves perform in ta'ziyeh. Others may be trained by a local *ustad* (traditional teacher) who may himself be a master performer or a producer. Training starts early, at five or six years of age. The older teachers provide singing instruction at this early age. From there the children go on to play small roles, like Sekineh (Imam Hussein's daughter), and afterward the children in the ta'ziyeh drama *Tiḡlān-e Muslem*. When they get older they play Qasem (Imam Hussein's young nephew, the son of his brother Hassan) and then if their voice remains strong and beautiful, they will be able to play in order of difficulty and prominence: Ali Akbar, Hor/Muslem, Abbas and, then, ultimately Imam Hussein. Otherwise they do the villainous *mukhaḡef* (lit., 'opposing') roles.

Performers view the voice as something god-given, and not something that one can develop through exercise. Vocal training per se is not as well-developed pedagogically as instrumental instruction in Iran. One of the performers in New York said that after one's voice changes, if you have no singing voice you end up doing the mukhaḡef roles. One ta'ziyeh performer

known by Ghaffari had two sons whom he made sing so much their throats bled. He said that in this way they wouldn't lose their voices later on. He trained them hard until their voices changed, and, because they had good technique, they were able to continue in heroic parts.

Singing is an inescapable skill in ta'ziyeh. Even the antipathetic mukhaḡef performers who declaim their lines must be able to sing at some level. At the beginning of the ta'ziyeh, all the actors perform chants, or *nukheh*, which is part of the *ḡish-khāni* (the overture). The nukheh has a limited range and all performers have to be able to sing at least well enough to perform in this chorus. A person who cannot do more than a nukheh will never play a main heroic character.

During these early years, the young ta'ziyeh performers learn by observing how the grownups act their roles. The musicians work with them as well to teach them the music. All of the adult artists say, 'Sing like this, and not like that,' gently but continually correcting them. This kind of training depends upon the motivation of the performer for its success. Usually performers will talk about *alagheli* and *husseli*, both terms expressing generalized desire. Frequently, young people will wax enthusiastic about their love of Imam Hussein and their desire to commemorate him. Added to this is the respect and love that young performers have for their parents and teachers. Ta'ziyeh training is difficult and continues throughout one's life (the oldest performer in the Lincoln Center performances was in his seventies). The social and emotional bond that is formed by common interest and mutual respect is a powerful motivator and perhaps the principal factor that keeps young children engaged in this ancient art form.

When the young performers portray Sekineh or one of the more important children's roles, such as the two martyred children of Muslem, they receive a great deal of coaching from their parents and other adults. Some of the children's roles are pivotal; the child martyrs especially evoke a strong reaction from the audience because of their inherent pathos. The best adult performers are often those who had extensive stage training as children. As the children work toward performing the smaller roles, they are simultaneously learning the larger parts. When they finally come of age, they are enthusiastic performers, ready to transform themselves into skilled artists.

During Muharram, a few of the heroic and villainous performers may be very good, and other performers may be weak, either because their act-

ing is less skilful or overly melodramatic or because their voices are not sufficiently strong and beautiful. The troupes will 'dilute' the performance with weaker performers, thus allowing them to send out several troupes at once and put on a greater number of performances. The troupe gets the contracts and profits from each production. Afterward, the troupe leader takes the money from all the contracts and then parcels it out to the performers. The performers may complain, but usually the leader gives them enough so that they are somewhat satisfied. However, they may switch troupes from year to year in search of better earnings. The situation is much like in the United States where performers may move from one production company to another depending on circumstances.

EXERCISES

Observers of rehearsals for the Lincoln Center performances of ta'ziyeh in New York may have noticed that the performers did some 'warm-up' exercises. As Ghaffari has noted in his interview with Peter J. Chelkowski in this volume, these exercises were not restricted to the ta'ziyeh tradition; they were derived from the traditional athletic training centre,⁷ the *zurkhaneh*—the 'house of strength' in Iran—and introduced by Ghaffari himself in preparing the ta'ziyeh for performance at the 1976 Shiraz-Persepolis Arts Festival. When conventional physical training techniques for the Western stage proved ineffective for the ta'ziyeh performers, Ghaffari hit on the possibility of adapting these traditional exercises. At the zurkhaneh, pre-Islamic physical training exercises are performed with Indian clubs, chains and other specialized athletic equipment, which would not be practical for ta'ziyeh training. However, one ta'ziyeh performer named Ali Akbar Razmara was a longtime member of the zurkhaneh and worked with Ghaffari to develop a repertoire of training movements based on the zurkhaneh movements, but which did not require all the training equipment. Ghaffari added endurance exercises and developed a training routine keyed to the kinds of movements that the performers used onstage. They also practice battle movements, such as whirling.

With these adaptations, the exercises seemed more organic to the performance, and the performers began to respect and even enjoy the physical training. At first some of the exercises, such as running and singing for 10 or 15 minutes, were very difficult and the actors had to be persuaded by

Ghaffari to participate, but ultimately they helped the performers maintain energy during the performance.

Many ta'ziyeh performers in Iran have other occupations. Those living in rural areas are often engaged in agriculture and lead vigorous physical lives. Nevertheless, the kind of breathing required to sing and declaim without microphones and to run and ride horses is enormously challenging. In the past, performers relied on their natural physical skills to carry them through their roles. Their primary concern was learning the dramatic and musical material. Ghaffari's introduction of physical training exercises may have inadvertently replicated nineteenth-century practice. Ta'ziyeh performers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may well have been denizens of the zurkhaneh, and they certainly were participants in Muharram ceremonies in which teams of organized marchers, or *dasteh*, marched and engaged in symbolic self-flagellation. These groups in some areas practised throughout the year, and bore gigantic standards, or *adams*, during the months of Muharram and Safar that required considerable strength and athleticism to carry. Benjamin mentions the presence of dastehs in performances at the Takiyeh Dowlat in Tehran in his writings on ta'ziyeh (see Benjamin 1982 [1887]).⁸

HORSES

Riding a horse onstage is an acquired skill. Learning how to control the animal, and fight and sing at the same time is extremely difficult. But many ta'ziyeh performers have ridden horses from childhood. Two children Ghaffari worked with from a village outside of Isfahan were such good horsemen that they could ride bareback. Some performers are unbelievably adept at riding: for example, they can grab one of the children off of another horse, and place him on the stage during the course of the dramatic action. Still there are always risks. At the Festival d'Automne in France, an accident occurred. Standard practice was for the actor to hold the reins firmly, but not to pull on them. When the rider kicked the horse in the side, it was a signal for the animal to gallop. One performer was riding a horse and didn't realize that he had to hold the reins, so he let them go slack. When he kicked the horse, the animal literally bolted, leaving the actor on the ground. As this was dangerous, Ghaffari insisted that someone else hold the reins for the performer. But the actor was adamant that he would han-

die the horse himself and Chaffari relented and permitted him to hold the reins himself in one performance. The same accident occurred, but this time the performer got his feet caught in the stirrups and the horse dragged him around the arena.

Chaffari insists that a horse must be shown the staging area in advance of the performance itself, so that the animal is not spooked. All of the flags, the sounds and other conditions must be familiar to the horse.

HISTORY OF STYLES

Chaffari believes that there must have been Persian theatre before ta'ziyeh, which established certain conventions. For example, the distinction between heroes singing and antagonists declaiming their roles likely has its source in a previous performance form. Author Simin Daneshvar claims that there were ceremonies for Siavush, the pre-Islamic hero mentioned in the *Shahnameh* (see Daneshvar 2001).⁹

There are other old stage conventions, such as in the play *Teylun-e Muslem* (Muslim's Little Children) where the children who are about to be martyred tremble to indicate fear. The trembling is a stylized action in which the children splay their hands, arms at their sides, and physically shake their hands and arms to indicate their fear in a prescribed fashion. It has to be learned, and is a hallmark of a weak or helpless person who knows he is about to be murdered. Ta'ziyeh productions all over the country share this convention. Part of the reason may be that different troupes maintain contact and watch each other's performances. Even in the nineteenth century, ta'ziyeh performers went to Tehran and watched performances in the Takiyeh Dowlat. Chaffari knew a ta'ziyeh khan in Neyshabur named Mirza Nasrullah Beizai who was invited by a ta'ziyeh troupe from the Caspian region to come and perform. He returned with many ideas for improvements and innovations for his own troupe's productions.

Individual innovation as well as borrowing plays a role in the development of ta'ziyeh performance conventions. In the beginning, performers imitate a master, but they gradually develop their own styles. One young ta'ziyeh khan, son of one of the great historic performers, Ali Azami, had wonderful riding skills and excellent rhythm, which he was able to incorporate into his work with his horse. Even when standing up in the stirrups, he could guide the horse back and forth while he declaimed his lines.

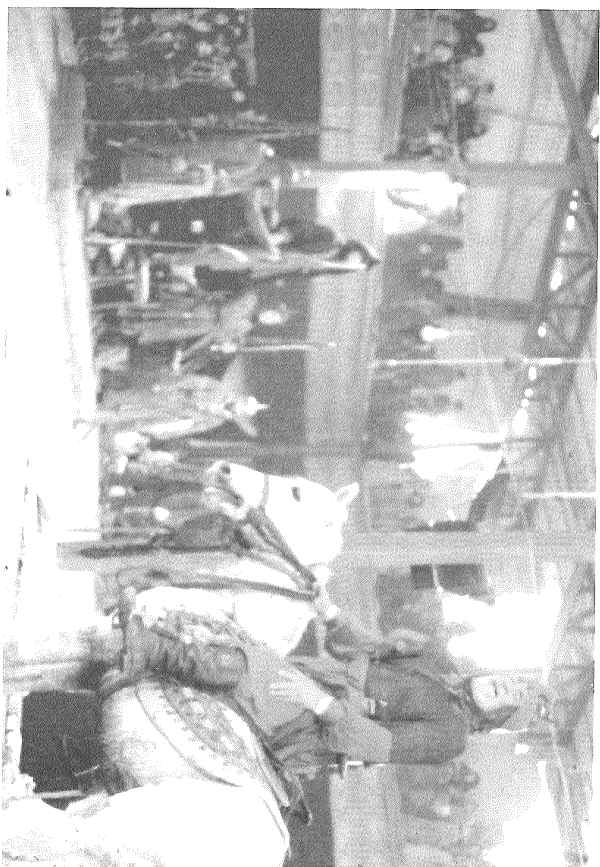


PLATE 22 (*above*): Shekur in the village street. The action of the ta'ziyeh takes place in the open air without a stage. Habbabad near Isfahan. Photograph by William O. Beeman.

PLATE 23 (*below*): Shekur on horseback addressing the protagonists. Habbabad near Isfahan. Photograph by William O. Beeman.

The older performers try to teach the younger, but they don't always succeed in passing on their special techniques. Murteza Saffarian-Rezai, who plays the mukhalet roles, uses a rhythm when he talks. His voice goes up and down in a dramatic intonation that is almost musical. His body rhythms are musical as well; he executes all gestures and movements with grace. One hand goes up and the other down, and his gestures perfectly accompany the music of his voice. Few young people can do this. The young people who appreciate what a man like Mr Saffarian-Rezai can do imitate him and through this discover their own styles.

REHEARSALS AND CASTING

Rehearsal frequency and intensity is different throughout Iran. There is one village where a ta'ziyeh performance occurs every Friday night without fail. In other places ta'ziyeh is held only during Muharram. The frequency of performance determines the frequency of rehearsal. In areas where performances are very frequent, there is no need for additional rehearsal. Given that in most cases the actors have been performing ta'ziyeh since childhood, they are generally ready to go on a moment's notice, even for roles with which they are less familiar. Emergency substitutions may require some special rehearsal—as at the Lincoln Center performances when some performers were unable to obtain visas. Also, work with animals—which happens when a community has the extra funds to provide this luxury feature—may require some special practice.

In villages that mount their own 'amateur' productions, it may be necessary to hold rehearsals under the tutelage of a more experienced performer. In this case, there may be nearly year-long rehearsals as local denizens learn their roles.

The 'contractor' for the ta'ziyeh is the troupe head, the one who determines who will perform what role. He may reserve the lead role for himself: Imam Hussein or a similar part. The performers sit down on the night before the ta'ziyeh, and the contractor (who may also serve as the *ta'ziyeh gardan*, or director¹⁰) assigns the roles. The performers respect him, and, even if they do not agree with the casting, they will accept what he has designated. Many performers are ambitious and want to do certain roles, but the contractor may or may not let them. There is a rough hierarchy of importance in roles that is reflected in the share of the money that each



PLATE 24: In this image, the visage of the man playing the role of Zainab is glimpsed through the veil covering his face. Habbabad near Isfahan. Photograph by William O. Beeman.

performer is paid by the troupe for the performance. The contractor and ta'ziyeh gardan (if a different person) get larger shares, as do the principal performers. The costume trunk also gets a share of the income.

For the ta'ziyeh performance at the Lincoln Center Festival in New York a number of roles had to be recast because some performers could not get visas to travel to the US. This required some creative substitute casting, some of which raised concerns. For example, Director Chaffari was reluctant to cast one veteran performer, Mr. Saffarian-Rezai, in a role that required strenuous horseback riding, because he was somewhat older than the other performers. However, he was eventually cast as the villain, Hares, in *Teffan-e Muslem*. Saffarian-Rezai was, in fact, wonderful as the villain and managed to bring out the comic aspects of the part. This was important: if the villain in this ta'ziyeh is not sufficiently comic, the ta'ziyeh fails.

THE EVOLUTION OF TA'ZIYEH ACTING STYLES

The frequent use of B-level film acting techniques in ta'ziyeh performances is a matter of concern for all serious ta'ziyeh artists today. In *The Ta'ziyeh of Ali Akbar*, the hero, Ali Akbar, goes backstage to put on a red-stained shirt and then returns to die in a very stylized manner. In one performance in Tehran seen by Chaffari, the character playing the villain Shemr stabbed Ali Akbar once. The actor playing Ali Akbar then crawled around the stage for several minutes and Shemr stabbed him again. The scene was taken directly from a Hollywood film, and was so melodramatic that it distracted from the inherent power of the scene.

A performer with the troupe presenting ta'ziyeh in Paris, a rather well-known actor whom Chaffari had worked with in Iran, made the role of Hares so melodramatic that it was nearly unwatchable. In one scene Hares must kill the children with a knife. The actor extended the scene with the children for almost five minutes, and chose to use a dagger. Chaffari finally asked him, 'What are you doing? Performing surgery?' The actor replied, 'This is *work*!' Chaffari said, 'No no, I don't want any dramatic "work". Just make the gesture of removing the thorns two times for each child, and lose the dagger.' The impact of the drama lies in the stylization, and the simpler realization is far more powerful and effective. The same problem arose when Hares was to place the child in the position to be killed. Chaffari told the actor to hold the child, let him struggle and, then, simply make two



PLATE 25: Abbas in his bloody shroud. Habababad near Isfahan. Photograph by William O. Beeman.

stylized strokes to indicate his execution. The actor began touching the child's throat and behaving like a maniac. It made Hares look like a psychopath, rendering the entire scene disgusting rather than tragic. Mr Safarian-Rezai, who played Hares in New York as mentioned above as a substitute for another performer who was denied a visa, turned in a brilliant performance. His acting was generally thought to have avoided melodramatic excess. It was masterfully nuanced, and humorous, while being sufficiently frightening to heighten the tragedy.

The corrective for melodramatic overacting is to reinstate the values of ta'ziyeh productions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by taking a firm hand with performances and performers. The Paris and Lincoln Center performances were designed in part to help reestablish the performing standards of an earlier, more disciplined time. Doing this is indeed a difficult task. No ta'ziyeh artist wants to see this great theatre form become a museum piece. It needs to grow and develop its own adaptive style while remaining true to its origins and traditions. Change should come from within as an expansion of the internal dynamics of the existing art; change should not be forced or imposed. It is the wholesale eclipse of that which is unique in ta'ziyeh by newer stage and screen forms of acting that endangers the uniqueness of this theatre form, and this is above all what must be preserved if ta'ziyeh is to continue to engage future generations through its dramatic impact.

Notes

- 1 This article was first published in *The Drama Review* 49(4) (T188) (Winter 2005): 48–60.
- 2 Some full scripts are available in Homayouni (1974).
- 3 See Kapferer (1976, 1979, 1981) for an example of another powerful form of ritual drama that is designed to have concrete effects on participants and spectators. Even though ta'ziyeh is very intense, there is variable attention on the part of the audience, who tune in and out of the performance depending on the interest inherent in the stage action. Inattention is not considered disrespectful (cf. Schechner [1979a] for a discussion of 'selective inattention' in traditional theatre).
- 4 According to Bauman, the meaning and the significance of the performance 'emerges' as it is enacted and as it unfolds. The collaboration with the audi-

ence 'creates' the actual performance in the course of its enactment.

- 5 For a review essay of the Lincoln Center performances, see Beeman (2003).
- 6 In general, a troupe is assembled for the performance according to the budget of the sponsors. The 'troupe' is a corporate body with variable actors. Of course, many actors stay with the same troupe from year to year particularly because so much of the work is seasonal during the months of Muharram and Safar, when they are performing all the time. A troupe manager may borrow a performer from some other troupe, or enlist someone whom he needs if he has too many performances to cast, or if someone is sick, etc. This state of affairs is not unique to ta'ziyeh. Today it is more common for performers to belong to a 'roster' rather than a troupe. There is a central organization, but no 'contracts' or anything to bind individuals to an organization. Essentially, there is an impresario who assembles the troupe for a particular commissioned performance. The specific performers will vary from performance to performance. They are somewhat like opera performers who know roles already, and are hired for a particular production.
- 7 These centres provide traditional athletic exercises based on medieval military equipment such as chains and clubs, and movements, such as spinning. The exercises are performed to drumming from a *marshed*, a reciter of verses from the heroic epic, *The Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by the eleventh-century poet Ferdowsi.
- 8 See also Pelly (1879) for another early account of ta'ziyeh in this period.
- 9 See Beizai (1965), Shahidi and Bulookbashi (2002) and Malikpur (2003) provide some additional recent scholarship speculating on this; see also Chelkowski's (1971, 1975, 1979) pioneering work on the history of the form. Lassy (1916) shows early performances in Azerbaijan. Note also that it is certainly possible that performance conventions have been shaped by Islamic restrictions on music. *A capella* singing is allowed by the most conservative Islamic commentators, as long as the text being sung is 'edifying' and the voice is unaccompanied by musical instruments. In ta'ziyeh, the drums and trumpets play to introduce actions or characters, but they stop completely when the protagonists sing their lines. In this way the performers do not violate the musical restrictions imposed by conservative religionists (cf. Beeman 2004).
- 10 The *ta'ziyeh garden*, if separate from the troupe head, is most often another senior actor.

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TA 'ZIYEH AS THEATRE OF PROTEST¹

by Hamid Dabashi

Some two decades before the twentieth century came to an end, a massive revolution shook an ancient land to its foundations. What was later to be called the 'Islamic Revolution' in Iran took much of the world by surprise. The surprise lay not so much in the event but in the manifestly religious signs of its mobilization. The revolution was led by a high-ranking cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, and organized by the clerical class, which demanded the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Some two centuries into 'Enlightenment Modernity', a project that had extended its colonial shadow to the four corners of the globe, a religious revolution of sudden and inexplicable ferocity brought a corrupt monarchy and its military to their knees. Why and whence a religious revolution? Why now, at this particular juncture in history, when God was long since proclaimed dead at the European site of Enlightenment Modernity? In a series of articles published in the Italian daily *Corriere d'ella Sera* (1978), Michel Foucault sought to explain the Islamic Revolution to himself and to the rest of the world. The leading critic of modernity had come to see how, in his estimation, it was being challenged at one particular periphery of its European origin.

SHIISM AS A RELIGION OF PROTEST

By the early 1980s an Islamic Republic was established in Iran and an all-out war was under way with neighbouring Iraq. As the ravages of the war wreaked havoc on both nations, the institutions of an Islamic Republic were consolidated in Iran. Some 200 years into the Iranian colonial encounter with modernity, and almost 100 years after a constitutional revolution that had established a secular monarchy, the organs of a repressive theocracy were now solidly put in place. The defining moment of the Islamic Revo-

lution in Iran was the political rehabilitation of Shiism by a succession of revolutionary ideologues. As a religion of protest, and as an ethos of speaking truth to power, Shiism was put to full revolutionary use to overthrow a corrupt government and then to mobilize the masses against the invading Iraqi army. Finally, it was used to consolidate a theocracy. That today the Islamic Republic of Iran is a discredited state apparatus, held together by a combination of militant repression, an entrenched clerical clique, and the contradictory consequences of nonsensical rhetoric such as 'The Axis of Evil', is nothing less than a historical testimony to the doctrinal paradox at the heart of Shiism. Shiism is a religion of protest. It can only speak truth to power and destabilize it. It can never be 'in power'. As soon as it is 'in power' it contradicts itself. Shiism can never politically succeed; its political success is its moral failure. And that paradox is at the very soul of its historical endurance.

At the end of the twentieth century, Shiism was thus put to immediate and enduring use in order to topple a monarchy, consolidate an Islamic Republic and institutionalize an outdated theocracy. True to its doctrinal paradox, Shiism has been instrumental in the first and the second task, and entirely useless in the last. In both its suggestive symbols and enduring institutions, Shiism has been the paramount ideological force in revolutionary and military mobilization, before being categorically abandoned by a clerical establishment bent on continuing their illegitimate reign, at the cost of their professed religion.

Nowhere is the central paradox of Shiism, in both its mobilizing and demobilizing contradictory forces, more vividly evident than in its most spectacular visual manifestations, namely in the thematics of *ta'ziyeh* and all their visual and performing variations. By *ta'ziyeh* I do not only mean a Shiite version of the Christian passion play similar to the miracle plays of Oberammergau, though the forms have striking similarities. *Ta'ziyeh* is more a performance of mourning—as its name clearly indicates—that has historically spread over a whole constellation of dramatic and ritual performances. *Ta'ziyeh* must be considered in its more generic and thematic sense, which includes the location-based *ta'ziyeh proper*; extends into the less elaborate recitatives, like *shabih-khani*; includes one-man or two-men recitations in front of an illustrated canvas, such as *shamayel-gardani* and *pardah-dari*; and can be stationary like *rawzeh-khani* (in which a preacher/cantor ascends a pulpit and melodically recalls the sufferings of



the Shii Imams); or mobile like *dasteh* (in which bands of mourners march through the streets and squares of a city, singing and self-flagellating in sympathy with Shii martyrs). It invariably extends to mild or brutal rituals of self-flagellation in the form of *sineh-zani* (beating rhythmically on the chest), *zanjir-zani* (rhythmically hitting the shoulder with chains), and in extreme cases *qameh-zani* (cutting the shaved head with a sharp saber). Ta'zیه is the constellation of all these variations on mourning the death of the Prophet's grandson, Seyyed al-Shuhada, Hussein ibn Ali, 'the Prince of Martyrs' (d. 61/680). It is in that thematic sense that ta'zیه became a paramount mode of mobilization during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and immediately following, during the war with Iraq (1980–88).

TA'ZIYEH AS THEATRE OF PROTEST

Ta'zیه is a Shii ritual drama. Although its dramatic and ritual roots are traced to such pre-Islamic Iranian practices as *Seyavashan* (the mourning of Seyavash, a legendary hero in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*), today it is a thoroughly recodified dramatic act that is a specifically Shii practice. It can be found in South Asia, Iran, the Arab world and even the Caribbean, where it was taken by South Asian émigré communities and then mixed with Latin American carnival. Ta'zیه is also a theatre of protest, based on the most dramatic event in early Islamic history. As a theatre of protest, ta'zیه is integral to Shiism and its paradox of power. Regardless of its dramatic or ritual roots in ancient Iranian or Mesopotamian practices, ta'zیه has now become an Islamic and, more specifically, Shii practice. The defining aspect of ta'zیه is its destabilizing dramatics, which keep the nascent charismatic moment of Shiism (when it was historically born, theologically articulated and dramatically conceived) thematically alive through mimetic representations and symbolic suggestions. Today it is impossible to understand ta'zیه outside its Islamic and Shii context. To exoticize it as 'Traditional Theatre', the way classical Orientalism has done; to isolate and sever it from the rest of the creative culture that generates and sustains it, the way contemporary anthropology has done; or to trace it back to its possible Iranian roots in Seyavashan, as the Iranian nativist reading is wont to do—all rob ta'zیه of its integral location in the entirety of its immediate cultural universe.

PLATE 49 (facing page): A poster celebrating the victory of the Islamic Revolution shows a green banner proclaiming, 'Independence, Freedom, the Islamic Republic', under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. In the ta'zیه, green is identified with the family of the Prophet. Courtesy of Peter J. Chelkowski.

The central thematic of ta'ziyeh as drama is the notion of *mazlumiyyat*, which is the defining aspect of Shiism itself. Mazlumiyyat constitutes the moral/political community in terms of justice and its aberration. Mazlumiyyat is the absence of justice that signals the necessity of its presence.

For Shiites, the original promise of Islam to deliver earthly and eternal justice to the world is kept doctrinally alive in the charismatic figure of the Imam. In ta'ziyeh, Yazid and Imam Hussein, the two principal nemeses, have emerged as metaphorical representations of unjust power and the revolutionary mobilization against such tyranny. Mazlumiyyat is more an assumption than a notion. It means 'having been wronged'. Hussein's epithet is 'Mazlum'; he is called 'Hussein-e Mazlum' or 'the Hussein who was wronged'. But the trilateral Arabic root of mazlumiyyat, ZLM, means 'tyranny' and 'injustice' at one and the same time, combining the political and the moral. Thus two paradoxical principles are instantaneously summoned and metaphorically collapsed in the assumption of mazlumiyyat. First, it is a weakness that constitutes power, a passivity that entails active agency; and second, it is a morality that surmises the political, a politics that summons the moral. As the supreme symbolic figure of Shiism, Hussein as a historical figure is morally sublated into the cosmogonically Mazlum. He is a permanent revolutionary. He can never be *in* power, because that, ipso facto, makes him a *Zalem*, a tyrant, and that can never be; that would be a contradiction in terms, the undoing of Hussein, and with Hussein, Shiism. Ta'ziyeh is the dramatic register, the suggestive symbol, of that doctrinal paradox at the heart of Shiism.

As an Islamically recodified drama, ta'ziyeh carries within its dramaturgical tension the central paradox of power constitutional to the Quranic revelation itself. The Quran consists of two major parts, each at narrative and normative odds with the other. The 114 *surahs* or chapters of the Quran are divided into those revealed in Mecca between 610 and 622 (or 12 years before the commencement of the Islamic calendar with the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina), and those revealed in Medina between 622 and 632 (or from year 1 on the Islamic Calendar to year 10). The Meccan *surahs* correspond to the rising crescendo of the Prophet's mission and are revolutionary and destabilizing in their moral defiance of injustice and tyranny, as Prophet Muhammad brings the Meccan pariahs and the down-trodden together through his insurrectionary revelations. The Medinan *surahs*, on the contrary, are the record of the Prophet consolidating his

power in Medina and establishing a political community. Between the Meccan and the Medinan chapters of the Quran—the moral uprising of a revolutionary movement and the political consolidation of its power—there is thus a narrative and normative tension. This tension has remained definitive to Islamic doctrine and history.

The transformation of the Prophet's charismatic authority into the institution of the Islamic caliphate following his death is the most immediate and suggestively metaphorical expression of this definitive paradox at the heart of Islam. The Sunni branch of Islam includes the overwhelming majority of Muslims who opted for the eventual institutionalization of Muhammad's charismatic authority in the juridical institution of the *ulama* (the Muslim jurists) and the political power of the *caliph* (the Muslim ruler). A small minority of Muslims, however, sought to perpetuate that charismatic aspect and doctrinally transfer it from the institution of Prophethood to that of the saintly figures they called imams, the descendants of the Prophet they consider collectively infallible and divinely ordained. The Shiites, as they came to be identified, related to the figures of their infallible Imams with the same charismatic spontaneity as they once did to the Prophet himself. While in Sunnite Islam the paradox of power constitutional to the nascent faith was disentangled and pacified in the dual institutions of the *ulama* and the caliphs, in Shiism the charismatic indecisiveness of the faith was kept allegorically alive. That charismatic spontaneity, holding the community of believers around a figure rather than allowing it to settle around a set of normative laws, is centred on the principle of justice (*adl*) as the defining moment of the faith. The imam personifies the principle of a divinely promised justice—upholding the Meccan spontaneity of the Quran over and against the Medinan propensity for institution-building—and tends toward the Prophet's prophetic spontaneity rather than his political prowess in the consolidation of power.

This historical proclivity toward spontaneous charisma over enduring institutions of legitimate power has given Shiism a politically paradoxical disposition reflective of the doctrinal tension hidden in the very heart of Islam and inherent to the Quranic narrative itself. Shiism, as a result, has encapsulated the insurrectionary aspect of nascent Islam and remained categorically a religion of protest. The constitutional paradox at the heart of Shiism—always protesting against power but never being in power—is first and foremost theorized in its doctrinal articulation of *Imamah*, or the

succession of a series of infallible saintly figures, but also dramatically staged in ta'ziyeh. Ta'ziyeh, as a result, carries within its dramatic tension the central paradox of Shiism, and in turn the principal doctrinal anxiety of Islam itself. Carrying within itself the very seed of Islam and Shiism as a religion of protest, ta'ziyeh combines the dual suppositions of the moral and political communities, disallowing the narrative and normative separation of the two. In the same vein, reality and fiction are counternarrated, bringing the tragedy of Hussein home to bear on the moment of its actual performance. This in turn merges the creative and critical dimensions of the drama much closer together than ordinarily allowed. The two moments of the act, its historical roots and its momentary remembrance, are equally collapsed into each other, preventing a sympathetic distancing of the audience from the fact of the event. The habitual bifurcation of the diachronic and synchronic axes of history and reality are equally fused into each other, making art and politics almost impossible to separate, making the world a performing stage.

This doctrinal tension at the roots of ta'ziyeh as ritual drama gives the nature and disposition of its mimesis an entirely different modulation from that of the Aristotelian Greek *mimesis* or 'imitation', which is tantamount to onomatopoeia, or the actual making (*poiein*) of the naming (*onoma*) of the mimetic act. We have no such presumptions in ta'ziyeh. Quite the contrary. In ta'ziyeh, acting is not mimetic; it is entirely suggestive—with a full contractual agreement, dramatically articulated, between the actors and the audience that they are *just* acting. Actors hold their script in their hands, not because they don't know the lines but because they want to demonstrate distance and suggest a dissimilitude. If the Aristotelian mimesis is based on similitude, ta'ziyeh is predicated on dissimilitude. The director of ta'ziyeh is always present on the stage, not because the actors don't know what to do, but because the audience needs assurance that this is just acting. The stage is not really a stage, not because the villagers and townspeople who staged the ta'ziyeh are poor and could not afford an amphitheatre, but because the stage must be an extension of the rest of the physical habitat of the actors and the audience. In fact, the actors come onstage directly from their houses, alleys, streets and markets. The stage never loses sight of its not-being-the-stage. Nonactors have easy access to the stage area; actors move in and out of character at will. There is fluidity between reality and acting because the actors are performing no act of fiction. They are acting reality. Imam Hussein and his 72 companions were really killed in the battle

of Karbala by Yazid and his cohorts in the year 61/680. You cannot perform that historical fact as if it never happened; and yet you cannot pretend that you are Imam Hussein either. That would be sacrilegious. This, as a result, necessitates an active vigilance on part of the audience to discern when you are acting and when you are not. This is substantially facilitated by the fact that ta'ziyeh actors are not really actors. They ordinarily have other professions. At one point the actors were greengrocers, butchers and carpenters, and now they may be dentists, lawyers and teachers. If one sees a ta'ziyeh with a built-in Aristotelian conception of mimesis, one is terribly disappointed. One has to understand how, in the doctrinally charged collapse of the then and the now, the moral and the political, and the real and the ideal, the charismatic paradox at the heart of Shiism informs the dramatic tension at the heart of ta'ziyeh and all of its suggestive symbolics of acting, staging, showing and representing.

As a performing art, though, ta'ziyeh is never totally under the control and authority of its invocation of an historical memory. There is a historical memory (the actual events of Karbala in the year 61/680) in ta'ziyeh to which its performing drama refers but to which it is not dramatically obligated. This is the performing paradox at the heart of the ta'ziyeh, which is itself located within the memorial paradox of Shiism as a religion of protest, which in turn is located within the narrative and normative paradox of the Quran, as the textual anamnesis of Muhammad's prophetic charisma. Ta'ziyeh is thus a theatre of protest whose moral parameters break and intrude on the boundaries of the political. The result is the peculiar status of ta'ziyeh, which is neither fictive theatre nor stylized ritual, neither real nor unreal. It is located on a tertiary plane between the real and the unreal, from which both the real and the unreal sustain their relevance.

SHIISM AND TA'ZIEH AS RELIGION AND DRAMA OF PROTEST

The fact that ta'ziyeh as a universe of creative imagination should lend itself to political uses is immediately rooted in its character as a theatre of protest, a performance of the most dramatic moment—the very historical birth—of a religion of protest. As a theatre of protest, ta'ziyeh is coterminous with Shiism, commemorating its very doctrinal disposition as a religion that was born at the death of its saints, first and foremost Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and one of his staunchest supporters, and then the death of Ali's son,

Hussein. Ta'zīyeh remembers and reenacts a doomed battle between a small band of revolutionaries and an entrenched and deeply corrupt political power. There is a universality to the battle of Karbala that can easily be extrapolated to include any small band of revolutionaries fighting against any entrenched political power. Ta'zīyeh, in effect, provides revolutionaries across time and space with the opportunity to change the course of history, as it was unjustly determined in the battle of Karbala. 'We are not the people of Kufa,' read some slogans during the revolutionary mobilization that invited Khomeini back to Iran, meaning that this time around these Muslims were not going to betray their saintly leader Imam Hussein/Imam Khomeini by inviting him to Kufa/Tehran and then not helping him to fight against Yazid/Shah.

The characters of ta'zīyeh drama are not just metaphorical, they are metamorphic—they easily mutate into contemporary historical figures. The transfiguration of ta'zīyeh characters is historically multimetamorphic, from historical to metaphorical, and from metaphorical to historical. That multimetamorphic aspect of ta'zīyeh characters makes them at once extremely potent allegories of cosmic significance and yet instantaneously accessible to contemporary remodulations.

During the Islamic Revolution, the figure of Khomeini was immediately identified with that of Hussein, or even more poignantly with a conflated figure of Muhammad, Ali and Hussein—which is to say with the most combatant saintly figures in the Islamic universe of creative imagination. By the same token, the Shah was identified with Yazid, a usurper of power, corrupt, tyrannical, banal and demonic. The configuration of the protagonist and the antagonist in this drama transformed the battle between Khomeini and the Shah into the simulacrum of the battle of Karbala, in which a new generation of Muslims could actually participate. We have to remember that ta'zīyeh is much more than a mere passion play commemorating the battle of Karbala. There is a profound element of redemptive suffering involved in its multifaceted self-flagellation that can assume mild forms of *Simeh-zani* (rhythmic beating of the chest) to very violent forms of *Qameh-zani* (cutting your shaved head with a saber). There is a real sense of angry regret in ta'zīyeh in which Muslims mourn their historical inability to aid their Imam. *Ta'zīyeh of Hor*, for example, is replete with a potential participation in the actual dramatic event though in absentia, with which contemporary Shiites vicariously identify. Every time forces of good and evil face each other, the extension of ta'zīyeh thematics into real time history

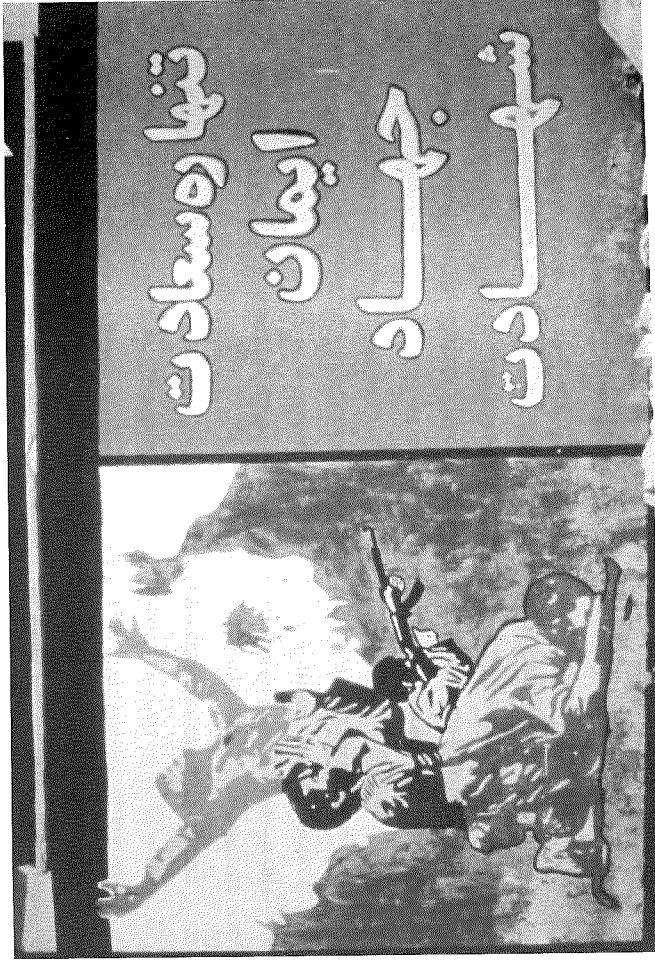


PLATE 50 (above): During one of the weekly patriotic parades that took place while the war was being waged, a banner declared, 'We are not the people of Kufa!'—inspired by the events of the ta'zīyeh in which Hussein was invited by the people of Kufa to come and be their leader, and was then betrayed by them. Other posters declared, 'We shall fight to the end!' (1984). Courtesy of Peter J. Chelkowski.

PLATE 51 (below): A mural from the city of Qazvin bears the slogan, 'The only way to Salvation: Faith, Holy War and Martyrdom.' The calligraphic message is reflected in the painting on the left. Courtesy of Peter J. Chelkowski.

provides the Shiites with an opportunity to participate in the battle of Karbala and help Imam Hussein win the battle against Yazid. There is a scene in the battle of Karbala, when one of Imam Hussein's companions asks him why he does not solicit divine intervention in his fight against Yazid. He opens his proverbial fingers in a V-shape in front of the interlocutor and asks him to look. Armies and armies of angelic and demonic forces are visible through the Imam's fingers, mounted on their celestial horses and ready at his command. But, he says, he will not summon them because this battle is a historical test of his followers. In any kind of revolutionary mobilization of the forces of good against forces of evil (suggested and constituted), there is an immediate, trans-metamorphic identification of the band of revolutionaries with the forces that the living Imam Hussein is summoning to the battle. There is a Manichean element of cosmic forces at war in the battle of Karbala that gives it its enduring metamorphic potency.

The invoking of the metamorphic battle of Karbala in revolutionary mobilization against the Shah soon after the success of the Islamic Revolution was gradually co-opted into building the war mobilization against Saddam Hussein. While Saddam Hussein could only invoke the battle of al-Qadesiyyah (in which the Sasanid army was defeated by a band of Muslim warriors in 637) for his war against Iran, Khomeini could invoke the battle of Karbala (which was a far more potent metaphor, judging by the tens of thousands of young Iranians who lost their lives in the course of Iran-Iraq war [1980-88]). It is a telling example of the power of these two respective metaphors that Saddam Hussein had to hire some Egyptian filmmakers to aid and abet him in his propaganda to make a film about al-Qadesiyyah, while Khomeini's propaganda was made much easier by the generations of ta'zieh performances that had paved the way for his battle of Karbala. The physical location of Karbala in contemporary Iraq, with Mesopotamia being the actual battleground between Imam Hussein and Yazid, made the identification of Saddam Hussein with Yazid and, by implication, Khomeini with Imam Hussein, that much stronger. Given the more regional and global context of the Iran-Iraq war, such figures as Menachem Begin, then the Prime Minister of Israel, and Jimmy Carter, then the President of the United States, were equally drawn into the cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil fought on the frontline between Iran and Iraq.

Somewhere halfway through the Iran-Iraq war, the legitimizing grace of ta'zieh began to abandon Khomeini and his cause. Here we need to

refer to the Iranian notion of 'divine charisma', *farrah-e izadi*, as the best possible mode of explanation, with the legendary king Jamshid in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* as the one who first received and then lost this gift of grace. Jamshid was one of the earliest kings in legendary Iranian imagination who built a civilization and made life as we know it possible. He lived a very long life and achieved many marvelous deeds, and precisely because of the wonders he had brought about, including the secret of immortality, which he shared with his subjects, arrogance overcame him and led him to proclaim himself Divine. Precisely at that moment, the Divine gift of grace abandoned him and the evil king Zahhak invaded his kingdom and ultimately destroyed him. The Divine gift of grace can be as arbitrarily given as it can be instantly taken back. In the Islamic universe of the same imagination, Shiism as a religion and ta'zieh as a theatre of protest have a legitimizing force only to the degree that a small revolutionary band of rebels are rising up against tyranny. The moment Khomeini refused to agree to a ceasefire, when young Iranians were being brought back in their shrouds in the thousands to be buried and all voices of reason and dissent were suppressed, neither Shiism as a religion nor ta'zieh as a theatre of protest could further lend themselves as a doctrine or a drama of legitimacy.

Today, close to three decades into the repressive consolidation of power by the entrenched clerical establishment in Iran, both Shiism and ta'zieh have categorically abandoned the organs and institutions of the Islamic Republic. As the dramatic nucleus of Shiism, the thematics of ta'zieh served the revolution to delegitimize the Pahlavis, by identifying it with the historic enemies of the Shii saints, and then wage a defensive war against Saddam Hussein. But long before Khomeini died in June 1989 it was obvious that ta'zieh (as the dramatic leitmotif of Shiism itself) could do absolutely nothing to legitimize a discredited theocracy. Shiism is a religion of protest. It can never succeed politically without failing morally. As a cosmic carnival of a constitutional injustice, ta'zieh is the mourning of a loss that must always fail in its stated objective if it is to be successful. No mourning could or should ever be successful. The success of mourning is its failure. Mourning is successful only to the degree that it fails, acknowledging the enormity of the loss, the incomprehensible dimensions of the tragedy. The success of mourning means the eradication of the central trauma that has caused it, and no such eradication of a trauma definitive to a culture is possible—without nullifying that very culture. Shiis are condemned/blessed forever to

remember the central trauma of their history, but never so fully that they can then forget it. The act of remembrance will have to remain always incomplete—like a dream that keeps haunting a people, forcing them to try to remember it, but never successfully. In commemorating the death of a martyr, Shiis are seeking to identify with absolute Otherness; with saintliness in the midst of sin and death at the moment of living; with dual, absolutely incongruent, Otherness; with the face and the body, miasmatic memory and creative incantation, of the saintly and the diseased. In that impossibility, mourning choreographed and staged, ta'zieh is made possible.

Shiism as a religion of protest has now diminished to a practice of private pieties, and ta'zieh has been on a tour of the 'Great Satan', as the US used to be called in revolutionary Iran. Ta'zieh has been thematically theatricalized, overtly aestheticized, Orientalized, anthropologized and, ultimately, museumized. But this is not the destiny of either Shiism or of ta'zieh. Institutional powers—political or religious—have always sought to ban or neutralize ta'zieh (as did Reza Shah and now, paradoxically, the clerics). During the Shah's time Shiism was officially neutralized and ta'zieh overtly theatricalized at the Shiraz Art Festival. As Shiism retreated to private pieties in Iran, in exile Ayatollah Khomeini prepared his followers for a massive political showdown. As ta'zieh was staged at the Shiraz Art Festival, ta'zieh leitmotifs were fomenting revolutionary mobilizations in the streets and alleys, markets and squares, of Iran. Shiism and ta'zieh are found today neither in the circles of the ruling clerics in Tehran nor indeed in the circus ring at Lincoln Center Damrosch Park in New York, where it was staged for a slightly bemused and altogether indifferent audience in Summer 2002. Both Shiism and ta'zieh are to be detected and celebrated smack in the middle of a student-led uprising that was ruthlessly suppressed in the summer of 1999—and yet its anniversary every 9th July threatens anew whoever happens to be the reigning Yazid and all his cohorts in Tehran.

Notes

- 1 This article was first published in *The Drama Review* 49(4) (T188) (Winter 2005): 91–99.

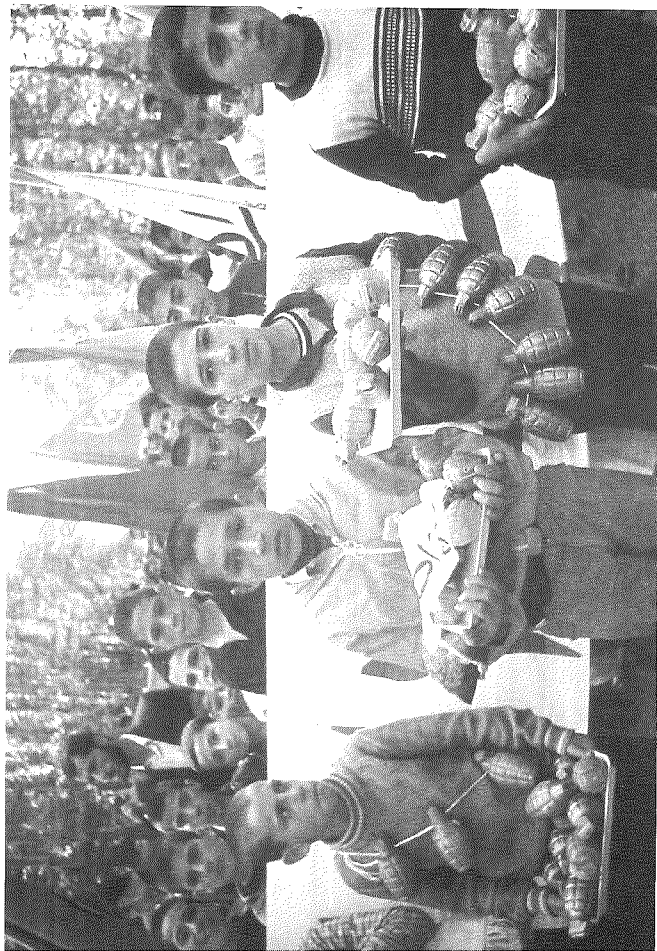


FIGURE 52: The Revolutionary guards and the regular armed forces were not strong enough to fight the Bani Hani aggressors and often incited teenagers to join the 'mobilization forces', inspiring them to see themselves as the youth of Karbala. In the weekly patriotic parades of the mid-1980s, young boys carried plastic grenades, but soon they were sent to the frontlines with real ammunition. Courtesy of Peter J. Melkowski.