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Beyond the Karbala Paradigm: Rethinking Revolution and Redemption in Twelver Shi'a Mourning Rituals

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ABSTRACT: In the mid-90s, Lebanon's Hezbollah movement and the Iranian Ayatollah Khamene'i both banned bloody forms of self-flagellation such as *tatbir* (cutting the forehead with a sword), calling them backward and un-Islamic. They argued that Shi'a Muslims ought to imitate Husayn by actively fighting against oppressors rather than passively mourning Husayn's martyrdom. This prohibition has not been unanimously applied in all Muslim countries, including Syria, where such practices persisted until the Arab Spring (when virtually all Shi'a Muslims left the shrine-town where these practices were performed). By closely reading the linguistic, conceptual, and juridical discourses that circulated in Syria in order to justify this position, the paper shows that the performers of *tatbir* conceived of these rituals in revolutionary, rather than reactionary, terms. By examining the performance and reception of flagellation processions in terms of differing modalities of affect, the paper opens up spaces for rethinking 'revolution' and 'redemption' in contemporary Twelver Shi'ism.

KEYWORDS: Karbala Paradigm, Shi'a Muharram practices, self-flagellation, affect, Syria, Sayyidah Zaynab

Introduction

In the mid-90s Lebanon's Hezbollah movement and the Iranian Ayatollah Khamene'i both banned bloody forms of self-flagellation such as *tatbir* (cutting the skin on the top of the head with a sword) calling them backward and un-Islamic.¹ They forbid bloody forms of self-

flagellation because, they claim, it portrays a negative image of Twelver Shi'ism.² They argue that Shi'a Muslims ought to emphasize 'modern, revolutionary' rather than 'traditional, soteriological' interpretations of Imam Husayn's martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala.³ Hezbollah in particular calls on Shi'a to imitate Husayn by actively fighting against oppressors, rather than passively mourning Husayn's martyrdom.⁴

In Syria, in contrast to Lebanon and Iran, bloody self-flagellation practices are legal and increased in popularity over the last two decades until the spring of 2011, when thousands of Shi'a fled from the violence that accompanied the Syrian uprising.⁵ As Twelver Shi'a backed, as well as received support from, Syria's 'Alawi government, they have been increasingly targeted. For example, in January of 2012, 18 Iranian pilgrims were kidnapped.⁶ In April, the head of the Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi's *hawzah* Zaynabiyyah, the oldest and one of the largest Shi'a seminaries in Syria, was shot and died on his way to the seminary.⁷ By July, the shrine-town was divided into sectarian zones at war with one another. Afghan and Iraqi Shi'a were fleeing en masse because they were threatened by Sunni Syrians, Iraqis, and Palestinians who live in and around the shrine-town of Sayyidah Zaynab, around ten kilometres south of Damascus. Other inhabitants have fled because of several attempts at bombing the shrine and its surroundings.⁸

Before this unrest, however, Shi'a memorial rites could be observed in the Syrian shrine-town of Sayyidah Zaynab. Sayyidah Zaynab is the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, daughter of 'Ali and Fatimah. She is a key figure in Shi'ism because she witnessed the Battle of Karbala, wherein her brother Husayn, the third Shi'a Imam, was killed in 680 CE during the Islamic month of Muharram. After Husayn's death, Zaynab was taken prisoner along with the other women and children from the camp of Husayn. They were brought to Damascus, where Zaynab confronted the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah and spread the story of the injustice through commemorative mourning gatherings (*majalis 'aza*). According to Um Husayn, the principal of Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi's Syrian seminary that I attended as part of my fieldwork, Sayyidah Zaynab was not only the first to lead ritual mourning gatherings, but also the first to self-flagellate and cut her head in mourning.⁹

This, according to the 'modern pious' Shi'a, which anthropologist Lara Deeb describes, is a 'traditional' interpretation.¹⁰ 'Modern pious' Lebanese Shi'a often follow Hezbollah and value 'rationalism' over 'emotion'. For them, rationalism means the use of Modern Standard

Arabic in mourning gatherings, rather than the southern Iraqi dialect which dominates Arab Shi'ism. They invoke rationalism as a slogan in order to oppose bloody forms of self-flagellation including *tatbir*. Proponents of *tatbir*, such as the Shirazis, do not deny the importance of rationalism.¹¹ Instead, they emphasize hemic rituals in an attempt to claim legitimacy through the concept of tradition. Both opponents and proponents frame their arguments about *tatbir* with reference to dualistic terms: tradition and modernity, healing/salvation and revolution.

In this article, I rethink these binaries by first reviewing academic approaches to Muharram mourning practices and discourses. Second, I introduce the Syrian shrine and town of Sayyidah Zaynab and local debates surrounding Muharram rituals. Third, I examine Twelver Shi'a mourning rituals in Syria, including *majalis* 'aza and *tatbir*, through two related dichotomous concepts, the Karbala Paradigm and affective mourning modalities, which I discuss below. Fourth, I show how paying attention to affect can help in reconsidering the concepts of 'revolution' and 'redemption.'

The Karbala Paradigm

Muharram rituals have been a favourite topic of discussion among historians, anthropologists, and political scientists. Prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, scholars framed their analysis in terms of the 'Passion of Karbala,' which they treated as a Shi'a genus of the passion play common in Christian Easter observances.¹² Following the Revolution, however, scholars such as Nikki Keddie and Michael Fischer became interested in the politicization of Shi'a Muharram practices and discourses.

In 1981, the anthropologist Fischer was the first to coin the phrase 'the Karbala Paradigm' in order to distinguish Shi'a Muharram practices from those of Catholic Penitentes. His construction pointed to the narrative's rhetorical operation, dramatic form, and significance in differentiating Shi'a. The paradigm, according to Fischer, 'provides models for living and a mnemonic for thinking about how to live.'¹³ By 1983, historian Nikki Keddie framed the analysis in terms of a duality with a relationship to politics. The duality in the subtitle of Keddie's edited volume, *Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution*, which Mary Elaine Hegland rephrased as 'accommodation and revolution,' became the dualism through which scholars came to understand the Karbala Paradigm.¹⁴ Around the same time, anthropologist Michael Gilson

published his comparison of Muharram rituals in Iran with Lebanon. He designated politically quietist versus revolutionary modes, 'passive' versus 'active' modes of piety.¹⁵

In their more recent studies, Kamran Aghaie, Lara Deeb, and Sophia Pandya have not only adopted earlier politically focused and dichotomous views of the Karbala Paradigm, but have argued that there has been a shift over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century from 'traditional' and 'salvific' interpretations to 'modern' and 'revolutionary' interpretations.¹⁶ At first, Shi'a in Iran, Lebanon, and Bahrain followed 'traditional' and 'salvific' interpretations, according to which Shi'a should participate in all forms of mourning and self-flagellation in order gain salvation in the afterlife as well as in this lifetime. Then, many Shi'a began following 'modern' and 'revolutionary' interpretations, according to which Shi'a should strive for 'modern' values, such as education, progress, political awareness, and social involvement.

The dichotomous concepts these academics have been using largely mirror those of religious Iranian ideologues such as 'Ali Shari'ati who in the decades prior to the Revolution had turned the Karbala narrative into a revolutionary manifesto. (Notably, Shari'ati lies buried in the cemetery adjacent to the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab in Syria.) Shari'ati argued that there are two types of Shi'ism: the first type was the 'pure, just, and populist' Shi'ism of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Imam. The second was Safavid Shi'ism, the worldly, complacent, and corrupt piety of the scholarly elite, the ulema.¹⁷ The clerics' 'worldly Shi'ism' implied that they were more concerned with the details of ritual observance than struggling against the corrupt regimes that had co-opted them.¹⁸ By holding up 'Alid Shi'ism as the pure, just, and true form of Shi'ism and delegitimizing scholarly authority, Shari'ati emphasized 'active emulation of Husayn in the form of active rebellion against corrupt rulers.'¹⁹ He transformed the Battle of Karbala from a religio-historical account, central to mainly soteriological practices, into an on-going moral and political obligation to revolt against injustice.²⁰ Husayn became the 'model for rebellion against the Shah and the foreign imperialist powers.'²¹

My caveat with both Shari'ati and the aforementioned academics is that the dichotomous interpretation of the Karbala Paradigm posits two mutually exclusive options. Muharram rituals and symbols are either traditional or modern, salvific or revolutionary. My objection to this binary is that it simultaneously depoliticizes salvation and desacralizes revolution.²²

In what follows, I complicate and reconcile this politically focused and dichotomous interpretation of the Karbala Paradigm. I do so by drawing attention to two underlying modes of affect, which are not only conceptually and linguistically inter-related, but interdependent. I argue that Muharram symbols, discourses, and rituals affect participants in two affective modes: *athara* and *thara*. They can transmit, have influence, and make an impression,²³ or they can stir up, arouse, and excite.²⁴ The first term derives from the root *a-th-r*; the noun *athar* designates 'traces' or 'tradition.'²⁵ The second derives from the root *th-ā-r*, which is also the root of the word 'revolution,' *thawrah*. The two terms are closely related both in form and in content, linguistically and with regard to their meanings.

To illustrate my theory, I show how *athara* and *thara* are both at work in two kinds of mourning rituals, which I observed in Sayyidah Zaynab: weekly women's mourning rituals (*majalis 'aza*) and men's annual 'Ashura processions including *tatbir*. I demonstrate how the concepts of *athara* and *thara* help reconcile and, at the same time, illuminate interpretive differences with regard to the Karbala Paradigm. Finally, I claim that an analytic focus on affect, rather than political effectiveness, allows scholars to rethink both 'revolution' and 'salvation' with regard to contemporary Twelver Shi'ism.



Figure 1: The eastern side of the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab. It is the side one sees when entering from the prayer hall. Above the entrance, it reads: '*Al-salam 'alayki ya Zaynab al-Kubra*' ('Peace be upon you, O Zaynab the elder').

At the shrine

It is ironic that the country which has been most tolerant of public Shi'a mourning rituals over the last decades is the same place where Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (d. 1952), the highest ranked Shi'a jurist or *mujtahid* of Damascus of his time, published a tract condemning flagellations in the 1920s, sparking a debate over bloody flagellation practices. Opponents accused Amin of giving in to Sunni pressure. Supporters argued that he only sought to reform 'Ashura practices by criticizing, for instance, the participation of unveiled women in public rituals. By removing the visually offensive aspects from these practices, Amin hoped to make these rituals into aesthetically pleasing spectacles, which would serve as proselytizing tools.²⁶

Despite Amin's disapproval, bloody flagellation processions are generally tolerated in Sayyidah Zaynab. Unlike the Iraqi government under Saddam, the Syrian regime does not fear the rituals' 'revolutionary potential.' And unlike both Iran and Lebanon, Syria is not mainly concerned with the 'modern' and 'authentic' image of Twelver Shi'ism. Struggling to rule over a majority Sunni country, the Syrian regime (which is largely 'Alawi) is indulgent towards Twelver Shi'a because it derives its Islamic credentials and legitimacy from them.²⁷ Moreover, Syria's stance towards Shi'a piety has made religious tourism a lucrative source of income. Thus, the Syrian state has sought to merely contain 'Ashura practices, but not to control or abolish them. The Syrian government sought to side-line and hide these practices in 2009, when the ties between Saudi Arabia and Syria became stronger and the Saudi king came to visit Damascus. However, they remained legal and lively.

The main promoters of self-flagellation rituals in Sayyidah Zaynab are the Shirazis and other exiled elite Shi'a. They first started coming from the Iraqi shrine-town of Karbala in the early 1980s, when Saddam Hussein exiled forty thousand Shi'a suspected of Iranian descent. In 1982, Ayatollah Hasan Shirazi was murdered in Beirut, Lebanon. Meanwhile his brother, Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi, had left Iraq for Kuwait, but following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, he moved to Qum, Iran. Muhammad Shirazi had had high hopes for Iran and the Revolution. The Shirazis had been close friends and helpers to Ayatollah Khomeini before the Revolution. However, they had a falling out by the mid-80s. The Shirazis disagreed with Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih al-mutlaq* and preferred *shurat al-fuqaha*, a system that would allow them to have a voice

in politics. Moreover, as the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khomeini had become more concerned with domestic matters. The Shirazis remained dedicated to their transnational network and ideology. Despite their political failures in Iraq and Iran, the Shirazis have been successful in building networks and institutions in Syria. They head the oldest and one of the largest seminaries in the shrine-town Sayyidah Zaynab, the Zaynabiyyah.

Significantly, the most important religious space in town, the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab and its prayer hall does not fall under the authority of the Shirazis. The shrine is under the influence of Hezbollah and under the control and authority of Khamene'i.²⁸ Women visibly affiliated with Hezbollah 'manage' female crowds on Fridays. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i controls the shrine in the sense that his views are preached from the pulpit and his advice is disseminated from 'Islamic information offices' in the shrine complex, across the entrance to the prayer hall. His influence is substantiated by the fact that it is Iranian money which has been funding much of the recent renovation of the shrine.²⁹ Notably, both Khamene'i and Hezbollah oppose *tatbir*. (However, they do not oppose *latmiyyat*, or rhythmic clapping on the chest.) As political actors, both are mainly concerned with the image of Twelver Shi'ism. They are opposed to bloody 'Ashura practices, because they argue that it makes Shi'ism look 'irrational' and 'backward.' They are afraid that seeing such practices leaves negative impressions on Sunnis and non-Muslims.³⁰

The Shirazis are also concerned with defending the image of Shi'ism, though their position as a minority within a minority make them more willing to embrace provocative practices. Their defence and active encouragement of *tatbir* performance demonstrates their defiance of and opposition to Khamene'i and his claim to be the sole supreme leader.³¹ The Shirazis compare their own exile and loss of power to that of the Family of the Prophet. They claim to be the defenders of 'tradition', in the sense that they equate 'flagellation' with the 'tradition' of Sayyidah Zaynab. Another sense in which the Shirazis invoke 'tradition' is by arguing that *tatbir* flagellation in particular constitutes a 'prophetic' (and thus, 'traditional') form of medicine. They claim that it is a form of 'cupping' which draws '*damm fasid*', rotten or corrupt blood, out of the body, thereby healing it.³² Tradition connotes healing.

In Syria, the Shirazis promote bloody forms of self-flagellation such as *tatbir* at their seminary, which lies around two hundred metres north of the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab, on the road to Damascus. They also have

a satellite television station. However, as noted earlier, they do not control the shrine. Khamene'i's representatives manage the shrine. This means that casual visitors and pilgrims, as well as local Sunnis who may also visit the shrine, are much more likely to hear and be exposed to Khamene'i's views. The Shirazis can only reach out to those who attend classes or mourning gatherings held at their Zaynabiyyah seminary. Who attends classes and rituals at the Zaynabiyyah? Though short-term visitors do occasionally come in and participate, most of the attendees are long-term foreign residents who live in Sayyidah Zaynab or its surrounding areas. They include mainly Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans, Africans, some Kuwaitis, and sometimes Syrian or Lebanese Shi'a. The demographic split between those who support Khamene'i versus those who support Muhammad Shirazi separates and even alienates locals from visitors and non-Shi'a locals, who are likely to hear Khamene'i's view if they visit the shrine. As foreign long-term residents perform bloody mourning rituals, Sunni locals and pilgrims from all over the world learn that extreme forms of flagellation are not acceptable. One might even posit that the hostilities post-2011 between on the one hand Iraqi and other long-term Shi'a residents and on the other hand Syrian, Golani, and Palestinian Sunnis, who came to the area largely before Shi'a began arriving, have been influenced by the discursive divide between the Shirazis and Khamene'i.³³ What influence it has on Shi'a in Syria as a whole after the uprising is another question entirely.

Affective mourning practices

While Ayatollahs Shirazi and Khamene'i do not agree on *tatbir*, they do agree on a variety of other Muharram practices which are regularly performed in the shrine and town of Sayyidah Zaynab. They both support *latm*, wearing black clothing, and crying. One of the most vital pious practices in Sayyidah Zaynab is the weekly mourning gathering (*majlis 'aza*), wherein Shi'a commemorate the oppression and deaths of the Imams.

The *majlis* begins when the *mullayah* ascends the *minbar* (or podium). The *mullayah* may begin with reading a *ziyarah*, a 'visitation prayer' for the particular member of the Prophet's family to be mourned during the gathering. *Ziyarat* are standardized prayer-formulas found in Shi'a prayer books, particularly *Mafatih al-Jinan*.³⁴ Alternately, a *mullayah* may begin with a slow *latm*, a mourning chant accompanied by rhythmic chest beating (though many women will slap

their hands on their knees or thighs instead of their chests). Following this introduction, the *mullayah* reads *salawat*, greetings to the Prophet's family, the *abl al-bayt*, which includes a short formulaic description of their oppression and ends with the wish '*ya laytana kunna m'akum fa-nafuzu fawzan 'adhiman*' (literally, 'O, how we wish we had been with you [at the Battle of Karbala], we would have won a glorious victory'). The *salawat* are usually chanted in the manner of a dirge. They set the mood melodically and pre-shadow the *na'i* lament, which follows later. Though this *na'i* is short, many women pull their *abayat*, black outer garments, over their faces as if practicing, readying themselves for the mourning to come later in the ritual gathering.

Next, the *mullayah* introduces the topic of her sermon either quoting Qur'an or a relevant *hadith*. In her talk, the *mullayah* may address doctrinal or legal questions.³⁵ 'Alawiyyah 'Aliya, a teacher at the Shirazi seminary, explained in a rhetoric class, that the preacher or *mullayah* should keep it short.³⁶ This way, the audience will be moved, but not bored. The *mullayah* should engage her audience through interesting stories and she should talk about something useful.³⁷ For example, it is useless to tell an audience of veiled women to veil. Instead, a *mullayah* should encourage them to pray on time. A *mullayah* should adapt their sermons or lessons to the interests of her audience. A carefully chosen topic will actually leave deeper effects; it will make the audience think.

To further illustrate this point 'Aliya related the following story: 'There was once a shaykh who went to a rural community where he wanted to perform ritual mourning gatherings. To his surprise, his audience did not respond to his lamenting chant as he held his first *majlis*. Disappointed, he asked his hosts whether they thought his voice was lacking. The hosts assured the shaykh that his lament during the *majlis* had been beautiful. The shaykh thought for a while and then asked the host: "What occupations do the villagers practice?" The answer was animal husbandry. The next day, the shaykh retold the Karbala story in a local idiom. He explained that the cattle of Yazid killed the animals of Husayn. And the audience wept almost immediately!' When 'Aliya finished the story, the seminary students laughed. They understood that using local idioms helps move listeners and causes them to reflect.

The *na'i*, which follows the sermon, covers a range of lament styles which follow a set order (*wannah*, *tahmis*, *muthaqqal*), but allows for improvisations within the parameters of this form. An accomplished *mullayah* has memorized countless lines of mourning poetry, which help her improvise while chanting.³⁸ She has recourse to standard

classic collections and newer fashionable collections for the *na'i*. In both cases, the poetry is in *shruji*, Southern Iraqi colloquial Arabic. In this, the *majalis* in Sayyidah Zaynab differ from the self-consciously 'modern and revolutionary' *majalis* in Lebanon, which use Modern Standard Arabic.³⁹

Though the emphasis lies on the *mullayah*, she is not solely responsible for the felicitous performance of *majalis*. Participants are expected to noisily, actively lament and cry during the *na'i* in response to the *mullayah's* chant. *Mullayah* Um Zaynab often tells her audience: 'If you can't cry, pretend to cry (*tabaki*)! Performing *tabaki* carries the same divine reward as crying and it will, *insha' Allah*, help you learn to cry with more ease.'⁴⁰ Pulling one's *abayah* over one's face, or simply hiding one's face in one's hands and acting 'as if' one cried is not only acceptable, but a necessary first step towards becoming a better, more pious Shi'a.

To signal the end of her *na'i*, the *mullayah* invariably recites the formula usually invoked when hearing the news of someone's death: '*Inna li-Allah wa inna ilayhi raji'un*' (or 'we are from and belong to God and to Him we return'). As if on cue, women cease their lament, dry their tears, pull back their *abayat*, and uncover their faces.

At this point, the *mullayah* has the option to perform *latmiyyat* (which are chants accompanied by rhythmic chest beating) before ending the ritual gathering. Syrian and Lebanese *mullayat* tend to minimize or omit this part, while Iraqis tend to extend it. At the Shirazi seminary, all *majalis* include at least three *latmiyyat*. Each increases in tempo, agitating and exciting devotees. The first *latmiyyah* may be accompanied by clapping on the thighs, the second by chest-beating, and the third by slapping one's cheeks.

The *majlis* comes to a close with one or more of three standard prayers. The *mullayah* tells her audience to '*salli 'ala Muhammad wa Al-i Muhammad*,' bless the Prophet and his family, and then recite Surah al-Fatihah for the benefit of the sponsors of the *majlis* and for themselves, for the sake of healing and for the fulfilment of their needs. If someone has a particular need or request, she may request the *mullayah* to ask everyone to respond to another '*salli 'ala Muhammad wa Al-i Muhammad*' and recite another Surah al-Fatihah.

In short, the weekly mourning gathering goes through a cycle of affect. It begins with a slow, 'heavy' chant. After this initial 'impression', the *mullayah* transmits a lesson, which ends in *na'i*. Through *na'i*, devotees descend into crying or *tabaki*, an emotional, cathartic low. Then, they ascend via *latmiyyat* to a rhythmic crescendo. Finally, the ritual ends

in a sudden stillness, a redirection, and a plea for the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam, to return and to save his Shi'a devotees.

One day after class at a seminary in Sayyidah Zaynab, I brought up the binary of *athara* and *thara* for discussion with Um Muhammad, a classmate at the Zaynabiyyah seminary. She liked the idea and suggested that another way to conceive of these two modes of affect is to link them to another dichotomy: 'theory' and 'practice.' She explained that there is a correlation: 'the traces (*athar*) which mourning gatherings leave are theoretical, dogmatic, *nazari*. The 'revolutionary' mode of Shi'a piety (*thawrah*), for her, constitutes 'practice.' It is '*amali* (or practical).'

⁴¹ Her attribution of the adjectives, 'theoretical' and 'practical', to the two modes of affect is complementary. One necessarily implies and requires the other. The theoretical traces of mourning gatherings occupy attendees' minds; mourning gatherings also agitate, engender practice and encourage practical action. 'They are like [the duality of] mind and body,' explained Um Muhammad. They encompass both salvation and revolution.


Figure 2: This photo was taken in 2007, when the eastern side of the shrine's compound was not yet exclusively dedicated to women. The men and women in the photo belong to the same tour group. The men are performing *latm* (a form of self-flagellation which consists of rhythmically slapping one's chest), while the women are lamenting loudly. The tour guide usually has some seminary education and leads the ritual chant which accompanies the *latm*.

'Revolutionary' and 'salvific' interpretations

While ritual mourning gatherings in Sayyidah Zaynab are often held on a weekly basis throughout the whole year, there are also calendar specific mourning rituals, such as 'Ashura processions, which take place on the tenth of Muharram. Some 'Ashura processions include *tatbir*, the practice of cutting oneself on one's forehead with a blade until blood flows. Others do not. I examine *tatbir* here is because it is an extremely popular practice, which draws both crowds and controversies.

Tatbir processions, in a sense, form the pinnacle of the annual Muharram cycle. In Sayyidah Zaynab, Shi'a perform *tatbir* processions at dawn on 'Ashura. Just after sunrise, rows of young men dressed in white *dishdashahs*, or long-sleeved robes, emerge from various seminaries and *husayniyyat*.⁴² Accompanied by boys and men carrying drums, the men rhythmically chant '*ya Haydar*' ('O lion', an epithet for Imam 'Ali, Husayn's father). Some carry their own swords and rhythmically hit themselves on their freshly shaved heads with the flat side of the blade in preparation for *tatbir*. The older, more experienced men cut themselves. First-timers let an elder hit them once or twice. In a sea of mourning Shi'a dressed in black, the flagellants stand out in their blood-stained white *dishdashahs*. The bleeding men march proudly around the shrine, pay their respects to Sayyidah Zaynab. They promise her, the gathered crowds and themselves that they stand by Husayn. Similarly to the weekly mourning gatherings, they wish: '*Ya laytana kunna ma'akum fa-nafuzu fawzan 'aziman!* O how we wish we had been with you [at the Battle of Karbala], we would have won a glorious victory!'

The flagellants range from five-year-old boys, whom their fathers carry on their shoulders, to elderly men. The majority, however, who perform this rite of masculinity, are young men from their late teens to early forties. They include Iranians, Afghans, and South Asians, but the majority is Iraqi. (There were roughly two million Iraqis in Syria around 2006 and many of those were Shi'a.) Crowds form in anticipation of the flagellation procession, consisting of women – the flagellants' mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters – and other men, both Sunni and Shi'a. Many cry while watching the flagellants. The atmosphere is both sad and energetic. When I watched the processions in 2008 and 2009, a few of the women who knew me proudly pointed out their male relatives who were performing *tatbir*.

Even after the procession is over and the crowds dispersed, dozens of young male flagellants continue to walk around in their blood-stained

clothes for the rest of the day. They bear visible traces of mourning. The traces are bodily: the pain fades, but the cut of the forehead remains for a while. The young men also make impressions on others. *Tatbir* influences observers: it can agitate them or make them think.

As most *tatbir* processions take place just after sunrise, few non-Shi'a critics and cynics come to see the flagellants. Most come in the afternoon, when two or three South Asian groups of men perform *zanjir* flagellations (wherein they use chains with attached blades). Nevertheless, on the morning of 'Ashura (in January 2009), a group of young Palestinian Sunni men showed up along the eastern wall outside the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab – mainly in order to make fun of the Shi'a men performing *tatbir*. A young Iraqi Shi'a man was slowly passing in front of them and felt personally offended by the Palestinian youth's comments. The Iraqi took his ceremonial sword, not the sharp one used for actually cutting the top-front of the head, and mockingly pretended to hit one of them on the head. The Palestinian youth jerked back, inadvertently admitting fear and defeat. The Shi'a man continued with the procession, while the Sunni recovered as his friends made fun of him. The scene was carnivalesque and playful.⁴³ At first, the Sunni boys felt compelled to react to the bloody procession. Then the flagellant felt stirred up, ignited, and maybe even a little bit irritated. In the background, the drummers continued their slow rhythm and mournful chant. Overall, the scene could be described as leaning towards *thara* rather than *athara*. By contrast, women's weekly mourning gatherings at the Zaynabiyyah can be predominantly thought of in terms of *athara*. Yet, in some cases, *athara* and *thara* coincide.

Consider the following example: in Sayyidah Zaynab, there is a resident group of South Asian Shi'a seminary-students and merchants that had been following Ayatollah Khamene'i, who is opposed to *tatbir*, as their *marja' al-taqlid*. After the 2009 Iranian election, when Khamene'i supported Ahmadinejad's re-election, the South Asian men were so disgruntled with the Iranian leaders that they chose to participate in *tatbir* processions.⁴⁴ Through *tatbir*, by cutting themselves with swords on the top-front of their heads, these men ritually inscribed their bodies. As opposed to the revolutionary transformation of a society through political mobilization, they were instead reclaiming their bodies in protest. Their protest may not have led to political change, but their performance of *tatbir* became a method for liberating themselves from Khamene'i's authority. Their performance combined *athara* and *thara*. What was this, if not revolutionary and salvific at the same time?⁴⁵

In his booklet entitled *al-sha'a'ir al-husayniyyah* (which the English preface translates as 'Husayni demonstrations'), Hasan al-Shirazi, the founder of the Zaynabiyyah seminary, explains that the nine mourning rituals he describes are an 'extension of Hussein's revolution'.⁴⁶ The Arabic text promises merit, intercession, and healing as rewards for participating in crying (*buka'*), *tabaki*, *ma'atim* (another name for *majalis 'aza*), wearing black clothing, tearing one's clothing at the neck, *latm*, flagellation with chains, theatrical representation, and *tatbir*. The English text pays no attention to salvation and healing. Instead, it begins with the scandal of dissent in the early community, the loyalty of 'Ali, the betrayal after Ghadir Khumm, and the martyrdom and sacrifice of Husayn for the sake of Islam. The implied meaning is that internal enemies, as well as colonial powers (which the second half of the preface describes), seek to obliterate Shi'ism and that only 'Husayni demonstrations' can preserve it. In this short account, the heavy story, which leaves traces (*athar*), precedes the call to ritual performance/revolution (*thawrah*), but is also a necessary prerequisite. In other words, they cannot be separated even if references to merit and salvation as such are omitted.

Conclusion

In the 1970s, bloody clashes erupted between Iraqi government forces and men marching in 'Ashura processions, including *tatbir* processions, in the southern Iraqi shrine-city of Karbala. Consequently, Saddam Hussein banned all Shi'a mourning processions, fearing their ability to mobilize crowds. In 1979 in Iran, mourning processions became demonstrations and led to the Iranian Revolution. Like other processions, 'Ashura processions can remain politically quietist. They can either fail or succeed in overthrowing regimes. As we have recently witnessed in Tunisia and Egypt, demonstrations alone can make regimes fall. However, as we have seen in Bahrain and Syria, this is not always the case. In other words, political change and revolutionary efficacy are not predictable and because of that, 'revolution' cannot be an inherent aspect of either Muharram processions or other forms of demonstrations. Therefore, I have argued that instead of focusing on political outcomes, it is more analytically productive to pay closer attention to affect, as it can help us re-think the 'revolutionary' mode of the Karbala Paradigm in broader terms.

Table of Key Transliterated Terms

Term Appearing in Text	Arabic/Persian	Term With Diacritics
Athara	آثر	athara
Latm	لطم	laṭm
Majālis ‘aza	مجالس عزاء	majālis ‘azā’
Mullayyah	ملایه	mullāyah
Na‘i	نعي	na‘ī
Thara	ثار	thāra
Tatbir	تطبير	taṭbīr

Notes

¹ Augustus Richard Norton, ‘Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon’, in *The Drama Review*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2005), 147.

² Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi‘i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 132; Wathiq al-Shammari, *Ikhbar al-Faqir fi Itbbat Hurmat al-Tatbir (The Information Guide of the Poor Man [or average Muslim] in the Assertion of the Prohibition of Tatbir)* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Naba’, 2010), 53-54.

³ Kamran Aghaie. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi‘i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Deeb, *Enchanted Modern*.

⁴ Currently, the main oppressor for Hezbollah is the state of Israel.

⁵ Lara Jakes, ‘Iraqi refugees flee Syria to avoid sectarian revenge’, Times of Israel, 31 July 2012 <<http://www.timesofisrael.com/iraqi-refugees-flee-syria-to-avoid-sectarian-revenge/>> (accessed 24 August 2012); Ryan Villarreal, ‘Refugees, Twice: Iraqis in Syria Displaced Again by Conflict’, International Business Times, 26 July 2012 <<http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/367226/20120726/syria-iraq-refugee-un-conflict-unhcr-civil.htm>> (accessed 24 August 2012).

⁶ The Iranian pilgrims were later released.

‘Fate of 18 Iranian citizens abducted in Syria remains unknown’, Press TV <<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/229787.html>> (accessed 21 March, 2011); Babak Dehghanpisheh, ‘Iranian pilgrims kidnapped in Syrian capital as fighting flares anew’, Washington Post, 4 August 2012 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iranian-pilgrims-kidnapped-in-syrian-capital-as-fighting-flares-anew/2012/08/04/8a2ed31e-de61-11e1-9ff9-1dcd8858ado2_story.html> (accessed 24 August 2012).

⁷ ‘Head of Hawza e Zainabia Martyred By Target Killing in Syria’, Jafria News, 15 April 2012 <<http://jafrianews.com/2012/04/16/head-of-hawza-e-zainabia-martyred-by-target-killing-in-syria/>> (accessed 20 April 2012). The *hawzah* was founded by Sadiq’s brother Sayyid Hasan Shirazi in 1973. Sabrina Mervin, ‘Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite? (Sayyida Zaynab, a suburb of Damascus or a new Shiite holy city?)’ in *Cahiers d’Etudes sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien: Arabes et Iraniens*, vol. 22 (1996), 149-162. Electronic document, <<http://cemoti.revues.org/document138.html>>, accessed 23 March 2009.

⁸ 'Bomb attack targeting Syrian holy shrine leaves 14 people wounded', Press TV, 14 June 2012 <<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/06/14/246193/car-bomb-hits-holy-shrine-in-damascus/>> (accessed 24 August 2012).

⁹ Field notes, Summer 2007.

¹⁰ Deeb, *Enchanted Modern*, 131-133.

¹¹ Notably, neither party promotes rationalism per se.

¹² Cf. Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979); see also Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shi'ism* (New York: Mouton, 1978).

¹³ Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 21.

¹⁴ Mary Elaine Hegland, 'Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village', in *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 218-236.

¹⁵ Michael Gilsean, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000 [1982]), 61.

¹⁶ Cf. Aghaie, *Martyrs of Karbala*; Deeb, *Enchanted Modern*; Sophia Pandya, 'Women's Shi'i Ma'atim in Bahrain', in *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2010), 31-58.

¹⁷ Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala*, 100-103.

¹⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 110.

²² See Sherine Hafez for a fascinating discussion on the problems with binaries: Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

²³ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 3-4.

²⁴ Ibid., 109.

²⁵ Mourning laments leave traces, and make listeners reflective. According to Um Zahra, words leave traces on 'soft' hearts. Fieldnotes, Monday, 14 December 2009.

²⁶ Werner Ende, 'The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi'ite Ulama', in *Der Islam*, vol. 55, no. 1 (1978), 19-36.

²⁷ Patrick Seal, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 173.

Twelver Shi'a were especially crucial for Hafiz al-Asad in the 1970s and 1980s because of the growing opposition by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, which accused Hafiz of being a non-Muslim and considered his rule illegitimate. Unlike his father, Bashar al-Asad has not associated himself closely with Twelver Shi'a symbols, rituals, and authorities. At the same time, Bashar continues to have strong links with Twelver Shi'a forces and authorities in Lebanon and Iran.

²⁸ Whose control it will fall under after the Syrian uprising remains to be seen.

²⁹ Mervin, 'Sayyida Zaynab.'

³⁰ They are, of course, also concerned with the mobilizing effect such rituals can have on Shi'a masses. The Iranian Revolution was, after all, born out of Muharram processions which turned into demonstrations.

³¹ Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 122-124.

³² Edith Szanto, 'Contesting Fragile Sainly Traditions: Miraculous Healing among Twelver Shi'is in Contemporary Syria', in *Sainthood in Fragile States*, eds. Andreas Bandak and Mikkel Bille (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

³³ Cf. Edith Szanto, 'Sayyida Zaynab in the State of Exception: Shi'i Sainthood as 'Qualified Life' in Contemporary Syria', in *International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2012), 287-289.

³⁴ Cf. 'Abbas al-Qumi, *Mafatih al-Jinan* (Beirut: Dar al-Murtadha, 2004).

³⁵ E.g., may a menstruating woman visit the shrine? Field notes, Thursday, 12 February 2009.

³⁶ In a sense, 'authenticated and modern' mourning gatherings are simply gatherings where the talk has become central and the other parts have been reduced to a minimum.

³⁷ Field notes, Wednesday, 30 July 2008.

³⁸ There is a common story about poetry and improvisation: there was once a young man who wanted to become a poet, so he went to a famous poet who told him to go and memorize 10,000 lines of poetry. This took the young apprentice a decade after which he returned to the poet who then told him to forget the poetry. That would make him into a poet capable of improvisation.

³⁹ Deeb, *Enchanted Modern*, 144-146.

⁴⁰ Field notes, Thursday, 1 January 2009 and Saturday, 14 November 2009.

⁴¹ Field notes, Monday, 14 December 2009.

⁴² In Sayyidah Zaynab, women usually do not participate in public performances of *tatbir*. However, there was a small group of women who performed *tatbir* in private. Field notes, Sunday, 27 December 2009.

⁴³ It is carnivalesque in Bakhtin's sense: it is grotesque and gluttonous. Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁴⁴ Field notes, Monday, 28 December 2009.

⁴⁵ Szanto, 'Sayyida Zaynab in the State of Exception', 291-292.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Shirazi, *Al-Sha'a'ir al-Husayniyyah (Husayni Affects)* (Beirut: Dar al-Sadiq, 1998), ix.