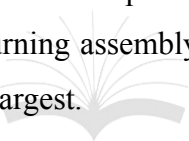


## Muharram: The Ritual and the Spiritual

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The most prominent feature of the Muharram observance by the devotees of Imam Husayn is the public display of certain symbols and signs in the various processions that are taken out in a number of cities around the world. These processions consist of people reciting dirges and lamentations in a collective voice, which is accompanied by breast beating. The breast beating gives a pace and rhythm to the recital, though there is no music. The processions began in Baghdad during the Buwayhid rule some one thousand years ago<sup>1</sup>. As the devotees of the holy Ahlul-Bayt spread across other parts of the world, they took that practice with them. Some of the largest Muharram processions taken out on the streets are in the countries of India and Pakistan. The mourning assembly (*majlis*) at Nashtar Park in the city of Karachi, Pakistan, is perhaps the world's largest.



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These processions act in two different ways. On the one hand, they give the community of the mourners a sense of solidarity and belonging, on the other hand, they make a public statement of *da'wa*. Because in this way no approach is made to any individual non-Muslim, they are for the most part totally innocuous and inoffensive.

Behind that wide-ranging practice of rituals, there is also a very deep spiritual philosophy. That spiritual philosophy is usually overlooked by the non-Muslim bystander and even by some of the Muslims who are totally uninformed or unsympathetic to the Karbala paradigm. The various symbols that are carried in the procession each have a story behind it and each one of them carries a specific message. Of course, placards and banners are self explanatory

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<sup>1</sup> The Buwayhids, Buyuds, or Al-Buyeh, were a Yazdani tribal confederation from Daylam. This is a region on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. These people were an ancient tribe, who migrated to the Caspian Sea and the Alburz Mountains. Their ancestral line is traced back to the prophet Abraham. During the period 945-1055 the Buwayhid ruled Baghdad and most of Iraq.

because they carry writings, but there are some symbols which require explanation for the uninformed. Some objects that are carried in the procession are: a coffin, a cradle and a number of standards (‘*alam*). There is also a horse. These objects are known as *shabeeh* (replica).

The most important point that has to be emphasized here is that these are not objects of worship, as usually is assumed by spectators who have insufficient knowledge about these things. Rather, these are the symbols of unfulfilled desires of the mourners.

The coffin is there to show that there was no one to bury the martyrs at Karbala, and if the mourners were there, they would have done it. The cradle commemorates the brutal killing of Husayn's six-month old baby-son Ali Asghar (also known as cAbdullah). The horse with its reins slashed and blood (actually red colour in case of the replica) all over its saddle, is reminiscent of Husayn's own death. The standard or ‘*alam* is to remember Abbas and his valour. ‘Abbas was the standard-bearer in Husayn's small band of soldiers. The bunting is usually green or white, with red color sprinkled on it unevenly. This is to commemorate Abbas's battle in which he lost both his arms and consequently, the standard he was carrying fell and was coloured in his own blood. There is also a dried water-skin attached to the ‘*alam*.

Husayn's ‘*alam* fell at Karbala, the mourners therefore, raise hundreds of ‘*alams* every year. This signifies the implied desire of every mourner to have been at Karbala, to fight and die for Islam. The paper-made *ta'ziyah* is there to show that the ladies of Husayn's family were carried on the naked backs of camels after his death, and there were no carriages for them. Another object, very similar to the *ta'ziyah*, is known as *dhareeh*. This is the replica of Husayn's mausoleum.

In India, some non-Muslims are very innovative about this. Some of them make a *dhareeh* out of clay, sprinkle it with wheat or some other seed, keep it wet for the ten days of Muharram, so that on the day of ‘*Ashura*, the seeds sprout and give the object a unique look. Both the *ta'ziyah* and *dhareeh* are buried in the local Karbala-ground on the evening of ‘*Ashura*. This symbolizes the martyrs of Karbala left unburied by the Umayyad soldiers. The ‘*alam* and other objects are kept in the Husayniyyahs for forty days.

Professor Peter Chelkowsky of N.Y.U. has done extensive study on the rituals associated with Muharram, and he has traveled to many different countries to see the local rituals and document the relevant information.

As the devotees of Ahlul-Bayt spread across the world over the past centuries, their particular Muharram practices became localized and they have developed their own individual way of doing things. That has made the practice of Muharram rituals more ethno-centric. Now that those devotees of Ahlul-Bayt have been settling down in various cities of Europe, U.K., and the United States of America, people from different countries and cultures have come together once again to unify those practices. However, that is a slow process. As more and more of those immigrants change to English as their main medium of communication, that process would speed up with the coming generations.

Proper public relations work is also much needed with the local indigenous populations in new countries. Recently in Canada, when mourners took out the replica of the Zul-Janaah (Imam Husayn's horse) in the procession, the local media labeled them as "horse worshippers." What we need is to give out a proper message about the mission of Imam Husayn at Karbala. At this point in time, banners in the English language (or whatever the local language in the area may be) are the best means of communication in the procession. Leaflets are also a good idea, but people are hardly ever interested in reading them.

It behooves various religious centers, particularly those in the large metropolitan cities in the West, to make proper communication channels with both the media as well as the public at large, to make assertive and positive statements so that accurate information is communicated.

There is always the danger that the Muharram rituals would deteriorate into something very unpleasant and totally undesired if the organizers do not take care of things appropriately. In the West Indies (particularly in Trinidad), a large population from the Indian sub-continent was resettled in the early 1900's. Some of them brought the practice of Muharram rituals with them. These rituals have, over the past century, deteriorated into an annual carnival. It has taken the

name of *Hosay* (which is probably a distortion of Imam Husayn's name). The participants conduct the carnival with music and dancing and are seen drinking beer in the procession. There is no semblance of mourning or lamentation there.

In India and Pakistan, the mourners wear strands of white or yellow cotton-threads round their necks, which are patched with red color. This is to commemorate the tying of the surviving members of Husayn's family in one rope which had cut through their skins and was reddened in their own blood. This custom is both symbolic and provides a means of communication to by-standers. Children should be encouraged to wear that and should also be ready to explain the message behind it, if anyone asks.

That, once again, brings us back to the spiritual aspect of the mourning practices. The most difficult thing to explain to a non-Muslim is the actual breast-beating (*matam*). The word *matam* in Arabic means 'to cry and weep for the dead.' In the modern usage of the word, it is used for the act of breast-beating. From a distance, the practice appears to be primitive, barbaric and irrational. However, it is the one element in the Muharram rituals which carries the deepest spirituality. Let us here give some background on it.

The tragedy of Karbala shook the very foundations of the Umayyad government in Damascus. The sole credit for that outcome goes to the surviving women and children of Imam Husayn's entourage at Karbala. When Yazeed was finally forced to release the prisoners under pressure from public outrage, he asked them as to where they wanted to go. Zaynab, Husayn's sister, asked her nephew, Ali Zayn al-Abideen, to ask Yazeed to give them a house in Damascus where they could gather and weep and lament for the martyrs. When that was done, the women of the city came to visit Zaynab and extended their condolences to her on the tragic events of Karbala. All of this was going on with the full knowledge of Yazeed. However, he was, at that stage, totally powerless to stop it. That was because the news of the tragedy at Karbala, the condition of the prisoners, as well as the death of Husayn's four year old daughter inside the prison, had spread all over the city and passions were rising against the oppression and wrongdoing by the government.

It was therefore prudent for the government to make the released prisoners go away as soon as possible. But before they had left the city, they were able to hold that lamentation assembly.

The women were able to do *matam* (according to the custom in Arabia) for their slain men-relatives in that assembly and the women of Damascus had participated with them in that. So, while the government was able to kill off the men at Karbala, that same government had become totally powerless before the women of Karbala.

Oppressors and tyrants do not dislike anything more than the oppressed standing up and protesting against tyranny and oppression. All the tyrant can do is to increase the oppression (*zulm*). However, that becomes totally untenable if the oppressed just laments and weeps, because that action appeals to human compassion. Most of the time, neutral and indifferent by-standers are drawn to the cause of the oppressed and the *zalim* (oppressor) is usually isolated in the process.

That is the power of *matam*. It is a powerful outcry against *zulm* which has no object of physical violence.

Experience has shown that some individuals, as well as organizations, are motivated in the wrong way as a reaction to *matam*. Even governments have taken action trying to stop those practices. The latest episode of that kind was the partial destruction of the golden dome over the Imam Askari Shrine in the city of Samarra, Iraq on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 2006. All indications are that it was a terrorist act. The culprits have yet to be found and apprehended.

Having said all that, our contention is that it is a fruitless exercise to try to convince and answer those Muslims who have always opposed the practice of *matam* and other rituals relating to the mourning of Husayn. No one is forcing anyone to participate in those rituals. So, why should anyone force those to desist from the practices of their choice; who do it and consider it good and appropriate? These lines have been added here after the latest protest-episode that was staged by an organization against the annual procession of Muharram held in New York City on

Sunday the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, 2006. That procession is organized by a New York organization and has been going on in cooperation with other organizations in the tri-state area for the last 20 years. New York City Police and other departments have also been cooperating in the effort. The counter-demonstration was stopped by the police just short of actual violence.

Muharram processions have now been going on in almost every major metropolitan city in the United States for the last twenty years. If the New York City incident is any indication, there may actually be a new trend of protests taking shape and organizers of Muharram processions should brace up for that eventuality. Such situations have to be handled prudently. The best thing is to ignore such negative activity and let the law-enforcement authorities handle the miscreants.

To be able to understand the full impact of *matam*, one has to understand the psychology of *zulm*, first. A powerful person needs something from a weaker person. The word ‘weaker’ here is used in the meaning of physical, political and material weakness, not intellectual and psychological weakness. The powerful person wants and needs that object badly enough that he resorts to force. He tries verbal force, ridicule and isolation. When everything else fails, in his arrogance of power, he resorts to the oldest trick in the book – murder and killing.

The physically weaker person continues to refuse and eventually gets killed. The irony of the whole situation is that the powerful person still does not succeed in his venture and the oppressed person defies him even in his death.

Not only that, if there is someone who, after that killing, starts protesting against that wrongdoing, it only adds to the embarrassment of the oppressor and makes him realize that he is losing further control of the situation.

This is exactly what had happened at Karbala. *Matam* is the continued protest which has been going on from the day Zaynab, Husayn’s sister, stood up first before Ibn Ziyad in Kufa and then before Yazeed in Damascus and protested against the *zulm*. The *matam* that is being done today by the devotees of Husayn is the continuation of Zaynab’s initiative. People and

organizations who try to stop *matam* and all other activities related with it, are either the apologists of Yazeed, who are much too embarrassed about the events at Karbala or they are clearly those who empathize with Yazeed's point-of-view which was based on arrogance of power as opposed to any human or ethical values.

The process of using *matam* as an instrument of protest did not come about in a day. It took some time and hard work from the leaders of the community.

The tragedy of Karbala was such a horrific crime that it had sent a wave of horror across the Muslim kingdom. There was also wide-spread anger in the community against the *zulm* perpetrated against the family of the Prophet. For the first hundred years or so, followers of Husayn would rise against the ruler, fight and give their lives. The leaders of the community realized that this was not the purpose of Husayn's sacrifice. Also, it was destroying the best talents of the community. The sixth Imam, Ja'far As-Sadiq started teaching the philosophy of lamentation and mourning en masse, as a replacement for the call for revenge. It was his persistent teaching that resulted in organized 'Aza<sup>2</sup>, particularly *matam* or beating one's face and chest.



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The fourth Imam, Ali Zayn al-Abideen, who was one of the survivors of Karbala, knew very well that if he or anyone else stood up and criticized the Umayyads directly, it would be easy for the government to eliminate them quickly. So, Ali Zayn al-Abideen would weep and cry privately and recite prayers and supplications to Allah. Thus, he turned his grief into that silent *matam*, and had left a record of some of the most profound supplications for posterity. The collection of his supplications has been published as a book under the title: *Saheefa Sajjadiyya*.

The fifth Imam, Muhammad al-Baqir introduced the practice of inviting poets and they would recite *marthiyya* (eulogies) for the martyrs of Karbala. The poets would be paid handsomely. He encouraged the poets to recite their poetry of lamentation widely, particularly where there were large crowds of Muslims gathering such as Hajj. The sixth Imam taught the actual *matam* as we know it; that is, beating one's own breast. The idea is that it is the mourner who strikes his breast with his own hand, but the thunder strikes in the heart of the enemy.

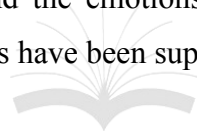
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<sup>2</sup> This word is derived from the Arabic root word A-Z-Y-Y, which means 'to lament.'

The explanation given above makes it clear that the breast-beating is basically an anti-violence message, as much as it signifies lamentation and commemoration of the martyrs.

Mourners also use chains and sometimes, other sharp objects, to inflict wounds on themselves. When Husayn was killed at Karbala, hundreds of his supporters were rounded up by Ibn Ziyad, chained and thrown in a dungeon in Kufa. When news of Husayn's killing and his family members' arrest and imprisonment reached those people, they broke their chains and started beating themselves with them in grief, anger and frustration. It is to commemorate this event that mourners use chains in *matam*. In India and Pakistan, this is called *zanjeer-ka-matam*, in Iran, *zanjeer zani* and in Iraq it is known as '*aza salaasil*'.

The purpose of that act is to commemorate the event and not to hurt oneself. Community leaders and '*ulema*' both have always urged the mourners to restrain themselves but the grief is so deep and the emotions are so high that people do get carried away. In modern times, these practices have been supplemented by acts which are beneficial to the community.



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For example, mobile blood-units move with the procession on the day of '*Ashura*' and mourners donate blood in Husayn's name<sup>3</sup>. Stalls are set up at every half-a-mile, where cold water and sweet *sharbat* are supplied freely to the mourners as well as the spectators. These stalls are called *sabeel*. When Husayn's son Ali Akbar had returned to his father in the middle of the battle, he had said: 'Father, is there any way (*sabeel*) of getting a little water?'<sup>4</sup>

'Aza, which is another word for *matam*, has really turned into a full institution. Historical events are related every year during gatherings and new generations learn about the religion from speeches made at these gatherings. There is room for intellectual satisfaction as well as physical exercise in it. People of all ages benefit from it. The emotional appeal in Husayn's story is so great that every new generation in every new place is attracted positively to it and consequently to all religious knowledge through it.

<sup>3</sup>This year (2006), my host, Dr. Kashif Haider, being a physician himself, had organized with the local blood-bank in Louisville to receive donors and accept blood from them should they want. <sup>119</sup>


<sup>4</sup> See our work *The Tragedy of Karbala*, for details.



It is natural with any ritualistic practice, be it religious in nature or otherwise, that over time the ritual becomes the main *raison d'être*, instead of an expression of its underlying philosophy. Much as the lectures and writings have tried to keep the real purpose of doing *matam* in view, due to the passion in it, the act itself has become sacrosanct and beyond any criticism of any kind. It takes a powerful religious scholar to revive the main purpose of doing *matam*.

In our times, it was left to the late Ayatullah Khumayni to do that. Khumayni identified Karbala as a triumph of blood over sword and not the passion of *matam*, *per se*.

Dr. S. Wahid Akhtar, formerly Professor and Chairman of the department of philosophy at Aligarh Muslim University, presented a paper at the conference on *Imam Khumayni wa Farhange 'Ashura*, (Imam Khumayni and the culture of 'Ashura), held on June 1-2, 1995 in Tehran<sup>5</sup>. In that paper, the author has shown Ayatullah Khumayni's involvement and achievements so eloquently, from which we quote:

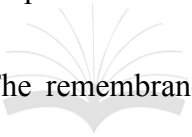
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Husayn (pbuh) initiated a movement that proved to be an archetype representing an eternal struggle of truth against falsehood, justice against injustice and tyranny, human dignity against dehumanization, the revolt of the oppressed against oppressors, and overpowering of the strong by society's weak. The un-Islamic rule of the Umayyads was challenged after him by his followers and descendants, such as Zayd ibn 'Ali, Yahya ibn Zayd, and before them by Mukhtar al-Thaqafi and the *Tawwab*, which created a ferment that finally resulted in the overthrow of the Umayyads and the coming to power of Banu 'Abbas, who deceitfully claimed to

<sup>5</sup> Taken from Al- Tawhid Vol XIII No. 1 (Spring 1996), see: <http://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/paradigm-akhtar.htm>

avenge the martyrdom of Husayn (pbuh) and to advocate his revolutionary mission.

However, this movement continued to be inspired by the message of 'Ashura during the reign of the 'Abbasid caliphs and afterwards. The emergence of Shi'i Sufi movements, like those of the *Sarbidaran*, the *Nuqtawis*, and the *Mar'ashis*, as well as the Fatimi-Ismaili sects, culminated in the victory of the Safawi Sufi order in Iran, who made it a point that the 'Ashura movement should continue as an inspiring force and dynamic principle in Muslim polity and society. It was the *Safawis* during whose reign the 'Ashura commemoration ceremonies took a particular shape.



The remembrance of the tragedy of Karbala' as a ritual did not remain confined to Iran and Iraq, but also influenced the socio-political and cultural life of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. As a result of this, in India, particularly in Avadh, there developed a culture that was inspired by the spirit of 'Ashura which was all-embracing. Other Muslim sects and even non- Muslims came under the cultural influence of this movement.


Unfortunately this movement, which represented a resurgence of the 'Ashura culture in literature and other art forms, gradually degenerated in the course of time in Iran, Iraq, and the sub-continent, losing its revolutionary spirit. One of the greatest contributions of Imam Khumayni is that he recreated and revived the spirit of 'Ashura through his messages

against the despotic Pahlavi rule and the exploitative domination of alien powers over Muslims throughout the world. Some of his disciples and contemporaries have also contributed to this 'Ashuraic resurgence of Islam, Shari'ati and Mutahhari in particular. Imam Khomeini and other champions of the revolutionary ideology of Islam in Iran made use of the traditional ritual 'Ashura ceremonies to reach the common Muslim masses for effectively conveying their message to the grassroots of the Muslim society.

There have been various attempts in the Muslim world to reinterpret and reconstruct Islamic ideology to meet the challenges of time. Ghazali demolished what was in his view un-Islamic in the ideas of Muslim philosophers; Jamaluddin Asadabadi, popularly known as Afghani, emphasized the importance of *ijtihad* and propagated a pan-Islamic ideology; his followers in Egypt and the Arab world, particularly Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida' and others, revived the practice of *ijtihad* in the Sunni world. Before them, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi and Shah Waliullah had made attempts to awaken Muslims to the needs of the time and revive the Islamic spirit. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Iqbal tried to reconstruct Islamic beliefs according to the challenges of the time and the ascendant supremacy of science and Western philosophy. In the words of Iqbal, all the earlier Muslim thinkers had failed in their mission because they destroyed the

prevalent philosophies but could not reconstruct Islamic ideas on a secure ground, and they failed to influence the Muslim society in general.

This failure, in my view, is due to these thinkers' inability to reach the Muslim masses and convey their message to them in a popular idiom. The success of Imam Khomeini and the other ideologues of revolutionary Iran found the popular platform of the Muharram ceremonies as a convenient weapon against the repressive Pahlavi rulers, imperialism and Western domination, particularly the exploitive American dominance of the East, to awaken Muslim masses and revive in them the spirit of martyrdom inspired by the episode of Karbala'. Because of this they succeeded in their movement, while others had failed to achieve the desired end.



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Imam Khomeini not only rekindled the flame hidden in the hearts of the pupils of 'Ashura culture, but also vehemently criticized the so-called 'ulama' and *fuqaha*' who, as time-servers, interpreted Islam and Islamic laws according to the convenience of the rulers and the exploiting class.

It was Khomeini's genius that he was able to bring about the Iranian revolution by reviving the true spirit of Karbala. He coined the famous slogan of the revolutionaries of Iran: "Every land is Karbala *and every day is 'Ashura*".

It is interesting that the main element of the Iranian Revolution took off on the day of 'Ashura. It was through the spirit of Karbala and 'Ashura that the Iranian people were able to get rid of a tyrant from their land. However, it was the brilliant vision of Khomeini that had brought the spirit of Karbala from a mere ritual of *matam* to its fullest spiritual potential. That same ritual of *matam* that we had identified in the beginning of this section, appearing to be primitive,

barbaric and irrational, was able to convert the public unrest and dissatisfaction with the worldly rule of the Shah into the most spiritual and effective National and International Revolution.

It is therefore, extremely important that the community should re-evaluate and re-assess the various rituals of Muharram as and when the community is faced with new cultural, intellectual and linguistic as well as geographical conditions. Ayatullah Khumayni recognized that need immediately and decided to act upon it. We quote again from Professor Waheed Akhtar's paper:

Imam Khumayni at the risk of losing popularity among the naïve and inviting wrath of professional *akhands* all over the Muslim world boldly restrained the devotees from unnecessarily shedding their blood during mourning ceremonies and advised them to donate their blood for the cause of defending the Islamic revolution. He also transformed the concept of *intizar*, waiting for the appearance of the Twelfth Imam (pbuh), from a passive state of waiting into active adherence to the Islamic principle of *amr b'il-ma'ruf wa nahy 'anil-munkar*. This injunction was aimed to give to the participation of mourners in the ceremonies a consciousness of the relevance of the ongoing socio-political struggle of Islam and the Muslim world against imperialism and oppressors by following the example of Imam Husayn (pbuh). Thus he successfully synthesized the ritual mourning with social action. He did not disapprove of mourning, but rather encouraged it with a view to making it the main source of a revolution. (Akhtar).

It was under the influence of that thinking that Khumayni first asked his followers to abstain from *Qam'a Zani*, a ritual in which mourners clad in white *kafan* (the shroud for the dead) use a very sharp knife to make an incision on the skin on their skull and bleed. He then

extended the ruling to *zanjeer zani*, and generally prohibited his followers from doing anything that would create a bad image of Islam and Muslims before the wider world.

Obviously, Khumayni was not the first of the ‘*ulema* to take such action. Intelligent and concerned ‘*ulema*, community leaders and intellectuals have always taken the lead in criticizing irrational activity in the name of religion. Indeed, they have taken the heat from the emotionally charged crowds, but they have left the mark of their reform on the community – whose benefits can be seen years later.

When the Nayshapuri Sayyids<sup>6</sup> and other devotees of Imam Husayn moved into the Indian subcontinent from Iran and Iraq, they brought the Muharram rituals and mourning practices with them. Both in Iran as well as in Iraq, street dramas are still performed in which real people dress up as various characters who were present at Karbala – both from Imam Husayn’s side as well as in the Umayyad forces<sup>7</sup>. The leaders in the Indian Muslim community dropped those dramas completely from the Muharram practices, and for good reason. In place of that, local ‘*ulema*, poets and leaders encouraged and devised new methods of mourning in poetry. Urdu *Marthiyya* took shape which was patronized by the rulers and was welcomed by the masses. That is a unique tradition. It has value as an instrument of mourning and lamentation. At the same time, it has added a new genre to the literature of the area.

<sup>128</sup> What could be a greater evidence to show the need for both a revival of the true spirit of Karbala in the hearts of the mourners to bring them closer to the great sacrifice in their thinking, as well as a process of catharsis, re-evaluation and re-assessment of the various rituals?

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<sup>6</sup> The Nawabs of Avadh were Moosavi Syeds who came from Nayshapoor in Iran.

<sup>7</sup> For details, see: Juan Cole, *The Roots of Indian Shi’ism in Iran and Iraq*, University of California Press, Berkeley; also see: Peter Chelkowski.