

SACRAL TRANSFIGURATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY.

'ĀSHŪRA' CELEBRATIONS IN LEBANON

Robert BENEDICTY

Saint Joseph University

Beirut, Lebanon

E-mail: roberbend@yahoo.com

Abstract: 'Āshūra' celebrations are nowadays some of the most forceful moments of Shiite community life in Lebanon. 'Āshūra' is the commemoration of Imām Husain's martyr in the Karbalā' battle (680). This *founding event* expresses – according to Mussā AL-SADR – 'the Shiite paradigm of history'.

From an anthropologist's point of view, 'Āshūra' festivities are a coherent number of semiotic instruments which the Shiite community uses to represent its vision of the world in its main components as well as its fundamental moral values, in scenic form. Thus, articles of faith and moral values become a lived experience in the present time through this scenic representation. It is a complex metamorphosis that occurs in the mental experience of the viewers, who then become *celebrating actors*.

Keywords: commemorative festival, martyrdom, Shiite, moral values, 'Āshūra' celebrations

'Āshūra' Celebrations as a Cathartic Experience

These celebrations are made of three liturgical activities whose aim is to help the celebrating actors to live a cathartic experience.

These three liturgical activities are as follows:

- 'Husaynite' or condolence processions;
- Condolence sessions;
- Scenic commemoration of the founding event, which in common usage is referred to as 'consolation' (فِي زَعْتَلَا).

'Husayite' Processions

The processions known as 'Husaynite' are liturgical processions organized by the inhabitants of various neighborhoods in the city, under the guidance of the *imāms* of mosques; they follow a path preliminarily set. The celebrating actors repeat pious exclamations – which are, often, political slogans – by hitting their chests in a rhythmic way, with their right hand, in sign of penitence: this rite is '*latm*' or '*mea culpa*'.

The respect of this penitence rite allows the viewer to observe the penitents' mental experience. In fact, the coordinated rhythmic movements, the repetition which is both monotonous and filled with emotional ritual exclamations, the bodies' attitude, the faces' mimics, and closed eyes are all signs that show that

the celebrating actors are fully plunged into the intellectual and emotional festive celebration. As such, in this exaltation moment, they relive in a mystical way the central moment of the founding event: the treason that their ancestors perpetrated against Imam Husain, 'the grand-son of the Prophet' and they want to atone for this crime. Processions are repeated during the first nine evenings of festivities, based on the same pattern.

On the tenth day of the festivities, the very day of 'Āshūra', the celebrating actors see and the researcher observes a new form of Husaynite processions: the '*procession of the swords*':

- These processions include small groups of men of all ages;
- The members of these small 'processions' hit their wounded heads with their right arms, rhythmically chanting the ritual exclamation 'Haidar':

This scene, which is quite impressive, offers the viewer a second opportunity to see the celebrating actors' mental experience: they seem to find themselves in a state of religious enthusiasm. In fact, by mystically reliving the treason perpetrated by their ancestors regarding Imam Husain, they want to repair it. It is an act of atonement.

Condolence Assemblies

The second series of liturgical activities is made of prayer gatherings, commonly called 'condolence assemblies'.

These assemblies occur either publically in mosques or in Husayniyyahs, and are guided by an *imām*; they may also be celebrated in private homes, in small communities, under the guidance of an *imām*.

The *ceremonial sequence* of assemblies occurs in three phases:

- It starts with the recitation of a Koranic periscope;
- Then a high-rank *imām* gives a '*khutbah*' or sermon;
- Eventually, an *imām* recites the martyrology.

The reading of the martyrology is, in fact, the monologue reading – by a reader – of an episode of the founding event; the 'reader' is usually a professional, such as an *imām* formed in Najaf, and represents a high artistic level.

I have observed the ceremony of condolence assemblies in the Husayniyyah of the city of Nabatiyyeh, apart from some visits to some individuals.

'Ta'ziyah' or the Scenic Celebration of the Founding Event

On the tenth day of the festivities occurs the liturgical *mise-en-scène* [composition; visual style] of the founding event.

The scenic celebration occurs in three acts:

In *the first act* the viewer sees the entrance of the two armies and their maneuvers. This *mise-en-scène* is – usually – used to present the viewers with antithetical images of Islamic society; in fact:

- Husain's army embodies the authentic Islamic society;
- Whereas the opposing Umayyad army is the image of the Islamic society of the depraved Yazid Caliphate.

Thus, the first act is the scenic expression of the theological idea of the true Islam, one which Husain wanted to resuscitate when he launched this 'suicidal' enterprise (according to the expression of some contemporary ulema [Muslim scholars and religious leaders]).

In *the second act*, the viewer sees the uneven battle between two armies; it includes a numbers of duels. In each scene, one of the *Imām's* companions is opposed to the powerful Umayyad army. Thus, the second act is the scenic representation of the intellectual supreme ideal of sacrifice, which is embodied by *Imām* Husain's freely consented martyr.

In *the third act*, the viewer sees the final assault by the Umayyad army against Husain's camp: it is the scene of the massacre of the men, and the humiliation of the women of the Prophetic home.

These are the three acts of a political-religious tragedy that is compared by a number of researchers to the 'passion' genre.

The Guiding Thoughts of the Karbalā' Tragedy

The careful viewer is likely to come out with two guiding thoughts in this tragedy:

- Based on the first idea, *Imām* Husain and his companions engaged in a hopeless, 'suicidal' battle in order to sacrifice themselves for a just cause. In fact, *justice* represents – in the Shiite theological thought – a fundamental value, which is explained in detail in the festive sermons.
- The second main idea is summed up in the *husaynite spirit of sacrifice*, which was evident in the freely consented martyrdom for the victory of the cause of the true Islam. Therefore, martyrdom is in Shiite Islam the quintessence of moral perfection.

It is clear that the *mise-en-scène* of this idea of moral perfection exerts a profound influence on the viewers, as seen in the ritual crying. In fact, a scenic commemoration of the founding event helps viewers to relive it over and again. The strength of this scenic commemoration resides in the fact that the *mise-en-scène* refreshes the initial tragedy of Shiite history.

The careful observation of the viewers and of their behavior during the scene allows the researcher to follow the transformation process in this public gathering of viewers, who are the celebrating community.

This transformation process highlights a remarkable phenomenon, which makes it possible to see the celebrating actors' mental experience. In fact, the limits that separate the scenic action from historical reality disappear from the

conscious thought of the celebrating-viewers as the scenic action evolves; the celebrating viewers forget that they are watching a play, which then becomes in their mental experience, a historical reality. It is in this mental process of *semantic shift* that resides the nucleus of the religious experience of the scenic commemoration's viewers.

The Viewers' Cathartic Experience

This rapid presentation of the celebrations of 'Āshūra' makes it possible to distinguish the framework of the celebrating actors' poignant religious experience. The faithful – who attend the ceremonies – and the actors – who carry out the ceremonies – *relive spiritually and intellectually* the founding event of the Shiite confessional community. The founding event is then made actual through ritual symbols. Through this ritual activity, they renew their loyalty to the Prophetic House, as well as to the entire Shiite community. They live a moment of communal enthusiasm, which unifies them in a unitary body and they become a sacral community.

The Thematic Content of the Cathartic Experience

The study of the discourse held by the celebrating actors in different occasions and in many contexts allows the researcher to study the thematic content of their mental religious universe. I was able to observe two types of religious discourse: on the one hand, occasional commentaries and unexpected gatherings by various speakers; on the other, sermons that the festive orator gave within 'consolation sessions'.

The 'leitmotiv' and/or central theme of this discourse is the idea of the community of the Shiite confessional community; it organizes the main themes of the Shiite discourse.

The Main Themes of the Shiite Discourse

The main themes of this discourse may be summed up in the following series of standardized statements:

1. *Imām Husain is the iconic personality who embodies the essential moral values of the Shiite confessional community.*
2. *The Shiites' predetermined destiny is to fight for justice and to resist the unfair masters.*

In fact, the idea of justice is at the heart of the Shiite theological thought so much that it became the second of the religion's five principles ('asl'). Then, the

idea of justice has produced a conception of history based on which the Shiite community's predetermined destiny is to fight injustice and to resist unfair masters.

First, this discourse highlights the Shiite socio-religious group's historical destiny as they fight injustice and commit to achieve justice. This destiny is embodied in an exemplary way by Imām Husain.

Second, this discourse combines two enemy groups in the same class, that of the 'unjust': distorted Islam and foreign enemies, which are both considered as the enemies of Shiites. Thus, resistance to these enemies is what distinguishes Shiites'.

'Āshūra' Celebrations are the Emblem of Shiite Identity

In fact, 'Āshūra' festivities have two functions to fill in the life of the Shiite community:

- On the one hand, they are a manifestation of their identity through a system of semiotic signs, which also reinforce their awareness of their identity;
- On the other, they bring out their autonomy and highlight their own personality facing other socio-religious Muslim groups, namely the Sunni.

The Husaynite Spirit of Sacrifice Finds its Roots in Islamic Ethics

These ethics, which the Prophet rooted in *generosity* and *dignity*, reaches its fullness in the martyr of Husain.

In this context, the orator has many times cited the Prophetic tradition, which attributes to the Prophet the following: 'I have been sent to complete good morals with generosity' (قال خال امرأكم مكل لَم كأل تل سرأ). Based on the Shiite interpretation, the martyr Husain freely consented to it, in fact, the achievement of this Islamic conception of ethics and presents him as the living archetype of these ethics.

These four themes are the theological context of the Shiite ethics that are represented in the 'Āshūra' ceremonies.

The Structure of the Shiite Discourse

The meta-textual presentation and the thematic analysis of the Shiite discourse show that the latter discourse carries a coherent thought and a well-structured ideology. The main themes, which are the semantic field of this ideology, are signaled by a series of thematic categories: they may be presented under the following matrix form:

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|------------------------------|
| AUTHENTIC ISLAM Prophet | PROCESSION HUSSEIN Prophetic House | DISTORTED ISLAM | ENEMIES STRANGERS |
| Hussein Mayrtyr | Love of Hussein Spirit of sacrifice 'Āshūra' Resistance Al-Sistani Martyrs AUTHENTIC IDENTITY | UMAYYAD Abbasid Ottomans Saddam Hussein LOST IDENTITY | England America Israel |
| JUSTICE | | INJUSTICE | |

This matrix disposition of the thematic categories – spread over four columns – highlights the internal articulation of this vision of the world:

- The left column groups the thematic categories that characterize authentic Islam as realized at the time of the founders: this is the universe of eschatological justice.
- The two columns to the right include the thematic categories that describe the world of injustice, through its two fractions: distorted Islam and estranged enemies.
- In the middle, there are the thematic categories that represent the party of Hussein who – in this earthly world – commit to the struggle for justice and the fight against the powers of injustice.

The matrix representation of the categories of this world vision pivots around the idea of eternal conflicts between the forces of Good and those of Evil. This conflict started with the battle of Karbalā’; as such, you find a list of Sunni tyrans, British colonialists, American occupants, and Zionist enemies who oppress the people of Hussein. Thus, the conflict of Karbalā’ became the paradigm of all the conflicts against injustice and for justice. Thus, the ‘Āshūra’ festivities represent a complex process of updating of the archetypal past. Behind this vision of the past there appear the contours of a group who founds its cohesion on conflict-based relations with its socio-political and religious environment.

The Sacral Transfiguration of the Shiite Socio-religious Group

It is this thematic constellation that is at the heart of the ‘Āshūra’ celebrations by forming the thematic content of the cathartic experience lived by the celebrating actors. It is a mise-en-scène of a moral ideal, which has a mobilizing strength.

In the light of what has been said, the idea of *martyr*, as understood in the theology of Shiites and lived in their religious experience, is comparable to the idea of *sainthood* in Christian theology and spirituality. In fact, in each of their theological systems, these two ideas represent the supreme ideal of moral perfection.

Similarity of Form [vs] Content Difference

This apparent similarity of the Shiite idea of martyr and the Christian idea of sainthood as two ideals of moral perfection cannot conceal the profound difference in the respective theological contents. The idea of *martyr* implies in its semantic field the idea of active resistance, which, in its turn, reaches its climax in the holy war, the 'dijihad' led against the forces of injustice. This 'holy war' is predestined by the Shiites to God. As a result, the Shiite ideal of moral perfection includes in its semantic field warring violence. Thus, the violent struggle led in order to achieve noble aims – such as the active resistance to injustice – is the supreme ideal of moral perfection. It goes without saying that this moral perfection also implies the disposition to agree to sacrifices, or even to sacrifice one's life.

The idea of active and violent resistance is one of the leitmotifs in the Shiite theological thought, especially in the works of Lebanese ulemas who – since Mussā AL-SADR – use it to justify the warring resistance against Israel. This idea lies on two master thoughts:

- On the one hand, the idea of martyrdom as a supreme ideal of moral perfection;
- On the other, the idea of reincarnation of this ideal in Hussein's destiny.

Christian theological thought also sees martyrdom as violent death endured for Christian faith. The death of the martyr is considered as a 'sign' that shows God's action through the perseverance of this witness, i.e. the martyr. As such, the Christian idea of martyrdom does not include in its semantic field active resistance.

Thus, it is clear that the difference between the two ideals of ethical perfection lies in the moral evaluation of violence, namely warring violence of each of the two theological systems.

To conclude, it should be noted that these two ideas of martyrdom are related to two ideals of moral perfection. In Shiite thought, this ideal is represented through the figure of a martyr. The Shiite martyr is, in fact, comparable to the epic hero. The epic hero embodies a system of ethical and religious values by living those values in his personal destiny, including those leading up to the ultimate consequences. He represents the perfect, accomplished man who commits to the end in order to put into practice sublime ideals, thus sacrificing his own destiny. The idea of this type of hero includes in its semantic field armed violence.

The Christian ideal of moral perfection is, on the other hand, embodied by the figure of the saint. The saint represents a type of man who is distinguished by both an intense internal life and the will to serve others.

'Āshūra' Festivities as the Sacral Transfiguration of the Shiite Socio-religious Group

In this context, 'Āshūra' festivities bear a clear meaning: For the celebrating actors, these ritual activities are a period of intense socialization. The activities have two functions:

1. The manifest function – represented by the celebrating actors' motives and aims – is the celebrating actors' subjective desire to have a communal religious experience through performing a work of piety;
2. Behind this manifest function of the festivities, there is a latent function. The analysis of data makes it possible to deduce two consequences that the celebrating actors have not considered:

First, periodic festivities help create and renew the institutional structures of the local socio-religious group.

Thanks to its coherence and monolithic unity, such a reference group is the center of power inasmuch as it exerts psycho-social pressure – or even sometimes physical pressure – in order to get its members to conform to a specific lifestyle. This reference group is based on a holistic concept of society, one which controls the members' socio-political practices and their existential experience. Through this holistic experience and this inclusive practice, the Shiite confessional group might be considered as a 'hierocratic group', to use M. Weber's words. Civil society and confessional community are the two complementary dimensions of this hierocratic group, which is the focus point of its members' loyalty. As a result, the group, which is very cohesive, shows relentless resistance to any attempt to break up its two constitutive dimensions.

The second consequence is the following: The celebrations help the celebrating actors to live a cathartic experience through the updating of basic religious ideas and main moral values as conveyed by the founding event.

Thus, as a result of this mental process of updating the founding event, 'Āshūra' celebrations – like similar rituals in other religions, such as the Easter celebrations in Christianity – become a tool that allows the religious participant to manipulate time.

In the light of these considerations, it is possible to consider the 'Āshūra' celebrations as a *mise-en-scène* of the Shiite idea of moral perfection, embodied by the heroic figure of the martyr. These celebrations are the sacral transfiguration of the Shiite community, which presents itself as the 'community of the companions of Imam Hussein, martyr of the Islamic cause'. It is the complex process of integration of the sacred and the profane in a holistic socio-religious group. In a way, the two dimensions are inseparable.