

## Conclusion

To immerse oneself in the plots of the central episodes of the *ta'ziyeh's* Muḥarram cycle, and, moreover, to witness how they changed through time, is to understand much about the dynamics of this vibrant tradition and its contributors. The physical environment of the *tekiyeh*, the experience of the performers and audience, and the close pact between them, have all left an impression on the scripts. The genre's compositional features, the innovations in dramatic content and poetic form, all have their story to tell. They tell of a tradition heavily influenced at its inception by Iranian storytelling. They tell of the exchange of dramatic material between performers from different regions, crossing in urban centres after the creation of a professional circuit. They tell of the toil of those players to bring fresh life to an old story, but of the imperative to remain true to its boundaries. They tell of those listening, of those composing and playing the likeness of the martyrs, of women, of dervishes, and of European visitors. To gain an overview, it is helpful to divide the conclusions into those concerning the tradition's inception, and then its development.

The trajectory of *ta'ziyeh-khānī* shows a tradition periodically embraced by the ruling classes, but originating from, and sustained by, the devotion of the masses. Sponsorship of Shi'ī rituals under the Safavid dynasty greatly facilitated the emergence of this form of devotional drama. However, Kāshefī's *Futuvvat-nāmeḥ-ye sulṭānī* shows that, even prior to this, other types of performance were given to inspire remembrance of the *ahl-e bait*, and that they were considered valuable acts of piety. Thus, the ground was ripe. I have shown that the earliest scripted *ta'ziyeh* plays in the form of *Haftād-u-du tan* (which portrays all of the most prominent Karbala martyrdoms consecutively) are likely to have emerged from re-enactments of the battle of Karbala staged amongst the common people, largely outside urban centres. The performance witnessed in Isfahan in 1051/1641 by M. de Montheron suggests that this custom existed by the 11th/17th century at the latest. Carsten Niebuhr's spectator account from Kharq Island in 1179/1765 provides an example of the form assumed by these performances as they gradually became more sophisticated.

While such performances were ongoing, the individual Karbala martyrdoms and events (such as the pillage of the camp) had begun to be treated in episodic form, as evidenced by the rendition of *Ghārat-e khāimeh-hā* dated 1136/1724. "Fanā'ī", this play's composer, was "late" by the time this copy of the script was made,<sup>1</sup> telling us that he was a Safavid era composer. Thus, the very

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1 Fath-'Alī Baigī and Daryāi, *Daftar* 13, 13–14.

first generation of episodes, early efforts at dramatizing the individual martyrdoms, will date to this period. Two oratory traditions will have influenced the performance of the Karbala narrative being divided into episodes. The *rawzeh-khānī* recitals, prevalent during the Safavid period, already divided the tribulations of the Karbala martyrs into a series of orations, told over the first ten days of Muḥarram; the *naqqālān*, professional storytellers, had long told the stories of the Iranian epics in daily instalments.

The scripts of the Zand collection show that the genre had already undergone considerable evolution by that time, and that its key compositional features were already in place. The composers of these scripts made adept use of poetic metre, and already embellished the Karbala narrative as transmitted in historical sources. The inclusion of the *gūsheh* featuring Mūsā and the desert dwelling dervish in the rendition of *The Martyrdom of Imam Ḥusain* dating to this period is a prominent example. Also, the use of what I have identified as the “martyrdom composition-scheme” is already evident in the episodes of this collection, and we have the inclusion of type-scenes. Therefore, these aspects of how the Karbala narrative would be dramatized in the *ta’ziyeh* had already taken shape. Despite this evolution, the earliest witness account of *ta’ziyeh* in episodic form as part of what appears to be an official programme of Muḥarram commemorations is Francklin’s 1202/1787 account from the Zand dynasty’s capital of Shiraz.<sup>2</sup> That “Fanā’ī” was active before the 1720s implies that the composing of scripted episodes had begun long before Francklin’s account. Interesting questions remain open about the interim period. Where were the performances of the early to mid-18th century taking place? Who were these early script writers? Was their work simply a devotional act, or were they remunerated for their efforts? Comprehensively addressing these questions requires further research. But I can offer a small piece of the puzzle.

*Ta’ziyeh* performances may have received patronage during the Safavid period but no evidence of this has come to light as of yet. During Nāder Shāh’s reign it is doubtful that they received official support. Although the early scripts reveal the work of skilled poets, it is unlikely that there was a living to be made as a *ta’ziyeh* composer or performer at this stage. Many of those involved in this emergent genre are likely to have honed their skills, even been professionals, in other oratory art forms – in particular the storytelling traditions of *naqqālī* and *pardeh-dārī*. The compositional features of the plays, the characterisation of Shi’ism’s martyrs as heroes of epic, the shared narrative

<sup>2</sup> Francklin, *Observations*, 100–01.

material, and connection between the *ta'ziyeh* performers and 'Ajam dervish order – major participants in the *pardeh-dārī* tradition – all support this thesis.

Borrowing the concepts of the type-scene and the composition-scheme has illuminated greatly the way in which the main episodes of the *ta'ziyeh* repertoire are structured. Of course, this is not how *ta'ziyeh* composers and performers describe their own work: their terms, including *vāqe'eh*, *pīsh-e vāqe'eh*, *faqareh* and *gūsheh* are useful in discussing these works and their sections but, unlike the composition-scheme and the type-scene, they do not cover the repeating patterns that we see in the structure of the episodes, and the recurrence of certain shorter scenarios, that becomes evident when we zoom out and look at the features of the repertoire more globally. These compositional phenomena are typical of oral art forms, providing ready-made templates for the improvisations of the bards. Although *ta'ziyeh* is a scripted tradition, transmitted largely through the copying, redacting and interpolating of written material, the presence of these structures speaks for its close relationship to storytelling. Furthermore, while the *ta'ziyeh* composers did follow the Karbala narrative as transmitted in historical sources, they did not include the plethora of individuals named there. Instead, they feature characters who, like the icons on the storyteller's painted canvas, are representatives of their kind: symbols of innocence, heroism or malevolence.

The same storytellers who narrated the epics (the *naqqālān*) had moved into the telling of religious stories (*pardeh-dārī*) before the advent of the *ta'ziyeh*: predominant amongst these proselytising storytellers were the predecessors of the 'Ajam dervish order. The *ta'ziyeh* composer "Nāṭeq", active in the Zand period and whose work I have discussed, gives us a potential example of the link between practitioners of *pardeh-dārī* and *ta'ziyeh-khānī* at this relatively early stage in the *ta'ziyeh* tradition's trajectory. Nāṭeq is said to have been a *sukhanvarī* participant.<sup>3</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, *sukhanvarī* involved the staging of ritualized contests in verse, and was a tradition practiced by Selseleh-ye 'Ajam.<sup>4</sup> That Nāṭeq was a *sukhanvar* not only tells us that this is probably the arena in which he sharpened his poetic skill, but also connects him to the 'Ajam dervishes and religious storytelling, *pardeh-dārī*. The network of a group such as the 'Ajam, or their predecessors, would have helped to sustain the *ta'ziyeh* as an art form during its early phases, facilitating the staging of performances before they became firmly part of the Muḥarram programme, enjoying widespread popular support, and later elite patronage.

3 Daryāi, *Daftar* 14, 9.

4 Mir-'Ābedīnī and Afsharī, *Āyīn-e qalandarī*, 335; Floor, *Theater*, 117–18.

We also find evidence of a connection between the *ta'ziyeh* tradition and the 'Ajam persisting over the next century. We have seen that *ta'ziyeh-khānān* are recorded amongst the members of Selseleh-ye 'Ajam's *futuwwat* circle during the Qajar period. In addition, the founding myth of the Khāksār (with whom the 'Ajam were affiliated if not synonymous), the story of the Dervish of Kabul, was integrated into the *ta'ziyeh*'s climactic episode.

Earlier scholarship has made much of the connection between *ta'ziyeh* and *rawzeh-khānī*, recitals (largely by mullahs) of the tribulations of the Shi'i martyrs, as told in Kāshefī's *Rawzat al-shuhadā'* and similar works. Indeed, the origins of *ta'ziyeh* are often given as intrinsically linked to these recitals. Their importance is undeniable, and we have seen their impact on both the *ta'ziyeh* repertoire's form and content. But considering this new angle – the influence of dervishes, who survived through their storytelling throughout the year, were often itinerant, and were members of brotherhoods that had their own practices involving the composition of verse – both illuminates and challenges our conception of the *ta'ziyeh* tradition. It takes it further from Karbala as recorded in literary sources, and closer to the memory of the martyrs that lived through its performance in marketplaces and coffeehouses, and not only during Muḥarram. Moreover, in *pardeh-dārī*, as in other forms of religious recitation accompanied by imagery, the "human relation to the divine" is mediated by "a triangulation of speaker, listener, and image".<sup>5</sup> When the events at Karbala were performed in the *ta'ziyeh* speaker and image became one, a material shift in the life of these narratives that can well be understood to give a more profound experience of contact with the sacred.

An experience of proximity to the sacred is likely to have been a major draw for the large and dedicated audiences that are attested in the multitude of sources pertaining to the Qajar dynasty's reign. The chapters above have tracked the developments in the content of the plays during this period, famed as a time of great flourishing for the *ta'ziyeh*. Both the process through which these developments took place, and the nature of the innovations, are testament to the life of the tradition and its participants. More than half a century of consistent patronage, from towards the end of Fath-ʿAlī Shāh's reign (the early 1830s) to the death of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh (d. 1313/1896), provided favourable conditions under which the genre could develop. From the 1840s, a number of factors began to cause a rapid evolution in the content of the plays. The trend in elite patronage and wave of *tekīyeh* construction in the cities saw the

5 David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) 183.

genre housed and the establishment of a professional circuit for performers. In the enclosed environment of the *tekiyeh*, the performances became more stylised. What had once been pitched battles between riders in open spaces became equestrian choreographies confined to the sandy track surrounding the *sakū*. Moreover, the relationship that the *ta'ziyeh* performers had with their audience intensified. They played to a seated crowd whose affective responses would have been very much apparent to them.

Year after year the same episodes were played to the same audiences and the composers were challenged to find new ways to retell the Karbala narrative, not only familiar to their public but of great religious importance to them. The strong understanding between actors and audience is evidenced by the fact that we see some innovations in narrative content accepted and becoming lasting features, while others are dropped. We know that the audience were well acquainted not only with the individual episodes but with the Muḥarram cycle as a whole. We see certain ideas being built up across a number of episodes, showing that their dramatic content evolved within the context of the wider cycle. The portrayal of 'Alī Akbar with Qāsem as his shadow is an example of this: it is introduced in earlier episodes and culminates with Qāsem having the wedding that should have been Akbar's. The fact that Akbar was to be married, whilst mentioned in *The Martyrdom of Qāsem*, had been established in previous episodes. The dramatists could rely on the audience knowing this.

The intensified demand for performances during the Qajar period not only gave the players the opportunity to hone their craft but led to creative exchange between performers from different regions, as they travelled to the new urban venues for work during the mourning season. In addition to this, from the 1830s the spread of lithography meant that the stories belonging to the *rawzeh-khāni/maqtal* genre became part of material culture to an extent that they had not been before. These books as sources for *ta'ziyeh* dramatists again led to the diffusion of narrative detail and contributed to its standardisation.

The diffusion of new dramatic content within the main episodes shows that the performers were inspired by each other's work. Innovations such as the poignant scene contrasting Umm Lailā and Qāsem's mother, the addition of the Dervish of Kabul and Sultan Qais to the climactic episode, and of the foreign doctor to *Bāzār-e Shām* (all of which took place between the 1840s and the 1870s) soon became standard to renditions of these episodes from across Iran. Most of the substantial narrative innovations appear to have taken place by the 1870s, with the content of the main episodes generally settling by the end of the reign of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh Qājār. However, while it is common for the versions of these scenes amongst my sample of plays to share short sections of

verse, the character's lines are by no means repeated verbatim. This suggests that such scenes were widely adopted not simply as the result of the swapping or selling of scripts, which no doubt took place, but as the result of the scenes being witnessed in performance.

Indeed, by the end of the stable period of patronage the main episodes had acquired a layer particular to how the Karbala narrative was imagined through the lens of Qajar Iran. We see in the *ta'ziyeh* repertoire both the preservation and growth of narratives. A prime example is the *Īlchī Farangī*, simultaneously the story of a Byzantine ambassador at Yazīd's court, and a military man bringing gadgets and firepower, a reflection of the European visitors to Iran during the Qajar period. But while we see much innovation, it is noteworthy that the dramatizations did continue to adhere broadly to the Karbala reports transmitted in historical sources. The inclusion of characters or narrative material originating from outside such sources, in particular that which is not traceable to the *maqtal* tradition, predominantly Kāshefi's *Rawzat*, indicates issues of importance to the players and their audience. Otherwise, why would these elements be there?

In fact, it catches the eye that when new characters were added to the main episodes, they tended to be women, foreigners or other outsiders. This is explained partly by practical concerns. Whilst historical sources attest the womenfolk being present in the camp at Karbala and being taken captive, discussion of them is scant. In Kāshefi's work we see a little more treatment of their perspective, such as the farewells between Qāsem, his bride and mother. But there is nothing of great depth; there was certainly space for the *ta'ziyeh* composers to further imagine the female experience.

To introduce foreigners, or to integrate stories about them from parallel traditions (such as Ḥusain's rescue of Sultan Qais, told by the *pardeh-dārān* and printed in Jawharī's *Tūfān*), would embellish but not contradict the core narrative. Practicalities aside, the incorporation of new characters who were foreigners or other outsiders could fulfil certain important functions. It was a means to affirm the religious legitimacy of Ḥusain and his family, by demonstrating the diverse nature of those who bore witness to their mantle. Sometimes these characters were representatives of living groups loyal to the Shi'i cause, their inclusion in the Karbala narrative connecting them to a crucial moment in sacred history and affirming their place within the community, an assertion of pan-Shi'ism even.

Whilst historicity does not seem to have been a great constraint for the dramatists when innovating new content, they were constrained by the conventions of their genre. Although their well-versed audience may have relished

certain embellishments, these could not deviate too much from the known, or they risked being rejected. The structure of the type-scene was useful in this respect, allowing the insertion of new characters and short stories but moulded into a form that would feel familiar to the audience.

Together with the developments in dramatic content, some sophistication in the verse of the scripts is evident during the Qajar period. A growing concern with keeping up the forward momentum of the action seems evident – the characters' interjections becoming more succinct and stichomythic dialogues more frequent. The efforts of distinguished professionals, such as Mir-e 'Azā-ye Kāshānī, saw the composition of scripts with a higher quality of verse. Due to borrowing and copying being part of the genre's inherent character, some of this diffused into later renditions. Yet, while the composers benefitting from royal patronage contributed to the genre, it must be recognised that they wrote within the conventions that had been established through many decades, two centuries even, of the work of their often anonymous predecessors. They also borrowed from them in their versification of the episodes. Thus, no matter the *takhalluṣ* they bear, by as late in the genre's development as Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh's reign, the main episodes should be seen as the work of many hands.

Women should be counted among the owners of those hands, and to no small extent. Indeed, it is fitting to give the last word of this book to them. They flocked to the *ta'ziyeh* performances of the Qajar period in vast numbers, numbers that significantly exceeded those of their male counterparts. Due to their seating position in the *tekiyeh*, the women of the less affluent classes constituted the vast majority of the audience to whom the *ta'ziyeh-khānān* most directly performed. Sitting on the floor around the *sakū* (raised platform), they were the front row. Numerous witness accounts attest their highly active and vocal participation. Developments in content that concentrate on the experience of women other than those of the Prophet's bloodline (namely Zainab and Fāṭemeh-ye Zahrā) reflect the composers responding to this important sector of the audience. Innovations such as the foregrounding of the plight of the mother of the martyr in *The Martyrdom of Qāsem*, and the addition of the scene highlighting the special status of the elderly *kanīz* Feẓẓeh in the climactic episode, are examples of this trend. Thus, the religious narrative, embodied by the performers (and audience) as it lived within the configuration of the *tekiyeh* was not static, it grew to encompass those who participated in its retelling.

We have seen that women were also active as *ta'ziyeh* players in female-only environments during the Qajar period. Among such performers were female *rawzeh-khānān*, storytellers and other entertainers; they played both male and female characters, apparently taught their parts by eunuchs who had first been

coached by Mu‘in al-Bukā’ (the royal *ta‘ziyeh* director).<sup>6</sup> It is likely that in the renditions of the main episodes destined for an exclusively female audience, the female roles were expanded. This may have been done by the male composers, or more likely by the female players themselves since these women were experienced, sometimes even professional, performers. The new material that was developed in this context had the potential to feed back into the mainstream renditions of the episodes that played to a mixed audience. Whilst this remains speculative, the existence of a women’s performance tradition, hosted by wealthy female patrons, must have created a market for the composition of plays that focussed more on matters of concern to women.

We heard from Mūnes al-Dawlah, maid servant to Nāṣer al-Dīn’s favourite wife Anīs al-Dawlah, that the performances hosted by such patrons included a number of plays about weddings. A prominent example of this trend is *‘Arūsī raftan-e Ḥaẓrat-e Fāṭemeh* (Fāṭemeh Goes to a Wedding), discussed in chapter 1. Mūnes al-Dawlah’s account of this play in performance shows the humour of the female *ta‘ziyeh-khānān* as they experiment with the absurd in their ridicule of the enemies of the *ahl-e bait*.<sup>7</sup> The majority of its characters are women, the Prophet Muḥammad and Jebra‘īl being the only other figures to feature consistently.<sup>8</sup> In performance to a mixed audience the female characters would have been played by men wearing face veils. Convention also usually dictates that the faces of performers playing angels are veiled. Thus for *‘Arūsī raftan-e Ḥaẓrat-e Fāṭemeh* to be performed by men for a mixed crowd would mean the vast majority of the action taking place between performers whose faces were veiled – presenting a considerable challenge when engaging an audience! Indeed, it is likely that this episode and others similar to it were originally composed for, even by, the female players.

I have commented above that despite the climactic and most widely performed *ta‘ziyeh* episode showing the womenfolk at Karbala potent and vigorous as they ready Ḥusain’s horse for battle, it in no way transgresses the norms and hierarchies governing the social order in which the female audience lived. Yet, in the lesser known *‘Arūsī raftan-e Ḥaẓrat-e Fāṭemeh*, staged for women in private spaces, we catch a glimpse of female performers who in their devotion play the likeness of none other than the Seal of the Prophets and most important of angels, whilst simultaneously pushing the boundaries of the *ta‘ziyeh*

6 Mūnes al-Dawlah, *Khāterāt*, 98.

7 *Ibid.*, 99, 104.

8 There are a number of versions of this episode amongst the Cerulli Collection. For details see Rossi, Bombaci, and Cerulli, *Elenco*, 351.

as a form in their lampoon of the heroine's adversaries. Much remains to be investigated about the treatment of the feminine in *ta'ziyeh* plays and the contribution of women to the tradition. In this book I have focussed my analysis on four of the Muḥarram cycle's main episodes. The wider repertoire includes many little-known plays foregrounding female characters and their experiences. We have a lot to learn from them.