

# Introduction

This book examines the relationship between the state and religion inherent in the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, through an ethnographic description of the mourning rituals held for Imam Hossein (hereafter referred to as “Hossein’s mourning rituals”), the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third Imam of Shia Islam, revered as both a spiritual guide and a political martyr. The Islamic Republic, established by the Iranian Revolution (or Islamic revolution; *enqelāb-e eslāmī*) in 1979, has established Twelver Shiism (*shī‘a*, henceforth Shia) Islam as the official religion of the state. The “guardianship of the Islamic jurist” (*velāyat-e faqīh*), conceived by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was intended to be an alternative governance theory to the modern Western model. The governmental body of the Islamic Republic, established by following this theory, has a hybrid mechanism comprising modern state apparatus and religio-juristic authority. The appearance of such a political body sent shockwaves through modern Western societies, which view the separation of politics and religion as an indicator of modernization.

In the Islamic Republic, Shia religious symbols and rituals have become important components of the state’s official ideology. In particular, the rituals of Ashura (which give this book its title; *‘āshūrā*)—also known as Hossein’s mourning rituals—which have traditionally been observed by people in a personal capacity, are now promoted by the state. This book approaches these rituals through the lens of a tension between two explanatory concepts—“instrumentalism” and the “discursive tradition”—for the “Karbala Paradigm,” which provides an interpretative framework for people’s experiences. Through an ethnographic description of the contemporary practices of Hossein’s mourning rituals, this book reveals the dynamic character of these religious rituals, which oscillate between the poles of domination and counter-domination—*submission* and *rebellion*, as they are carried out by people in a state based on religious discourse. This book also examines some of the political implications of their dynamic nature.

The aim and scope of this book are rooted in what I have learned from the people I worked with during my fieldwork in Iran. Iran is a state that contains multiple ethnic groups, and its people are not singular in their political outlooks and religious beliefs. Living in Iran—even for a brief period—and engaging in conversations with its people reveals a wide range of views regarding the Islamic Republic. During Muharram, the month in which Hossein’s mourning rituals are held, these rituals are conducted on a large scale and with great enthusiasm in the district where I resided, located southwest of central Tehran.

The area densely fills with participants and onlookers, and I would occasionally encounter individuals passionately chanting the name of Imam Hossein. At the same time, more critical and distanced perspectives also exist. For example, in 2015, Jamshid,<sup>1</sup> a male student studying at the University of Tehran who was critical of the regime and uninterested in religion, remarked, “The regime is trying to distract the public from various social problems by encouraging the rituals as a frenetic pastime.”

These contrasting attitudes—encapsulated in those who immerse themselves in these rituals and those who purposely distance themselves from them and see ritual as a means of coercion with an ulterior purpose—not only divide individuals and groups in Iranian society but can also coexist within a single person. In 2019, I was in Ardabil during Muharram, an Azeri-majority city in northwestern Iran, where I observed *qame-zanī* (dagger-beating), a self-flagellation ritual currently banned in Iran but still practiced in secret (as discussed in detail in Chapter 5). I had asked a friend originally from Ardabil if I could accompany him on his homecoming visit during the Ashura holidays and whether he could arrange for me to witness the ritual. As he was neither interested in mourning rituals nor comfortable with this blood-letting practice, he asked his friend Youssef to take me to the site where the ritual would be held—early in the morning on the Day of Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, which marks the climax of a series of rituals during the month. The day before the event, Youssef shared his personal story with me. He had participated in self-flagellation rituals since childhood, but at the age of fourteen, he struck his head with a dagger so forcefully that he fractured his skull and had to be rushed to the hospital. Since that incident, he had abstained from practicing *qame-zanī*, though he continued to attend the ritual each year. While recounting his experience, Youssef expressed derision toward the participants, echoing the critical tone of secular Iranians who are disillusioned with the regime. He claimed that the state manipulates enthusiasm for Hossein’s mourning rituals to serve its own interests, using them to divert attention from the country’s social problems. However, on the morning of Ashura, as we watched *qame-zanī* together, Youssef was so moved by the participants’ emotional intensity that he broke down in tears.

The central theme of this book is an approach that *takes seriously* the diverse and often conflicting attitudes that coexist within contemporary Iranian society today and as illustrated by Youssef—within individuals. These attitudes tend to coalesce into two opposing perspectives in Iran: one that

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1 Pseudonyms are used for individuals who are not considered public figures.

regards Hossein's mourning rituals as inherent to the Shia Islamic worldview, and the other that interprets them as instruments of state governance. In Chapter 1, I explore how this tension between these two opposing views can be approached anthropologically.

### About the Materials and Ethnographic Data

This book is based on materials gathered under the theme of Hossein's mourning rituals, including online sources as well as materials collected through my fieldwork in Iran—mainly in Tehran—between 2013 and 2019. It also incorporates insights from my research on the pilgrimage to Hossein's shrine in Karbala, in the Republic of Iraq, conducted in 2018. Presented in this way, it may appear as though I initially set out to investigate religious rituals in Iran. However, as is often the case in anthropological research, immersion in a different culture preceded the emergence of a clearly defined research topic. My subject of inquiry gradually took shape through lived experiences loosely connected to Islam.

Between 2014 and 2017, I was enrolled as a Master's student at the University of Tehran, during which a formative experience occurred. In the summer of 2015, an Iranian Kurdish man of the same age—whom I had met through a classmate—invited me to share a room with him in a district located southwest of Enqelab Square, near the university. My time in the university dormitory had left me with a sense of constraint, as I was isolated from both Iranian students and the broader public. I therefore made a prompt decision to relocate to a shack built on the roof of a private house. Each time I walked from the narrow alleyway where the house stood to the main street, I passed a row of small private shops, bustling with local residents and filled with rhythms of daily life. Chapters 2 and 3 are primarily based on the mourning rituals I observed in this district.

The discussions in this book are primarily grounded in ethnographic data that I collected during fieldwork. However, as scholars have frequently noted, ethnographic data is not independent of the researchers' cultural background and physical characteristics (Heider 2015; Vartabedian 2015). With this in mind, I consider it necessary to outline the context of my own positionality at the time of the research.

First, it is important to note that, in contrast to the majority of studies on contemporary Iranian society in English scholarship—which are often conducted by Iranian researchers based abroad—my presence in the field was marked by a distinctly foreign (*khāreji*) appearance, making me a visibly noticeable figure.

The presence of Iranian acquaintances who accompanied me was crucial, particularly when accessing private or sensitive settings, such as the self-flagellation ritual. Another key factor that facilitated my research was my status as a student at the University of Tehran, where I was enrolled in the Iranian Studies Department. When introducing myself, I would typically state that I was a university student studying Iranian culture. Rather than providing detailed explanations about my research or conducting structured interviews, I would often listen to people as they share stories about themselves and their lives. These encounters played a direct role in shaping the research question that this book seeks to address.

Second, my gender and age also played significant roles in shaping the scope and nature of my research. In Iranian society, gender segregation—rooted in Islamic norms—structures many aspects of public and religious life. Religious spaces are typically divided by gender, which meant that, as a male researcher, I was not able to directly observe women's religious practices. Moreover, due to the relatively homosocial character of Iranian society, the majority of individuals who contributed to this research were men. My interactions were also shaped by generational proximity: I spent most of my time engaging with people in their late twenties and early thirties, roughly my own age group. These factors inevitably influenced the relationships I formed during fieldwork and, by extension, the perspectives and themes that emerged in this book.

### The Structure of This Book

This book is divided into two parts. Part 1 lays the premise for the ethnographies discussed in Part 2. Chapter 1 begins by addressing the predominance of instrumentalist interpretations of religious rituals in Iran—explanations that often frame such rituals as tools for political or social control. While acknowledging the insights these interpretations offer, I highlight their limitations. As an alternative, I propose that the Islamic Republic can also be examined through an anthropological lens, specifically using the concept of the discursive tradition as developed by Talal Asad (1986b). Yet this approach, too, has its constraints. I argue that in order to fully grasp the complexity and dynamism of religious ritual in the Islamic Republic, it is necessary to move back and forth between instrumentalist perspectives and that of the discursive tradition.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Shia religious rituals in contemporary Iran. First, it describes how Shiism—one of the two major sects in Islam—was formed, and how Hossein's mourning rituals developed and the role they played in the formation of Shiism. The history of the acceptance of Shiism

and the development of religious rituals in Iran is then examined. Based on this, the history of Tehran is considered in terms of the formation of the *hey'at*, the groups responsible for organizing and performing Shia religious rituals (including Hossein's mourning rituals). Finally, drawing on ethnographic data from participant observations, the chapter concludes with a case study of a *hey'at* organizing a street procession, illustrating how such rituals are embedded in and sustained by local community.

Part 2 examine specific examples of Hossein's mourning rituals—chest-beating, the pilgrimage to Karbala, and self-flagellation—as independent subjects. Chapter 3 also introduces key theoretical themes that run through the remainder of the book. It lays the groundwork for the discussion in Chapter 4, which explores the tensions between the state and religious communities, and anticipates the focus of Chapter 5, which investigates the interplay between religious discourse and bodily practices.

Chapter 3 places the chest-beating ritual and accompanying lamentations as an extension of the politics of sound culture in the Islamic Republic. While music and dance traditions have long been part of Iranian cultural life, the post-revolutionary regime has sought to regulate sound culture in accordance with Islamic norms. Despite this, the boundaries of what is considered permissible in terms of music and dance have gradually expanded in Iranian society. Referring to debates within the discursive tradition on sound culture, this chapter examines both the “strategies” employed by the state to manage the creation of communality through sound culture and the “tactics” individuals adopt in response to such regulation. Finally, the chapter argues that the politics of sound culture can also be found in religious rituals.

Chapter 4 discusses the pilgrimage to Karbala in Iraq and explores how this contemporary religious practice reflects a tension between two modes of explanation of the Karbala Paradigm: instrumentalism and the discursive tradition. The pilgrimage, which was practiced historically, was suspended for political reasons following the establishment of Iran and Iraq as modern states but has resumed in recent years due to changes in the international situation. This chapter discusses how the modern pilgrimage to Karbala is conducted by the people and states living within the Karbala Paradigm, and how international relations are interpreted within this paradigm. It further analyzes how the state seeks to harness pilgrimage to mobilize the public and legitimize its authority, while also showing how the lived practice of pilgrimage often exceeds or resists such instrumental uses.

Chapter 5 examines the practice of self-flagellation rituals, which, despite being officially prohibited in Iran, continue to be performed covertly. These rituals, often viewed with disapproval by non-practitioners, provide insight into

the complex interplay between religious authority, public perception, and state policy. The chapter first explores the rationale behind the ban as articulated by the high-ranking Shia jurists within the discursive tradition. It then considers how the modern Iranian state has internalized the Enlightenment's external gaze, positioning itself in relation to global norms of modernity. Finally, the chapter highlights the limitations of these explanations by examining situations in which the state is forced to deal with the excesses of devotional bodily practices.

In the conclusion, the book revisits each chapter through the lens of its key theoretical themes and reflects on the broader implications of its findings for the anthropology of religion, particularly in terms of the interplay between instrumentalism and discursive traditions.