Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran

Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590-1641 CE

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND DATES

The present work adopts a system of transliteration for Arabic, Persian, and Turkish based loosely on that used in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES), eliminating all diacritical marks, with the exception of the ayn (‘) and when transliterated passages from the original text are included. All years mentioned in the text relate to the Common Era. Quotations or descriptions in European languages (especially in the case of travel reports) have been translated in the main text, although occasional footnotes refer to the original term when their meaning is deemed significant to the argument in the text.
This book has been ten years in the making. It started off as a doctoral thesis and was eventually revised into a manuscript after substantial changes were made, especially in its theoretical parts. The idea of the study was born from a contentious academic and public debate that took place in the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new meta-narratives of history articulated in the idiom of “clash of civilizations” or “end of history,” a renewed interest in Islam and, particularly, its political manifestation in the form of Islamist movements, brought into question the possibility of “modernity” in the Muslim world. With the triumph of the ideology of liberalization, particularly pronounced in the narrative of “democratization,” progress posited in historical time served as a measure of cultural differentiation between an imaginary “West” and a “Muslim world” that was assumed, due to its inherent political religiosity, to resist the irreversible march toward “freedom.”

Though hardly gone were the modernization theories of the 1950s and 1960s that saw the “West” as an idealized manifestation of what can (or should be) “modern,” a common theme in the 1990s debate revolved around the question of the extent to which Islam can accommodate or reject a liberal democratic conception of political modernity through which either a universal march toward liberty (Francis Fukuyama) or conflicts of competing cultures (Samuel Huntington) could be realized. Long characterized by Orientalists as lacking communicative consensus and urban rationality, the regions known as the Middle East and North Africa were represented as the last global frontiers to defy the Western civilizing process, a dark territory where politics continues to be haunted by the whim of the rulers and the tyranny of patronage and tribe. The late British anthropologist, Ernest Gellner, inspired by Ibn Khaldun’s historical sociology of the cycles of power between tribe and city, led the way in challenging the possibility that Muslim societies could, at all, achieve political modernity based on the fundamentals of “civil society,” modeled after a Western experience of civil modernity. Harking back to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment discourse of “Oriental Despotism,” some of these scholars claimed to identify a unique socio-structure in Muslim societies
that would only produce governments and societies of an authoritarian or semi-democratic character. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ever-globalizing liberal-capitalistic order, what we faced, they argued, is not a clash of ideologies, but the challenge of managing disparate yet vying civilizations best tamed into relations of co-existence or adaptation to Westernization as the universal manifestation of liberal polity. The advent of neoconservatives under George W. Bush’s administration and the neo-imperial launch of the “Project for a New American Century,” backed by academics like Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, brought this ideology into full swing, eventually changing the political landscape of the Middle East.¹ With the U.S.-led institutionalization of a fledgling democracy in Iraq, the era of “Oriental despotism” had now come to an end, heralding the dawn of a liberal political order in the region.

But politics is a fertile ground of competing tropes. With a counter-narrative, a number of alternative approaches in both the humanities and social sciences also emerged to overcome Eurocentric narratives that have largely marginalized other non-European-American histories to what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “an imaginary waiting room of history.”² The new focus turned on discursive and cultural processes of conflict and exchanges in rethinking modernity as interrelated historical processes shaped in dynamic interaction between economics, politics, society, and civilizations in contact zones and cross-cultural entanglements through which identities and social imaginaries are shaped and changed in the course of history. With a multiplicity of traditions and historical understandings, where otherness is defined not just against Europe, Islam as a singular concept became increasingly destabilized and conceptual bridges—such as “inter-civilizational” “entangled” or “alternative modernities”—were coined to overcome neat oppositions between Islamic and Western historical trajectories. Aziz al-Azmeh’s famous assertion that “there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it” not only added complexity to emerging studies of Islamic subjectivities in new academic circles, but also challenged the

² The “waiting room of history” is a reference to John Stuart Mill’s argument that Indians or Africans were not yet developed (or civilized) enough to achieve autonomy and therefore had to wait their time before they could reach maturity. See D. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.
central problem of essentialism, which has haunted the field of Middle East studies especially since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978. That is, Islam, far from a locked up cultural entity, maintains a (inter) civilizational complex in the production of institutions, texts, meanings and identities that is living, dynamic, porous and changes from one society to another, situation to situation, from one historical context to another; “Islam” is both there and not there, a paradox in the making.

The notion of “public sphere” presented the most unsettling concept in this debate, as factions within academia published and presented papers at major academic conferences to either defend and modify the Habermasian vision of public rationality, which posited the Enlightenment narrative of European public sphere as the idealized model of normative public, or to offer an alternative, more heterogeneous notion of public interactivity (i.e., “counter-publics,” “subaltern publics” or “enclave publics”), riddled with tension and competition. In the early 1990s, key theorists like David Zaret, Nancy Fraser, and Keith Michael Baker emerged to offer narratives that would undermine both the conventional historical and theoretical accounts of public sphere in its European context, largely in vogue after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. The works of Eiko Ikegami on the early modern Japanese aesthetic networks and public sphere and Turkish scholars like Gengiz Kirli and Nilüfer Göle on Ottoman and Turkish public spheres elevated the intensity of the debate to new discursive dynamics. The “public” was now multiple and conceptualized beyond Europe.

In this light, the question was no longer how non-European societies could attain enlightened rational publics, as advanced by key liberal democratic or Marxist theorists, but how a distinct narrative of, say, Tokugawa or Ottoman public spheres could be articulated without the incorporation of “Westernization” as the prerequisite of societal modernization. The critical question went something like this: can there be a non-European history of public sphere(s) without the Western (discursive) sense of public rationality? Moreover, can there be an indigenous public sphere that could be described in the context of transcultural processes, hence avoiding the problem of nativism or essentialism?

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In the context of this ongoing debate, the idea for the present study came to me as I first read Jean Calmard’s seminal essay on the religious culture of Safavid Iran, “Shi’i Rituals and Power” (in Charles Melville’s Safavid Persia). What if, I thought, a historical narrative of the Iranian public sphere could be written with ritual as a distinct public? Scholarship in the field of regional studies has largely viewed developments in “popular culture” or “popular religion” as peripheral processes in relation to elite formation, military building or class conflict. In contrast, such an approach, forged around ideas of symbols and performances, could make the peripheral more central than has been conventionally perceived. Ritual, as a public upon which emotions and performative interactions take place, could alert us to new ways of looking at the question of political agency as well as structure, and help us re-think the notion of being (or becoming) modern with publicity at the center of analysis.

The theoretical allure of this question later persuaded me to rethink not only the history but also the theory of public sphere, especially in the context of Iranian history, which I attempt to conceptualize in Chapter Two by following the works of Russian cultural theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). Specifically, I use cultural and sociological theories as a conceptual means to guide my inquiry while traversing through uncharted theoretical territories. The works of Said Arjomand, Sussan Babaie, Kathryn Babayan, Marshall Hodgson and Masoud Kamali have considerably influenced the historical section of this study. A number of contemporary theorists have also influenced this study, but two major scholars stand out among the rest, namely: Maurice Bloch and Clifford Geertz. Though their theories of ritual are incompatible on many levels, these anthropologists provide an alternative conception of state that emphasizes the authority and efficacy of ritual performance, in either the reinforcement of the ideology of traditional authority as a timeless expression of a transcendent order (Bloch) or the very constitution of the state (Geertz), rather than how elites compete or form coalitions to consolidate power. The notion of “theater state” in the title of this book is meant to underline the performative dimension of state and public interactivity in what Erving Goffman regards as the dramaturgical aspect of power relations.

While this book progresses through a process of interweaving theories and histories, the changes made to the original dissertation can be discerned in terms of a multi-directional approach, which
combines cross-disciplinary interpretations of primary sources with
the aim of producing an alternative historical narrative of the forma-
tion of early modern Muslim public spheres. It is the attempt to merge
diverse genres, theories, and historical narratives, at times with diver-
gent language-games and contradictory grammars, that has made this
scholarly enterprise so challenging. Although I have done my best to
evoke a language that would have cross-disciplinary appeal, certain
idioms of theoretical nature are applied here that aim to overcome the
limitations of certain academic discourses. In a way, my aim is to open
a path way toward a dialogical engagement with a number of disciplin-
ary discourses and, I suspect, this polyglossia with its carnivalesque
implications will likely disturb certain disciplines. Anthropologists, for
instance, might find this work puzzling due to my reliance on his-
torical sources and the absence of informed ethnography in “present”
time. Historians, especially those in the subfield of Safavid studies,
might find the proposed arguments lacking in “historical” depth, as
though history has a “depth” to be retrieved and revealed by mere
archival research. In his famous Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,
Jacque Derrida described such historiographic desire as “a compulsive,
repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire
to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to
the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”4 History is but a
longing for the authentic.

Against this disciplinary mode of knowledge, the present study is
essentially a theoretical exercise, a conceptual-discursive gaming by
way of re-narrating the public sphere in the context of the early mod-
ern history of a non-European society. The notion of “theory as his-
tory” propounds a vision of historical transformation that ultimately
requires a paradigm shift in our conceptual way of seeing the past.5
In many ways, the historical knowledge that is marshaled here aims
to elaborate on the proposed theoretical argument, not to expand or
make an original claim on historical knowledge based on archival

4 J. Derrida, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago:
5 See J. Banaji, Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation,
(Leiden: Brill, 2010). I borrow the term “theory as history” from Banaji’s volume in
an attempt to “construct viable models” (Banaji, Theory as History, 3.) of historical
processes with a theoretical reference point, although I do not adopt a (neo) Marxist
concept of historical materialism in the present study.
research. In what David W. Cohen calls the “absence of disciplinary configuration,” such an approach is predicated on the transgressive attempt in blending disciplines to destabilize the authority of archival knowledge and highlight the unsettling of classificatory truth and contingency of objectivity.⁶

For the most part, the debate revolving around “clash of civilizations” has been reconfigured in light of a new historical consciousness shaped in the aftermath of the so-called “Arab spring” in 2011, but the conceptual problem of public sphere, especially in its early modern manifestations, remains a theoretical challenge for those who seek to rethink a non-Eurocentric account of modernity. The key problem, I argue, lies in the confluence of historiography and ethnography, and ways of knowing the past of people whose voice has been silenced by the hegemony of the archives. Yet as Said advised us, “we should keep before us the prerogatives of the present as signposts and paradigms for the study of the past...not to level or reduce differences, but rather to convey a more urgent sense of the interdependence between things.”⁷ Many of the proposed arguments made in this book rest on the understanding that the past is an imagined trope of connected histories. But such histories cannot be articulated without recourse to the question of the everyday living actors. How can the experience of Safavid Muharram female or male participants be understood and analytically interpreted based on archival study of European travel accounts or Safavid sources with their distinct frameworks and discursive bias? Is there a rigorous interpretation of Safavid social life, where enclaves of experience and visual or symbolic cues can be explained in the idiom of publicity or the common good? Can the idea of self-generated publicness be conceptualized without taking into account the normative discourse of democratic rule, especially when dealing with early modern societies alien to our contemporary experiences of modernity? Does our academic language of public sphere entail a distinct Western bias that can hinder us from understanding the indigenous practice of

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publicity in various social contexts? Is the public sphere “unspeakable” in non-European contexts? 8

The difficulty in theorizing and historically narrating the public, I suggest, is the ultimate failure to bridge the analytical gap between the desire for stable knowledge and nostalgia of authenticity, a discursive space of tension where truth is relentlessly desired but never attained. The deconstructive moment in this work is, therefore, the way historical knowledge is produced without claim to authenticity. In a critical move, the challenge here lies in the reconstruction of past experiences through contemporary languages grounded in the self-conception that academic knowledge cannot be produced in isolation from other modes of knowing, including frames of cultural perception. Much of the present rethinking of the “public sphere,” therefore, can be characterized as an attempt to overcome normative historiographical knowledge in a way that cultural essentialism is denaturalized and other possible worlds are imagined. “The variety of meanings,” Roland Barthes describes, “is not a matter of a relativist approach to human mores; it designates not the tendency that society has to err but a disposition towards openness…” 9 It is precisely this effort at “openness” that I hope will navigate the direction of this book. While aspiring to go beyond the dominant discourse of public sphere, this work refuses to arrive at a certain truth-claim. Rather, the aim here is to disrupt, interrupt, and provoke the self-imposed conceptual boundaries of dominant academic and public discourses. It holds the possibility of revealing without exposing, signaling without discovering an archival “truth” that is in a constant process of renegotiation and construction.

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8 See Leo Ou-fan Lee Wang Hui and M. M. J. Fischer “Etymologies: Is the Public Sphere Unspeakable in Chinese? Can Public Space (gonggong kongjian) Lead to Public Spheres?” Public Culture, 6, no. 3 (1994): 597–605; and M. Abedi and M. M. J. Fischer, “Thinking a Public Sphere in Arabic and Persian,” Public Culture 6, no. 1 (1993): 220–230, where the authors argue that notions of public sphere in non-European settings can entail multiple translations in complex semantic networks and those concepts can also be highly contested. In my approach, I reject the specific histories of “public sphere” as a distinct European invention, although I do acknowledge that discourses of publicity can play a critical role in the way that publics are formed and articulated.

“The work,” Walter Benjamin writes, “is the death mask of its conception.”¹⁰ This work too should be seen as a ray of critical reflection that lit up only to die out into the discursive field of truth-claims, in an attempt to re-evaluate established hierarchies of concepts and yet introduce a new discourse of an imagined past in their place. Such an interruptive thrust validates the “quest for paralogy” as a movement against the accepted positions of knowledge, while sketching out an outline of an alternative conception of modernity.¹¹

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Babak Rahimi
INTRODUCTION

Among the numerous early modern European Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox travelers who toured or resided in Safavid Iran, including those who later published detailed accounts of the makeshift empire for the delight of their readers back home, the 1727 Amsterdam publication of the travel report of Jean de Thévenot (1633–77) provides one of the only illustrative depictions of the Shiʿi Islamic rituals of Muharram, performed to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn, the beloved grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who died in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE.1 Thévenot, who traveled to Safavid territories in 1664 and resided for months in the capital city of Isfahan and later in Shiraz in 1665, wrote a brief description of the commemorative rituals in his published work, but left no pictorial depiction of the ceremonies.2 As in the case of many printed travel accounts in the early modern period, the rare drawing in the 1727 publication appears to be inked by an anonymous artist(s) with the aim of representing a more visual account of the written narrative of the ceremonies.3 While

1 As a major Shiʿi Islamic event, the ceremonies traditionally take place over the span of the first ten days of the Islamic lunar month of Muharram, during which the ritual participants mourn the martyrdom of their saint Husayn. I will expand on the history and theory of Muharram rituals in Chapters One and Four. As for the other two known early modern engravings of Muharram, see J. F. Bernard, Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde, vol. 7 (Amsterdam: J. F. Bernard, 1737), after 258; and A. Olearius, Offt begehrte Beschreibung der newen orientalischen Reise (Schleswig, Germany: Bey Jacob zur Glocken, 1647). For more on these depictions, see also K. Rizvi, The Safavid Dynastic Shrine: Architecture, Religion and Power in Early Modern Iran (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 124–126; and K. Rizvi, "Persian Pictures: Art, Documentation, and Self-Reflection in Jean Frederic Bernard and Bernard Picart’s Representation of Islam," in Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion, ed. L. Hunt, M. Jacob, and W. Mijnhardt (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2010), 169–196. I am grateful to Kishwar Rizvi for bringing these two sources to my attention.

2 Thévenot’s account of Muharram rituals, or what he calls “Aachour,” along with ‘Umar Kushan ceremonies, is based on his eyewitness account in the city of Shiraz. It is uncertain to what extent Thévenot was familiar with Muharram rituals as practiced in other Safavid cities, especially Isfahan, since, as Raphael du Mans notes, he was not closely engaged with everyday Safavid life. R. Matthee, “The Safavids under Western Eyes: Seventeenth-Century European Travelers to Iran,” Journal of Early Modern History 13, no. 2–3 (2009): 144–45.

3 The artist was most likely commissioned by the publisher to produce a number of pictorial representations of Safavid Iran based on a number of earlier travel accounts,
similar illustrative representations of the customs, clothing, traditions and geography of “Persians” and Safavid cities can be found in other seventeenth-century European travel accounts, this particular sketch is unique in several ways.\(^4\)

First, published fifty years after Thévenot’s death, the drawing appears in a fold-out page, hinting at a panoptic perspective that combines several elements and themes in a single printed format.\(^5\) Such a

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\(^4\) J. Thévenot, *Suite du Voyage de Mr de Thévenot au Levant*, volume III (Amsterdam, 1727), 383. See also R. Matthee, “The Safavids under Western Eyes: Seventeenth-Century European Travelers to Iran”: 144–45. The first volume of Thévenot’s account in French appeared in 1664 in Paris with the title of *Relation d’un voyage fait au Levant*, with the other two volumes in print by 1684. Subsequent translation of his accounts into other European languages is as follows: Dutch (1681–88), English (1687), and German (1693). It should be noted that the 1727 printed volumes also include a number of other proto-ethnographic illustrations, largely depicting the political, social and religious life of the places Thévenot traveled. In one drawing in a chapter entitled "Des Mortuaires," an illustration shows the uniqueness of Indian mortuary customs in the depiction of the Sati rituals, in which a female widow is shown to jump into the fire, watched by a native audience.

\(^5\) The fold-out technique appears to be a feature of the baroque print culture, in which the interplay between the discourse and a set of dramatic images confirms...
generic perspective reflects an impersonal standard of observation in the form of objective distance that confirms a disconnection between the observer (i.e., artist and viewer) and the native reality represented. In this pictorial space, the concern is less about depth, the meaning behind the ceremonies, and more about the exterior display of an alien society in that the viewer is invited to assume a fixed perspective by eyeing the ceremonies from multiple positions. The aesthetic depiction of Muharram evokes a representation of the “religion of Persians” that combines gaps between spatial and ritual performances with the beliefs of the religious actors so as to comprehensively depict the strangeness of the event in a way that the written travel account cannot put into discursive representation.

The overall scene is a cluster of images, a visual narrative of several ritual performances, perhaps a proto-ethnographic pictorial account of a religious ceremony that aims to portray, in almost a codified form, the “nature” of the events that appear in the rendering of bizarre actions that qualify the image as ultimately concerned with chaos. In a generalized categorization of “religious” custom, the drawing invites the viewer to sustain a timeless image of Persian religiosity as the “other” Muslims [“Shiai’”] in ways that may also tie in with the generic European representation of Persians since antiquity in terms of those with essentially different civilizations.6 Ironically, the image of Muharram
is energized by the stillness of chaotic action, in which the Persian devotees seem frozen in their frenzied performances and act as though

corrections and understandings of “religion” through the study of Others. See S. Subrahmanyam, “Monsieur Picart and the Gentiles of India,” in Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion, ed. L. Hunt, M. Jacob, and W. Mijnhardt (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2010), 198. Sanjay Subrahmanyam also refers to an intriguing work in French published in 1988 that argues how modern study of religion emerged in respect to European encounters with the Americas in the sixteenth century. See C. Bernand and S. Gruzinski, De l'idolâtrie: Une archéologie des sciences religieuses (Paris: Seuil, 1988). Seen in this way, the early modern European depiction of Safavid Shi‘ism emerged in respect to how Sunni Islam was described in close relation with Ottoman identity, an endeavor to understand Islam on which the European modern had to be juxtaposed, not compared. Matthee’s comment that Shi‘ism was viewed by both Catholic and Protestant Europeans as “familiar in its iconography, with its saintly depictions of Imam ‘Ali and the veneration of the Messiah-like Imam” is reading into the European travelers’ accounts an assumption of perceived cultural affinity, which is largely absent from the accounts. See R. Matthee, “The Safavids under Western Eyes: Seventeenth-Century European Travelers to Iran”: 166. For the most part, many of the seventeenth-century (and to a certain extent eighteenth-century) reports categorically define Shi‘ism in terms of the counter-category of Sunni Islam, with little [other than the use of the name “passions plays”] or no reference to European religious traditions, especially messianism. In fact, there is no implicit or explicit attempt to elaborately highlight similarities between Shi‘ism and Christianity, except in the travel report of Membre from the 1540s and Father Vincent in 1621. In the case of Muharram, a number of travelers even describe the Shi‘i rituals as resembling certain animalistic or demonic features [De Chinon and Du Mans: “Howl like wolves”] or mere “fancies” and “ridiculous spectacle” [De Montheron, 1641]. The perceived cultural differences were so stark that de Montheron would finish his Muharram description with the following statement: “I would bother you too much if I would relate them to you...” J. Calmard, “Shi‘i Rituals and Power II: The Consolidation of Safavid Shi‘ism: Folklore and Popular Religion,” in C. Melville, Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society (London: L.B. Tauris, 1996), 175 [hereafter Calmard, “Ritual Power II”]. By and large, the European comparisons of Shi‘ism to familiar Christian cultures (in the few instances in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) were at best impressionistic observations rather than definite descriptions of Safavid religiousity. For a broader study of Ottoman Turks and Safavid Persians, along with a mention of Muharram as a way to contrast Sunni and Shi‘i Islam, see L. Hunt, M. C. Jacob and W. Mijnhardt, The Book that Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 247–69. For sixteenth-century European representations of Shi‘i Islam, especially in regard to Shah Ismail’s depiction as a Christ-like figure, see P. Brummett, “The Myth of Shah Ismail Safavi: Political Rhetoric and ‘Divine’ Kingship,” in Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays, ed. J. V. Tolan (London: Garland Publishers, 1996), 331–59; for British colonial textual and visual depictions of Muharram in India, with its distinct aesthetic strategies of representations in contrast to the early modern period, see R. M. Brown, “Abject to Object: Colonialism Preserved through the Imagery of Muharram,” Res (Anthropology and Aesthetics) 43 (2003): 203–17.
trapped in an unchanging stage in textual time. Ritual time stands still in an imagined space of representation.

Second, given the use of theatrical imagery, the artist(s) appears to select dramatic themes from a number of other narratives of Muharram ceremonies by European travelers and add visual elements calculated to enhance the entertainment value through pictorial means. In the foreground scene, the viewer can observe a series of performances: dramatic representations of knocking stones, self-inflicted injuries with blood gushing out of the performers’ bodies, buried penitents, all of which are also narrated in the written part of Thévenot’s account. What is missing from the drawing, but can be found in the written account, however, is the distinction between daytime and nocturnal ceremonies, along with the colorful use of black and red on the bodies of younger men to express mourning in the course of the ceremonies. The cluster of foreground images also tends to emphasize violent scenes as a way of dramatically introducing the viewer to a peculiar world of Persian religiosity on a black and white textual stage.

In the background, the depictions of the ceremony change significantly. The artist(s) seems to portray what appear to be orderly processions of mourners while underlining an open urban space of chaotic order, wherein the ceremonies are neatly arranged for visual display to the public. Amid the orderly processions, a sub-set of images viewed in the background seems to suggest a series of fights, ritual dances, and coffin-carrying pageantries, some of which take place before the governor or officials of the city on the right side of the drawing. Accounts of these particular performances, however, can be found in the travel accounts of Raphaël du Mans (observed in 1647–1696?), Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (observed in 1667), and Jean Chardin (observed in 1666–7, 1669, 1673–77), who also provided descriptions of Muharram, though largely in the imperial capital city of Isfahan. What the artist appears to be doing is at one and the same time depicting the Persian Orient as the exotic strange and representing it on an illustrative stage with the generic aim of revealing the presence of a great chain of social events as an alien performance on display for a European audience.

\[7\] I am grateful to Sonja Brentjis for bringing this critical point to my attention. Seen in detail, the drawing depicts rituals that seem to display generic performances of (self) violence, hence underlining the possibility that the artist liberally reinterpreted the accounts in creative ways to depict a dramatic pictorial representation of the ceremonies.
Muharram is the stage on which the Persian is confined and on this textual platform will appear, as Edward Said notes on the Orientalist mechanism of representation, “figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate… The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European World, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.”

The key to understanding the panoramic imagery of Muharram under discussion is the complex interplay between diverse travel accounts, both discursive and visual, through which the ritual life of the “Persian” evokes an accepted social imaginary of the Orient through public circulation, via print texts, maps or drawings, in early modern (western) Europe. Studied by numerous travelers, scholars and thinkers, especially by the intellectual culture known as the “République des Lettres,” Thévenot’s travelogue, in its eighteenth-century printed form, represents an important early modern European depiction of non-European cultures in the production of both discursive and visual knowledge about various parts of the world—wherein Persia would signify a familiar and yet alien culture to Europe. For the most part,

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9 The Muharram illustration resembles an engraving by Engelbert Kæmpfer, who depicted Shah Sulayman’s ceremonial departure from Isfahan for the qurban ceremonies. They are both panoramic (i.e., fold-out) and fixed in perspective, along with the show of detailed information about particular ceremonial movements. For Kæmpfer’s drawing, see “Ceremonial Departure from Isfahan of Shah Sulaiman I and His Grand Vizier for the Festival of Sacrifice,” in *Shah Abbas*, by D. Blow, between pages 82 and 83, no. 7 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).
10 On Thévenot’s travel account, see L. M. Heller, “Le testament olographe de Jean de Thévenot,” *XVIIE siècle* 167 (1990): 227–34; see also N. Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85–86 and 134; and M. Ní Fhlathúin, “The Travels of M. de Thévenot through the Thug Archive,” *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 11, no. 1 (2001): 31–42. Although space precludes me from expanding on this point, the claim that Persia is both a familiar and alien culture implies that in the social imaginary of early modern European intellectual life “Persians” were viewed as the nearest to Europe in terms of language and culture, and yet part of an alien, Oriental domain, which remained essentially distant from European identity, especially in terms of politics. So, a family resemblance of culture was detected, yet viewed as limited to the geographical distance of an imaginary space between Europe and Asia. In this sense, the English traveler, Thomas Herbert, would state that “for their manner of husbandry, buildings, and civility,” Persians more resembled “…ours of Europe than any other we had hitherto observed in Asia.” T. Herbert, *Travels in Persia* (London: Rutledge & Sons, 1928), 168. For Jean Chardin, the French Huguenot, the Persians, as the most civilized people of the East, were tolerant and tempered, traits mostly unknown in the Orient. M. Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45. Similarly, as Suzanne Marchand notes, Thomas Hyde’s
the *Suite du voyage* is more than a travel report, but the repository of a social practice in an age that Nicholas Dew calls the “baroque culture of curiosity,” a period during which the Orient was increasingly viewed as an alien domain, wherein travel as a distinct experience served to reveal hidden knowledge to the inquisitive intellectual public. \(^{11}\)

By the latter half of the seventeenth century, with the growing European presence in Iran and the expansion of international markets, together with the flow of information through an interconnected network of artists, travelers, writers, publishers, and readers, such a culture of curiosity identified “Persia” as a subject of cultural and scholarly fascination. Works such as Olearius’s translation of Sa’di’s *Gulistan* (1654), Joseph Labrosse’s Persian dictionary, with translations into major European languages (1684), and Thomas Hyde’s study of the ancient religion of Persia, *Historia religionis veterum Persarum* (1700), exemplified the type of texts that were circulated, exchanged, and bought at the market in response to the heightened demand for knowledge of the exotic Orient. \(^{12}\)

Likewise, the experiences of cultural encounter and

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“professionalization of Oriental travel,” together with multifaceted narratives of the Orient in their mix of humanistic and scientific approaches, promoted the formation of early modern European reading publics in the eighteenth century, characterized by the rise of periodicals, newspapers, novels, and other printed forms of communication.13

Yet it is not the distinct textual depictions and visual strategies of Persian life that limited the narrative scope of the European travel reports, but the way constructed knowledge of the Orient came to produce distinct European identities in contrast to different cultures of exotic nature. Notwithstanding questions about distinct textual depictions and visual representations of Persian life that made the travel reports highly popular, such constructed knowledge of the Orient came to reflect the complexities of shaping European identities from which different cultures of exotic nature were essentially contrasted. In this light, the European mapping of non-European societies like Safavid Persia entailed frameworks and cultural assumptions that, in the words of Sussan Babaie, “reflect the complexities of the cultural matrix from which they [travelers] are generated and not necessarily that of those observed.”14 Central to this complex cultural matrix are the literary and scientific practices that engaged in attempts to refashion European subjectivity in light of represented conceptions and produced knowledge of the Other.15 While data was collected and transported back to
Europe in travels to unknown regions like South America and West Africa, works of travelers and Oriental scholars were read by writers, philosophers, and scientists for their (proto) ethnographic values. Such information would establish a discursive regime of knowledge and conceptual categorization that would set Europeans apart from the rest of the world. As in the case of literary culture, works such as Montesquieu’s epistolary fiction, *The Persian Letters*, inspired by the seventeenth-century travel accounts of Chardin, helped the emerging European public achieve a self-evaluating sense of urban subjectivity through the imagined Persians that, subsequently, would reveal more about an idealized Parisian identity than a represented Persian subject. Equally significant, the conversion narrative of Uruch Beg, famously known as the Don Juan of Persia, *Relaciones de Don Juan de Persia*, the tale of a secretary in the diplomatic delegation of Shah ‘Abbas in 1599 who converted to Catholicism, bespeaks what Nasrin Rahimieh calls the reworking of the “transculturation” process through which the European identity finds expression in a Safavid subject in exile. In these narratives, the Orient is an imagined space of self-definition.
It is against this background of “contact zones” of exchanges and encounters that the emergence of early modern travel literature and its reading public also signals the development of interconnected publics in the course of an intensified level of global interaction between an expanding centralized imperial Europe and non-European territories. In exchange, translation and circulation of ideas, aesthetic tastes, material goods, scientific discourses and the representation of another society’s religious and cultural practices like Muharram these publics also indirectly spotlighted the dynamics of non-European publics that had become increasingly visible to the European popular and scholarly gaze through commerce, travel, and war. The flourishing of the early modern Persianate civilization, for instance, in what Muhammad Tavakoli-Taghi describes as the production and circulation of “homeless texts,” is testimony to the proliferation of literary publics across Asia and Europe from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Notwithstanding the element of power in the discursive and visual regime of European publics, what various textual productions and readerships, especially the travel narratives, bring to light is how the formation of an early modern European public spheres largely depended on a culture of self-knowledge that became increasingly realized in representations of other publics manifested in their distinct local settings.

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20 See M. Tavakoli-Targhi, Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2001) 1–17. Tavakoli-Targhi’s original work offers one of the only accounts of “Persian modernity” in the context of transcultural historical processes in the field of alternative modernities.

21 Such a statement would also echo Subrahmanyan’s argument that curiosity about other cultures involved non-European experiences as well, such as Zheng He’s Indian Ocean voyage that produced distinct conceptions of geographic space and ethnographies. S. Subrahmanyan, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” Modern Asian Studies 31, no. 3 (1997), 737.
Broadly speaking, the seventeenth and (early) eighteenth centuries mark a critical “early modern” period in the surge of Eurasian publics in the context of interdependency of interregional relationships and cross-cultural interactivities around the world. By virtue of the ebb and flow of extensive human contact in the form of biological exchanges, colonialism, commerce, migration, piracy, slavery and cultural encounters, new integrated global spaces of interaction were carved out across Africa, the Americas, Europe and Asia. These spaces would signal the advent of new networks, markets, and models of civility and shared aesthetics that would pave the way for the development of diverse socio-political processes across the globe. In Europe, the rise of the territorial state, as a new kind of polity from England in the west to Poland in the east, together with the expansion of a robust global market economy led to the crystallization of new social forums, urban arenas, aesthetic cultures, markets, and reading/writing networks that shaped distinct public domains with competing claims over communal and political authority. In non-European contexts, from colonial America to Qing China, from the Ottoman Empire to Tokugawa Japan, the changing global economy, state expansion, and new patterns of urbanization gave sudden rise to divergent and yet interconnected publics—though not necessarily a mirror image of their European counterparts. As a direct result of expanding

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22 By “early modern” I refer to what Joseph F. Fletcher calls an “integrative” period, roughly speaking, between the (late) 1400s to the (late) 1800s, before the French Revolution (1789–90). As I see it, early modern geography expands across both Afro-Eurasia and the transatlantic and transpacific regions, although not entirely reaching out on a global scale. The proposed model of the early modern period relies less on a developmentalist conception, which sees history through progressive moves or stages in time, and more in terms of intensities and complexities of interconnectedness of civilizational relations in transcultural spaces in ways that contact through long-distance trade, centralization, or capitalism, which become more dynamic and shape new economic and socio-political institutional changes and overlapping and yet conflicting imaginary ways of being. For a discussion of early modern history, see J. F. Fletcher, “Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period 1500–1800,” in Studies on Chinese and Islamic Central Asia: Collected Articles of Joseph Fletcher, ed. B. F. Manz, 1–35; for a developmentalist approach, see J. Goldstone, “The Problem of the Early Modern World,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 41, no. 3 (1998): 249–84; P. Van Der Veer, “The Global History of Modernity,” Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient 41, no. 3 (1998): 285–94.

23 For a macro-historical account with a focus on global space formation, see C. H. Parker, Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400–1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
long-distance trade, the settlement of new trade diasporas like Armenian, Indian, Jewish and Persian merchant communities across the Atlantic and African-European landmass facilitated the formation of complex social networks that elicited distinct spaces of sociability in major urban centers.\textsuperscript{24} Likewise, the emergence of new urban spaces with the rise of distinct aesthetic cultures during the so-called Genroku period (1688–1704) in Japan, the proliferation of consumerist luxury spaces during the so-called “Age of Tulips” (1703–1730) in the Ottoman Empire or the literary media culture in Ming China serve as a few examples of how new and dynamic expressions of interconnected publics grew on an indigenous level as a result of increasing interconnectivity that operated on a trans-Eurasian scale.\textsuperscript{25}

In this transcultural context, I identify the formation of the Safavid public sphere in the first half of the seventeenth century, during which in the aftermath of distinct state-building patterns and the steady globalization of the realm’s economic and political processes underlay increasing expansion of social life over the period. I argue that as a result of significant centralization processes, initiated by Shah ʿAbbas I (1587–1629) in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to further consolidate the Safavid Shiʿi (Imami) state, dramatic changes in state-society relations occurred that ultimately produced distinct public spaces and network associations that signaled the formation of an early modern Safavid public sphere. My historical account of Safavid state-society relations, though at times focused on state development, revolves around the argument that the widespread proliferation of Muharram performances in close connection with the two-stage construction phase of the new imperial capital, Isfahan, in the 1590s


\textsuperscript{25} “The Age of Tulip” was coined by Ariel Salzmann, who argues that the early eighteenth century was a period in Ottoman history when the tulip, as a transcultural symbol of luxury, became a site of consumption and competition between elites and in the ways such aesthetic culture shaped new public spaces like gardens, parks, palaces, and architecture in urban settings. A. Salzmann, “The Age of Tulips: Confluence and Conflict in Early Modern Consumer Culture (1550–1730),” in Consumption Studies and the History of Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922, ed. D. Quataert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 83–106. For the Genroku period, see E. Ikegami, Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 245–285. For Qing China, see Hung-tai Wang, “Information Media, Social Imagination, and Public Society during the Ming and Qing Dynasties,” Frontiers of History in China 5, no. 2 (2010): 169–216.
was tied to the crystallization of distinct social spaces, whereby the ceremonies produced integral spaces of official and unofficial communicative domains that, paradoxically, both defined and defied state culture in the ongoing construction of the Safavid collective identity.

I underline two distinct yet interrelated historical phases. First, the state patronage of the mourning rituals, as a manifestation of state power, grew in significance along with an extraordinarily rich repertoire of ceremonial spaces devoted to creating what can be called “theater state” under the reign of ʿAbbas I. Second, this theatrical state development gave rise to complex spaces of carnivalesque dynamic under the reign of Shah Safi I (1629–1642) that developed in correlation with ritual sites of misrule and dialogical interaction within the public life of Safavid society. By the latter half of the seventeenth century, the Muharram public progressively grew more autonomous from the state in light of the escalation of participation among socio-professional groups, guilds, futuvvat members, females, and the poor. Combined with other public spaces, such as the market (bazaar), coffeehouses (qahvekhaneh), travel lodges (caravanserai), public baths (hammam), schools (madrasah), squares (maydan), and sport clubs (zurkhaneh), this ritual spatialization identified a type of public characterized as an informal sphere of civic cultures and cognitive networks of relations.

By way of definition, the focus here on Muharram is based on the notion that ritual as communicative and performative space accommodates enactments and representations of both power and resistance on multifaceted public and state levels. My emphasis on social performance is guided by the assumption that power and drama are interwoven in such that politics as theater reveals the aesthetic processes that make the state legitimate and rational—though not necessarily just.26 In this performative conceptual framework, I understand

26 I borrow the term “politics as theater” from David Apter, who, by arguing against quantitative and institutional approaches, describes politics as dramatic performances that essentially take place in public space, as “semiotic ground that contributes to the authority, and on occasion the sanctity, of performance itself as, for example, on so many occasions in the case of the vast space, Tiananmen Square, or Red Square for that matter, or any of the other grandiose spaces (Albert Speer’s great amphitheatre at Nuremberg where Hitler performed).” D. E. Apter, “Politics as Theatre: An Alternative View of the Rationalities of Power,” in Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual, ed. J. Alexander, B. Giesen and J. L. Mast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 221.
“state” and, by extension, “state-building” in its (early) modern manifestation as a theatrical process through which power is articulated, enacted, imagined, staged, and visualized in ways that cast a territorially bounded set of relations on the construction of a distinct political community. The notion of the Safavid public sphere also bespeaks how ritual action carries out meaningful events out of new situations with communicative frameworks and strategic practices of transgression through which diverse publicities with distinct social bonds are (re) constructed and institutionalized. As conflictual and multifaceted, Safavid Muharram spaces are identified here in terms of living fields of interaction wherein changes, constructions, subversions, and shifting of both individual and collective identities take place.

**Public(s), Ritual and Power**

As I see it, in their broad historical development, Muharram rituals are one kind of micro-public among many shared spaces, forming a web of *inter-publicities* that are typified by affections, sensualities, serious conversations, jokes, mundane discussions, aesthetic expressions, solemn sympathies, ironies, solidarities and techniques of inclusion/exclusion in a relational structured field. Even though the participants might never meet all together in one place, the seasonal Muharram events form distinct modes of social performance that intimately form and link several publics of everyday/everynight lives, situated in diverse urban, rural or transregional settings. Such a multiple-domain of rituality implies that the Muharram publics share a common horizon of social interaction with all those who participate in the overall

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27 With this definition, I am deliberately moving away from an elite-centered conception of state that either defines power in terms of how elites can consolidate power through alliances or dominate the “masses” through various means of manipulation including administrative, legalistic, propaganda, and military institutions. For a recent use of an elite-centered study of the Safavid state, defined as “project” or “realm” due to the fractured nature of the polity’s elite relations, see A. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 8. For new approaches on Safavid state power from a performative theoretical approach, see the recent works of S. Babaie, *Isfahan and Its Palaces: Statecraft, Shi‘ism and the Architecture of Conviviality in Early Modern Iran*; and C. P. Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

domain of publicity. Like the coffee shop, theaters, restaurants, parks, city squares, streets, gymnasiums, women’s Quranic study groups, gay weekly gatherings at cinemas, blogs and chat-rooms on the Internet—just to name a few—the Muharram public represents a communicative forum wherein social relations are dramatized, made meaningful or contested in a switching back and forth between different public domains to shape network associations. Though in their seasonal form the ceremonies mark temporal forums of spatial identity and discursive imprints, the cognitive networks constructed through the annual ritual practices characterize, in the words of Hamid Dabashi, a “transformative mode of signification,” a creative force manifested in multiple performative operatives such as metaphors, myth, parables and symbols dispersed in daily life.

In the context of Iranian history, the main difference between official celebrations of the Muharram events and other public spaces, however, is that the Shiʿi ceremonies are, first, intricately connected with other official, older forms of associational networks (e.g., bazaars and guilds) that have historically organized themselves apart from the state and, second, they are, partly, carriers of a pervasive masculine regime of moral values (i.e., chivalry, martyrdom, piety, and gallantry) that are articulated, enacted, staged, consumed, re-constructed in close connection with other communicative publics. This regime of values in their gender sensibilities is authoritative of experiences that have undergone various transformations according to shifting

29 The notion of “network associations” is from Harrison White, who argues that social reality is formed “when there was switching back and forth between at least two domains, everyday ceremonial, with their continuing networks.” H. C. White, “Network Switchings and Bayesian Forks: Reconstructing the Social and Behavioral Sciences,” Social Research 62, (1995): 1035–65. Harrison’s conception of identity formation was predicated on a person’s encounter with others in everyday life through shifting and switching network connections to form a collection of multiple identities. The idea of “network” specifically refers to social relations that not only create solidarities, but shape identities in multiple public forums and accommodate intersections of various persons with changing perceptions of the self and reality. See also H. White, Identity and Control: A Structural Theory of Social Action, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); and E. Ikegami’s Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture.


31 Such a “masculine regime of moral values” is subject to interpretative and performative processes that largely take place in the everyday life of actors whose network affiliation allows them to creatively select and de-select such values for aesthetic, ethical, and pragmatic purposes.
historical and social settings. But it is important to note here that values produced by the Muharram public are not categorically based on “religious” self-understanding that commands an other-wordly type of mental life. Rather, they inform a dynamic cognitive frame as symbolic or non-symbolic expressions of sociability through which action is made meaningful. It is in the paradigm of communication that Muharram rituals elicit a particular worldview within a matrix of power that recasts already familiar situations in alternative terms. As communicative processes that produce diverse experiences of normative (official) and transgressive (unofficial) public behaviors, Muharram rituality opens up moral authority for possibilities of action.

While steering away from an exhaustive historical and comparative analysis of the “Muslim public spheres,” in this book I focus on the intersection between ritual, public sphere, and state power with the aim of producing a more complex understanding of society and state relations. By studying the ritual devotional life of Safavid society, I want to examine the transformation of urban life and state-building to describe the importance of incorporating the public(s) as sites of interactions, wherein various expressions and performances of power and resistance occur. More specifically, I define “the public sphere” as both hidden and visible, unofficial and official sites of social relations that generate socio-cognitive frames of communication through which individuals interact in both conflictual and cohesive associational forms in concrete historical contexts. The notion of “sites” (discursive/imagined/physical/symbolic/virtual) plays a critical role in the way I identify the public sphere in this study. The concept of space here is not a neutral place where rational debate takes place, but a complex site of social performance wherein power, in its both dominating and transgressive forms, is (un)made visible through discourse (e.g., rhetoric) or practice (e.g., ceremonies) in producing imagined and shared forums of interaction where social relations in the form of familial ties, class, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation or status can be (or become) the object of contention.

Such shared sites of the public realm operate in ways that, on one level, involve visible contours of discernable structure of an official culture and, on other levels, comprise unofficial, opaque, subversive or anti-structural forms of interaction that marshal change into social life. As both visible and hidden spaces, the ritual public can be described as both an official event and yet a disjointed forum of socialization for various individuals who are able to temporarily leave their normative
identities and gain a new inverted perspective, an upside-down understanding of everyday life, and challenge a stabilized cognitive framework of social relations. In such ambiguous spaces, relations can be integrated according to how the performances are carried out in coordinated ways and yet emerge to subvert an official forum with moral authority over a distinct community. Power and resistance, therefore, are integral to the formation and the constitution of the public sphere, but so is the structure of stratification that sets limits on the emergence of new publics exposed to the threat of decline, delegitimization or revival in the course of historical transformations.

The notion of “unofficial culture” is inspired by the late Russian cultural theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of public sphere as a “dialogical concordance of unmerged twos or multiples,” interaction between competing and uneven voices can be sharply distinguished from Jürgen Habermas’s rationalist public where “critical public discussion of general interest” takes place.32 My use of Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque, together with other thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Nancy Fraser, to describe the Muharram public, aims to challenge certain critical-rationalist conceptions of the public sphere and seeks not only to run against those theories that overlook the performative forms of public communication, but also to shed light on how we can understand ritual as something more than a mere performance of preassigned behavior limited by norms of doctrine or tradition. While I do not entirely reject Habermas’s approach, I do treat the problem of public sphere in the direction of a heteromorphous perspective so that I can in a way underscore the rituality of public and the publicity of ritual.

Seen in this light, the basic approach adopted here is not of the culturalist determinist model of thinkers like Clifford Geertz, who would identify Muharram culture as the integral constitution of the Iranian public sphere and, by extension, Iranian collective identity. Rather, the model I propose here recognizes Muharram as one among many

shifting, overlapping, and conflicting spheres of publics, involving the coming to be of interactive sites of communication that are unstable and fluid, though still a major public realm because of its considerable sway over everyday life in its Shi'i cultural manifestation that historically emerged under the Safavids in Iran. In historical terms, by “Safavid Muharram public” I am therefore referring to a prototypical form of “modern” publicness that marked the beginnings of an Iranian public sphere in the Safavid period as a set of complex, integrated, and yet competing domains of interaction, which eventually, in the nineteenth century, played a critical role in the formation of Iranian civil society and, accordingly, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911. While my aim is not to offer a comprehensive history of Iranian public sphere in the (post)Safavid period, I specifically attempt to provide here a socio-historical account of the distinct public space of Muharram that significantly, though not determinately, contributed to the launching of the Iranian public sphere with a profound impact on the structural transformation of state and society relations since the early modern period.

Such notions of publicity as communicative sites of performance are meant as an alternative to those schools of thought that conceptualize on functionalist or normative models of political action. More specifically, my attempt here is to move away from an elite-mass paradigm that neatly categorizes social reality in terms of a binary language of popular/high (culture), emotion/reason (action), and public/state (institution) in that ritual is either merely used by elites to legitimize power or identified as a medium to express devotional desires that could hold institutional significance on the societal level. This is not to say that processes that allow elites to utilize rituals to advance their interests are irrelevant to the study of the politics of Muharram, as I will also draw upon such a mechanism in Chapter Four when I

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33 In this study, my objective is limited to the study of the public sphere and not Iranian civil society, which, as I see it, developed under the Qajars in the second half of the nineteenth century. In terms of definition, while a public sphere can be a prerequisite of civil society; civil society is not required for a public sphere to emerge.

34 Inspired by the historical sociological works of Perry Anderson, Michael Mann, Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, and Douglass North, such a state-centered approach may not serve as significantly relevant if applied to later periods of modern Iranian history and viewed in connection with other nation-state-building processes in the region and beyond. As will be argued in Chapter Five, the state played a vital role in the formation of the Safavid Iranian collective identity, and, in close connection, the public sphere in the seventeenth century.
describe how Safavid shahs promoted devotional rituals to advance a distinct kind of Shiʿi polity. My point is simply that reliance on functionalist approaches fails to grasp other aspects of ritual action that involve the constructions of authority or the deconstructions of power in complex historical and situational settings.

There is also the problem of normative bias. Various conceptions of the public sphere, especially in the field of political science, apply standardized categories of democratic rule (“civic-republicanism”), primarily modeled after a European experience to describe political modernity and, accordingly, public and civil society formations on historical and transregional levels. Such discourses employ cookie-cutter applications of narratives preordained by Anglo-American and European historical experiences and conceptual models as the yardstick for assessing non-Western experiences of publicness and their developments in an interconnected global setting. Because westernization, circumscribed in the idiom of European supremacy vis-à-vis other societies, remains an active rhetoric in interpretations of the early modern era, an alternative assessment of Safavid society and politics must consider the question of cultural contacts and their implications on state and society relations. An alternative theoretical approach would outline the formation of the public sphere not by “default” but by indigenous processes prior to the rise of American-European hegemonies.

The Structure of the Book

My objective in this book is twofold. First, I aim to offer a multifaceted conception of Muharram rituality by demonstrating how various performative practices intricately interrelate with both devotional and carnivalesque patterns to render a public space a site of ambiguous interaction. This conceptualization is carried out in a way to show that ritual can change in diverse historical settings and create multiple public realms according to changes in social relations and developments in state formation. I, therefore, seek to construct a narrative of

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35 It is important to keep in mind that a study of public sphere should not overlook democratic rules of public in their diverse historical trajectories, but only that socio-historical discourses should not be limited to norms of democratic rule as a way to evaluate a public space.
Muharram that can be defined in rather imprecise ways, involving identities, performances, and experiences that may in fact defy the very official or formal mechanisms of the ceremonies that were originally meant to display state power.

My second aim in this book is to fuse the language of ritual action with the discourse of public sphere and demonstrate how in the case of an early modern Shiʿi Muslim public we can identify the possible crystallization of a non-Western form of public sphere with distinct Iranian cultural traits. This second objective is more ambitious because it alludes to the possibility of multiple public manifestations of early modernity by describing the Muslim public sphere(s) in their indigenous manifestations. Such publics present a unique example of a home-grown process towards the dynamics of transcultural processes in the formation of non-Western public spheres.

The book follows a thematic approach with the interplay between theoretical and historical themes in the presentation of material. The first part of the book opens with a description of the current discourse of ritual studies and public sphere in contemporary academic discourses. While challenging the modernization assumptions dominant in historical and social theory, the section introduces the basic conceptual framework of the following historical chapters. Those not interested in theory can skip this section and move to the second part where I deal more with history, though in these chapters I continue to apply theory to various historical case studies. In the second part, the chapters that deal specifically with Muharram are divided into macro-micro historical analysis of the Safavid rise to power in the early sixteenth century and the historical emergence of Muharram rituals under their reign. The final four chapters (excluding Chapter Seven, the conclusion) focus on Safavid Muharram rituals and, based on available primary sources, an attempt is made to underline the ambiguous performative processes in the course of the rituals.

The first chapter focuses on the creative dimension of ritual action, described here as a type of communicative action that dramaturgically shapes a public space of interaction. The notion of “carnivalesque paradigm” is meant to underline the disjointed or transgressive nature of Muharram rituality. First, such a theoretical postulate is made explicit in an attempt to highlight the constructionist power of ritual as dynamic and indeterminate in performative and symbolic characteristics, presented in juxtaposition to those interpretations that cast Muharram rituals as the secondary manifestation of a normative or
utilitarian outlook. Second, the aim here is to familiarize the reader with the theoretical ideas of ritual, especially carnivalesque processes, injected in the following chapter on the performative constitution of the public sphere. Chapter Two continues the argument of the creativity of ritual action by considering the theoretical models used to interpret Muharram rituals in the Safavid period as a distinct communicative space. The idea of public sphere as the carnivalesque in this chapter underlines the inventive strategies in the formation of sites of “conviviality” or social modes of performances that are ultimately about multi-leveled and conflictual communicative ways of interactions. Here is a deliberate attempt to move beyond mostly normative conceptions of the public sphere, advanced by thinkers like Habermas, and towards the notion of multiple publics with contentious and often complex amalgams of communicative strategies.

In the second part of the book, the direction of my analysis takes the form of a historical anthropology/sociology of political ritual and ritual as public sphere. In these critical chapters, I want to underscore the historical connection between city, collective identity, and state-building with myth, ritualization, and carnivalesque processes. Readers should bear in mind that the analytical framework used in the second part is largely a theoretically charged one and that history is seen through questions of how norms or transgressive processes could operate in complex ritual performances woven in intricate patterns of state-building. Since my strategy is to work through a back and forth interplay between the levels of public sphere and ritual culture via a transcultural historical setting, the theoretical model used here will play a central role in my historical analysis.

In Chapter Three, I draw attention to the broader, macro-historical processes, conceptualizing early modern Iran in the context of (inter) civilizational transformations towards the late middle periods of Islamicate history (907–1501). I discuss the origins of the Safavid movement as a Sunni-Sufi order founded by the mystic Shaykh Safi al-Din Ishaq (1252–1334) in Anatolia and elaborate on the movement’s rise to power into an imperial Shi’i order in the context of civilizational analysis. The aim of this chapter is to describe the rise of the

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36 Here I borrow the term “conviviality” from Babaie not merely as interactive processes of “pleasure” but communicative spheres of sociability and political authority. See S. Babaie, *Isfahan and Its Palaces*, 10–11.
Safavids in close connection to the ritual culture of the spiritual guild associations (futuvvat) and Sufi brotherhood movements (or akhi associations) in the transcultural age of the middle period. In this period, Central Asiatic and Mediterranean-Mesopotamian civilizations intermingled to create new cultural complexes and political institutions. The focal point here is to elaborate on the history of state-building and expand on the Isfahani phase of Safavid rule (1590–1666 CE). Here, my investigation into the public culture of Safavid sociability leads me to focus on the concept of transculturalization, largely based on the theoretical schema discussed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Four looks at the history of Muharram rituals from the late seventh century to the post-Safavid era (early Qajar period). While arguing against a constricted historical description of the ceremonies in the context of Iranian history, the chapter claims that Muharram rituals carry certain transcultural features that transcend strict soteriological civilizational traits. By emphasizing the cultural cross-fertilization of Central Asiatic and Mesopotamian ritual practices, it is argued that Muharram rituals underwent major developments from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries due to deep-seated transformations on an inter-civilizational scale. It is in the context of this major historical epoch that the Safavids emerged as a sectarian-millenarian movement, and later consolidated power as a “gunpowder empire” in competition with other Muslim empires like the Ottomans and the Uzbeks.37

I therefore reject Rudi Matthee’s argument that the Safavids should not be described as a gunpowder state because of their inability to completely restructure their army according to the military revolution that had swept Europe and the Ottomans; by and large, the Safavid military, Matthee argues, resembled a nomadic or semi-nomadic force. Two problems with this claim can be underlined here. First, the Safavids, especially under Shah Abbas, kept out the nomads and other great imperial powers like the Ottomans partly because of the application of gunpowder, despite limited use of military technology. Second, and more importantly, the central problem with Matthee’s position is conceptual rather than historical. The assumption that gunpowder would have to be the defining military character of a state in order to be defined as such assumes a conceptual standard of definition that would only qualify the Europeans and the Ottomans as “true” or “complete” gunpowder states. However, as Matthee also acknowledges, Marshall Hodgson never identified gunpowder as the central marker of the military apparatus of early modern Muslim imperial states like the Safavids. The key to underline here is how gunpowder, despite its degree of applicability, should be seen as part and parcel to the larger state-military building processes of various early modern imperial powers across Eurasia, a process that originated in Asia (not Europe), under the Song dynasty, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. P. A. Lorge, The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); R. Matthee, “Unwalled Cities and
The institutionalization of Muharram rituals accommodated certain non-soteriological practices inherited from Central Asiatic cultures, which the Safavids continued to promote in their imperial domain throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The main contribution of this chapter is the use of primary sources (mainly Safavid and European travel reports) to describe an alternative history of Muharram rituals.

In Chapters Five and Six, I turn my attention to the multifaceted dynamics of ritual as both constitutive of state power and subversive modes of actions that defy official culture by creating alternative public spaces of misrule. Using a performative approach on politics, Chapter Five shows how the Safavid state was built around the Karbala narrative and the ritual culture of mourning. Muharram as theater of grief identifies spaces of power wherein the state would performatively be defined as a reified, transcendental entity. In theoretical terms, the particular case of the Safavid Muharram rituals reveals how the mourning ceremonies to commemorate the saintly deceased (Husayn) can legitimize state power through the symbolism of resurrection attributed to the mythical narrative of an original violence: the tragedy of Karbala. Such mythical narratives are performatively displayed through the mourning spaces of Muharram, so as to produce a heightened death-oriented sense of collectivity (or social death) in the formation of necropublics, wherein ritual participants experience and associate with the mythical narrative of the death of a revered saint and participate in his immortality.

Chapter Six looks at the other side of the coin by considering the subversive patterns of Muharram rites. Highlighting the transgressive markers of unofficial culture, it analyzes Muharram rituals from the perspective of the Bakhtinian conception of carnivalesque modes of dialogical communication as “unfinished” voices of informal domains that transcend the uniformity of sanctioned discourse(s), approved by the religious establishment and the state. In its ephemeral and dialogical expressions, Safavid Muharram calendar rites can also be described as unusual carnival events, intertwined with grotesque processions that

are (officially) meant to be melancholic in reenactments of Husayn’s martyrdom. The chapter continues the argument against those discourses that depict Muharram rituals as expressions of religious faith, limited to doctrinal discourse and theological narratives of transcendental significance. But it also shows how these rituals produced textual and performative sites of resistance that possibly rejected official power in hidden and subtle ways. Based on a number of European travel accounts, the claims here illustrate a number of carnivalesque practices in Safavid Muharram culture, which differ sharply from examples offered in the previous chapter. Chapter Seven briefly draws some broad conclusions with the hope of sketching out a possible history of modern Iranian civil society with reference to associational networks of the bazaar-guild-cleric complex in close connection with the Muharram publics that produced interactional spaces of tastes, shared symbols, values, ethics, and solidarities.

Problems of Methodology

In terms of methodology, the present project is undeniably an exercise fraught with danger. The problem lies mainly in the methodological grounds for the use of European and Persian primary sources. As for the Persian sources, Iskandar Beg, the “Munshi,” (secretary) and Munajjim Yazdi’s chronicles provide the only two indigenous descriptions of Muharram ceremonies in the Safavid era. But, as Sholeh Quinn has shown, these Persian narratives produce distinct representations of Safavid past and present histories with agendas closely tied to the royal court or the dynastic ideology of the state. In the case of Iskandar Beg’s account of Muharram, the rituals are rhetorically described in correlation with the great military victories of the shah against Ottoman forces, with no attempt to expand on the particular performances of the rituals, which can be found in European accounts. The most accessible source on Muharram culture is Husayn Va’iz Kashifi’s Rawzat al-shuhada (Meadow of Martyrs), a popular sixteenth-century devotional text that has been in use, at least in Iran, in the course of the ceremonies since the Safavid period. This martyrdom narrative, which I will examine in Chapter Six, provides a fascinating glimpse into how the cosmology of redemption can produce a disjointed sense of reality. However, much of my readings of the text will be limited to how such perceptions of self and reality appear in written form and not how it
was performed or understood by various everyday participants in the
ritual processes of two centuries under the Safavids. Accordingly, there
is also much room for open interpretation when dealing with Shi‘i
poetry of Muharram and the sacred Imams.

In the case of European travel reports, as the most available sources
of (quasi) ethnographic data on Safavid ritual life, the texts pose a
serious limitation to our knowledge of the ceremonies as reported
from an early modern European (male) perspective. Three points are
important to bear in mind. The first is the problem of the discursive
construction of the rituals in the context of the textual production of
the travel reports, as I described earlier, in the Orientalist thrust of the
Muharram illustration in Thévenot’s 1727 travel report. In this regard,
the discursive representation of Muharram by the Europeans depends
largely on the institutional settings in which an account is textually pro-
duced and reproduced in the context of economic and socio-political
transformations. In fact, the very use of the terms “ritual” or “religion”
assumes a particular framework of definitions and categorizations of
everyday life and societal processes through which Muharram became
articulated under the European gaze.38 While deconstructing a text
could help reveal the contradictory meanings and reductive tenden-
cies of the discourse, it may not delineate the many manifestations of
Muharram as they were practiced under the Safavids.

The second problem is the issue of reliability. From a realistic point
of view, how accurate are the reports in their description of the cer-
emonies under study? For the most part, the reports reveal a consider-
able amount of inconsistencies, omissions, variations, mistranslations,
and even plagiarism in the writing and (re)production processes of
the travel texts, some of which were published years after the travel-
er’s experience of travel.39 Consider the case of Della Valle, the Italian
traveler to Safavid Iran in the early seventeenth century. As Brentjes
has shown, certain differences exist between the unpublished and the

38 Space precludes me from expanding on this, but for a general critical look at the
genealogy of the terms “ritual” and “religion,” see T. Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion:
Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hop-
kins University Press, 1993).

39 See S. Brentjes, “Immediacy, Mediation, and Media in Early Modern Catholic
and Protestant Representations of Safavid Iran.” For an example of inconsistencies in
translation of texts that describe Muharram, see W. Floor, “Fact or Fiction: The Most
Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1995), 65–68.
printed letters of Della Valle in the description of the Muharram rituals in Farahabad. The account in the published version, for instance, was added to the letters when Della Valle revised them for publication after his return to Rome in 1626. To what extent do possible discrepancies between descriptions in the unpublished and printed texts diminish the possibility of reliable first-hand knowledge in the travelers' accounts of the ceremonies? But more importantly is a point that I raised earlier in my comments on the Muharram illustration: Can perception of encountered societies ever produce immediate and direct access to knowledge of “objective” reality through which “raw” information can be accordingly attained? As I see it, a narrow realistic approach mistakenly assumes that eyewitness accounts can unproblematically produce transparent knowledge on the subject under study, as though authenticity and representation can be unproblematically fused. At the core of the realistic approach lies the ocularcentric ideology of transparency in the medium of eye-witness accounts.

Third, and most importantly, the lack of ethnographic data about the rituals and their meaning for the ritual participants entails a great challenge to thorough theoretical interpretation of the performances. What were the symbolic meanings of sacrifice for ritual participants? How did the performers understand the use of violence in the course of the ritual activity? It is in respect to these thorny questions that a comprehensive study of Safavid rituals will remain elusive. While acknowledging such methodological constraints, the following theoretical analysis is, at best, suggestive. My ambition here is motivated by the conviction that an alternative understanding of the relationships between ritual and Safavid political order necessitates a detailed study of the symbolic and performative processes, however incomplete and fragmentary the interpretation may be.

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40 The original unpublished letters of Della Valle to his friend in Naples, Mario Schipano, can be found at the Vatican Library, MS Ottoboniano Latino 3382; for the unpublished diaries, see Ms Archivio Della Valle-Del Buffalo 51. Ott. Lat. 3382. The letters are written in distinctly individual flowing handwritten script, with an ink pen or quill. Also, according to Brentjes, Della Valle substantially revised the letters and eliminated native names of the places he had visited by adding ancient Greek names and quotes from classic authors after he returned to Rome. S. Brentjes, “The Presence of Ancient Secular and Religious Texts in Pietro Della Valle’s (1586–1652) Unpublished and Printed Writings,” in Travellers from Europe in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, 16th–17th Centuries: Seeking, Transforming, Discarding Knowledge, (Ashgate Publishing, 2010) 1–23.
The chapters that follow depict what can be described as a study of multiple aspects of public manifestations of power and subversions that map out the early modern geography of Muslim public spheres. To this end, I place considerable emphasis on seeking out the peripheries and understanding how they force themselves into the centers of power relations, creating counteralignments to the finalization of a stable regime of truths. In doing so, I want to bring to light how disjointed processes of sociability are made visible and, at the same time, concealed in a domain of everyday and public interactions in their ritual settings. At the heart of the present project is the challenge to articulate the ambivalent.
In 1978, Michel Foucault witnessed the dramatic performance of Muharram festivities, performed in commemoration of the death of the Prophet’s beloved grandson, Husayn, whose death on the plains of Karbala at the hands of the massive Syrian army of the second Umayyad Caliph, Yazid (r. 680–83), has for centuries led to diverse expressions of emotionally charged public events. Amid an intense period of revolutionary fervor against the Pahlavi regime, Foucault would describe the ceremonies in the Italian daily Corriere della Sera in the following words:

On December 2, the Muharram celebrations will begin. The death of Imam Hussein will be celebrated. It is the great ritual of penitence. (Not long ago, one could still see marchers flagellating themselves). But the feeling of sinfulness that could remind us of Christianity is indissolubly linked to the advance toward death in the intoxication of sacrifice. During these days, the Shi‘ite people become enamored with extremes.¹

There is something dramatic in Foucault’s description of Muharram. On the surface, the Shi‘i mourning ceremonies seem to resemble Christian rites of penitence in the display of shame and sorrow for the loss of a sacred ideal. It should be remembered that, similar to the early modern European travelers to Iran, Foucault wants to familiarize his European audience by drawing out certain cultural similarities with his host society. But the brief description is also concerned with the experience and possible meanings for the participants he observes. The reference to “intoxication” plays a critical role in this interpretative thrust. By this, Foucault wants to draw attention to that which exceeds boundaries, especially everyday subjective ones.

Pain is a creative force. The “feeling of sinfulness” by those who engage in theatrical displays of self-renunciation and repudiation of guilt is an experience that opens up action and reminds us of the possibility of transfiguration for the commonplace. In a temporal sense, action becomes “enamored” with “extreme” so as to upset and threaten the taken-for-granted world of social norms. The enamored sense of being, an extreme sort of being in love, paves the way for a radical break from a regime of norms that govern behavior and thought. Muharram, at least in its December 1978 manifestation, and by extension the fortieth-day mourning ceremonies that followed Muharram, a ritual cycle that continued into 1979, stirs up an intensity that would force the participants to undergo a feat or an “advance toward death,” propelling individuals into an authentic state of existence, a state of being beyond oneself, an experience replete with new vitality devoid of mechanism of power. The notion of “intoxication of sacrifice” informs us of a frenzied state of effervescence that brings a collectivity, the “Shi’ite people,” together in ways that would rupture their ordinary conception of embodied selves and institutional identities. Rather than a simple religious ceremony, Muharram reveals a festive vitality that releases the self from the shackles of disciplinary daily life and plunges participants into a domain of transgressive experiences.

For Foucault, this transgressive force marks a reflexive moment led by the ethos of living dangerously, a sort of flirtation with death that reconfigures the order of things when, in the course of excess the collective exuberance leads to a world “with no limits, no rules…” The excess is a sort of precarious longing for death or the subversion of a stable life that would ultimately resist domination and produce an alternative reality. Meanwhile, the fervor that defined the revolution as one of the most emotionally charged social movements in the twentieth century provided an alternative model of selfhood in the

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transfiguration of the everyday into an alternative beginning. This innovative conception of modernity would open up new ways of engaging in politics, a “political spirituality” dramatized through bodily ritual performance in order to transcend the mundane secularity of Western political cultures.

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4 On this transgressive dimension of revolutionary Shi‘ism, Foucault writes “...religion for them was like the promise and guarantee of finding something that would radically change their subjectivity...when I say that they were looking to Islam for a change in their subjectivity, this is quite compatible with the fact that traditional Islamic practice was already there and already gave them their identity; in this way they had of living the Islamic religion as a revolutionary force, there was something other than the desire to obey the law more faithfully, there was the desire to renew their entire existence by going back to a spiritual experience that they thought they could find within Shi‘ite Islam itself.” Foucault, “The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes,” 255. The key point to understand in this passage is not the actual return to a “true” Shi‘ism that would bring about change in selfhood, but the very “desire” for renewal, the will for change that underlines the revolutionary force in relation to a traditional Shi‘i Islamic practice like Muharram.

5 According to Afary and Anderson, Foucault mistakenly reads into Muharram a liberating quality that overlooks the ceremony’s potential for totalitarian political appropriation. Foucault’s reading of Muharram, they argue, resembles his early 1980s lectures on the early Christian ritual practices of self-injury. Afary and Anderson, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, 51–53. The Christian institution of penance was practiced in the form of bodily pain with the aim of self-mastery, displayed in acts of self-disfigurement and public mourning that transported the ritual participant away from a set of power relations, dominated by the clerical establishment, whose job was to monitor and control the mental life of the faithful. Unlike the Christian confession, a type of “exagoreusis” action, as a model of disciplinary social control through which the sinner would express guilt under the subversion of authority, an “exomologesis” public display of penitence involved an individuated process of creative expression through the theatricality of self-sacrifice. This spiritual cleansing comprises a drama of suffering articulated in the discourse and practice of martyrdom that can be largely detected in the display of dramatic acts of self-inflicted violence. For Afary and Anderson, the problem with Foucault’s reading of the Shi‘i tradition in close relation with the notion of penance is that it fails to recognize the multiple manifestations of Muharram in diverse settings. However, my understanding of Foucault’s reading of Muharram does not lead me to think that the Shi‘i rituals, in their diverse practices throughout history, can be identified as “total obedience to higher religious authorities,” Ibid., 54. Muharram rites, like many ritual practices, are situational and their varied practices impart multiple dimensions along with diverse meanings for participants and observers, a point that Afary and Anderson also acknowledge. In fact, the transgressive aspect that Foucault highlights is the very subversive force that allows participants to see establishments of power, clerical or otherwise, as ephemeral and, therefore, subject to dispute. Especially because of its rich symbolism, the “ethics and politics,” Muharram is ambiguous. Ibid., 55. The other difficulty with Afary and Anderson’s analysis lies in mistakenly underlining Foucault’s comparison of Christian passion plays to Muharram. Foucault’s objective, I suggest, is more to draw attention to the creative elements in embodied practices rather than deny the multiplicity of its symbolic and embodied meanings. Moreover, the assumption that the 1978 ceremonies were “carefully staged” and performed solely by “Islamists” reduces the rituals into a tool of the
Although a study of Foucault’s account of the 1978–79 unrest and the Shi’i cultural practices that contributed to the 1979 revolution goes beyond the scope of the present study, I have quoted this remarkable description because it expresses a position that I seek to advance in this chapter. My basic claim here is that Muharram, in its diverse historical and social manifestations, entails a transgressive drive with which reality is interpreted to render experience into something dramatically different. Transgression is ultimately about the relational and shifting existence of experiences and subjectivities, but also about what “breaks rules or exceeds boundaries,” be it imaginary, physical or virtual. The use of the Bakhtinian notion of “carnivalesque” is meant to underline this transgressive mechanism through which an unofficial and subversive set of relations and behaviors emerge to endlessly undermine the norms of social order. The “carnivalesque paradigm” in Muharram is, then, about the negative, that is, what the rituals defy or exceed and not necessarily what they achieve or maintain.

In this crucial chapter I also want to arrive at a critical understanding of the contemporary field of Muharram studies. My aim here is to draw attention to certain discourses that tend to downplay the ambiguous culture of Muharram in its flexible scheme of adaptability amidst a stochastic flow of historical situations, involving significant historical phases in creating ambiguities, instabilities, and transformations in Iranian public life and beyond. In the following critical remarks, the

Islamist revolutionary forces. A close analysis of Muharram in 1978 would show that non-Islamist Shi’is, secular factions, and even leftist Iranians, who saw the events as an opportunity to challenge the Pahlavi state, also participated in the ceremonies. In many ways, meanings that were generated by the 1978 ceremonies hardly carried a singular cultural logic of exclusion or the propagation of a totalitarian agenda.  


7 As in the case of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11, for instance, secret societies met and performed the lugubrious Rawzeh-khwani (an elegy involving a recitation-narrative of the drama of Karbala), displaying their opposition to government forces and foreign domination, though hardly performed for mere political expediency. As in the 1979 Islamic revolution, Muharram symbols of self-sacrifice were reiterated when thousands of (male) protesters marched in the streets of Tehran with slogans reading, “We are ready for martyrdom!” However, these highly politicized ceremonies were also practiced in the shanty towns and rural regions without any specific revolutionary overtones. For a study of Muharram rituals during the Constitutional Revolution, see A. Lambton, “Secret Societies and the Persian Revolution of 1905–1906,” in St. Antony’s Papers 4 (1958): 55. For accounts of the ceremonies during the 1978–9 Iranian Revolution, see P. J. Chelkowski, “Iran: Mourning Becomes Revolution,” in The Asia Society 3, no. 1 (1980): 30–7; S. Bakhsh, “Sermons, Revolutionary Pamphleteering and Mobilisation: Iran 1978,” in From Nationalism to Revolutionary
emphasis on ambivalence is meant to underline that, like all other rituals, Muharram entails a mechanism that defies an authorial order of meaning which would demarcate a universal set of ideas and norms of behaviors, though the human interpretative endeavors may endlessly seek to shape meaningful aspects behind the accidental and situational world of existence. As Jonathan Z. Smith has described, rituals are less about reflecting a universal set of meanings, but rather specific historical ways to create broad patterns of order for the need of stability in human life.⁸

In the first two sections of this chapter, I briefly consider the genealogy of academic discourses on Muharram that through specific tropes confine the Shi‘i rituals to a set of discourse-dependent set of actions with distinct otherworldly orientations. I will do this by exploring two different yet interdependent discourses that discursively construct Muharram in essentialist terms, and, in return, conceptually categorize the Shi‘i ritual as either operating the power (i.e., state ideology) or reiterating the dogmas basic to the order of political and religious institutions. I identify these as normative and functionalist discourses with which the power that ritual claims, due to its unique ability to shape a plurality of experiences by reversing the everyday senses of time and space in a creative fashion, is denied as a result of a reductive set of conceptualizations.⁹ In contest, I will also include a study of an alternative school of thought that offers a different theoretical perspective on Muharram. The section on the praxis approach is meant to lay

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⁸ J. Z. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 64–65. While the transgressive interpretation that I advocate here does not entirely lend itself to Smith’s phenomenological theory of ritual, I share the assumption that, on some level, ritual practice is about making reality less chaotic and hence more stable, though hardly unproblematic.

⁹ I should stress from the outset that this chapter is not primarily a review of the history of Muharram, but an analytical, critical attempt to identify how Muharram has maintained a mere residual quality in certain academic discourses. Also, the following is not a comprehensive study of Muharram studies, but a selective look at some critical junctures in the scholarly discourse.
the groundwork for the carnivalesque theory of Muharram, which I will introduce later in the chapter.

I begin my examination by critically considering the notion of a “Karbala paradigm” and look at some of the normative approaches that reify ritual as the expression of salvation. Foremost in this narrative strategy lies what I call “soteriological-doctrinalism”: the assumption of a discursive core to Shiʿi Islam, defined in the tropes of redemption and enactments of meaningful ethics of action. In this narrative framework, devotional performances are ultimately represented as windows to a constitutive ethical ideal that confines ritual action to a residual discursive norm in otherwise apparently irrational behavior. The second part of this chapter focuses on the literature of the Safavid Muharram ceremonies and draws attentions to a common theme that binds them together. I shall elaborate on a distinct functionalist discourse that essentially acknowledges the domain of ritual action as an ideological contrivance to reinforce and justify the existence of elites in power through elite-designed institutions. The term “elite-institutionalism” signifies a way of depicting Muharram that tends to homogenize an understanding of power according to elite rule.

“The Karbala Paradigm”?

The production of discourses may loosely be identified as a complex regime of truths established in practice in a particular historical period. Discourses operate to make the reality they represent or the subject they portray to be the natural way that things are, though deviations from what is regarded as acceptable leads to conflicts between ways of practicing a discourse. Yet it is in the naturalization of concepts that discourse maintains durability. In his famous *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argued how, in the course of history, discourses have the ability to make us see the world in what is presented to be a natural characterization of the way things are.10 In relation to discourse(s), a set of concepts, units, terms, and a regime of tropes are produced, articulated, and circulated as thematic starting points that would have durable and significant impact on what could be called the “structure” of the production of knowledge. The circulation of ideas in the

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practice of publication and reading publics reproduces knowledge in advancing the contours and possibilities of what is deemed to be true. As described in the case of the early modern European travel reports, knowledge is constructed in a system of testimonials and references to established texts by which a set of dominant ideas and practices circulate and shape patterns of perception in a given historical context.

In the academic studies of Muharram, too, the genealogy of the discourse can be traced back to the recognition of a set of “classical” texts that at once open up new possibilities for further research, while also pinning down a set of self-evident assumptions, which authoritatively standardize a discourse in a given field of inquiry. The formation of authoritative exegesis on Muharram historically can be traced back to the post-World War II period when a number of studies on Iranian (and to a lesser extent Iraqi) culture set the stage for the proliferation of Muharram studies. The most critical phase took place between 1978 and 1984 when a number of works were produced with the aim to identify the relationship between religion and revolutionary politics within Iranian socio-cultural life. With the authority to interpret the meanings and patterns of social change from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, history and sociology, these authors emerged to offer the most comprehensive explanation of Iran’s rapidly changing political structure in the post-Mossadeq period (1953–1979). For the most part, these studies turned their attention to religious life to understand the unfolding social changes that eventually led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution that toppled the Pahlavi monarchy.

With the production of numerous works on the “root” causes of the Iranian Revolution and an expanding reading public in the West,

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11 While the modern production of knowledge on Shi‘ism grew largely out of the travel narratives which originated in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the origins of Muharram studies may ultimately be traced back to the nineteenth century, when a number of American and European works by diplomats and scholars like Matthew Arnold, Samuel Green Wheeler Benjamin, Ilia Nikolaevich Berezin, Alexander Chodzko, M. le Comte de Gobineau, Edward Montet, Sir Lewis Pelly, J. E. Polak, Ernst Renan, Lady Sheil, and C. J. Wils arguably produced the first academic analysis of Shi‘i religious culture, with a focus on ta‘ziyeh, under the Qajars. For a study of the field of Shi‘i studies from the nineteenth century to 1970s, see P. J. Chelkowski, ed. Ta‘ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran (New York: New York University Press and Sorough, 1979), 259–268; see also A. H. H. Abulhasani and M. Nori, “Negahbi be Ashurapajhohi dar Gharb,” Islamic Books Quarterly 2, no. 3 (2001): 51–60; and E. Kohlberg, “Western Studies of Shi‘a Islam,” Shi‘ism, Resistance, and Revolution, ed. M. Kramer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 31–44.
especially in the aftermath of the U.S. hostage crisis, the tendency in academia in the 1980s, particularly in the field of regional studies, was to demonstrate how a “secular” monarchy that had successfully managed to promote westernization (as modernization) could be replaced by a theocracy. While certain discourses adopted socio-economic (i.e., class) and state (i.e., elite and ideology) explanations, a new trend focused on “cultural” processes in which Shi’ism was viewed to play a critical role in the realization of the 1979 revolution. In terms of politics, the topical debate over the nature of the Islamic Revolution accompanied a rethinking of Shi’i Islam in light of the emergence of radicalism in both popular and clerical circles in the late 1970s and 1980s.

In this critical period, the field of Shi’i Islamic studies saw a proliferation of diverse theoretical approaches that focused largely on contemporary Iran. The first development, closely tied with the previous one, underlined certain religious (or cultural) characteristics of Iranian collective identity that created conditions for revolutionary change in the country on both everyday and institutional levels. Shi’ism, as a window to Iranian culture, became the key emotive and discursive vehicle for a new revolutionary ideology that would find expression in key figures like clerics, merchants, and lay intellectuals such as Mehdi Bazargan and Ali Shariati. The second development was the emergence of meta-narratives of Shi’i Islamic history that saw this distinct form

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14 Shi’i studies in a non-Iranian setting proliferated in the 1980s, mainly with the purpose of highlighting the impact of the Iranian revolution on other Shi’i communities, see, for example, J. R. I. Cole and N. R. Keddie, eds., Shi’ism and Social Protest (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

of Islam as a “world religion” of salvational orientation. This original view was mainly articulated by Said Arjomand, a prominent Weberian sociologist, who focused on how changes in the clerical establishment since the Safavid period led to distinct institutional transformations and shifts in spheres of authority in modern Iran.16

Changes in Shi’i Islamic studies concurrently led to the emergence of Muharram studies, especially in the fields of anthropology and drama or theater studies, between the 1960s and early 1980s.17 This discursive development was partly because of the spectacular growth of graduate programs in Iran and exchange of academics and graduate students that took place between the late 1950s and 1970s. In particular, the growth of anthropology in Iran, in correlation with Western anthropological interest in rural and urban Iran, also helped pave the way for the production of a number of remarkable studies by emerging researchers like William Beeman, Michael J. Fischer, Margaret Gulick, Mary Elaine Hegland and Richard Tapper.18 Four prominent scholars led the way in the production of new knowledge on Muharram. In his 1975 dissertation, Jean Calmard, a French historian, produced the first historical and cultural analysis of Muharram as a cultic “popular” practice.19 The Polish-American scholar, Peter Chelkowski, also emerged as a leading figure, publishing a number of original studies on ta’ziyeh or the sacred theater of Muharram, especially on the ritual performances during the Iranian Revolution; his work broke new ground from the perspective of performative theory.20 Later in 1979,
Chelkowski’s edited volume on ta’ziyeh introduced the first theoretical accounts of the ritual culture of Muharram from various disciplinary backgrounds. The German scholar Werner Ende’s 1978 article shed light on tensions between the clerical and popular conceptions of Muharram practices, in particular the self-flagellation processions. The work of American anthropologist Gustav Thaiss focused on religious practices of ordinary Iranians in everyday life situations, offering the most elaborate theoretical study on Muharram in the emerging subfield.

But it was in the works of three other scholars that Muharram studies developed into a more cohesive and yet theoretically complex field of inquiry. They are: Mahmoud Ayoub’s Redemptive Suffering in Islam (1978); Fischer’s Iran (1980); and Said Arjomand’s The Shadow of God (1984). In these works, a common conceptual thread blends and emerges that discursively identifies Muharram with symbolically charged varieties of redemptive action. Seen in the context of Shi'i Arab and Iranian histories, ritual is identified as a medium of expressing or reinterpreting values in the ways that participants understand their ritual activities in response to changes in their social settings.
Mahmoud Ayoub, a Lebanese scholar of Shi‘i Islam, set discursive grounds for the first serious attempt to theoretically interpret Muharram as a set of devotional practices tied to doctrines of Shi‘ism.\textsuperscript{25} According to Ayoub, Shi‘i rituals of mourning, in historic terms, emerged in the medium of hagiographic and theological traditions. Expressed in exegetical stories and eulogies of martyrdom, the Shi‘i devotional tradition led to the formation of a distinct devotional culture, in which “through the interiorization and emulation of that suffering by the community and through the high favor of the Imam as an intercessor,” Shi‘ism came to adopt a distinct theology of affliction in the memory of the figure of the holy Imam.\textsuperscript{26} The theological tradition created a sacred worldview in that, for Shi‘i Muslims, the Imams “may be thought of as a primordial idea in the mind of God which found temporal manifestation in persons occupying a position midway between human and divine beings.”\textsuperscript{27} The Imams are the manifestation of divine thought, in which Shi‘i Muslims seek to participate by following devotional traditions.

With Husayn’s act of self-sacrifice at Karbala as the greatest performance of cosmic drama, of which the other Imams and other Prophets had foreknowledge, Ayoub is keen to show that the Muharram cultures of devotion are \textit{expressions} of a spiritual quest for redemption that meaningfully seek for other-worldly fulfillments in the here-and-now. With Husayn’s act of self-sacrifice at Karbala as the greatest performance of cosmic drama, of which the other Imams and Prophets had foreknowledge, Ayoub is keen to show that the Muharram devotional cultures are expressions of a spiritual quest for redemption that meaningfully seeks other-worldly fulfillments in the here-and-now.

\textsuperscript{25} Since \textit{Redemptive Suffering} was published in 1978, a year before the Islamic Revolution, Ayoub’s objective for studying Shi‘i devotional tradition was not to show how the rituals played a role in the revolutionary movement, but primarily to offer a theoretical account in response to various negative views of Muharram, mostly present in certain Shi‘i communities since the early twentieth century, particularly in clerical circles. Ayoub’s contribution was original in a significant way. Ayoub’s scholarly training in Iran and the U.S., together with his knowledge of Arabic and Persian, provided him with both traditional and academic sources to reinterpret Muharram. To this day, \textit{Redemptive Suffering} remains the single most important text on the theological history of devotional Shi‘ism.

\textsuperscript{26} Ayoub, \textit{Redemptive Suffering in Islam}, 15. I should note here that Ayoub distinguishes theological from the emotionally charged meaningful conception of “suffering.” (Ibid., 23).

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 54.
Suffering of sacred orientation, Ayoub argues, stems from the attempt to overcome the evil in the world, embracing the pain that has engulfed the cosmos for the wrongs that have been done to the Imams. By commemorating the drama of Karbala, the Shi’i community is renewed every year and in sorrow it grows stronger. Yet enactments of affliction are more than a disciplinary method of purifying the soul from evil, but a way to release the worldly self from empty, indulgent existence that can largely be described as a realm absent of the memory of the presence of the holy Imams. Salvation through suffering lies at the heart of Muharram.

Published just two years after Redemptive Suffering, Fischer’s Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution continued the soteriological theoretical thrust advanced by Ayoub, except that now the emotive category of “suffering” became less an expression of a theology of redemption but a creative (re)enactment of the modality of the Karbala story in terms of a paradigm for action. Fischer’s study of Shi’i Iran, specifically its everyday culture, is a product of detailed field work that combines anthropological and sociological insights into the culture, history, and politics of the country. The ethnographic study revolves around an interpretive analysis of Shi’i informers that brings to light how the everyday life of Shi’i Iran, specifically in the seminary institution in Qum, can lead to deep-seated transformations in Iranian society. The historical setting of Fischer’s work plays a critical role in his analysis, since the Pahlavi modernization, especially since the so-called White Revolution in the 1960s had transformed Iran into a “westernized” (or “westernizing”) society. The revolutionary interpretation of the Muharram story by mid-ranking clerics like Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani provided a new way of conceptualizing devotional practices in new, politically dynamic terms, a feature mostly neglected by Ayoub in his overly theological analysis. In many ways, Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution advanced Ayoub’s theological interpretation of Muharram toward a new soteriological conception of ritual as political action.

28 Ibid., 26.
29 One may argue that whereas Fischer sees Muharram as a communicative device in terms of a paradigmatic narrative that can be used for political purposes, Ayoub recognizes Muharram as an inherently devotional set of traditions that could be (mis) used for political aims in a given historical situation.
In theoretical terms, Fischer’s work marked a critical discursive turn. The study highlights both the importance of shifting religious ideas and political affiliations (both religious and secular) and, moreover, how the sacred story of Karbala provides a means of expression not only for norms of salvation but political change. According to Fischer, the term “paradigm” signifies the archetype of moral narrative that, in the idiom of Karbala stories, carries the “spirit and knowledge of Husayn,” as guide posts for the believers who seek salvation or changes in their worldly lives in the sacred stories. As standards of thought and action, these narratives of loss and eventual redemption are articulated, reenacted, and, accordingly, reinterpreted in diverse historical and social settings, appropriating new normative understandings of Husayn’s noble endeavor at Karbala with eschatological significance for the ritual participants. In the case of the Iranian Revolution, the tragedy of Karbala and its eventual promise of redemption provided powerful “reference frames” for shaping radical consciousness and unifying revolutionary actors in their anti-government activities. Intrinsic to the paradigm is also the universal sense of justice, devoutness, and righteousness that Husayn best embodied in his battle at Karbala. In a grand drama of sacred history, everyday time and space are transformed and reconstructed in sacred terms in meaningful ways so that the day of Husayn’s martyrdom (‘Ashura) becomes the eternalized now and the place of Karbala becomes the present here.

Since the 1980s, Ayoub and Fischer’s soteriology of ritual action has come to represent one of the standard ways of discussing Muharram in the field of Shi‘i Islamic studies. The works of leading scholars in

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32 I should note that there have been discursive deviations from this “standard” way of theorizing Muharram. As I will show later in this section of the chapter, the praxis school of thought adopts a different theoretical approach, one that focuses less on belief and redemption and more on variations of practice in a given situation. Other non-soteriological approaches are as follows. In 1979, Christian Bromberger analyzed Muharram and the “myth of martyrdom” from a semantic perspective rather than a theological one. William Beeman’s 1982 study of performance, communication, and everyday ritual culture in Iran offered a rare account of Muharram, especially on
the 1990s and 2000s like David Pinault’s *The Shi’ites, Ritual, and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (1992); *The Horse of Karbala* (2001); Vernon James Schubel’s *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam* (1993); and Toby Howarth’s *The Twelver Shi’a as Muslim Minority in India* (2001) in a South Asian context presented original anthropological accounts of Muharram in terms of expressive (i.e., poetic and symbolic) performances of redemption. Pinault’s study of Muharram in Hyderabad and Ladakh, India evokes the Karbala paradigm with a focus on the interplay between Shi’i doctrines relating to salvational beliefs in intercession or divine unity (tawhid) and ritual mourning performances, together with the performative ways such doctrines are expressed in the ambience of sectarian relations. This line of argument is also echoed in Schubel’s study of Muharram in Karachi. In a similar context of Shi’i-Sunni conflict, Schubel argues that the role of Muharram observances can be described as reenactments of the Karbala narrative in various performative declarations of allegiance to the ta’ziyeh, from the perspective of performative and “communication system” studies. There is also Farhad Khosrokhavar’s sociological analysis of the popular culture of martyrdom during the revolutionary movement and the 1980s war with Iraq. Khosrokhavar’s work exemplifies the type of analysis that focuses on how the individual actors from their distinct socio-economic background interpret their actions in the context of a socio-culture of self-sacrifice, with potential for agency and subjective creativity. See C. Bromberger, “Martyre, deuil et remords: horizons mythiques et rituels des religions méditerranéennes (A propos des ‘passions’ du Christ et l’Imâm Hoseyn: essai d’analyse comparée),” in *La mort en Corse et dans les sociétés méditerranéennes: Études corse 12–13*, (1979): 129–153; W. O. Beeman, *Culture, Performance and Communication in Iran* (Tokyo: ILCAA, 1982); F. Khosrokhavar, *L’islamisme et la mort: Le martyre révolutionnaire en Iran.* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995); F. Khosrokhavar, “‘Bassidje,’ auxiliaires juvéniles de la révolution iranienne,” *Cultures & Conflits* 18 (1995): 105–19; F. Khosrokhavar, *L’Utopie sacrifiée: Sociologie de la révolution iranienne* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1993); F. Khosrokhavar, *Le Discours populaire de la Rédoution Iranienne* (Paris: Contemporanéité, 1990).


Prophet and his household. The work of Howarth on the Shi'i Indian subcontinent represents most explicit attempt to frame the Muharram performances of sermons and eulogies in terms of a faith-based discourse of “theology of mediation,” recalling Ayoub’s discourse of redemptive suffering, by which penitents devotionally engage to display their obedience and “love” for the Prophet and the Imams and, accordingly, reinforce the community’s Shi'i identity. The common idea that the above-mentioned studies maintain is that rituals can be used as mediums of expression to affirm Shi'i belief in a core ideal or a theology of transcendental significance.

The soteriological discourse of Muharram has advanced and gained considerable prominence with the production of a number of outstanding ethnographic and historical studies in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In one of the best appropriations of the Karbala paradigm discourse, Kamran Scot Aghaie offers the most elaborate study of Shi'i Muharram culture in the context of modern Iranian history. His use of the terms “core-narrative” and “meta-narrative” advances Fischer’s theory of Muharram culture in ways that broaden the narrative strategies employed by Shi'is to redefine “self” and “other” in shifting historical circumstances. Frank J. Korom’s Hosay Trinidad (2003), Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson’s Foucault and the Iranian Revolution (2005), Lara Deeb’s An Enchanted Modern (2006), Syed Akbar Hyder’s Reliving Karbala (2006), and Negar Mottahedeh’s Representing the Unrepresentable (2007) rearticulate the discourse of the Karbala paradigm in diverse historical (Afary, Anderson, Mottahedeh) and global (Deeb, Hyder, Korom) settings, while breaking up the practice of narratives into shifting situations on the everyday level.

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35 Schubel represents a theoretically more complicated case. His use of Victor Turner brings him closer to the performative theory of ritual. Though he uses soteriological concepts, Schubel could also be identified as a ritual theorist of praxis, which I will discuss later in this section of the chapter.


The difference between these works and Fischer’s original approach is the emphasis not only on the enlargement and diversity of symbolic frames of reference, but the complex ways multiple understandings of the Karbala tropes bring about dynamic relationships between symbols, rituals actors, situations (i.e., local and political), and ways of being in the world.\textsuperscript{38}

The situational factor plays a key yet implicit role in a number of alternative discourses of Muharram that employ non-soteriological paradigm of analysis. This alternative school of thought, in what I refer to as the praxis discourse, has been mostly concerned with how actors from diverse backgrounds (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, race, etc.) create circumstances and positions of social relations or subjectivities through practices by which Muharram is experienced (and not merely used) for understandings of reality in everyday life situations.\textsuperscript{39}

In the early 1970s, Gustav Thaiss articulated the first use of the praxis model of Muharram in the case of pre-revolutionary Iran. Thaiss’s ethnographic analysis shows that ritual actors in various organizations, especially the bazaar, can bring about social transformation in response to the everyday situations that they encounter.\textsuperscript{40} Moving away from a

\textit{Historical Images of National Reform from the Qajars to the Islamic Republic of Iran}, (New York; Syracuse University Press, 2007).

\textsuperscript{38} Korom’s \textit{Hosay Trinidad} is unique in its soteriological approaches. I will discuss his work later in this chapter. In Lara Deeb’s \textit{An Enchanted Modern}, Muharram is described in the national-political context of Lebanese society as defining a new conception of Islam and modernity. According to Deeb, the Shi’i Lebanese mourning gatherings or majalis and especially acts of self-mortification (latam) can be viewed in connection with the growth of Shi’i population in urban areas. However, what is most important is the way the rituals change from the 1970s to 1980s, a period when revolutionary Shi’ism led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran influenced the way many Lebanese Shi’is viewed themselves in relation to other sects and religions in the country. While in the pre-1980s version, for instance, Muharram acts of self-mortification were directed at oneself, implying a quietist concept of inward grief, the 1980s version saw a new conception of ritual violence that mainly evolved around an outward, public expression of grief for collective political action and as a form of resistance. See L. Deeb, \textit{An Enchanted Modern}, 149–152. Syed Akbar Hyder’s \textit{Reliving Karbala}’s ethnographic analysis situates Muharram commemorations in the South Asian context and shows how symbols and devotional Urdu discourses of Karbala are subject to shifting social tensions (i.e., sectarianism). In \textit{Representing the Unpresentable}, Motahedeh’s historical culturalist approach focuses on the Karbala paradigm, particularly in the nineteenth-century tradition of ta’ziyeh under the Qajars, and argues how the dramatic enactments and tropes are used in Babi historiography that depict Babism’s role in the formation of the modern Iranian identity.

\textsuperscript{39} For a description of the anthropological theories of praxis, see C. Bell, \textit{R ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 76–83.

\textsuperscript{40} For a list of Thaiss’s 1970s works, see footnote 23, chapter 1.
cleric-oriented conception of Shi‘ism, Thaiss underlines the experience of Muharram not merely in terms of a theology of redemption, but in the sociocultural realities of everyday life where disruption of customs and struggles to incorporate the new and adjusting or radically changing the old takes place. Shi‘i Islam, especially in its popular expression, is not about belief in ideas, but changing practices of symbols and meanings in a given situation.⁴¹

The 1980s ethnographic study of Mary Elaine Hegland and Reinhold Loeffler advanced the praxis approach with an emphasis on subjective interpretive processes of Muharram that have largely become operative in distinct circumstances.⁴² For Loeffler, Muharram ritual actors in a rural setting produce different interpretations of religious experience and ideas in ways that may not necessarily match the urban conceptions. The ethnographic research of Hegland is particularly important since it underlines the way Shi‘i actors from diverse ethnic, gender, and national backgrounds display performative abilities for “agency” and self-definition in response to particular local situations tied to transnational dynamics.⁴³ Her classic essay on the two images

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⁴¹ In his later work, Thaiss would expand on his sociocultural approach in one of the most interesting carnivalesque analyses of Muharram in Trinidad in the context of Caribbean culture. G. E. Thaiss, “Muharram Rituals and the Carnivalesque in Trinidad,” ISIM Newsletter 3 (1999): 93–94. As Dabashi correctly argues, Thaiss’s carnivalesque analysis is limited to Trinidad. H. Dabashi, Shi‘ism: A Religion of Protest, 358. One possible reason for this restricted approach, as Piotr Chelkowski explains with regards to his 1991 study of the Hosay celebrations in Trinidad, is the way the rituals evolved away from “its origins in Iraq to its current day manifestations in the Caribbean,” which is “the result of inter-multicultural factors making it a multi-dimensional tradition.” He continues, “As is the case with Christian pageantry observing the passion of the death of Christ, the further one moves from the center to the periphery, the more spectacular the staging becomes.” In other words, when Muharram becomes culturally transplanted in regions farther from the perceived Shi‘i heartland, the more carnivalesque it becomes. From a critical view, the concept of “origin” here is loaded with essentialist assumptions, including the idea that somehow the so-called origin of a phenomenon is marked by the invocation of a deeper solemn character in contrast to the more superficially reproduced version. See Piotr Chelkowski, “Muharram in South Trinidad,” Folia Orientalia 29 (1992): 57.


of Imam Husayn addresses the creative ways individuals change their perception of holy saints according to their particular mundane needs, appealing to the Imams as intercessors between the human and divine worlds and later, during the Iranian Revolution, recalling him as a model of courage and justice.\textsuperscript{44} Hegland’s emphasis on subtle ways of contestation over meaning and identity introduced the first serious analysis of the transgressive aspect of Muharram in the field.\textsuperscript{45}

In the 1990s, the work of Farhad Khosrokhavar also focused on the practical ways in which individuals would reenact or rearticulate Muharram in response to economic, gender or social conditions.\textsuperscript{46} Following Khosrokhavar and other praxis theorists, David Thurfjell’s \textit{Living Shi’ism} (2006) elaborates on the praxis model of ritual action in urban Iran by connecting the “embodied levels of meaning” of gender-specific ritual practices with the everyday, situational lives of his informants.\textsuperscript{47} In an original study of devoted Shi’i men in the Isfahan bazaar community, Thurfjell astutely demonstrates the complex ways in which sacred values and acts of piety are tied in personal interpretative ways that render rituals and their symbolism significant for a particular group. The “canonical” meanings produced by the actors are a reflection of the creative exchange between subjective corporeal reflections and a reformulation of accepted values. “Meanings,” Thurfjell eloquently explains, “are bound to the different life situations of the individuals who hold them and may . . . change dramatically with the passing time.”\textsuperscript{48} A critical point that Thurfjell highlights in his intriguing analysis of everyday Shi’ism is the emphasis on emotions and corporeal or non-verbal communication that mark ritual as distinct from other types of actions.


\textsuperscript{46} For a list of Khosrokhavar’s works, see footnote 32, chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{47} D. Thurfjell, \textit{Living Shi’ism: Instances of Ritualisation Among Islamist Men in Contemporary Iran} (Leiden: Brill, 2006) 19.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 240.
study of the Shi’i Lebanese in Dearborn, Michigan. Walbridge examines the everyday life of Lebanese-American Shi’i immigrants and explores the flexible and multiple interpretative ways in which Muharram is performed by communities to decrease tension with the host society and also other Muslim groups and yet affirm communal solidarity in an urban milieu. In Shi’ism in America, Liyakat Nathani Takim expands on Walbridge’s North American study of Shi’i Islam and offers a broad analysis of a number of migrant Shi’i communities. Although a doctrinal approach is largely applied in the study’s analysis of Shi’i devotional culture, Takim contributes to the praxis analysis by showing how Shi’i communities from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan adjust Muharram performances to their new host environments, an adaptation process that is intensified because of competition between each other and Sunni factions. Similarly, in the post-apartheid South African context, Goolam Vahed examines how competition between various Indian communities produces multiple practices and understandings of Muharram rituals and symbols to reshape identity and Shi’i authenticity. The element of diversity in mourning practices and symbols is most evident in the 2006 ethnographic documentary, The Procession of the Captives by Sabrina Mervin, who shows how the practice of Muharram in the southern Lebanese village of Kfar Kila largely revolves around the staging of scenes of liberation of prisoners from Damascus to Karbala to mourn the death of the martyrs of Karbala. The scenes underline the performative ways the village continues to come to grips with the memories of war in the reenactment of practices that ultimately aim to deal with the pain of grief and loss.

50 L. Walbridge, Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi’ism in an American Community, 93–96. See also her article “The Shi’a Mosques and Their Congregations in Dearborn.”
52 Takim makes explicit use of Schubel’s claim that Muharram rituals are intrinsically linked to the basic belief in “the Quran, the Prophet, and the Imams as the source of authority,” Ibid., 77.
the most part, Muharram becomes re-negotiated in the social practice of communal conflict. The element of conflict plays a critical role from the praxis perspective, since, as Takim notes, ritual “constructs boundaries of identity and exclusion and establishes the basis for Shiʿi differentiation from Sunnism” or other ethnic or religious groups.\(^{55}\)

My argument here is not that the discourse of the Karbala paradigm fails to recognize the significance of the relationship between practices and situations.\(^{56}\) I am also not suggesting that such discourse ignores the aspect of transgression, as Fischer’s study innovatively underlines this dimension in his analysis of revolutionary Shiʿi Iran. The problem with soteriological approaches, I contend, is an epistemological one.


\(^{56}\) For a good study of a soteriological approach that also applies a praxis analysis, see V. J. Schubel, “Karbala as Sacred Place among North American Shiʿa: ‘Every Day is Ashura, Everywhere is Karbala,’” in *Making Muslim Space in North American and Europe*, ed. B. D. Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 186–203.
By this, I mean how knowledge of Muharram is produced by focusing on a certain framework of narratives and conceptions that posit ritual, in particular devotional rites, in a particular discursive way.

First, there is an overemphasis on the superiority of ideas as stories or theologies over non-verbalized and corporeal practices or what Bakhtin calls grotesque realities of ritual in the way actors playfully engage with shifting, everyday situations. The assumption that narratives of purposive direction are at the core of ritual action injects an *a priori* conception of salvation, as a prevailing set of ideas as discourses, in the analysis of a ritual actor’s intentions and actions in everyday life circumstances. The manner in which a (sacred) story motivates a ritual participant to act in a certain performative way is therefore determined by the power of the moral ideal “to which almost all of life’s problems can be referred.”57 The difficulty here lies in the overriding value assigned to verbalized discourses that simultaneously demotes the non-verbal performative aspects of ritual action (e.g., body, emotion, casual behaviors or random acts of misrule, etc.) to one of secondary significance. In this light, Muharram performances are no longer seen as independent from moral stories that inhibit action, but have become narrative paradigms of redemption (Ayoub) with potential political implications (Fischer). By limiting the scope of ritual experience to a normative perception, the soteriological approach inserts an epistemic standard of perception, and, by extension, praxis, that implicitly sets up a binary model of action in terms of the realm of ideas (i.e., mind) over the domain of practice (i.e., body).

Second, the formalization of tropes, which is a central feature of a ritual process, requires the recognition of other, non-salvational performances that make symbolic action a communicative force of social significance. Undoubtedly, the soteriological approach is right to consider narratives of redemption as playing a significant role in the Muharram ritual process. However, by focusing solely on normative discourses of the sacred as the core of Muharram ritual, other significant narratives of non-soteriological significance or non-narrative performative processes, such as playful or carnivalesque behavior, are subsequently downplayed—and at times even denied.58 As a number

58 I once spoke about misbehaviors in Muharram to a Shi’i cleric, who angrily denied the existence of such activities.
of Muharram studies have shown, casual conversations, informal interactions, jokes, gossip, mundane and even profane discourses of non-meaningful or “irreligious” substance also make up the Muharram communication realm. The marginalization of other forms of ordinary communication entails a tendency to think of ritual as a secondary working of redemptively charged symbols that render the activities of ritual participants meaningful in their lives. As I see it, it is the underpinning assumption that ritual practice has something to do with the coherence of belief, a reading of religious practice that looks at “meaning” as the overriding force behind how individuals relate to the world.

The element of everyday or situational communication leads to a third problem: universalism. To what extent are practices of redemption a common feature of Muharram practices around the globe? In an important study, Yitzhak Nakash shows that the Shiʿi Iraqi practices of Muharram, especially in the dramatic displays of taʿziyeh, are less concerned with redemptive themes of intercession or a theology of redemption and more focused on practical issues like tribal solidarity or harvest production. Iraqi Muharram performances use fewer symbols and elaborate melodramatic spectacles in their performances of the taʿziyeh and emphasize more “the use of live metaphors, the movement of characters, and the participation of a large number of players drawn from the local population.” Even the Karbala characters, like ʿAbbas, the half-brother of Husayn, who is usually depicted in Iranian taʿziyeh as a courageous young man in search of martyrdom, are more down-to-earth; they are perceived by Iraqis as masculine protectors of the community and Islam. The case of Iraqi Muharram bespeaks the possibility that a salvation-minded approach tends to read an Iranian cultural element into various global practices, hence abstracting

59 See, for example, L. Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 154–8. I will expand on this communicative aspect later in this chapter.

60 Space precludes me from expanding on this point, but this theoretical orientation toward meaning plays a central feature in the German scholarly tradition of the study of religion, which eventually influenced key figures like Max Weber and Geertz.


a universal model of ritual action based on a specific national practice.63 This argument can also be militated against those approaches that attempt to discern a common universal value system between the Catholic Christian passion plays and Shi’i mourning practices.64 Although resemblances of performances and symbols can be detected, mostly because of the inter-civilizational context from which the rituals emerged (I will discuss this in Chapters Three and Four), the attempt to universalize the meaning behind the ceremonies, especially in the idiom of redemptive suffering, is to deface the situationality and heterogeneous semantics of ritual practices.65 In the words of Richard K. Wolf, “no commonplace system links” the performative or aesthetic and the semantic display of ritual practices.66

I referred earlier to Arjomand’s Shadow of God and noted that his original Weberian analysis contributed a unique perspective to Shi’i Islamic studies. I set apart Arjomand’s analysis from the other approaches because I want to draw attention to the discursive way a salvation-oriented analysis of Muharram can easily overlap with a functionalist conception of ritual as an elite tool of domination to maintain or change political order. But I also aim to underline how a salvation conception of a “world religion” like Islam can forge ahead with a distinct historical narrative that would deny the development of non-soteriological religious practices. This critical point is meant to lay the groundwork for Chapters Three and Four, where I discuss the

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65 I should note the position that Muharram, or ritual in general, entails a carnivalesque feature across cultures and regions is not a universalist but a transculturalist claim, since it considers the manifestation of such practices as dependent on the shifting situational and historical context in which are performed.

impact of Central Asiatic religions on the crystallization of Muslim political institutions in the early modern period.

*Shadow of God* (1984) was original in both its historical and theoretical analysis. In a significant way, Arjomand’s study introduced a new discursive element in the debate on Shi‘i Islam that framed religious action as a set of values that inherently accommodated ritual as a medium of both expression and subordination. As for theory, at the heart of Arjomand’s analysis is the Weberian conception of the lawful autonomy of each sphere of action (a feature that persistently appears elsewhere in his writings) as a factor of crucial significance. Following this systematic theory of compartmentalization of social order, Arjomand is interested in demonstrating the ways in which meaningful religious action, operating in reference to normative ideals embodied in a belief system, influences political action, the institutions of normative political governance, and, by extension, constitutes societal transformations. The application of Weber’s taxonomy of action—“affectual,” “traditional,” “instrumental,” and “value”—is essential to such an analysis, since it stresses the respective degree to which rationality, inherent in these types of social action, systematically weighs means and ends or carries out specific conduct for their own sake in the world. Action in its various forms is rational, and its rationality may vary in degree in different periods of social development and historical transformations. Rationality of action accordingly depends on the rationality of belief by which behavior is historically and socially constrained. Belief-formation and rational action are therefore inseparable, since rationality requires the incentive to act in accordance with normative principles and motives to uphold them.

In this theoretical perspective, the impact of Shi‘ism on “pre-modern” Iranian political life is described according to the ultimate values that constitute an ethical system of beliefs under which religious action becomes possible. In Arjomand’s 1984 analysis, a sociological study on the relationship between political and religious spheres should aim to discern the ethos of Shi‘i belief as a source of motivation for social action that consists of value rationalization and involves the formation of affective and traditional action according to a set of norms and values.67 The salvific-based doctrinal worldviews of redemption through

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67 I should note that Arjomand’s sociological analysis of Shi‘ism has undergone considerable change since the 1980s because of his growing interest in civilizational
devotional expression “constitute a source of motivation in that they shape the believer’s attitudes, and in that they differentially affect the believer’s propensities to act in various spheres of life.”68 The emphasis here is on the ethos of action that induces or inhibits various forms of orientation to salvation as the “foremost religious goal.”69

Arjomand’s historical analysis is also an original take on political and spiritual authority at the institutional level. The historical narrative goes something like this. The emergence of Imami Shi‘ism in its early sectarian form in the first two centuries of Islamic history, he argues, marked an important phase in the evolution of the political doctrine of the Imamat in variance with the Sunni notion of political leadership.70 Around 800 under ʿAbbasid rule, the crystallization of the quietist doctrine of taqiyya, religious dissimulation to protect one’s self and household from persecution, primarily advocated by Ja’far al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam of Shi‘i Islam, legitimized Sunni rule by discouraging Shi‘is from armed resistance and approved submission to non-Imamate rule.71 The quietist consent to Sunni rule led to the separation of religious and political authority, a process that was further consolidated in the nineteenth century. During this period, Shi‘i Islam saw a theological-intellectual transformation occur in terms of an increasing differentiation of spiritual and political authority as a consequence of the emergence of the doctrine of occultation (ghayba), the idea of an imminent return (zuhur) of Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam

68 Arjomand, Shadow of God, 3.
69 Arjomand, Shadow of God, 3.
70 The Shi‘i doctrine of the Imamate is a concept of political-religious leadership that essentially recognizes the succession to the Prophet in terms of designation (nass) by Muhammad of a person (his cousin and son-in-law ʿAli) as Imam, the commander-in-chief of the Muslim community. The Imam obtains legitimate authority to the religious and political station from his predecessor.
71 The doctrine of taqiyya served to protect the followers of Imam Sadiq at a time when Mansur conducted a brutally repressive campaign against the Shi‘i community in the mid-eighth century. On an ethical basis, the doctrine forbids the community to challenge Sunni political rule, especially during a time of persecution. Imam Sadiq instead encouraged a quietist attitude among the Shi‘is so as to improve the plight of the community under oppression. Throughout history, taqiyya has mostly served as a significant dramaturgical act closely connected with other Shi‘i ritual performances. See D. J. Stewart, “Taqiyyah as Performance: The Travels of Bahā’ al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī in the Ottoman Empire (991–93/1583–85),” Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies 4 (1996): 1–70.
of Shi’ism, believed to be concealed by God from the eyes of men since 874.

With the spread of the mystical chiliastic belief in the return of Mahdi, the beginning of the thirteenth century saw the spread of extremist and militant millenarian movements. According to Arjomand, the success of the chiliastic movement of the Safavids as a Sufi order in the early sixteenth century helped to institutionalize the first independent Imami hierocracy, laying the groundwork for the momentous impact of Imami religion on Iran’s polity under the Qajars in the nineteenth century. This transformation enabled the Imami ‘ulamas to emerge as a “crucially important consensual status group and Rechtsgenossenschaft,” and entrusted them with the power of “orthodox” authority in representing the religion of the Safavid state, while increasing “domestication of the masses” and legitimization of the royal institution. With the invitation of Syrian-Lebanese Shi’i doctors like Ali Karaki (d.1534) to Iran, the Safavids established the first Imami hierocratic institution. The transition of Shi’i Islam from sectarianism to an institutional hierocratic order with a monopoly on social organization of religion marks an important epoch in Shi’i Islamic history, since it is at this juncture, Arjomand argues, that “religion inevitably becomes a factor in the dynamics of politics.”

The identification of the hierocratic institution of Imamism as a distinct “world religion” grounded in the ethics of salvation marks the central thesis of The Shadow of God. In this respect, drawing upon Weberian sociology, Arjomand is interested in expanding on the relevance of political and social consequences of world religions based on the respective “contribution of requirements of religious doctrine and the exigencies and pressures of world social action to the shaping of the final ‘compromises,’ which are embodied in the officially sanctioned normative regulation of social and political life.” Here, the idea of official “normative regulation” in the making of “final” decisions underscores Arjomand’s basic sociological position. The assertion rests on the normative postulate that, in respect to both “world-rejection” and world-engaging ethical orientation, the institutional organization of religious authority plays a central role in socio-political action.

72 Arjomand, Shadow of God, 14.
73 Ibid., 15.
74 Ibid., 18.
75 Arjomand makes a trichotomous typology of norms of religious authority in the course of Imami history. During the sectarian phase of the religion, the Akhbari
How does Muharram operate in the institutionalization of the Imami hierocracy? In an important passage explaining the ideological significance of the ceremonies under the Qajars in the nineteenth century, Arjomand writes that because of their tremendous cathartic effect on the spectators, the ceremonies acted as channels of discharge of potentially rebellious energy and thus aided in the domestication of the masses.76 Here, notions such as “cathartic effect,” “channels of discharge,” and “domestication of masses” in the above statement underscore aspects of a functionalist approach that will be discussed later in this chapter. However, there is something more sophisticated in Arjomand’s brief analysis of Muharram that resists easy categorization. In the same paragraph, in explaining the Muharram performances under the Qajars, he adds:

...these ritual reenactments of the tragedy of Karbalā made the Shi’ite theodicy of misfortune a source of powerfully emotive notions and imagery, which could also be drawn upon to motivate communal oppositional action, both by the hierocracy and by chiliastic revolutionaries.77

With these words, Arjomand’s Shadow of God introduces a new dimension to the 1980s soteriological discourse of Muharram. The reenactment of “Shi’ite theodicy of misfortune” as motivational sources and “imagery” for action signifies a complicated conceptualization of ritual that primarily considers ritual as a motivational vehicle for action. Here, the emphasis on the “emotive” and “communal” features in mobilizing action, both by religious elites and revolutionary masses in the course of Shi’i history, underscores a deviation from both Ayoub’s and Fischer’s analysis that underlines the significance of non-cognitive practices (i.e., emotions and imagination) over ideas. Muharram, then, is not a mere medium of expression, but a motivational force that reflects a salvation ethics of action.

tenant denied the possibility of authority after the occultation of Mahdi, hence enhancing the role of sayyids, descendents of the Prophet, as charismatic and hereditary leaders of the community. The Mahdiastic conception flourished mainly between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, based on belief in an eventual return of Mahdi, a point I will briefly elaborate upon in Chapter Three. The last, though most important, type of normative conception of religious authority, according to Arjomand, is the juristic authority of the ‘ulama organization, coexisting with royal political authority. The norms of religious ranking among the community of believers, however, can be deduced from the dogma of Imamate, that is, the infallible leadership of a direct male descendent of the Prophet.

77 Ibid., 241.
But the apparent shift of discourse to motivational aspects of Muharram does not signify a methodological break from other soteriological-minded discourses. Rather, it implicates a discursive change of emphasis based on a restricted conception of religious action defined in terms of dogmas reflective of ultimate values. Here, the rhetorical move from a conceptualization of ritual as a functional to a meaningfully rational and, essentially, ethical re-enactment of the ethos of sacred law gives value to the role of the ceremonies as motivationally restricted expressions of values. These expressions, however, are produced mainly in reference to normative principles upheld and reproduced by an established hierocratic structure of domination, in which, accordingly, habitual and instrumental motivations are sanctioned for public enactments.

Yet the implication of this motivation-oriented approach is more momentous than it may appear at first sight. My contention here is primarily directed at the treatment of motivation as a form of social action. This is most apparent at two key conceptual levels. First, the Weberian categorization of religious motivation involves a soteriological bias on the macro-historical evolution of religious action. On the historical level, the significance of Muharram is overlooked by applying a mono-linear historical narrative of religion defined in the Weberian tropes of “world religions.” The first and foremost aspect of this linear historical-rational approach is implicit use of the Weberian postulate of developmentalism.

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78 Please note that by “Weberian” I do not put stock in Weber’s fragmentary and, at times, incoherent sociology of Islam, but in his broader theoretical assumption embedded in his sociology of religion.

79 Despite his analysis of modernity’s quest for organization, I should note, Weber by no means denied the multiplicity of rational action in diverse civilizational contexts. As S. N. Eisenstadt and W. Schluchter have noted, Weber’s concern with composing a history of Indian and Chinese religions, for instance, was a way to underline the specific and distinctive rational trajectories of non-Western religions. Yet, in the context of Western history, this is not to say that Weber’s developmental account of history, as an ever-increasing process of rationalization, is a progressive account, despite Eisenstadt and Schluchter’s interpretation. For the present chapter, I consider Weber’s historical sociology as developmental though not progressivist, but also that his approach overestresses the role of instrumental rationality in respect to a basic conceptual dichotomization of reason in terms of instrumental and value-based rationalities, resulting in a hierarchy of rationalities that the West represents as the most complex. For a critical look at Weber’s idea of rationalization in line with the modern West, see B. Hindess, “Rationality and the Characterization of Modern Society,” in Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity, eds. S. Whimster and S. Lash (London: Allen and Unwin), 144.
Briefly recalling his famous historical narrative, Weber posits the manifestation of two corresponding forces that pin down the development of religions in the course of history. Since humans are disposed to construct images of the world, as “world images,” which respond to extraordinary and sometimes astonishing experiences that present individuals with apparent intricacy for the continuity of life, they attempt to overcome their condition in intellectual terms. The cognitive drive to come to terms with the absurdity of life marks an intellectual hold on the world, to the extent that the development of understanding leads to the construction of more unified and systematic images of the world. The allure inherent in rationalization of the worldview lies in the dynamic of human suffering, whereby the experience of pain directs humans from one adaptively rational stage of understanding to another, hence enhancing the cognitive ability to elaborate learning in the advance of religious culture through time.80

Crucial to this historical process is the advancement of religious culture from a primitive animism, in the form of magic and ritual control of natural forces, to anthropomorphism, a more developed form of systematized action in which the experience of misfortune is interpreted as meaningful. With the rise of theism, and in particular monotheism, the role of suffering became central to the practice of punishment, a consequence of revealed law by the deities. The movement away from magical religious action, in the form of ritualistic performances, towards religion as a “rationalized” code of conduct, (I use quote marks to show that I acknowledge the following use of the term by Weber as a concept rather than a sociological fact), which finds expression in the institutionalization of religious hierocratic order,

marks an attempt to normatively categorize the world by orienting action in the ethical motivational and institutional derivatives. The notion of “Ethik” connotes in this sense a symbolic and organizational feature of spheres of societal action with the intellectual cultivation of rational worldviews, as a decisive force in the historical development of world religions. Since ideas operate to anchor values, which ultimately produce action leading to structure of cultural life, “the rational elements of a religion, its ‘doctrine,’ also have an autonomy… The rational religious pragmatism of salvation, flowing from the nature of the images of God and of the world, have under certain conditions had far-reaching results for the fashioning of a practical way of life.”

In this developmental, ethic-based narrative, ritual plays a discursively less significant role in religious conduct of rational theodicy of misfortune; in other words, it becomes relevant only when it tends to express an ethical ideal based on a set of dogmas or reflects a series of formalized action sanctioned by an institutionalized hierocratic order.

Two objections can be deduced here. First, the linear developmental discourse of religious conduct in the world with the famous notion of “demagification” or the “disenchantment of the world,” central to the Weberian dichotomization between “traditional” and “modern” societies, which Arjomand uses to build his own analysis to “illuminate societal change in traditional societies,” conceptually neglects the heterogeneous expression of emotions and ideas manifested in non-normative spheres of everyday life. Second, the classification of the historical rise of “world religions,” or prophetic religions like Islam, essentially identifies value systems of religious action in terms of transcendental ethical ideals of salvation. This, for the most part, limits the ways in which social organizations presuppose the breakdown of “affectual” or ritual action in place of value action.

In the context of such historical linear processes, a Weberian approach tends to give historical precedence to “intellectual” over “emotive” modes of religious action in an evolutionary move away from the primitive to a higher, more mature stage of human rationality

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82 “Ritual has correspondence to rules and regulations, and, therefore, wherever a bureaucracy has determined its nature, religion has assumed a ritualistic character.” Ibid., 283.
in its struggle for power and meaning in the world. Here, the implicit dichotomization of action into emotive (magic and ritual) and rational, procedural ones (prophetic religions) discursively disengages “ethical” and “intellectual” religious action, characterized by administrative organizations that legitimate them, from ritual action. So, it is not that ritual lacks rationality, but that it manifests rational action if it expresses the normative ideals of dogma embodied in the self-regulating belief system that are, quintessentially, institutionalized and sanctified by a hierocratic authority.

This point ultimately begs the assumption that a study of the historical development of Shiʿism predominantly necessitates the development of dogmas as a set of prescribed meaningful norms of religious action, legitimized and institutionalized by a hierocratic component in the societal structure of domination. Though legitimate institutions of religious and political order safeguard these norms by means of coercion, persuasion, and legal sanctions, ritual operates only as a mere affective operative in the propagation of ideals of religious dogma. Ritual is a means to ensure the “reinforcement” of belief in normative doctrines defined and sanctioned by a normative discourse—i.e., the way ideas are expressed through ritual and ceremonial action.

The most striking feature in Arjomand’s 1984 account is the absence of a description of popular understanding of the religious dogmas, and an acknowledgment of the ways in which the everyday interpretations of ordinary actors, at both conscious and unconscious levels, often considerably deviate from canonical conceptions, even if they are sanctioned by the religious elites. This can be primarily demonstrated with the salience of voice or “subjective” actions that focus on the “who I am” or, more importantly, the “who we are” of culture, on individual and collective identities.84 As Victor Turner has demonstrated, ritual performances are composed of physiological phenomena—i.e., desire and feeling—and constitute affective behaviors that essentially transcend a doctrinal (and also ideological) orientation to the sacred, and yet at the same time ground a cognitively affective orientation for the shaping of identity.85

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In contrast, the praxis approach considers the everyday situations through which interpretations and meanings are created and articulated through practice contra other forms of action.\textsuperscript{86} Values are products of action and not vice versa. Canons of belief and theologies of performances are relevant and play a role, though changing according to various circumstances, in the course of ritual processes. There is also the element of non-soteriological practices such as shamanism, medical practices, and meditation that mark practical ritual ways to deal with life situations and, indeed, are a set of practices that in fact play a significant role in the early history of Safavid political and religious cultural formations. The analytical power of the praxis approach lies in the attempt to overcome the misleading conceptual boundaries often drawn between ideas and practice (Ayoub; Fischer) or values and motivation (Arjomand) and the opening up of a new way of looking at action.

**Muharram as Propaganda?**

So far, I have discussed two distinct conceptual takes on Muharram: the soteriological (or normative) and praxis (or situational) approaches. Both of these theories, on one level or another, identify various patterns or aspects of rituals that either express cultural ideals that, in turn, serve to prescribe action or construct new identities or social relations in shifting local or transcultural situations. The two approaches, however, share a common assumption that ritual is about complex processes of both subjective and social significance through which performances are displayed and made meaningful.

\textsuperscript{86} As L. A. Hoffman has pointed out, “It would be nice if Christians leaving their Christmas mass walk out on a world where the reality of the Christian promise makes them over into hopeful charitable Christians; where even the most mean-spirited scrooge among them sees the light, as we say. But as often as not, it is any one of the other meanings that carry the day, the public understandings that everyone except the experts recognize as the rite’s message, or the private meanings that individuals hold, perhaps only inchoately but certainly nonetheless—Ms. Fahy’s walking away from the icon of Mary with the happy feeling that she has been among believers, for instance. Forget the theology of the occasion; she came to be with people like herself, and leaves with the feeling that the cynical folk, including her own bishop who told her to stay away, the people, that is, who populate the world of officialdom, are not the ones who matter.” L. A. Hoffman, “How Ritual Means: Ritual Circumcision in Rabbinic Culture and Today,” *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993): 82.
Another, though less prevalent, approach can also be identified in Muharram studies, particularly in the field of history, namely, functionalism. For the most part, a discussion of the functionalist analysis would go beyond the scope of the present study, but, from the outset, it is important that I distinguish two types of functionalism. While the discourse became an established field of academic discourse with figures like Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Durkheim’s theory of religion is most famous for articulating the social functionalist approach, which can also be detected in certain praxis studies because of its emphasis on social practice rather than doctrine. In his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, published in 1912, Durkheim perceived ritual as playing a constitutive role in shaping social order.87 Ritual maintains the ability to organize individual experiences to maintain or transfer the representation of social cohesion that it expresses. By linking ritual action to social structure, communal functionalism acknowledges the power of ritual as a *constitutive force* to maintain social solidarity. At the political level, as David Kertzer has shown in *Ritual, Politics and Power*, the category of ritual transcends a mere instrumental quality as “symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive.”88 For a social functionalist, ritual is the basic unifying medium wherein social cohesion is affirmed and a political community is defined. Accordingly, “standardized” actions are the basis for political actions that help to shape a person’s sense of self and social reality.

Functionalism of the second type, however, what I call “elite-functionalism,” focuses less on how actors regulate behavior and, accordingly, achieve cohesion on the societal level, but on the instrumental ways in which elites, as those with the authority to govern over a particular community, can utilize symbols, myths, ideas, and practices as a means of propaganda to subdue those they seek to govern. Though

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87 Durkheim’s famous definition of ritual as “rules of conduct,” which “prescribed how man must conduct himself” in relation to a unified system of belief and practices oriented toward the sacred, marks the basis for a number of communal-functionalist approaches. E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K. E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 38. Thinkers like Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, and Talcott Parsons are the best representatives of this school of thought. Although communal-functionalist definitions vary in approach, they do, however, agree that ritual is a collective expressive action performed to create solidarity and maintain social ties.

not all studies of propaganda are elite-minded, the simple claim of elite-functionalism is that rituals are effective in the way they can serve the interests of the elites, political or otherwise. The first scholar to have arguably advanced a functionalist perspective is Jean Calmard, whose 1975 dissertation and later work on Muharram culture made explicit use of both elite and social functionalist tropes.

In his later writings, Calmard’s two-part essay, “Shi’i Rituals and Power,” represents an elaborate account of the history of Muharram under Safavid rule. While relying on European travel accounts, he outlines the development of the Shi’i rituals in the course of imperial

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89 The work of Peter Chelkowski and Dabashi on Muharram and its role in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the creation of the Islamic Republic provides the first original culturalist study of ritual as “propaganda machinery.” Following the Parsonian sociology of propaganda, the authors identify the role of the ceremonies as powerful ideological processes to mobilize the masses to political action, which paved the way to the revolutionary events of 1978–79. While using the neo-Kantian concept of consciousness, especially with reference to Hans Blumenberg’s works on myth, the authors further argue that the ceremonies provide an emotive medium in persuading ritual participants to perceive the working of their imagination. Ritual, as a symbolic mechanism, affirms a process of “rationalization” of the world in the form of myth, which provides a worldview for the ritual actors. “A commitment to action,” the authors write, “rests on the active construction of myth,” that the rituals on both religiously ascetic and symbolically aesthetic levels produce. P. Chelkowski and H. Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 34.

90 Functionalist accounts of Muharram have been sporadically used by scholars in the field. In the 1980s, for example, Hamid Enayat would comment on the general historical development of the ceremonies as the following: “... *ta’ziyyah* was promoted by the financial and political oligarchs who used it under both Safavid and Qajar dynasties as a means of consolidating their hold over the populace; and in its golden age, a despot like Nāsir al-Din Shah saw no contradiction between his oppressive methods of government and the provision of the most elaborate amenities for the performance of *ta’ziyyah.*” H. Enayat, “The Safavid Era,” in *Expectation of the Millennium*, ed. H. Dabashi, S. H. Nasr and S. V. R. Nasr (Albany: New York State University Press, 1989), 54.

expansion of the Safavid dynasty and in the context of the politics of converting the Sunni majority population of Iran to Imami Shi'ism.\footnote{In the first essay, he argues that the process of conversion of the Persian population, then widely made up of Sunni adherents, was relatively smoother in the territories ruled earlier by the Aqquyunlu dynasty then those controlled by the Timurid in the northeastern regions of Iran.}

Focusing on the evolution and expansion of various rituals, such as cursing ceremonies of the official public extractors (tabarra‘iyan) scapegoat festivals, camel sacrifice ceremonies (baria kurban), and storytellers (ma‘arakagiran), in the sixteenth and particularly the early seventeenth century, Calmard shows how the Safavid shahs helped spread Muharram by using ceremonies to propagate the new official religion of the imperial state.\footnote{The tabarra‘i, meaning “one who disavows something or someone,” was an agent of the Safavid shah. According to Sharifi, a Sunni cleric serving as a vizier under Shah Tahmasb I, in the formative period of the empire, a tabarra‘i was given a list of names, including the names of the first three caliphs believed to be the murders of Imam Husayn, to curse them out loud in public; when cursing was finished, the shah would fill his mouth with coins. M. M. Sharifi, \textit{al Nawaqid li-bunyan al-rawafid}, British Museum, Or. 7991, f. 172 (London: British Museum Photographic Service, 1974). The ritual cursing of Sunni names recited in public spaces was known by the term “jarr al-qitar” (dragging a train of camels), and it included, as Sharifi puts it, the “cursing of all the righteous of the religion,” Ibid., f. 172. The rituals were meant as a method of publicly denouncing the enemies of the newly established Shi‘i state. See also, R. S. Johnson, “Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities during the Reign of Tahmasp I,” \textit{Iranian Studies} 27, no. 1–4 (1994): 123–33. Likewise, along with these propaganda tactics like the practice of tabarra‘iyān and taxation of the Sunni population, Calmard argues that the proliferation of numerous Shi‘i religious ceremonies in the early seventeenth century encouraged by Shah ‘Abbas I helped to diminish the presence of Sunnism in Iran. J. Calmard, “Ritual Power II,” 151–53. I will elaborate on these ceremonies in Chapters Five and, especially, Six.}

Calmard also argues, were instrumental in the creation of dramatic displays of “spectacles of grief,” or popular stage setting performances, which encouraged ritualized violence between ethnic and religious groups (namely Haydari and Nimatullahi groups), creating a society divided in factional strife that involved the implementation of the shah’s policy of “divide et impera.”\footnote{I will expand on this alleged “divide et emperia” regarding the Haydari and Na‘mati ritual combat in the second section of Chapter Six.} Paradoxically, the remarkable aspect of this policy is the deliberate attempt by elites to transcend ethnicity, class, and gender differences by institutionalizing an Imami Shi‘i collective identity. In many ways, the institutionalization of Muharram as a “spectacular”—in particular in the latter period of the empire—played a critical role in the creation of a unified Safavid Shi‘i identity.
Calmard’s historical narrative articulates a position that defines the Shiʿi rituals in terms of popular events that reinforce the authority of the royals and at the same time provided “penitents,” or ritual participants, a “way to express their inner feelings and to assert their social cohesion as well as their differences.” The term “inner feelings” here is important, since it evokes the notion of a cathartic quality, a ceremonial and supervised means to discharge pent up emotions through the evocation and expression of feelings dangerous to the authorities in power. In many respects, Calmard further argues, the introduction of Muharram to the empire’s social life marked the formation of popular institutions that gave the “devotees” the opportunity to “express” these inner feelings, emotional dispositions, though in a controlled fashion, guided by an established pattern of official norms, in which “everyone amongst the faithful had to play his part in rituals.” Muharram was directed at the apt enactment of what was “internally” dependent on external regulations sanctioned by those upholding political authority, something that involved the emotive dispositions formulated in the context of imposition of institutional rules designed by the elite to legitimize their power. Put differently, apt enactments involved symbols set up and organized by the elites in which “inner feelings” of the ritual participants were channeled for expression in an institutionally meaningful manner.

The argument one may raise against this narrative account is the mechanical ways in which the ritual actors are described. The basic assumption here involves a deterministic conception of social action that can be manipulated for the legitimization of elite authority. More significantly, the manipulation of values and ethos embedded in ritual performances as officially sanctioned behavior reveals the limited mental life of the participants in the way that consensus is ceremonially manufactured to legitimize the authority of the elites. Manipulation through ritual is about constructing elite power.

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96 Ibid., 169.
97 The central idea underlying this approach can be identified within the relatively historical intellectual framework of Marxist functionalism in such that the meaning of ritual events is articulated as the mobilization of consensus in accordance to the interest of the ruling group. See also S. Lukes, “Political Ritual and Social Integration,” in Essays in Social Theory, ed. S. Lukes (London: Macmillan, 1977), 62–73; N. Birnbaum, “Monarchies and Sociologists: A Reply to Professor Shils and Mr. Young,” Sociological Review 3 (1955): 5–23.
This constructive aspect is twofold. First, the role of ideology is an operative one, manifested in the form of institutionalized ritual practices in that organization of collective perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors ultimately arrive at the recognition of the elites as legitimate authorities. Second, ideology, in particular in its religious popular manifestation, serves to mask contradictions that emanate from hierarchical social inequalities, marking the imagery of the absolute rule of elites through orchestrating popular practices as propaganda strategies to mobilize action to maintain the status quo. But if the political merit of the performances sanctioned by the elites is in controlling the masses, then does this explain anything about the rituals? This point is critical to my discussion of ritual action since it brings to light a major fallacy of the elite-functionalist analysis advanced by Calmard.

The presupposition that Muharram can be used as a propaganda device already defines the ceremony according to something presumed to be externally dependent on it (i.e., elites), hence neglecting a study of the ritual’s dynamics. In a circular sense, the conceptual limit of an elite-functionalist discourse is that consequences intended by one group are used to explain the efficacy of the phenomenon under study. Ritual defined according to its functional consequences leads to the problem of how consensus is achieved in the first place. If the specific nature of ritual is to be used for the purpose of propaganda, entailing a special ability to deceive ritual participants into behavior in favor of the powers that be, then what motivates ritual actors to perform the ceremonies in the first place? For the most part, the elite-functionalist account of ritual is incomplete since it never explains how the ideological construction of power is made relevant to the ritual participants.

My main objection here is whether the ritual participants are able to go on practicing the ceremonies while the ceremonies function as instruments of propaganda. As Roy Rappaport has argued, rituals are performed not in their mere thrust of functionality but in reference to orders established by others in the past, sanctioned by custom and tradition; otherwise, if the participants come to the realization that

they are arranged for specific purposes, the rituals would cease to be credible. Likewise, in his study of religious practices in Madagascar, Maurice Bloch argues that rituals constitute a variety of authoritative ways to reinforce cultural themes already familiar to participants. In this light, the authority of the elites (e.g., elders, priests, kings, etc.) is one of mediators rather than manipulators of symbols of transcendental significance. It is in the symbolic connection with these transcendental forces that the elites justify their dominance in the eyes of other ritual participants. In other words, the appeal of rituals are in the way they perform symbols in reference to distinct ways of seeing the world, not in the extent to which the elites are successful in orchestrating more elaborate ceremonies to further legitimatize their authority.

Please note that I do not altogether dismiss the functionalist analysis. Rituals are used by actors for different purposes; they can be reshaped, reinvented, and even eliminated in response to distinct situations. Elites also use rituals to legitimize their authority, as I will also underline in Chapter Four where I offer a historical account of Muharram. But a mere use of functionalism as a way of explaining rituals is incomplete and, at worse, a misleading way of setting up a historical account of Muharram. For the most part, functionalism alone as a way of understanding ritual implies that cultural practices of a popular nature are merely adaptive and mechanistic: it concerns the contribution of the parts, the ritual participants, to the continuity of the whole, the political order, designed by the all-too-powerful elites.

The logical paradigm of the classification of social relations into dependent and independent units marks a striking deterministic conception of society as a total organic body; in the regulative medium of ritual, society is endowed with a superior (elites) body and a secondary subordinate (mass) body with a passive disposition for subjection and control. The societal structural assumption here refers to a rigid underlying assertion that meaningful expressions are articulated and enacted in the form of ritual, symbols, and myths. But the functionalist approach of the elite-minded type dispenses with the active subject altogether. It denies creative action, both at the individual and collective

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101 Ibid., 189.
levels, by simply attributing ritual action to a set of premeditated rules set up by elites through institutions that are designed to control and dominate them.

My emphasis here on performance is meant to underline ritual as a type of reflexive act that constructs and disrupts spaces of interaction and social relations in non-deterministic ways. This line of thinking on ritual tends to overlap with a praxis approach, except that in this approach disruption in the course of formalized action takes precedence. The concept of the carnivalesque is not meant to identify what rituals can do exactly, but what they tend not to do by inverting norms of action and status quo in creative performative ways. The carnivalesque is ultimately about reversal.

**The Carnivalesque in Ritual**

During one of my fieldwork research trips in Iran, I wrote the following in my notebook:

Late in the afternoon on the tenth day of the Islamic lunar calendar of Muharram, known as ʿAshura, Shiʿi Tehranis celebrate the martyrdom of their saint, Husayn. In the busy streets of southern Tehran, where the impoverished population of the capital city resides, young men beat their breasts and flog their backs, mourning the fall of their “prince of martyrs,” while dramatically chanting sorrowful songs that depict in detail the events of Karbala. By shouting the name of Husayn (“Ya Husayn!”) the everyday life of ordinary Tehranis is transformed into a collective ecstasy in the form of mass rituals that reenact Husayn’s tale of martyrdom in various gender-specific ways, opening up new positions of affectional relationships and interactive ties, changing the everyday understanding of the participants. Such mournful visibility speaks of a collage of experiences through which grief is made public and the story of Husayn’s martyrdom, his epic struggle against an imagined evil, and the promise for deliverance, is internalized as a solemn occasion to collectively recall a divine destiny. But Muharram spectacles of grief can also have an embedded hidden structure, a concealed casual publicness combined with subjective implications. Here, I encounter on the “margins” of Muharram another world that involves sub-communicative sites of the here-and-now, utterances, gossips, ridicules and laughter, and at times nonsensical behaviors, amid the solemn performances. As loud sermons stir the audiences to tears through recitation of the tragic detail of the Battle of Karbala, in their segregated gender spaces, men talk about the trivialities of everyday life, as women, busy splitting sunflower seeds, gossip and talk about the quality of their sex life. Children play and shout, as (adult) male performers dramatize their lamentation.
to such a point that it begins to sound like a maddening laughter, ironically leaving the mourning performance open to become a potential site of the ridiculous and the hilarious. In the procession of Muharram grief is the vitality of festive energy. In the coordinated chest-beating processions, male performers appear to merrily dance as their mournful shouts culminate in grotesque and exaggerated cries with the ending hours of ʿAshura. The procession then momentarily breaks up from its routine pattern as fights erupt among the younger male members of the neighborhood. The processions continue. Young women keep their phone numbers available, as young men put on display their masculinity by volunteering to serve as standard-bearers of ritual standard or alam, carried in front of male processions. After phone numbers are exchanged, the standard-bearers quietly talk about which girl watched whose performances, hinting at a mating ritual confined to a specific set of bodily encounters at the street level. Finally, as blows and self-beatings culminate in a festive banquet, the mournful celebration comes to a standstill as participants cross over gender segregated spaces and stand in a chaotic unruly line to collect a communal meal, which participants gorge on after the celebration. At the end of the ritual performances, the festive meal carves out an informal space of sensual consumption. The communal meal serves as an incongruent site of jumbled, unformed, decadent interactions as children, youngsters, and older participants intermingle to confuse the hierarchy of age, gender and class relations and complete the ritual procession.

I wrote the above observation as Iran was undergoing a major political transformation. In the wake of the 1997 presidential elections and the electoral victory of Muhammad Khatami, the country came under an intense struggle between conservatives and reformists over the definition of the Islamic Republic. While the intensity of factional tensions led to major institutional changes and the rise of new social movements (e.g., the Green Movement in 2009), public spaces, especially those of festival events like Muharram, became major conflictual sites of interaction, especially for a younger generation who sought out possible opportunities to challenge the official culture of the state.

In the above description, the parody of institutional power and order is best displayed in licentious plays and subversive though subtle sexual interactions like the practice of phone number exchanges or the

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102 I conducted a number of fieldwork studies in Bushehr, Isfahan, and Tehran between 1998 and 2006 with the aim of producing a comparative study of Muharram in an urban setting. The present account is based on ten days of fieldwork in Tehran in 2001.
breakdown of gender boundaries over a communal meal. 103 Though much of this domain of misrule has and remains a major feature of Muharram culture, in the reformist period, the travesties of behavior in the course of public life were considerably enhanced in various urban and even rural areas. In this context, gender relations would come into question as men and women joined together in ways they are typically kept apart in normal times and places. The informal and casual noises of laughter and profanity disrupt the official normal behavior of the rituals, as disorderly conduct becomes the norm of the day. 104 In the case of Muharram’s most dramatic displays, ta’ziyeh, normal gender identities undergo radical transformation with the male actors playing the role of female characters in the play, hence, as Negar Mottahedeh notes, marking a performance of “sexual transvestism.” 105 While the degree or intensity of subversive practices varies in shifting situations, during periods of major social transformation like the 1979 revolution or the early reformist period (1997–2001), the symbolic performances of resistance are enlarged for a new critical consciousness of reconfigured everyday life.

In a significant way, the anatomical indeterminacy of Muharram performances is marked by the co-presence of misrule activities, creating a distinct public of composite yet irreducible experiences for the participants, interactively sharing a “wild public” marked by spaces of conflictual heteroglossia. 106 What the female and male participants

104 This misrule aspect can also be detected in other ritual forums such as shrine visitation or Quranic readings at the mosque. See A. H. Betteridge, “Muslim Women and Shrines in Shiraz,” in Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East, ed. D. L. Bowen and E. A. Early (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 240–41.
105 N. Mottahedeh, Representing the Unrepresentable, 75. For a personal account of gender transgression and luminal gender identity in dramatic performances, see M. M. J. Fischer and M. Abedi, Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition, 13–14.
106 As I will elaborate on in the next chapter, “wild publics” refer to contested spaces where hierarchies are questioned through carnivalesque performances of inventive patterns, including the use of grotesque language and symbolic inversions. See M. I. Young, “Impartiality and Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critique of Moral and Political Theory,” in Feminism as Critique: On the Politics of Gender in Late Capitalist Societies, ed. S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (London: Polity Press, 1987),
undergo in the course of the ten-day of the ceremonies is an encounter of something disjointed, a temporary loss of self to gain the ability that invigorates a performance of collective ecstasy. Henri Lefebvre described the disjointedness as the “subjunctive” or “as if” realm of a perceived universe that takes place in diverse forms of human action. Unlike Geertz and in many ways following Bakhtin, they do not consider meaning as the determining set of guidelines for action, but in fact “incongruity between the world of enacted ritual and the participant’s experience of lived reality,” and thus the focus on the world that ritual accomplishes. Festive moods create arenas of collective effervescence marked by a frenzied spirit of movements that lead each participant to a state of extra-ordinary experiences and posit ritual as a shared site of in-between reality. For the most part, the participants reach a jubilant mood of exceptional intensity to attain a sublime feeling of an alternate sense of ordinary life. Such synergistic energies produce playful moments, reinterpreting the world “as if” it were or should be so, that permit diverse interactions to cohesively take place (e.g., exchanging phone numbers between sexes) or collide in the com motion of events (e.g., fights between male participants), accordingly creating possible worlds of perception and action. Coupled with multiple cognitive processes in the course of the ceremony, contents change as new preposterous, ridiculous encounters lead to festive spaces of interaction. The festive becomes the public.

The collective core is unmistakable in the above interpretative ethnographic account of Muharram ceremonies. As Durkheim famously explained, the devotional events highlight the ways in which religious experience, the sacrilization of the mythical event of martyrdom, gains integrative public force in mustering the most intense personal experiences into a kind of collective solidarity. In these dramatic processions, the loosely collective experiences of mundane activities like joking and gossiping do not reinforce irrational or blasphemous behavior of trivial significance, but expose emotionally charged performances with an opacity that may seem vitally routine and yet communicatively transformative. And yet the impact of such celebratory, festive interactions amid mourning processions is not merely collective, but also subjective.

57–76. Bakhtin identifies “heteroglossia as an intersubjective dialogical process that shapes the background of a diversity of speech acts.

Muharram rituals operate, in the words of Kathryn Babayan, as a “productive mechanism” for conversion and allegiance, for social transformation and collective identity formation, since they occupy “emotional space” in the social imaginary of the participants.\textsuperscript{108}

The affective dimension is critical to the study of ritual action since it brings to light how emotions articulated in symbolic performances can serve as a dialogic interaction, appearing in the form of ethical sympathies and compassions of the heart (e.g., shame, envy, and disgust) with the cognitive element to pass eudaimonistic judgments.\textsuperscript{109} It is not that ritualized action lacks a rational center, but that its type of rationality is devoid of the sort of dry, insubstantial, and non-empirical motives for self-regulation and socialization. In other terms, ritual entails a thinking process that carries the potential to emotively submerge, performatively disguise, implicitly communicate, and creatively maneuver through the more publically visible pomp of an official ritual event. Such subversive processes operate through practices that create subaltern (non) discourses and strategies, subject to heterogeneous sets of rules, which are rooted in the everyday situations of ordinary interaction.\textsuperscript{110}

My argument is that Muharram entails carnivalesque strategies that include motifs of misrule that disrupt a cohesive meaning of orchestrated performances with unpredictable consequences. In his famous \textit{Rabelais and His World}, Bakhtin, the main theorist I use here to expand on Muharram, sets out to conceptualize the carnivalesque not just in the mere display of carnival activities, but in the breaking up of the status quo and the construction of non-official publics as the “extracarnival life” that undermines all that is regarded as normal.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{108} K. Babayan, \textit{Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs}, 178–79.

\textsuperscript{109} Eudaimonistic judgment is the kind of affective opinion that views others as part of a person’s immediate sense of concern, see M. C. Nussbaum, \textit{Upheavals of Thought} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 197–353. For the relationship between emotions and dialogic, see E. Weigand, ed., \textit{Emotion in Dialogic Interaction: Advances in the Complex} (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004).


\textsuperscript{111} M. Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World}, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11. The carnivalesque is hardly about a mere joyful and affirmative parody of reality. As Dostoevsky’s novels of corruption, crime, and inner cynicism reveal, carnival is about the darkness of inversion of reality, a festivity of the coarse violence and the entropy of life. Moreover, it is perhaps Bakhtin’s philosophical reading of carnival as a social process that has led a number of Bakhtinian scholars to conclude that his studies are hardly based on “sustained historical research.” C. Brandist,
Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque emphasizes how free play of behaviors prevails with the rejection of one’s own institutionalized self in the context of established hierarchies of social relations. In the medium of masks, customs, cross-dressing, and performances of inversion, the self is transfigured as self-representations take on fantastic, at times bizarre, expressions of agency that, in so many complex ways, dissolve a clear-cut process of symbolic expression in terms of a display of social status or belief in established dogmas of faith and those who advocate them. The mask becomes the very performance of ambivalence: while certain representational displays produce images of social order or moral norms sanctioned by the ruling groups, they can also negate uniformity in the unabashed show of masquerade practices. The masquerade process creates liminalities of self and the Other in ways that suspend identity and, accordingly, accessibility to intentions, motives, and desires.112 Yet the meanings of symbols get lost, not because of how they are expressed, but because of the indeterminate and flexible ways in which they are understood by the ritual participants, whose perceptions fracture and blend with variations of behaviors that exceed the limits of ordinary action, even in the course of an orchestrated ritual process.

The complex relationship between carnivalesque and ritual action implies a number of other claims. First, it considers ritual as a distinct kind of social practice that involves occasions or instances of chaos, though at times orchestrated in a way as to bring about social conformity once the ritual events end in momentous and distinctive ways. The carnivalesque element brings together groups and individuals who are “normally kept separate and create specific times and spaces where social differences are either laid aside or reversed for a more embracing experience of community.”113 Instead of confirming power, elite or others, carnivalesque shapes passive and active stages for actions that challenge the social world in subtle and, at times, obvious ways by turning upside-down and inside-out an elaborate order of meaning and norms.

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Second, norms break down into meaningless activities in the course of dramas of interactive misrule by dislodging the intended and specific uses and meanings of ritual events as orchestrated and performed by those who seek to allocate a specific purpose to the performances at a given public space. The carnivalesque in ritual is, then, about the frenzied fermentation between festive, sensuous vitality and misbehaviors of corporeal and spectacle dispositions that limit the rigid official culture that aims to impose an orchestrated rhythmic pattern over how people behave in the ritualization of action. In other words, norms of meaning and set values become incessantly interrupted as a result of the plurality of voices, erratic behaviors, and playful moments that tend to establish unusual relationships among the participants who are released from the shackles of their normative senses of order and stability. Hierarchies of self (in relation to others) and society (in relation to those who maintain authority) collapse, albeit temporarily, with the disruption of received commonsensical perceptions and accepted viewpoints.

Third, the bodily element plays a crucial role in this celebrative process, as ritual experience moves away from being a simple expression of an abstract sacred ideal, such as salvation. In a ritual event, the bodies of individuals intermingle in a collective jumble of bellies, breasts, genitalia, mouths, spit, and blood, which reveal the grotesque experience of “an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life.” The grotesque body, then, functions not as a medium of expressing ideas or beliefs, but “as a sign of the materialization of openness,” a social field of disclosure with the display of bodily fluids and human organisms.

114 Here by “meaningless” I do not mean that meaning does not play a role in the carnival features of rituality, but that meaning is always limited to the “potential of absence, negation or irrelevance.” M. Engelke and M. Tomlinson, eds., The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 23. That is, rituals always entail the possibility for mistakes, misplaced motivations, misunderstandings and failures of purposeful action that could render an action “meaningless.”

115 M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 423.

116 So Bakhtin famously writes, “In the world of carnival the awareness of the people’s immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative.” Ibid., 256.

117 Ibid., 48.

Yet the grotesque challenges what ritualization, in its officiated form, aims to achieve: permanence. The incompleteness of the body as a generative source of action and an organism that opens up the self to the world and others through flesh and fluids, brings human activity closer to what Bakhtin describes as the “earthy” experience of “heterogeneous elements of reality,” debasing and bringing down to earth with its emphasis on the corporeality of existence.\textsuperscript{119} While representational symbolism within the ritual process fades and the line between performers and spectators collapses, grotesque experience becomes the essential (inter)subjective marker of renewal, a new birth, implicit within the decadence, deformation, and degradation of life. This ambivalence is the primary guiding logic of grotesque experience. It stresses regeneration through the sensual, such as nudity, the belly, or procreative genital organs, and defilement, such as urine or excrement. “To degrade an object,” he explains, “does not imply merely hurling into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth takes place.”\textsuperscript{120} The grotesque is about constant transfiguration of self, “always conceiving” while constantly dying into a reality made flesh.

Muharram is clearly not the Rabelaisian carnival described by Bakhtin, and, indeed, many of Bakhtin’s arguments about parodies of the carnival process may appear to defy the symbolism and performative spectacles of Shi‘i mourning ceremonies. However, a careful application of Bakhtin’s social theory can bring to light certain carnivalesque themes embedded within Muharram mourning rites. Frank Korom underlines these carnivalesque features in his seminal study of Trinidadian forms of Muharram observations. In his study, Korom shows that Muharram mourning processions, especially in South Asia, are entangled with carnivalesque ambience of masquerade, song, dance, play, and game.\textsuperscript{121} In the Caribbean context, where the processions include Hindu, Sunni, and African-Trinidadian cultural traits, the carnivalesque theme plays a more prominent role in local Muharram performances. Known as Hosay, subversive processes of festive type are displayed in the form of drum processions, float

\textsuperscript{119} Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World}, 41.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{121} See F. J. Korom, \textit{Hosay Trinidad}, especially 83–96.
parades, martial dance, and even riots against the local authorities. As inclusive inter-ethnic processions, Hosay presents a site of revelry that challenges the official culture of colonial racism.

Similarly, in his study of Muharram in Fiji, Sudesh Mishra has shown that mourning rituals, known as Holi and Tazia festivals, served as “interruptive” moments that challenged the industrial plantation social life of the migrant Indians in the late nineteenth and first-half of the twentieth centuries. Muharram practices, he argues, “were not simply appealing to some intangible transcendent world that lessened the inequities and miseries of plantation life (although this may have constituted an epiphenomenon); rather, they were performing a counter-social formation which, since it was short-lived, epitomized the potential for a more enduring arrangement along the same lines.”

The escapist element that made the festivals so popular among the Fiji Indians was precisely what made the rituals essentially transgressive, forcing colonial authorities to ban the ceremonies in 1930. That is, following Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, the “frivolous revelry” of the festivals in the holiday period became “enacted utopian” sites of change, wherein compromised “of that which was yet to come, of a community yet to form.” In a way challenging those who argue that festival time signals a period of mere escape or a “safety valve” to ultimately strengthen the status quo, Mishra’s groundbreaking study describes Muharram as a social practice of carnival experience. Such a description of Muharram underscores the ways the rituals undermine social hierarchies through popular expressions of misrule that “rarely distinguished between the drunk and the devotee.”

On a transregional scale, Muharram involves the drama of inversion, blurring the normative boundaries that separate mind and body. The interplay between death and life presents the most significant symbolic carnivalesque theme in Muharram ritualization, with its emphasis on

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122 Korom describes the Hosay riots in 1884 as the most political manifestation of Muharram rituals in the Caribbean context.
124 For a similar account of anti-colonial features of Muharram practices among Indian migrants, see J. D. Kelly, “From Holi to Diwali in Fiji: An Essay on Ritual and History,” Man 23 (1), 1988: 40–55.
125 Ibid., 88.
126 Ibid., 90.
the martyrdom of a saintly figure whose death recalls a renewal of life in the course of bodily ritual activities. Although the expression and reenactment of symbols vary considerably in different historical and social settings, the intense awareness of the open-ended quality of life symbolized in the act of martyrdom as well as the inseparability of deformation and regeneration, heightens a sense of inversion of reality that can make Muharram an event of carnivalesque depth. Recalling here Foucault’s account of Muharram as a way of moving “toward death in the intoxication of sacrifice,” in the commemoration of martyrdom, living through death becomes a new reality and, in dying, life becomes possible.\(^\text{127}\) This ambivalence guides various types of Muharram ritual strategies designed to underscore the festive triumph of regeneration in the grotesque experience of mourning. The festive underscores the “inverted social order of the comic performance” with the production of an alternative view of life in which enactments of an imagined past inform the possibility of dramatic intrusion on the boundaries of status quo.\(^\text{128}\) Muharram, especially in its aesthetic form of ta’ziyeh, can therefore be described as a set of destabilizing acts that are, in the words of Dabashi, “never totally under the control and authority of its invocation of an historical memory.”\(^\text{129}\)

On the performative level, Muharram also includes the “living” drama of upside-down practices: the grotesque experience of bodily interactions, such as group performances of self-flagellation, and the disruption of hierarchies of time and space. The particular case of self-flagellation, which has been mostly frowned upon by religious authorities, signifies a grotesque act of bodily disclosure that opens up an individual and a community to new possibilities of being in the world. Like pregnancy, childbirth, and dying, the terror of corporeal rupture in the act of self-mutilation carries the promise of a new life that is beyond the normal, transgressing established boundaries of bodies and selves that normally would guide a person to think of life in a

\(^\text{127}\) M. Foucault, “The Revolt in Iran Spreads on Cassette Tapes,” 216.
\(^\text{128}\) W. Beeman, Culture, Performance and Communication in Iran, 111.
\(^\text{129}\) H. Dabashi, “Ta’ziyeh as Theater of Protest,” The Drama Review 49, no. 4, (2005): 92 and 95. This “destabilizing” feature is also pronounced in the course of ta’ziyeh performances in the form of goriz or digression. Goriz serves as a dramatic device that interrupts the flow of the core-narrative of dramatic performances, which allows the drama to transcend beyond time-space limitations and turn the everyday into a sublime event of extraordinary significance.
stable way. The transfiguration of the body in the grotesque practice of self-mortification (e.g., crying, wailing, chest-beating, knife cutting, etc.) plays a critical carnivalesque role in Muharram’s ensemble performative process.

Yet the carnivalesque in Muharram is not entirely about the body but also involves consciousness. In his remarks on folk humor and carnival life, Bakhtin writes, “Actually the grotesque liberates man from all the forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept of the world.”130 He continues, “The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities.”131 The basic grotesque theme in carnivalesque is the raw awareness of something that is other than the status quo, a defiance of the ordinary that generates a new way of looking at self and reality. This “raw awareness” or what Bakhtin refers to in a non-Freudian sense as the id is a transgressive spirit that liberates the mind from all that is “dark and terrifying,” all that limits human action, all that is about conformity.132 In the moment of liberation, consciousness undergoes a trauma of carnival freedom, a moment of “festive madness” that enables perception to exceed its own limits.133

In his highly original study, Shi’ism, Dabashi identifies Muharram consciousness in the trauma caused by the killing of Husayn, with redemption over his death as an impossible endeavor for the devotee to attain in ordinary life. From a Freudian perspective, Dabashi shows how at the heart of Shi’ism lies a negation, a defiance of the way history betrayed Husayn, the son of Ali, the father figure, and how reenacting or reliving his death can only prolong the desire for his long absence, marking a “mimetic suspension” in which reality becomes always a signifier of transgression.134 The connection between Bakhtin’s notion of “festive madness” and Dabashi’s “mimetic suspension” is precisely the impossibility of normality in which Karbala as a “complex,” and not a “paradigm,” signifies a disjoint space of extraordinary

130 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 49.
131 Ibid., 49.
132 Ibid., 47.
133 Ibid., 39.
134 See Dabashi, Shi’ism, 73–100.
traumatic experience, dislodging consciousness from all forms of limitation, including the tyranny of discourse.\textsuperscript{135}

By and large, an attempt to work out a Bakhtinian reading of Muharram would require the basic acknowledgment of just how an account of carnival stimulated activities, such as festive penitent performances or dramatic spectacles of mourning processions, can indeed transform our interpretive approaches and conceptual formations in the study of Muharram ritualization.\textsuperscript{136} As Korom correctly argues, Muharram involves a “festive and celebratory air engulfing the phenomenon of Muharram performances that demands our attention.”\textsuperscript{137} So, while I acknowledge that soteriology plays a critical role in Muharram, a carnivalesque account would also recognize the way discourses of redemption or narratives of martyrdom can, ironically, operate to undermine the very ideals of salvation they seek to achieve through various transgressive strategies like masked costumes, cross-gender role playing, or festive consumption of blessed meals, by which the penitents become carnivalers in the course of the rituals. Seen in this way, redemption indeed becomes an event of the carnivalesque.\textsuperscript{138}

The carnivalesque in Muharram is therefore marked by interruptive performance and symbolism: misrule motifs and images that disrupt a cohesive meaning of action with unpredictable consequences. In a way, moving away from a praxis approach, a carnivalesque conception

\textsuperscript{135} Dabashi’s notion of “Karbala complex,” therefore, offers an alternative theory of Muharram rituality, contra to Fischer’s “Karbala paradigm”. The key difference between these two concepts is the way Dabashi underlines the significance of “Karbala” in terms of an inclusive socio-psychological process (or event) and not merely as a narrative framework through which action takes place.

\textsuperscript{136} I take note of this carnivalesque rituality in reference to Jack Goody’s seminal essay on the definition of ritual and religion. It is “impossible,” he writes, “to escape from the fact that the category magico-religious acts and beliefs can be defined only by the observer and that attempts to see either this or the sacred-profane dichotomy as a universal part of the actor’s perception of his situation are misleading.” J. Goody, “Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem,” \textit{The British Journal of Sociology} 12 (1961): 160. Goody’s insistence on acknowledging the limitation of the concept of religion and ritual is important since it permits us to see how the terms are formed and institutionalized with reference to the development of the researcher’s own folk-categories.

\textsuperscript{137} F. J. Korom, \textit{Hosay Trinidad}, 49.

\textsuperscript{138} Here, one can also suggest that the Karbala paradigm itself is a carnivalesque discourse of transgression, a critical point that could in fact redefine the very concept of redemption through reinterpretation of time and space. For a transgressive conception of the Karbala paradigm with references to the carnivalesque aspects of ta‘ziyeh, see J. Afary and K. B. Anderson, \textit{Foucault and the Iranian Revolution}, 46–49.
of Muharram would ultimately reveal how practices can cancel themselves out rather than what they can achieve in particular circumstances. This is what I will attempt to do in Chapter Six, where I examine various Muharram expressions of carnivalesque practices in forming non-official public spaces of interaction. In light of the relationship between ritual public and carnival practice, I now turn to the concept of the public sphere. My aim in the next chapter is to bring together the public in ritual and the ritual in the public so as to conceptualize the public sphere in carnivalesque terms.
CHAPTER TWO

THE CARNIVALESQUE PUBLIC: BEYOND HABERMAS

In an address to Louis XVI in 1788, months before the French Revolution, Simon-Nicholas Henri Linguet (1736–94), a royalist with an ardent anti-parliamentarian sentiment, would write the following remarks to the king of France: “Your majesty should not allow himself to be alarmed or disheartened by this phantom of PUBLIC OPINION so artificially displayed on all the standards of confederations that league together against his rights. No, sire, the true public opinion is not against you, nor against your authority.”¹ In this statement, Linguet’s strong opposition to the anti-royalist rhetoric of “public opinion” articulates an ambiguous expression that identifies the public as an impalpable reality, approaching something of a ghostly appearance. While the notion of “public opinion” evokes a certain kind of authority, its reality is described by Linguet as a contested discourse, an unstable yet simulated form of authority. The phantom-like public is articulated and made audible, textualized and yet challenged in the discursive domain of politics, where ideas of the concept of common good are evoked and fought for against state power.

As an active participant in the same “phantom” public that largely contributed to a conservative backlash against the republican revolutionary forces, Linguet saw such “public opinion” to be largely responsible for the transformation of a political culture of the ancien régime, which later gave rise to the democratic discourse of civic power in nineteenth-century Western Europe. But Linguet also finds the key to the theatricality of the new politics as conflictual. The discourse of “public opinion” as it first arose in the eighteenth century served as an

¹ Quoted in K. M. Baker, Inventing the French Revolution (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 185. As Baker explains, Linguet, a journalist and the most passionate adversary of parliament, launched a powerful attack against the decision to restore the convocation of the 1614 Estates General in September of 1788. Linguet feared the excessive power of the parliament and its violation of rules in the desire to imitate the English experience of political dissent. In this statement, Linguet expresses his concern for the legitimization of abuse, tyranny, and “excesses” by the parliament in the name of an elusive “public opinion.”
imaginary social authority for political communication and symbolic contestation outside the institutional boundaries of state authority. In the context of eighteenth-century France, “opinion” in the public served as reference to support of freedom of the press or, in the words of Baker, a “political invention” that appealed to an audience “beyond as a way of reformulating institutional claims that could no longer be negotiated within the traditional political language.” In part because of a developing market society with literacy and printing leading the way toward the formation of a national culture, the perceived collective judgment helped mediate between state and society, shaping a sphere of discursive interaction in the form of collective opinion that laid claim to authority and ways to contest it. In one respect, the discursive reference to the common good and the development of the civic-liberal conception of autonomy of the self and the public sphere, which collective opinion comes to represent, serves as both the foundation and the process through which a public of distinct political identity contra state power becomes realized.

Particularly from the eighteenth century onwards, a key factor in the rise of revolutionary political discourse, largely wrought by printing and the formation of new literary and scientific circles between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had to do with the late Enlightenment reinvention of the “Oriental despotism” thesis, which in anti-royalist discourse identified absolutist rule as an illegitimate entity to be challenged. In many ways, for revolutionary France and

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3 As K. M. Baker argues in Inventing the French Revolution, the political culture of revolutionary France involved linguistic and rhetorical means through which individuals, like Linguet, were able to make innovative claims to authority in the idiom of “public opinion” and, as a result, make politics dependent on a symbolic discursive domain where political interaction took place. Within a matrix of symbolic discursive practices, claims about “public opinion” were made, articulated, contested, interpreted, and put into practice in diverse meaningful and conflictual contexts.

4 See M. Curtis, Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India. By “late Enlightenment” I am referring to the intellectual tradition of the Encyclopedia and the philosophies in the latter-half of the
in close relation to the “Continental variation” or the English model of the public sphere contra a modernizing state, it was the “Orient,” as depicted in early modern literary culture, especially in travel reports, that provided an imaginary reference point for inventing a high European modernity. Together with a conception of higher subjectivity that would be sharply contrasted with an “Oriental” world, exclusion of an Other, either internal (e.g., women, blacks, etc.) or external (e.g., Gypsies, Jews, Persians, Turks, etc.), played a critical role in the formation of modern (European) identity. So, for revolutionary figures like Comte de Mirabeau (1749–91), the “Sultan” became an operative term for the Orient to describe royalists like Linguet in order to exclude them from the emerging Enlightened European modernity. While the rationalist conception of public action in the idiom of “public opinion” belonged to a radical political discourse, European modernity, partly shaped through the discourse of democracy, was primarily informed by a rigid distinction between self and Other, “Europe” and the “Orient,” where “all is state and no society.”

In this chapter I argue that the modern notion of “public sphere,” and, as John Keane would describe, its “partner” terms like “public opinion,” “public interest” or “common good,” should also be viewed as a type of discourse that combines an intricate set of rhetorical strategies that bring together understandings of self, Other, and reality within socio-historical network relations and a set of power relations across regions and histories. So like Muharram, I also view “public

eighteenth century. Early Enlightenment refers to a “radical” period of scientific and intellectual upheaval that was initiated by figures like Baruch Spinoza and Giovanni Battista Vico. See J. I. Israel, Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750.


6 When Linguet published a number of pamphlets against Mirabeau in the 1790s, the French revolutionary described Linguet as pompous and a defender of the Sultan. Linguet was guillotined in 1794.


8 My position here is close to D. Zaret’s The Origins of Democratic Culture, where he locates the birth of democratic discourse with the rise of print culture in seventeenth-century England. Zaret explores the emancipatory consequences of print communication in changing secrecy into open discourse as politics of public expression. Since the historical origin of public sphere lies in advancements made in technology, and not Enlightenment philosophical discourses, for Zaret “public opinion” takes up
sphere” as a construct. But my account does not deny the public its “empirical” or sociological dynamics. A constructivist argument of this type assumes that the “public” is imagined and yet very real, fluid in societal processes and yet tied with discursive patterns that tend to reify the concept into a self-evident entity, at times manifested in rhetorical strategies for claims over the public.9 As both hidden and visible sites of social relations, the proposed conception of public sphere is drawn on cognitive frames of communication through which individuals articulate, recollect, reenact, and perform in diverse settings to shape fields of interaction where “disagreements, conflicts, and even shadow positions don’t exclude the emergence of a dialogical space.”10

The Bakhtinian notion of “dialogical space” is an indicator of irreducible fluid-like fields of interaction, articulating phantoms of authorities abounding in abstract subtleties that emerge from shifting sociohistorical trajectories that serve both as conditions and operatives in the coming into existence of spheres of publicity.11 As the term dialogical signifies, the public can be recognized as sites of competing and uneven “voices” of groups or network ties to which individuals belong from different cultural and social backgrounds.12

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9 Consider Pablo Piccato’s original study of the Mexican public sphere and the complex ways in which the discourse of honor as representative of public opinion helped to demarcate the limits of political action and public participation in mid-to-late nineteenth century Mexico. P. Piccato, The Tyranny of Opinion: Honor in the Construction of the Mexican Public Sphere (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).


12 It is in regards to the relationship between culture and subjectivity of “voice” that an account of public sphere cannot be separated from the question of identity. See also E. Ikegami, Bonds of Civility, 52.
heteroglossia tends to deny the existence of a single meaning or privileged voice in the public domain. As in the marketplace or the public square, the language of monological authority and the social order it promotes is constantly challenged by carnivalesque strategies of various manifestations, including irony, theatrics of ambiguity, symbolic degradation, metaphorical language, comical inversions, or grotesque ritual practices. The dialogical is inherently conflictual.

In this fractured sense, the public sphere is understood as nested in socially framed and performed relational processes. These enunciations contribute to institutionalized and non-institutionalized modes of discursive and non-discursive interactions, wherein conflicts of self and other representations take place in everyday domains of public life. Thus at one level the sphere of the public designates an interactive forum wherein people with and without power render action by referring to normative claims to imagined public authority (i.e., “public opinion”). At another level, these forums designate specific kinds of interactive spaces wherein “the plurality of competing publics” takes place, led by a variety of groups identified by class, ethnicity, gender, tribe, religious affiliation, sexual orientation or other subaltern status.

As with the previous chapter on the conceptualization of ritual, part of my ambition here is to critically sketch out certain discourses that categorically identify the public sphere as an inherently normative domain of expression, which, I contend, inhibit its boundary-form to something of an idealized and disembodied site of “rational-critical” communication between speaking actors. Here, I consider Habermas’s account of the public sphere, identified here as the critical-rationalist position, the focal point of my critical attention. This is so since his normative approach best represents, and to a certain extent, dominates the critical points of contention I plan to raise in this study. This,

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14 For a study of “competing publics,” see Robbins, The Phantom Public Sphere. The notion of “subaltern status” is made in reference to Nancy Fraser’s claim that the public sphere is made up equally of nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing publics that engage in the contestation of an official public sphere, hegemonically claiming to be the public. Such a pluralistic approach is also adopted in this book, while extending it to the non-Western socio-historical trajectories of publicity. See N. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere (Baskerville: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), 108–42.
I hope, will lead me to envision an alternative conception of public in which ritual would play a more integral role.

Broadly speaking, my critical take on the Habermasian-inspired image of the public sphere is meant to question certain presuppositions that uncritically employ the civic-republican model as the yardstick for assessing every other formation of the public sphere in diverse civilizational and regional settings. My objective here is not to offer a comprehensive critique of the rationalist approach, which would be a major challenge to explain in one chapter, but to specifically focus on various problems in the normative model of public sphere that tends to be regarded as the standard way of conceptualizing the term. By this, I should add, I do not want to diminish the significance of Habermas’s contribution to the discourse of public sphere; in fact, like Nancy Fraser, I concede that his work has “genuine critical potential” for social action. My main goal here is only to highlight the blind-spots of a normative approach and stress the failure in the limitations of (mono) rationalist assumptions that render the public as disembodied and formal units of interaction that reduce interaction to mere speech communication of argumentative type.

Similar to my objection to the discourse of the Karbala paradigm discussed in the previous chapter, the main problem lies here in the overemphasis on speech as a privileged type of communication, a sort of “tyranny of discourse” that limits the interactive spaces between individuals to a linguistic regime of an overarching public. In contrast, I draw upon the Bakhtinian notion of carnivalesque to underline the fractured nature of shifting public domains of everyday life, which are always marked by conflictual processes as shifting sites of interactions wherein exchange (dialogue and emotive interaction) takes place. In light of the mentioned emotive interactivity, I want to underline the significance of dialogical and embodied features of spheres of publicness, largely manifest in various social spaces that also include

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15 For the most part, I do not wish to provide a thorough study of Habermas’s entire (earlier and later) work, but merely underscore certain problematic groundings of discourse of the public sphere that can help us develop an understanding of the specific case of Muharram ritual as a forum of public with distinct communicative markers.

16 N. Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 123.

ritual. By focusing on Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque public, which revolves around the non-normative processes of interaction, the public comprises competing “voices” that break social interaction down into a myriad of modes of communication grounded in everyday life with a “loophole left open” for alternate meaningful worlds. The concept of carnivalesque public acknowledges the existence of counter-public, wherein polyphonic activities (i.e., multiple voices, representational markers, aesthetic expressions) are displayed and performed in the context of unstable and disjointed cognitive frameworks of interaction.

The present chapter is divided into two sections. In the first part, I examine the four interrelating theoretical aspects that I find most problematic and relevant to our discussion on Habermas’s notion of public sphere: (i) reflexivity, (ii) corporeality, (iii) transiency, and, finally, (iv) transparency. In the last chapter, these four dimensions will play a crucial role in my conceptualization of Muharram ritual culture as a type of carnivalesque public and a dialogical space of inter-publicity. In the second (shorter) section, my focus shifts to a historical conception of public sphere. There, I will consider the possibility of “Muslim public spheres” in such a way as to problematize Habermas’s mono-centric (or Eurocentric) historical account of public sphere, and expand on the transcultural public sphere as an interactive domain of contact zones, whereby public cultures come into contact with subaltern and official ones, forming conflictual though overlapping spheres of inter-publicities.

Critique of the “Critical-Rational” Public Sphere

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was more than a political event, but an eruption of a new intellectual current marked by intense discussions over visions of a post-Communist future. With the dawn of the Leninist-Marxist utopian project, however, the (neo) liberal ideology of market triumphalism emerged to claim primacy over the ideal model of global politics. The 1992 publication of The End of History and the Last Man by Francis Fukuyama articulated the most

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18 M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 233.
19 The present critique will only focus on two of his most important books: The Theory of Communicative Action and The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, though I will make reference to his other works as well.
sophisticated defense of the triumph of Western liberal democracy, as its perceived universalization signaled the end of humanity’s search for utopian models of governance. The doctrine of liberal-individualism, which historically arose out of the ashes of the English Civil War (1642–1651), seemed to have reached its logical conclusion; that is, in the words of Alan Wolfe, “the answer for which modernity is the question.”

Yet controversy over what should be the universal mode of politics in a post-Cold War era also led to new accounts of emerging democracies, especially in countries where authoritarianism continued to be present despite institutional transition to democratic governance. For most of the 1990s, the key to the popularization of democratic theory was the recovery of the notion of “civil society,” though first revived in the opposition within the Soviet bloc, which acknowledged the core relationship between state and society in a set of intermediate groups that mediated between private individuals and the state. Though the discourse of civil society has been part of the intellectual tradition of European societies since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, largely initiated by thinkers like John Locke and later in Scotland by Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, the new interest in civic politics came to be conflated with the discourse of free public interaction of private citizens who seek to advance their interests in an autonomous layer of society apart from economic and state structures. For the most part,

21 This is a reference to increasing democratization of a number of East European countries in the aftermath of the breakdown of the Soviet Union.
the late twentieth-century relative consensus of the term “civil society” as a realm of freedom overlapped with the cultural and institutionally undifferentiated concept of the “public sphere” in ways that the two came to be seen as inseparable. However, unlike Lingue't’s public in revolutionary France, the post-Communist conceptions of the public sphere appeared to be less phantom-like, primarily identified, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, as political arenas that neither depend upon nor are governed by the state. These arenas were historically found in eighteenth-century England and France, and later all major Western nations, where historically liberal democracy arose, challenged by the advent of Communism, and eventually revived with the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

The 1989 English translation of Habermas’s postdoctoral thesis, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, written in the late 1950s and published in 1962, introduced a new conception of democratic politics in the Anglo-American intellectual context, which anticipated many of the debates that arose after the collapse of Soviet Communism. As an historical-sociological study of social changes in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain, France, and Germany, the book offers the most sophisticated elaboration and an alternative reconstruction of liberal democracy that emphasizes the importance of cultivating rational discussion as a civic process through which consensus can be reached on matters of common good. In the tradition

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25 Historically speaking, the term was first used by the democratic opposition within the Soviet bloc.

26 While Habermas was known for his other, later works in English, this early work was relatively unknown in the Anglophone context.

27 The claim “reconstruction of liberal democracy” underscores that Habermas’s “deliberative democracy” too includes strong elements of liberalism. In contrast to classical civic-republicans like Rousseau, Habermas takes into account the liberal principle of the constitutional state as an institutional setting whereby communicative processes of democratic opinion as public sphere can be realized. So, as Armando Salvatore correctly notes, the work of Habermas “represents the leading approach to the public sphere within the liberal tradition at large.” A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 6.
chapter two

of critical theory of the Frankfurt School, though heterodox in many ways for its use of liberal thought, Habermas’s 1960s public sphere as a public domain (Öffentlichkeit) of debate about public affairs not only identified a civic ideal of discursive interaction as an essential feature of democratic rule, but also as a means through which civil society can find expression through quality of discursive interaction in the extent of civic participation. Habermas, who was primarily responding to the problems of European welfare states and economic expansion of Germany’s postwar period, identified the public sphere as a normative undertaking for dynamic debate whereby “private members” of a political community, through the use of free/uncoerced critical-rational means, engage with one another for a pragmatic accord. This communicative realm of rational publicity specifies a sphere wherein a relatively autonomous space of critical sociability is institutionalized and exercised on a daily basis. For Habermas, the public sphere, as it historically arose with the golden age of bourgeois civil society in Western nations between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, eventually, came to erode post-World War II with the rise of welfare democracies, also represents a civic space wherein individuals make communication of argumentative dialogue and language the basis of public life.

By and large, the 1989 translation of the book forged ahead in a discourse of publicity that deeply influenced the debate over democratic politics. To many who sought an alternative vision of post-Communist politics, especially in eastern European and Latin American countries, a “critical-rational” concept of democratic rule defied the possessive individualistic ideology of neo-liberal politics of the 1990s. Largely a trend associated with Lockean-liberalism, such individualism came to increasingly identify the monopolistic grip of capitalistic

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28 According to Habermas, the public sphere is a product of eighteenth-century British and French bourgeois societies, which initiated a sphere whereby “private people” came together to form a domain of public discussion for arriving at a consensus for political cohesion. Such domains constitute, Habermas argues, the public that had long since grown out of early institutions like “the coffee houses, salons, and Tischgesellschaften and was now held together through the medium of the press and its professional criticism. They formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself.” J. Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, 51. I will expand on the history of public sphere in the next section of this chapter.
rationalization bent on crushing “public opinion” to a mere advertisement marker.\textsuperscript{29} In the post-World War II period, likewise, the rise of mass cultural consumption brought a gloomy vision of public life to the minds of many critical thinkers. Commercialization of shared social life and commoditization of the mass media was perceived to have turned the public into a mere market of consumption rather than action or contemplation. In many ways, Habermas’s 1960s concept of public sphere echoed the works of Karl Jaspers’s \textit{Philosophy is for Everyman} (1960) and Hannah Arendt’s \textit{Human Condition} (1958), both of whom argued in favor of public life as a social practice of communication that redefines the human condition as an intimate community of speakers rather than individualistic consumers as an aggregation of self-interested actors.\textsuperscript{30} But \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere} also echoed the 1980s and 1990s concern about how commodity-oriented media had driven the public into a mere tool of manipulation by enmeshing public life into economic and state structures. The work of John Keane, \textit{Public Life and Late Capitalism} (1984), for example, articulated this growing concern by reflecting on German thinkers who sought to safeguard the public from profit-driven advertising institutions.\textsuperscript{31} The 1990 work of Nicholas Garnham, \textit{Capitalism and Communication}, however, made the first explicit defense of Habermas’s normative ideal of public sphere by calling for public service broadcasting as a way to ensure a domain of free and equal interaction between citizens.\textsuperscript{32}

In a historical sense, in the 1960s and 1970s \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere} was largely read in German-speaking academic circles for its original diagnosis of post-World War II Germany

\textsuperscript{29} The term “possessive individualism” was coined by Crawford Brough Macpherson, who critically reinterpreted classical liberal thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in advocating a distinct kind of individualism that reduces a person to a commodity in the open market of exchange. See C. B. Macpherson, \textit{The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke}, (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1964).


and the degeneration of the bourgeois public sphere. However, the 1989 English translation of the book unleashed a major debate over the constitution and formation of the public sphere and its liberating potential, together with its criteria of rationality or universality of its historical trajectory. The 1992 volume, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun and based on a 1989 conference on the occasion of the English publication of his book, and Bruce Robin’s edited essays in *The Phantom Public Sphere* (1993) expressed the most sophisticated critical study of Habermas’s model of public sphere up to that period. These critical essays provided intriguing studies of Habermas’s failure to acknowledge the complexity of the public sphere on both its historical and theoretical levels. The attacks came from various groups. From feminists (e.g., Nancy Fraser, Mary P. Ryan) to historians (e.g., David Zaret, Lloyd Kramer), Habermas’s idealized version of the bourgeois public sphere came into question as his defense of the rational-critical public appeared to reflect the capitalistic drive toward exclusionary politics, together with the denial of contestation and fragmentation. For the most part, such objections held potential for an alternative image of the public sphere, which also came to indicate the growing multiplicity of approaches on public sphere theory discourse. In what follows I will briefly outline Habermas’s theoretical approach, in both his early and later works, and, accordingly, underscore those critical points that best outline the notion of public rituality as a feature of the public sphere.

Broadly speaking, Habermas’s strategy in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and his later works like his massive two-volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), is to relate modernity as a European-originated project to its historical foundations in the idea of the public sphere of rationality. Habermas’s take on the Enlightenment thesis of the “disenchantment” of the world in

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34 C. Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Baskerville: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), viii. This was not the first critical study of Habermas. In 1986, Seyla Benhabib wrote one of the earliest critical accounts of Habermas in English. See S. Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). In the German context, earlier in the 1970s, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge provided the most elaborate critical study of Habermas’s work.
the emancipation of human institutions and habits of conduct from overarching metaphysical worldviews characteristically reflects an emphasis on critical communication as the standard basis for public reason in the modern era. Drawing from Jean Piaget, George H. Mead, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Weber’s discussions of the rationalization of worldviews, “reason,” according to Habermas, maintains a central role in the making of humanity in the developmental sense of process from “mythic” through “religious,” and, finally, “enlightened” cognition in the form of the unfolding progress of potential reason towards a higher level of critical maturity.\(^{35}\) Reason is tied to history, and in time it matures.

Against positivistic-utilitarianism’s notion of reason as a relationship between means and ends, Habermas’s theory of rationality, especially in its latter form, seeks to uncover how human action operates in close relation with argumentative speech that shapes common values and consented norms. Action, he argues, is essentially communicative between those “who seek to reach an understanding about their action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement.”\(^{36}\) Habermas conceptualizes this coordination of action in terms of a socio-cognitive theory of “communicative rationality” built on a dualistic model of reason: instrumental and communicative rationalities. Whereas instrumental reason refers to manipulating patterns of technological development; values depend on communicative reason, generating consensus, which constitutes “the lifeworld” as lived knowledge we require in order to create social relations.\(^{37}\) Reason is a double-edged sword and yet it remains in unison

\(^{35}\) Space precludes me from elaborating on the influence of pragmatism, and in particular Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, in Habermas’s theoretical approach. My objective here is limited to showing Habermas’s monocentric conception of rationality. I should note that, moving away from a Marxist-Hegelian approach, in his later work Habermas rejects the notion of a single subject of humanity. Nevertheless, he does see historical processes playing a critical role in the way humans as individual actors in various societal contexts attain cognitive and moral progress. For an account of Habermas’s historical notion of cognitive evolution, see H. Joas and W. Knöbl, Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 222–25.


\(^{37}\) Habermas defines the lifeworld as: “an unproblematic shared horizon defining what is the case, what should be done and how authentic expressions and works of art are to be assessed.” S. K. White, The Recent Work of Jürgen Habermas: Reason, Justice and Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 105. In other terms,
in the way it relates to the world and the human actor in question. The assumption here revolves around the unity of procedural reason in the form of critical-argumentative action that takes place in an “ideal speech situation,” where each participant seeking to undertake discursive interaction must be oriented to idealized presuppositions.\textsuperscript{38}

In this regard, a discursive “situation” becomes possible as individuals come into contact and understand the meaning of an expressed symbol on the basis of reciprocal recognition. Habermas proposes this as a guiding, rational, interactive ideal among individuals in the public domain, occurring once a consensus oriented argumentative communication maintains the “identity of meanings, the foundation of every communication,” that is, “based on intersubjectively valid rules.”\textsuperscript{39} In Habermas’s later works, communicative acts are ruled by norms that provide understanding and establish agreement. This he refers to as the inherent “telos of human speech.”\textsuperscript{40} For communicative reasons, it involves an evolutionary process that ultimately maintains the potential for universality since it exposes distorted communication in expecting critical analysis in diverse social settings; in other words, it provides a universal framework in which reason becomes a communicative event. The dynamics of rational discourse and symbolic interaction also provide normative resources that can be used for both practical and theoretical purposes. This notion of publicity is dynamic since in order for a public opinion to be formed it must operate in the sole medium of “discussion,” which “requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it.”\textsuperscript{41} The print media in this regard serves as the prime communicative medium of the public sphere, “mediating between society and state to which the

\textsuperscript{38} In his later works, Habermas expressed reservations about the practicality of the ideal speech situation. See J. Habermas, “Reply to My Critics,” Habermas: Critical Debates, ed. J. Thompson and D. Held (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1982), 219–83.


\textsuperscript{40} Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, 287.

public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion accords with the principle of the public sphere.”

The implication of this dichotomizing understanding of reason is crucial to our initial discussion as it spotlights Habermas’s distinct notion of rationality in identifying the public as a formalistic sphere of speech communication. Much that can be attributed to this conception of public sphere revolves around a “hyperrational” discourse of interaction that perforce denies the creative contingencies of the agonistic mode of plural communication inherent in diverse forms of publicities. The constricted consensual-theoretical approach that has prompted much debate in various academic and public circles assumes a homogeneous and, by extension, a Eurocentric denial of different, in the words of Johann Arnason, “cultural universes” of public spheres.

The above objection here is hardly original. It is comparable to a number of post-modernist critiques, in particular the Lyotardian claim that Habermas’s defense of the consensus-based form of the public sphere represents a domineering Enlightenment “metanarrative,” which, in attempting to include “the public,” instead advocates a monolithic position to exclude the heterogeneous nature of social interactions. Though his latter notion of public sphere acknowledges the range of networks of overlapping and connected publics, Habermas’s public(s) are guided by the ideal of critical-rational discourse that overlooks the impetuous force of diverse language games, in which consensus marks

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42 Ibid., 198.
43 I borrow the term “hyperrational” from Jeffery Alexander’s convincing critique of Habermas’s overrationalistic approach and his failure to consider the cultural dimension of discourse in his analysis of the public sphere. Habermas’s emphasis on speech-act theory is theoretically distant from cultural implications, in which segmented public spheres can coexist in a given society. Some of the most important aspects of public life, as Alexander argues, are absent from Habermas’s theory. J. C. Alexander, “Durkheimian Sociology and Cultural Studies Today,” in Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies, ed. J. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1–21. It is worth mentioning here that by “overrationalization” I do not imply that Habermas employs an excess of rationality in his account of the public sphere. Rather, following Foucault’s famous claim, rationality is misleadingly conceptualized here as a unitarian phenomenon in its denial of plurality of rationalities, that is: “different foundations, different creations, different modifications in which rationalities engender one another, oppose and pursue one another.” M. Foucault, “Critical Theory/Intellectual Theory,” in Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate, ed. M. Kelly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 119.
only a “particular state of discussion not its end.”

But what I want to underscore here is not merely the Habermasian notion of normative conditions of everyday interaction, especially in its argumentative form, but the tendency to identify communication as a symmetrical process of collective interaction that abstracts social relations in the social imaginary of speech discourse.

The idea of argumentative action invites us to recognize publicity on the mere basis of proportioned relations between individuals that operate in accordance with a set of nearly unchanging and emotionally detached participants in the cold pursuit of “truth.” But such a conception also denies spontaneity, frivolity, and the cognitive reflexiveness to coordination of interaction. This problem of (i) reflexivity can be essentially identified in Habermas’s binary conception of reason in that it emphasizes a univocal medium of communication, which overlooks the capacity for non-purposive action ascribed to actors. By univocal I mean, following Michael Warner, that Habermas relies too narrowly on a dyadic model of speech in terms of the prototypical medium of rationality. This model is explicated in The Theory of Communicative Action, where language is defined “as the medium of communication that serves understanding, whereas actors, in coming to an understanding with one another so as to coordinate their actions, pursue their particular aims. In this respect, the teleological structure is fundamental to all concepts of action.” Since communicative action is defined as being essentially oriented towards understanding, Habermas’s image of public as a reasoned exchange presupposes a dispositional unitary mode of communication that solely registers (inter)action in the idiom of “coordination” through argumentative-oriented speech. The model in this regard not only fails to accommodate the

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46 I shall return to this point accordingly.
48 Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, 101. I should note that there appears to be a conceptual discrepancy between the so-called “early” and “later” Habermas. The Theory of Communicative Action points to a more complicated notion of public sphere and communicative action, in which he tends to lean towards the pragmatist school of thought. But, in broad terms, I contend Habermas maintains a consistent account of public sphere, defined as a realm of critical interaction, throughout his works.
motives and intentions of actors in a given publicity in time and space, but also ignores other expressive or communicative modes of public communication like identity-narratives and aesthetic discourses, especially the agonistic expressive processes of interaction, largely made visible in the form of theatrical performances.49

While participation in the public involves other features including individual interest, display of power, and cultural recognition, and not merely consensus over the common good, the public sphere can also accommodate sites of contestation where dramatic performances of subversion take place in the form of ceremonies by subaltern or marginal actors and groups.50 This critical point is best defended by Dana R. Villa on Hanna Arendt’s conception of public sphere as an agonal collective field of interaction. According to Villa, the main reason Habermas’s theory of public sphere fails to accommodate Arendt’s “agonistic model of public space” is largely due to a reductive assumption that identifies the agonal or the theatrical dimension of public life as a means of manipulation for irrational ends.51 For the most part, Villa convincingly argues that by separating the deliberative (or associational) model from the theatrical dimension of public life, Habermas ignores the democratic potential of drama by reducing reason to a mere deliberative process.52 This is so since theater provides an expressive mode of public reasoning and entails a motivational force by which, in the medium of mask-wearing or theatrical plays, knowledge

49 In his Between Facts and Norms Habermas appears to associate aesthetic and dramatic communication with the notion of the public sphere, as he refers to theater performances and rock concerts as “occasional or arranged publics.” J. Habermas, Between Facts and Norms (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 374. But this later move towards popular vibrancy and symbolic tendencies of publicness in the form of theater and rock concerts would have a secondary or a stand-in status to the more serious “rational” tendency of argumentative communication.


52 This is a reply to an earlier essay by S. Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” in Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. C. Calhoun (Baskerville: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), 73–98. There, Benhabib argued that Arendt’s appeal to theater in the public realm was outdated and does not qualify as a democratic, deliberative kind of action in the modern public sphere.
about self and reality is produced in ways that a mere formal speech-act process cannot formulate.53

Although my interest here is not to highlight the democratic possibilities of agonal interaction, I am keen, however, to expand on Arendt’s recognition of theater or dramaturgical action as a significant component of public sphere.54 Theatrical performances contribute to the critically reasoning public in ways that a Habermasian conception of reason fails to recognize.55 “Theatricality,” Villa writes, “can be every bit as dispersed as rational argumentation or information gathering, perhaps even more so...we are able to envisage multiple and fluid public sites of contest and debate.”56 This “dispersed” quality, of course, is crucial to the case of Muharram since—especially in the case of ritual space—dramatic processes involve this fluid and spontaneous effectiveness for motivation and participation not only to entertain but to accommodate interpretative spaces of public interaction.57 The

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53 I should note that the concept “performance” here is not made in reference to Austin’s notion of “illocutionary act,” defined in terms of influencing people through speech-acts and utterances. The problem of Austin’s notion of performance, as Judith Butler argues, is that it rigidly conflates utterance with conduct; such conception operates through a process of temporal deferral in that its repeated effects bring into being derogated subject position. See J. Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (London: Routledge, 1997), 27–28. By “performance,” I include both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communication that operate on both levels of formal and informal speech acts that produce indeterminate outcomes as a result.


55 Calhoun also argues that Habermas does not stress creativity and expression in the same way as Arendt. Habermas’s rational-critical discursive model, he argues, “somewhat narrows the meaning and plurality…” of the public sphere. Unlike Arendt, Habermas’s take on a “disinterested rational-critical public discourse” is reductive since it fails to give a deeper account of the public sphere as something more than a forum of advancement of “competing material interests.” C. Calhoun, “Nationalism and the Public Sphere,” in Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy, ed. K. Kumar and J. Weintraub (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 82.

56 Villa, “Theatricality in the Public Realm,” 167. Villa follows Sennet’s conception of theater in close connection with Arendt. For Villa, Sennett’s account of the decline of theater as a public sphere and the rise of an ideology of authenticity draws close similarities to Arendt’s notion of the rise of the “social.” According to Villa, both Arendt and Sennett lament the decline of public culture as the indicator of the fall of public sphere. For Sennett’s work, see R. Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (New York: Knopf, 1976).

57 This apparently missing dramaturgical dimension in Habermas’s account, I gather, has to do with a narrow cognitive approach towards reasons of uncoerced or
agonal underpins the importance of dramatic performance as a form of communicative action, which involves the ensemble of expressive practices both embodied and experiential that shape social relations in conditions that are potentially conflictual.

The everyday spaces of live interaction play a pivotal role in public reason as practiced in the form of dramatic performances. As Susan G. Davis observes in street theater politics in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, grand civic processions, as with orations, lectures, sermons, balloon ascensions or building dedications, and the construction of political action represented distinct social spaces of public interaction where distinct forms of public communication would take place. In post-revolutionary America, these communicative realms constituted sites of contestation wherein “non-literate, nonelectronic communication” provided a rhetorical forum of interpretation for participants in their multiplicities and varied forms and in the way “people use street theater, like other rituals, as tools for building, maintaining, and confronting power relations.”

These performances were distinguished from other modes of communication, such as newspapers and radio broadcasts, since they were built around the idiom of dance, orations, lectures, sermons, riots, images and, by and large, vernacular folk-cultural processes that defied official spaces. According to Davis, the role of street theater, as “a popular mode of communication in the nineteenth century city,” was essential to the staging of a Philadelphian public sphere, since they were frequented at the popular level, and produced knowledge about the assorted ways a collectivity can be formed in accordance with non-mediated forms of communication.

In a similar manner, though from a different theoretical approach, in his famous 1946 dissertation, Bakhtin argued that popular carnival performances in medieval Europe signaled a mode of communication through the dialogical voice of unofficial festive culture, that is, the carnivalesque process that transcended the prison house of religious dogma and state uniformity. The space of the medieval marketplace and town squares in the chronotope of a carnival event marked a fluid communicative social integration, in which feelings, needs, pleasures, fears, dramatic displays of emotions, or, to use a Benjaminian term, expressive “gestures” are relegated in place of subjectively cognizant processes.

The actuality of discourses resided not in abstract norms of language, but rather in the endless diversity, multiplicity, and richness of ordinary speech, of dialect, and idiolect, of swearing, of the street, of the square, of the court and trade market, of the criminals and the state officials, all subject to changes in genre and content in shifting historical settings. The spectacular vitality of the medieval public square and its diverse linguistic expression, for Bakhtin, is not limited to a symmetrical set of social relations articulated merely in the print media. When communication in print was still a minor experience, the public square took (and takes) its heteroglot publicity in the production of multiple manners of expression, both in textually narrative and performative modes of communication, in the everyday, informal, and oratory languages that in turn defy a constricted conception of communicative action. Unlike a Habermasian hyperrational position, in which reason is limited to the performance of the speech-act for the ideal of mutual understanding, Bakhtin’s version of reflexivity invites us to an agonistic notion of public sphere as public square, wherein an uneven set of language games takes place in the form of “rogue, clown, and fool” who occupy a special status in the “intermediate chronotope of the theatrical stage.” The publicness of the everyday domains of interaction, as I will argue in Chapter Six, relies on this heteroglossia and the asymmetrical realities of daily life through which public spaces like Muharram attain vitality in the dialogized voices of participants, who undermine the lines that separate life and art, the clown and the mourner, the rogue and the penitent, parading characters in a spectacle that revolves around life and death, grief and festival. To deny this heteroglossia vision of public and by extension the theatrical dimension runs up against the societal vitality of the public in its ambivalent manifestations.

Yet, in an agonistic view, rationality does not operate in a single medium of speech-act. There is no one model of communication that serves as a foundational vantage point to assess diverse modes

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60 See S. Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought* (London: Routledge, 1995), 35. I have borrowed the notion of “uneven” public square from Ken Hirschkop’s important book, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*. This conception of public space will be applied to Muharram rituals in the second section of Chapter Six.

of expression. Rather, it is people who use reason and, in return, use it in complex ways in the public to both communicate and express themselves in a process of interpretive self-Other fashioning in shaping emergent publics. To describe communication in its substantial agonistic modes of utterance, speech-acts and indeterminate dramatic mediums are to recognize the complex heterogeneous basis of the public sphere in that such interaction and encounters in public are constructed through a diversity of communication and potential for conflict. In this sense, the missing agonistic element in Habermas’s account of communicative action diminishes the role of conflict in the public sphere, since such a conception excludes spontaneity of human relations in ways that “I,” to use Arendt’s description, can “appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” in unpredictable and indeterminate ways. For both Arendt and Bakhtin, the creativity of “spaces of appearance,” as visible forums of interaction, is not based on the uniformity of speakers who lack room for diversity of action within a community of transparently communicable selves; it is rather the reflection of the “revelatory” ability of wide-ranging means of expression in connection with the social contingent factors that allow uncertainty of outcomes to prevail in a given community.

The notion of diverse forms of communicative action brings us back to our central issue: the relationship between ritual and the public sphere. As I argued in the previous chapter, ritual understood as epiphenomenon to value-laden (i.e., doctrine-oriented) modes of action and the marginalizing of emotive and performative processes as something opposed to rational action largely ignores the way it can offer its own capacity for communication, and accordingly autonomy of action. The assumption of tension between ritual and rationality is not new and it can certainly be detected in Habermas’s account of the public sphere. Similar to the two schools of thought discussed in the previous chapter, the Habermasian developmentalist conception of reason also carries strong elements of reductionism, in which action is strictly defined in terms of a dualistic tension between mechanistic or

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63 In a non-Kantian approach, Arendt, I suggest, is able to bring together aesthetics and morality in ways that Habermas’s Kantian approach ultimately fails to do. See especially, Ibid., 187.
manipulative forms of action like ritual and communicative rationalities like argumentative reason. In many ways, the failure to acknowledge the role of affective behavior in the public sphere reflects a basic hyperrational bias that reaffirms the liberal-autonomous conception of self-created collective norms grounded on the ideal of autonomy freed from traditional action, which ritual represents. In the Habermasian dualistic account of reason, in which communicative action is challenged by the systematic colonization of instrumental rationality, the historical development of reason is defined in the increasing relegation of emotive (expressed through ritual action) in place of communicative knowledge, in which ritual represents an inferior status of human cognition in the historical process towards maturity and self-realization. The suppression of “traditional” forms of reason towards a more enlightened rational public leaves little room to recognize ritual as a means of communication in the public sphere. It is important at this point to analyze Habermas’s account of ritual.

In an important section in The Theory of Communicative Action, “The Uncoupling of System and Lifeworld,” Habermas quickly dismisses the relevance of ritual in his progressive development of communicative action. In his comments on Durkheim’s analysis of a shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, he discards ritual as a social form of traditional action, which has gradually been relegated to the domain of religious symbolism in lieu of communicative action. In his comments on Durkheim’s analysis of a shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, he discards ritual as a social form of traditional action, which has gradually been relegated to the domain of religious symbolism in lieu of communicative action. In a

\[64\] I take note here of Xavier Costa’s interesting study of the modernist’s relation with “tradition.” The emphasis on festive reflexivity and the use of Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque will be important for Chapter Six. X. Costa, “Festive Traditions in Modernity: The Public Sphere of Carnival and Popular Culture in the Festival of the Fallas in Valencia (Spain),” The Sociological Review 50, no. 4 (Nov. 2002): 482–504. Moreover, Habermas’s account of the relationship between the system and the lifeworld appears to be unilinear. This involves a major difficulty for his approach since, in Peter Wagner’s words, it “…raises not only normative problems, it is also analytically troubling.” P. Wagner, Sociology of Modernity (London: Routledge, 1994), 189. This problem lies mainly in the concept of “lifeworld.” As Hans Joas has described, Habermas’s conception of communicative action is still constricted to a functionalist construct because the notion of “lifeworld” entails certain aspects of the conservative theory of social order. See H. Joas, “The Unhappy Marriage of Hermeneutics and Functionalism,” in Communicative Action, ed. A. Honneth and H. Joas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 97–115. Following this point, the issue of social cohesion raises a serious difficulty for Habermas’s recognition of conflict as an important aspect of public interaction. It is on this basic point, I gather, that J. P. Arnason criticizes Habermas’s theory as consisting of a homogeneous “project,” lacking a “field of tension” in competing claims to modernity. See J. P. Arnason, “Modernity as Project and as Field of Tensions,” 181–205.
way, the role of ritual in modern life has either faded away or reflects the remains of a passing “traditional” world. With the devaluation of the spellbinding effect of the sacred in the “transitional field,” from structures of the worldview in “vertebrate societies” to tribal, then, from cultic to religious metaphysical and finally to “modern,” ritual stands at “one end of the scale,” while in the hierarchy of stages, “practices of argumentation” stand at the other end.65 As Habermas puts it, in the end process of disenchanted traditional forms of reflexivity, “a modern observer is struck by the extremely irrational character of ritual practices.”66 This “irrationality” is partly a reflection of the emotive (non-linguistic) quality in the commitment that emanates from ritually conjured performances, at once an attracting and terrifying force with an “element of expressive action” that displays unreason in “assertor” fashion to represent and reproduce magic and myth.67

Broadly speaking, this process of deritualization is the manifestation of a social evolutionary process of cognition that, as a “second order process of differentiation” in one direction, makes system rationality more complex and simultaneously shapes lifeworld reflexivity into a higher form. In a sense, it is in the movement away from ritual that a superior or “higher” form of lifeworld in the pattern of the social system as a whole emerges in the medium of “grammatical speech.” The “linguistification of the sacred” consists of a process that linguistically disempowers the domain of “ritually secured” worldview in place of a more rationalistically orientated communicative one.68 The high quality of argumentation that is best represented in the end progressive trajectory of the rationality potential inherent in communicative action is something that is missing in ritual performance. My objection to this linear developmentalist reading of the history of human communication will not be extensive. For the moment, I shall only examine Habermas’s reading of ritual by expanding upon the

65 “...to myth there corresponds a ritual practice (and sacrificial action) of tribal members; to religious-metaphysical worldviews a sacramental practice (and prayers) of the congregation; to the religion of culture [bildungsreligion] of the early modern period, finally, a contemplative presentation of auratic works of art. Along this path, cultic practices get “disenchanted,” in Weber’s sense; such practices lose the character of compelling the gods to some end, and it is less and less carried on in the consciousness that a divine power can be forced to do something.” Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, 190.
66 Ibid., 191.
67 Ibid., 193.
68 Ibid., 77.
communicative action potential of ritual performance according to three anthropological accounts.

I noted earlier that performance in a sense is communicative. This performative aspect of communication provides the participants the enactment of symbols that take the form of “theatrical acting.” As recent developments in the field of ritual studies amply demonstrate, ritual actors’ use of symbols is not simply the application of empty representations, but is a performative creation and recreation of meaning in diverse symbolic mediums. Performance theorists like Richard Schechner have identified the relationship of diverse forms of expressive genres, like games, sport or dance, with performative action. Whether in the form of religious ritual or musical drama, Schechner argues, theatrical performances maintain the ability to communicate a reality that transforms the world before the participant’s eyes. Since the boundaries between ritual and theater are not fixed, Schechner explains how ritual involves a special arranging of time, and often a special space set aside for performance. He offers an example of ritual dances from Highland Papua New Guinea to mark the efficacy of performance from ritual behavior to theatrical enactment in the form of cultural drama. At Kurumugl in the Eastern Highlands, this process of “efficacy” can be detected in pig killing, ritual dance, and consumption of slaughtered animals in the form of the communicative exchange of meat between villages. In this sense, dancers, as warriors, are transformed into friends through sets of performative ceremonies that range from ritual to theatrical events. While ritual as a formalized action retains its main social functionary features, the movement of performance in prohibiting intertribal conflict marks a move towards drama in the form of identity formation processes. In another example, a circumcision ceremony may effect a transformation of a person’s status in the symbolic ways in which it brings together physical and social changes with a particular dramatic event. Ritual, understood in this sense, is identified as a dramatic based mode of action that informs everyday life; it is something that we engage in ordinary ways with extraordinary effects that transcend the mere sphere of religion. Ritual as drama provides a communicative means of performance interaction

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to which our understanding of self and other, or boundary identity maintenance is shaped and transformed on a daily basis.

Similarly, though from a different theoretical point of view, in a seminal essay, “The Past and the Present in the Present,” Bloch has argued that rituals do not simply operate in relation to “expressive” emotive paradigms, but rather in a correlative social and communicative capacity to represent an imaginary, invisible world where a fundamental change in time and space is communicated.\(^{71}\) For Bloch, rituals do not simply make statements about the world, but express ambiguous idioms that persuade and legitimize power in mystifying ways. In another important essay, Bloch further argues how symbols in ritual processes provide communicative modes of interaction in a ritual idiom, such as dance and song, by articulating a special use of language in formal utterances. Since much of ritual communication is in fact linguistic, the semantic process of ritual action embodies an occasion when “formalized speech and singing” take up a “force of their own” and provide a creative alternative to natural and ordinary language.\(^{72}\)

Ritual communication is not merely about “communicating” statements, but performing messages that are simultaneously communicated and disguised. The important point here is that through symbolic performance, rituals cannot simply be reduced to either doing something (functionalist approach) in the world or saying something (symbolist approach) about the world; they rather construct ambiguous propositions, performatively communicating distinct time-space configurations. This ambiguity is of the essence, since it accommodates diverse levels of experience among the ritual participants to partake allegiance to the same ritual.

It is, however, with Geertz’s study of the Balinese cockfight that the most significant challenge is posed to a reductive interpretation

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\(^{72}\) I mention here Bloch’s highly formalized notion of ritual action not to rigorously follow his theoretical approach, but only to pose it as a counter-example to Habermas’s crude conception of ritual. As Chapter Seven will illustrate, I do not follow Bloch’s formalistic notion of ritual communication in terms of something entirely separate from everyday language. See M. Bloch, “Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority,” in *Ritual, History and Power* (London: Berg Publishers, 1989), 19–45.
of ritual. According to Geertz, the importance of cockfight rituals in Bali is that they make valid statements about society and the world in the ways that ritual participants discover their temperament and their society’s temper at the same time. Symbols in ritual enactment do not only express, but communicate the metaphorical textual basis of social life; they establish pervasive motivations in people by creating conceptions of a general mode of existence with an impression of reality that may seem to be unreal otherwise. In this sense, rituals are not only about the sacred, they are also about social reality that could in fact include both elements of “profane” and “mundane” existence. According to this assertion, Geertz refutes the Habermasian account of ritual by identifying multifaceted elements of communication in the ritual process.73 Though a relatively unique form of communication, since it depends simultaneously on enactments that produce the metaphorical condition of the performance, ritual produces dramatic spaces wherein the participant can make sense of reality in distinct ways.74 To follow another influential anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, the non-functional quality of ritual enhances its communicative potency of both emotive and cognitive faculties in self-referential ways—or “auto-communica
tive.” Ritual both expresses and communicates its symbols with a rational *spatiality* of its own, in the textual and performative spaces of metaphors for social life, rather than mere “irrational” expressions embodied in magic and myth.75

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73 In fact, a Geertzian approach can provide us with a step beyond the secularist position by highlighting the ritualistic features of communication that are also present in “secular” public processes. Ritual communication, in this sense, is not limited to the realm of “magic” and “myth,” but an everyday forum of communication. The 1977 study of “secular rituals,” directed by Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, convincingly demonstrates that “non-religious” rituals are in fact common phenomena in industrial societies, appearing in the form of “meetings, court trials, installations, graduations, and other formal assemblies of many kinds” as ordinary parts of modern social life; they transcend sacred space by operating in the form of non-doctrinal spheres of collective life. Similarity of approach can also be detected in Douglas’s theory of ritual, which space limits me here from further exploring. See S. Moore and B. Myerhoff, ed., *Secular Ritual* (The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, Assen, 1977), especially 3–24.

74 Therefore, Rappaport argues, “to understand ritual to be made of communication does not restrict its scope. On the contrary, it entails an expanded notion of communication.” R. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, 50–51.

75 I make this point in reference to Jonathan Z. Smith’s seminal work on ritual space. In *To Take Place*, Smith stresses the importance of ritual constructed spaces, in which “empty” action becomes ritual and takes up a life of its own. In theory, Smith’s argument represents a serious challenge to Habermas’s denial of ritual space, a point...
The denial of rationality in the case of ritual action underscores Habermas’s rigid modernist approach. This is a crucial point since, as Peter Wagner has shown, such modernist privileging of “rationality” made explicit in the monist and developmentalist sense of the category of “modern” in contrast to “tradition” as a thoughtless “declining” phenomenon, presents a singular conceptualization of action that ignores the plurality and the possibilities of “modes of theorizing” the public sphere, and, by extension, modernity. This singularity is indicative of an exclusive approach, which would deny inclusive cultural presuppositions to the historical development of the public sphere. In a sense, the Western achievement of rationality identifies an element of European superiority in the realms of culture, politics, and scientific knowledge as the yardstick for assessing every other society’s path to the realization of a fully developed public sphere.

The issue of reflexivity is followed by another problem, that is, the neglect of (ii) corporeality. In correlation to the issue of ritual as performance, the progressive conception of cognitive development of language tends to undervalue the role of the body, and in what conceptually can be associated with the “emotive” mode of action, in place of an idealized linguistic capacity of critical claims to validity with the rise of modernity—in what Iris Young correctly calls, “the disembodied coldness of modern reason.” Such understanding directs us to a misleading assumption that through the passage of time an increasing distinction between the cognitive realm of mind and body arises as a result of an assumed liberating effect of language development. By

that will be crucial to my argument in Chapters Five and Six. See especially J. Z. Smith, To Take Place, 2–23.

76 P. Wagner, Theorizing Modernity (London: Sage Publication, 2001), 8. The problem of this dichotomist conceptual framework, Wagner notes, lies mainly in relation to the problem of time, to which plurality is ignored by the modernist discourse, eliminating questions that seem unattainable and unanswerable due to limitations of everyday life situations. Ibid., 3.


78 In fact, this modernist historical anthropology can also be identified in Communication and the Evolution of Society. Following Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, Habermas involves himself with a progressionalist approach by identifying cognition as something distinct from the body, moving away from the “irrational” self (corporeal) to the “decentered” critical self (communicative), with an ability to engage in abstract reasoning. J. Habermas, Communication and the Evolution of Society, trans.
virtue of this evolutionary process of cognition’s gradual development into communicative action, the differentiation of individuals grows in identity with the expansion of “rational thought” that produces intersubjective norms as the basis of autonomy. Built around the assumption that configurations of action oriented to achieve understanding in the applicability of consensus-based norms, such a narrative overlooks the validity or rationality of sensual existence as a basic feature of public interaction.

My main objection is largely in reference to the range of feminist theories that explore how bodies, in their specific uneven gender relations, create the very stuff through which public space is experienced and articulated, practiced and communicated, and how in fact individuals and their genders become both the material and symbolic expression of such spatial experiences. Following Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, a comprehensive study of the public sphere requires the study of experience (Erfahrung) that, consequently, conditions various forms of communicative rationalities within a public realm. The heterogeneity of encounters, contradictions of perceptions, consumption, and exchange of collectively mediated cultural symbols, the bodily elements of festive forms of collectivities are connected with diverse sites of interaction such as “the press, public opinion, the public, public sphere work, streets, and public squares” in that they include “a general social horizon of experience in which everything that is actually or ostensibly relevant for all members of society is integrated.” What is the significance of the body? It is a symbol and an instrument that

T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 80–87. The assumed cognitive developmental process ignores the integral aspects of emotional and aesthetic processes in the idealization of abstract reasoning. The absence of emotion—or perhaps the denial of it—in the course of communicative interaction constitutes a crucial theoretical deficit on Habermas’s part; it ultimately draws attention to his dualistic rationalism, which underplays the role of dramatic expression and emotion in public interaction.

See also E. Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); and A. K. Martin, “The Practices of Identity and an Irish Sense of Place,” Gender, Place and Culture 4, no. 1 (1997): 89–119. The problem of gender, of course, has been raised by a number of commentators. Nancy Fraser, for instance, in her famous essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere” has pointed out the missing aspect of gender corporeality in Habermas’s account of the public sphere. I briefly raise the issue of gender in order to highlight the problem of corporeality, and also in order to bring to light the relevance of gender relations in my account of ritual public sphere in Chapters Six and Seven.

mediates between self and public identity. Sensory experience, Lefebvre argues, is the presupposition of overall social practices; the use of bodily organs constitutes some of the basic perceptions of our surrounding, the self and its lived experiences, collectivity and the world.\(^{81}\) As we shall see in Chapters Five and Six, bodily practices through ritual performances in the organization of spaces underlie an indispensable aspect of the early modern Iranian public sphere; the corporeal in fact, as I will demonstrate, marks a basic form of communication in that a collectivity articulates itself in diverse performative and discursive genres through myth and poetry.

To sum up my argument at this point, Habermas underpins a monolithic notion of rationality in the validation of argumentative discourse; his insistence that reason is universal, though historically developmental, neglects the complex manifestations of public reason. Yet the difficulty of exclusivity of rationality raised here ultimately leads to another significant problem, as pointed out by a number of critics. In the attempt to universalize (objectify) reason by advocating the potential in historical progression of rationality, Habermas envisages a restrictive notion of reason by detaching the plural realms of communication from a monist notion of critical cognition. Despite the fact that he adheres to the principle of fallibility, Habermas tames plurality of reason by making an analytical distinction between imaginary and “real” perceptions, between fiction or expressive interaction and truth or communicative reason. Such an approach can be problematic since it leads the binding/bonding power of critical rationality and validity to a vision of harmony, seen as exemplifying a non-ambivalent realm of social order. It is primarily due to this element of reifying rationality into a harmonious-oriented activity that I use the term hyperrationalism, in which knowledge is denied to those ambiguous social and cultural practices that do not fit the standard model of communicative rationality.\(^{82}\) Unlike Weber’s search to identify rationality

\(^{81}\) See especially H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 40. While his sociology of everyday and the body plays an important role in Chapter Six, Lefebvre’s argument is interesting here since it links corporeality with the organization of space on material spatial practices (physical), representations of space (sign), and spaces of representation (mental inventions) levels.

\(^{82}\) This in fact distances Habermas from his pragmatist stand, in the way that reflexivity becomes a consequence of action to a more transcendentalist conception, whereby reason, as a form of knowledge, becomes validated in speech-act processes.
in plural forms, Habermas appears to be involved in a narrow conception of reason, aiming to transcend contingent realities of cognition in place of an abstract form of perception. In a sense, as Karl-Otto Apel has noted, Habermas’s discourse theory of rational morality, which identifies the validity of moral-practical norms in an ideal communicative agreement, ultimately leads to the absolutism of impartiality for admitting the possibility of absolute truth in the assertion of fallibility.83

Recalling Negt and Kluge, we can consider here how Habermas’s neglect of ordinary experience, in a sensual and corporeal sense, indirectly forces his theory of communicative action to overlook the importance of transient corporeal vitality of the public as a core of collective interaction. In respect to this missing bodily dimension, Habermas’s model of the public sphere suffers from the necessary element of (iii) transiency. To what extent does the collective experience of transience of life (i.e., the vitality process of birth, maturation, decay, and death) play a role in Habermas’s conception of the public sphere? Accordingly, what is the importance of emotion, empathy, fantasy, ecstasy, and other aesthetic and moral sensibilities that are built around the collective experiences of death as the basis of the human condition in the world? Nowhere in the works of Habermas can we find an answer to these questions; nowhere in his account of the life-world are we offered an explanation of the relevance of death to the everyday background assumptions and the communicative processes as a “principle of sociation” of lived life.84

83 The difficulty, by and large, is marked in Habermas’s problematic take on both pragmatism of consensus rationality and transcendental rationality. So Apel argues that in case of open strategic use of language it is “impossible in principle to decide which use of language—the *strategically rational* or the *consensually communicatively rational*—is more fundamental, without appealing to controversial *philosophical* presuppositions concerning the rational norm of language.” See K. O. Apel, “Openly Strategic Uses of Language: A Transcendental-Pragmatic Perspective (a second attempt to think with Habermas against Habermas),” in *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, ed. P. Dews (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 275.

84 It is interesting to note that Habermas acknowledges the importance of implicit perception, in the form of background knowledge, in the ways in which it produces unsettling effects on our “natural worldview”; but he simply fails to give account of the ways in which the world can indeed affect our emotive and cognitive dispositions in the course of life experiences, as it is articulated in discourses and played out in our everyday practices. See especially Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 336–37. It is due to these idealistic tendencies that Eugene Halton describes Habermas’s account of language as “subjectivist” rather than “intersubjective,” since
But if so, what role does death play in the public sphere? Consider the remark of Hannah Arendt on “organized remembrance” in *The Human Condition*. Commenting on the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration, she states:

> The organization of the polis, physically secured by the wall around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws—lest the succeeding generations change its identity beyond recognition—is a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men, who outside the polis could attend only the short duration of performance and therefore needed Homer and “other of his craft” in order to be presented to those who were not there.85

Arendt’s description of the *polis* as a “space of remembrance” for those who have died, but in “reality” continue to live in the memory of the city, highlights the significance of death in the public sphere. Death poses both a threat to the vitality of the city in its capacity to decompose life, and yet provides a source of cohesion for the “mortal actors” in the form of performing memory through rites of commemoration for those who heroically sacrifice themselves for the ideal of immortality. The vitality of the city operates in this sense in the form of spatial organization of shared memory to which a collectivity affirms its boundaries while facing the futility and the certainty of its members’ “fleeting” human condition.

My argument in this respect rests on the claim that the Habermasian conceptual categorization of rationality is devoid of any reference to the theme of memory, which creates a serious problem for his model of human cognition and social practice. I consider here Arendt’s notion of “space of remembrance” in order to draw attention to the role of memorialization processes in the cultural construction of public sphere. What is the significance of memory? For Arendt, memory grounds shared spaces of interaction in which individuals can relate to each other by transcending their immediate encounter in everyday

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space and time. Memory entails monumentalization. Whether considering the world’s public arts—triumphal arches, obelisks, columns or statues—or exhibitions of poetry or displays of commemorative rituals (the subject of this work), the collective experience of death marks the foremost aspect of publicity.\(^\text{86}\)

The organization of space around death not only reflects the existential process of erosion of individual identities in the shared spaces of everyday life, but also the promise of continuity of collective identity after individuated death(s) through speech performances (i.e., Pericles’ oration) as invocations and prayers spoken to dramatize vitality in terms of transcendence, the foundation of which, in Arendtian terms, suffering of life’s transience makes the “space of action” lasting/tolerable/endurable.\(^\text{87}\) The notion of *necro-public*, which I will expand on in Chapter Five, deals precisely with the complex relationship between public spaces’ formation and identity, in connection with performative and symbolic boundaries that (re)create social imaginaries of interaction as distinct communities.

In his study of public sphere in American society of the nineteenth century, Russ Castronovo, for example, shows how the meaning of citizenship has evolved around symbolic practices of mortality. He demonstrates how abstraction of public membership in the American public sphere was built around official rituals of exclusion and inclusion, rites of remembrance, occult séances to summon the dead, fetishization of the deceased and of suicide, belief in an afterlife and in the organization of public spaces that were entangled with the disembodiment of members into impersonal corpus citizens. Death has been pivotal to political membership, and idealized disembodiment over embodiment has been crucial to the formation of the American public sphere.\(^\text{88}\) Following Zygmunt Bauman, along with Castronovo,


\(^{87}\) “Without action,” she writes, “to bring into the play of the world the new beginning of which each man is capable by virtue of being born… without the enduring permanence of a human artifact, there cannot ‘be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.’” H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 204. It is indeed the power to preserve the “space of appearance” through speech where the “lifeblood” of publicity lies.

\(^{88}\) See especially chapters “Political Necrophilia” and “That Half-Living Corpse,” where Castronovo correctly argues that Habermas’s account of subjectivity lacks the element of conflict. There, he argues that citizenship is a form of violence to the body.
we could further argue that collective experiences of death are the very force that constructs lived spaces as life strategies to keep death at bay by denying the finality of life.89 Death organizes spaces where the symbolic practices of everyday life and the production of lived spaces becomes manifest in the form of drama and performances, in which through “act” and “speech,” to quote Arendt, “the human essence…can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story.”90

Monumentalization makes power visible. The organization of physical or symbolic space in connection to the social experiences of death (for instance the official commemoration and internalization of necropolity) produces a highly complex relationship between the self, household, and the collective, the perceptual private and the official apparatus of power in public. Since the state also requires monuments to legitimize its authority, the boundaries that separate the public from the state grow thin with the construction of spaces to commemorate a political order. This point, which I will expand upon in Chapter Five, raises the possibility in the overlapping boundaries between the state and society of the sharing of state and public spaces within which a collectivity is imagined, contested, and negotiated in complex ways.91 It also stresses the ambiguous relationship between space and power, the sensory and imaginary condition of collective identity formation within the vying and yet overlapping realms of state and society relations.

on both levels of racial and gender relations. Necro ideology provides a sacred sense of oppressive institutions, such as slavery and subjection of women, while fostering a collective demand for impersonal freedom. R. Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth Century United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 25–61 and 101–50.

89 Though, as Bauman argues, death cannot be perceived or visualized, it can, however, be learned to be forgotten (or denied) through meaningful practices of life strategies, a common theme in all human societies. Z. Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

90 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 193. By this I am referring to both the performative and narrativity of social practices in the public sphere. This will be central to my argument in Chapters Five and Six.

91 I take note of this point from A. S. Ku’s interesting critique of Habermas and his overly rationalistic conception of public culture in connection to state apparatuses, built upon an interpretation of public according to a set of simplistic dichotomies, such as secrecy/privacy versus publicness, public versus state and public versus masses. A. S. Ku, “Revisiting the Notion of ‘Public’ in Habermas’s Theory: Towards a Theory of Politics of Public Credibility,” *Sociological Theory* 18, no. 2 (2000): 226.
This brings us to the missing factor of public culture in Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality. What Habermas underappreciates is the role of “gestures, genres, frames, versions, performances, stories” as the metaphorical, rhetorical, imaginative and performative dimension of interaction in shaping the public. As Calhoun, Nilüfar Göle, and Charles Taylor have famously argued, the social imaginative entailed in images, stories, and myths are at the core of the everyday social dynamics of publicity and constitute ways in which spaces are produced, shared, distributed and demarcated by individuals or groups in shaping identities. Moreover, imaginative processes are essential to the fabric of the collective identity since it is through memory, ritual, and narrative that diverse publics are constructed and a collectivity is, accordingly, identified or contested through idioms like “public opinion” or “common good”. Competing interests, visions and discourses often contest for claims to authority, while shifting locations, discourses and practices destabilize identities as they shape new arenas for solidarities. Yet it is because of interaction, in the words of Hans Joas, that the “experience of self-formation and self-transcendence” of values renders the shaping of everyday public life. The normative, in a sense, can only be articulated and performed in the imaginary communicative processes shaped by value commitments that motivate

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persons to interact with one another in public spaces.97 In a way, physical spaces as arenas of conviviality, civility and transgression play a critical role in the “birth and life” of the public sphere as a domain where actions and wider processes of political mobilization takes place.98 It is precisely in regards to the concrete spaces of inhabitation where social relations take place that I consider the motif of death, and by extension the spatial monuments built around it, to play a critical role in the public sphere. Death and social processes related to dying allow us to understand how the production of space is entangled with the representation of the transience of life and construction of spaces that build various senses of political agency or behave as if to belong to a wider apparatus of political entity like the state. I will further expand on this important aspect in Chapter Five.

The issue of memory and power in this respect leads to my final objection regarding (iv) transparency of the public sphere: do official spaces of visibility define the sphere of publicity? In Habermas’s view, the public sphere comprises, in its all-apparent guises, sites of visibility wherein collective bodies of private selves make themselves apparent to one another with the potential to make politics accountable. But what the assumption of transparency ignores is the creative and subtle ways in which diverse invisible public spaces emerge in the context of the matrix of power relations with a distinct official culture. Although we could expand on this point by recalling Kluge and Negt, for the most part, the notion of oppositional public spheres or “subaltern counter-publics,” the term coined by Fraser, specifies the counter-ritualized, counter-discourses of invisible spaces that ultimately defy an officially defined public sphere. Counter-publics comprise dynamic and often contested fields of values, representations, signs, and discourses in ways that participants could create diverse hidden publics to undermine power structures in particular historical and social contexts. In this process of contestation, meaning is reconstructed, negotiated, and resisted in heterogeneous spaces of interaction in terms of competing

97 Joas criticizes Habermas since his discourse ethics ignores the importance of values that provide incentive for people to abide by normative procedures to interact with one another. Habermas’s distinction between values and norms is, therefore, problematic since it overlooks the possibility of their ethical, and hence universal, orientation. H. Joas, The Genesis of Values, 181–82.

in fields of “discursive connections.” These alternative domains of the public produce practices and, in return, are produced by practices that both defy official publics and define invisible publics in the most subtle, unnoticeable ways.

This is mainly the case with secret societies, underground movements or acts of ordinary resistance that do not necessarily appear in the same way as official public spheres. Paul Gilroy, for example, demonstrates how traditions within “the Black Atlantic” have developed unique forms of countercultures that defiantly recreate their “own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in partially hidden public sphere…” The African slaves in their expressions of desire for liberation demonstrate how countercultural processes are shaped in the medium of popular traditions under the yoke of dominant groups. Through song and dance, through masking strategies of mimicry, Gerard Aching expands on Gilroy by identifying Caribbean cultures that have created a carnivalesque milieu of counter-memory that involves a series of masking strategies to subvert organized visible colonial spaces.

Likewise, in his *Cultures of Darkness*, Bryan Palmer identifies distinct types of hidden public spaces in the cultural history of night life, wherein “the deviant, the dissident, the different” and the dispossessed bond among themselves to create a counterculture in the shadows of the night. These disguised public spaces that operate mainly in the dark hours of the night are the equivalent of the Habermasian literary salons, though for the most part they remain out of sight from the official domains of daily interaction. People can disappear in the darkness of nightly places where there is a switching back and forth between the everyday and ceremonial domains with their continuing casual ties in spreading ideas, gossip, and rumor.

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99 I use Calhoun’s phrase here in a way to move away from the predescriptive notion of the public sphere, understood in terms of a single entity, towards “public culture” in its descriptive form. C. Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 37. Though I do not specifically use the term “public culture” in my analysis here, my approach, however, sympathizes with the implied notion of cultural interaction in conflictual terms.


The above cases offer alternative empirical studies to formalistic theories of the public sphere that neglect the realm of the “masses” of ordinary people in the streets, carnivals, brothels, and nightlife as arenas of shifting identity and hidden or subtle spaces of interaction.103 This alternative discourse finds its most theoretical expression in the theoretical literary works of Bakhtin, who, unlike Habermas, identified the public sphere as a fractured realm of informal and embodied spaces. While Bakhtin and Habermas share a neo-Kantian understanding of history and societal processes as grounded on language, they essentially differ in how public communication shapes public spaces of everyday life with the potential for political action.104 In Bakhtin’s view, the public sphere resembles more a public square, or what Iris Marion Young refers to as “wild public,” where divergent “voices,” situated in specific cultural milieu and socio-historical contexts and articulated in specific utterances or “speech genres,” come to clash, overlap, and merge to facilitate distinct spaces of dialogical interaction.105 Yet because language is ultimately a messy process in which the transparency of “voices” remains an intractable ideal, the public square represents an indeterminate sphere of heteroglossia, which appears at once as something concrete and yet also imagined; that is, a space of interaction wherein face-to-face conversations, utterances,

103 In Chapter Six, I will take up the cultural processes of masking and mimicry in order to underscore the theme of hidden public spaces, defined as “carnivalesque spaces.”
and interactions sustain an unfinished or ongoing process towards ambivalence of sociability.

The metaphor of the public square as public sphere also implies how utterances like everyday oral speeches and informal conversations like songs, gossip or jokes by various “social groups, professions and other cross-sections of everyday life,” especially marginal associations (i.e., ethnic, racial, sexual, or subaltern), are structured around diverse expressions of individual and communal identity. As I explained in the previous chapter, ritual as a form of public site of carnivalesque interaction presents forums of embodied contestation and symbolic communication over questions of self and reality. Ritual as public square, correspondingly, is endowed with diverse rationalities and modes of expression that mark both official and unofficial spaces for aesthetic, self-representation, and theatricality, in which either power is affirmed or challenged through performative interaction. In this socio-communicative forum, as Robert Moser has shown in his study of Brazilian literacy culture, reason is less about transparency of deliberation to extend life-related pragmatic concerns, but rhetorical strategies of subversive motifs that express distinct understandings of reality that break down rigid spatial and temporal boundaries between the world of the living and the dead. In many ways, the carnivalesque expression of rituality represents types of parodic, degraded, and morbid publics so that (mis)communication becomes possible through “pluralistic and conflictual heteroglossia” in that consensus over self

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106 M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. M. Holquist and trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 367. The relationship between identity and publicity remains one of the most problematic aspects of Habermas’s theory of public sphere. This is so since Habermas ultimately assumes cultural identity (or religion) as something actors detach from as they enter public domains of critical discursive interaction. This assumed neutrality of culture, secularity of civic sphere, and accordingly art and religion, prevents Habermas from seeing ethnic, gender, race, religion or sexual orientation as playing a critical role in the constitution of the public sphere. See N. Fraser, “Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere: Toward a Postmodern Conception,” in Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics, ed. L. Nicholson and S. Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 287–312. For a critical analysis of Habermas’s earlier secular position and his later acknowledgment of religion’s significance to the public sphere, see A. Harrington, “Habermas’s Theological Turn?” Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior 37, 1 (2007): 45–61.

and society based on critical-discourse undergoing a perpetual series of crises. The public square of carnivalesque social life as public sphere is, in a way, a site of contestation. This is precisely what I aim to show in Chapter Six.

The Historical Public Sphere

So far I have engaged in a theoretical discussion on the limits of a critical-discourse conception of the public sphere and briefly provided a description of the carnivalesque public as an alternative to a Habermasian approach. I have done this in order to show that the reality of the liberal public sphere is, first and foremost, a discourse in contention and, second, that an alternative discourse would have to consider the sensuous particularities, embodied performances, carnivalesque rationalities, and hidden aspects of publicness in diverse circumstances. In this section, however, I want to consider the historical manifestations of dialogical spaces of interaction by looking at historical possibilities of non-European publics in transcultural spaces of interaction.

In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas offers his most historical description of the public sphere. He argues that the public sphere emerged in the form of coffeehouses, salons, clubs, reading and language societies, journals and newspapers of eighteenth-century Britain, France, and Germany. These spaces were the loci of oppositional bourgeois associations, in which the sphere of private people assembled as a public. The advancement of mercantile capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, together with changes in political order in the chasm between the state and the public realm on the one hand, and the strengthening of the private domain on the other, gave rise to a bourgeois public sphere constituted of private persons who met to deal with the affairs of civil society, autonomous from the developing bureaucratic state.

Habermas also argues that the bourgeois liberal public grew out of earlier public literary guilds, salon cultures, print literature, and newspapers—in what Benedict Anderson would later call “print capitalism.” Although due to commercialization, consumerism, and mass culture, the boundaries dividing state and society began to disappear with the decline of the public sphere in the twentieth century, modern publicity found its golden age in the eighteenth century; it was in that century that the world saw the formation of the first, and only,
public realm of critical interaction.\textsuperscript{108} In short, for Habermas, the modern public sphere is, first and foremost, the child of the early modern European bourgeois society, which perforce laid the foundation—or at least the model—for future public spheres in the form of rational-critical argumentation.

As a number of historians have shown, Habermas’s historical account of the public sphere is problematic in a number of ways. Two major problems underscore his historical account of the rise of the European public. First is the failure to give an account of the historical formation of alternative public spheres, alongside the urbanite bourgeois one, which have been an integral part of the multifaceted cultural landscape of European societies since the eighteenth century. Referring here to the works of Natalie Davis and E. P. Thompson, these alternative non-bourgeois public spheres, such as unruly mobs, cockfighting, horse racing, food riots endorsed by the plebian trade clubs, rural peasant feasts, or religious (Protestant and Catholic) factional guilds, reflect the complexities of class, gender, and ethnic-racial relations—the two latter points virtually overlooked by Habermas.\textsuperscript{109} These various forms of publics illustrate distinct domains of sociability, unique realms of \textit{mentalités} that involve mixtures of rational actions in ritualized and theatrical modes of collective expressions.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{108} For Habermas, the market, defined in its instrumental rational processes, entered the public sphere and rendered it apolitical. This is a historical process that began in the middle of the nineteenth century, during which the pseudo-public of mass consumption surrogated the worlds of letters and speech. This process took the form of a transition from the public domain of critical reflection to the mere culture of consumption.

\textsuperscript{109} For a good example of these cases, see N. Davis, “Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France,” \textit{Past and Present} 59 (May 1973): 51–91; and, E. P. Thompson’s classic work, \textit{The Making of the English Working Class} (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), where he outlines the cultural basis of class identity in line with economy and values, between agency and structure. But it is in his important “Patriotic Society: Plebeian Culture,” \textit{Journal of Social History} 7 (1973–74): 382–405, where he outlines the historical formation of early modern plebeian society as a “robust” and “church-free” culture, “greatly distanced from the polite culture” of patrician and, ultimately, bourgeois society.

\textsuperscript{110} The basic assertion made by Habermas is not that, as Calhoun explains, “What made the public sphere bourgeois was simply the class composition of its members. Rather it was society that was bourgeois, and bourgeois society produced a certain form of public sphere.” C. Calhoun, “Introduction,” in \textit{Habermas and the Public Sphere}, 7. What is important to note here, in line with this class-based interpretation of the public sphere, is that ceremonial and ritualistic aspects of cultural life in the course of European history—in particular the High Middle Ages—play a secondary role, since they represent the heyday of “representative publicity,” in which the public
The second problem relates to the issue of the universalism of the bourgeois society of early eighteenth century Europe in that Habermas saw it as an idealized social force to play a critical role in the formation of political modernity. In *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Joan B. Landes argues that the development of the early modern public sphere in the course of the deep-seated events of the 1789 French Revolution was in fact an extension of masculinist political culture of the *ancien régime*, and that in the medium of symbolic order of nature, ideological discrepancies between sexes were in fact solidified by an increase of separation between the spheres of public and domestic (household) life. In that sense, the appeal to the universality of reason was indeed a reflection of the ideals of masculinity inherited upon the collapse of Absolutism with the relegation of women to the domain of the household.\(^{111}\) The paradox of the bourgeois ideal of the classic public sphere was that, while claiming to include all members of a given society, it was simultaneously based on the rigorous exclusion of various groups—i.e., slaves, children, property-less city dwellers, rural peasants, foreigners, and women.

In many ways, Habermas’s account suffers from a bias grounded in the assumption that a distinct class expresses a universal ideal with the potential to expand on a transregional level. According to Habermas’s historical analysis, the modern public sphere appeared in the middle of the seventeenth century as a conscious reaction to the developing property class in its need for communication for commerce, and later

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\(^{111}\) In fact, Landes claims that the exclusion of women from bourgeois society was central to its development, and that such a public sphere has been historically a process of masculine-identity formation. J. B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere: In the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 7.
was transformed into literary salons, where private people expressed their views in a world of letters and the literary public wherein the rational-critical discourse occurred. The new sociability of print culture that proliferated with the rise of critical discourses in the salons and coffeehouses, accordingly, was dependent on the development of nation-states and the early capitalist economy. But as David Zaret has shown, this historical process was an unanticipated practical rather than a theoretical effect of print culture in changes that occurred in the world of political secrecy transforming into a disclosed culture that eventually led to the rise of public opinion.\textsuperscript{112} By this, Zaret insinuates that the formation of the early modern public sphere was not the result of an already established bourgeois reasoning space, and especially not in the philosophical trends of the French Enlightenment, but rather the consequence of practical transformations in technology that occurred prior to the bourgeois intellectual movement. Zaret’s argument challenges the basic Habermasian claim that the early modern European press formulated a pristine extension of human rationality in paving the way to a revolution in print culture.\textsuperscript{113}

Likewise, the spread of new sociability in the medium of print technologies or other forums of communication has hardly been limited to the global diffusion of European modernity in the early modern period. Here, I draw attention to what Shelton Gunaratne describes as Habermas’s “Eurocentric bias” in terms of his neglect of the possibility of indigenously and relatively autonomous, though globally connected, formation of publics in the context of local agencies and culturally specific histories of non-Western societies.\textsuperscript{114} These non-

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item In fact, as Zaret explains, the history of early modern print culture was a very complex process. Rather than print, there were a number of alternative public spaces, such as coffeehouses, that relied on scribal modes of communication to publish political texts.
\item “A press that had evolved out of the public’s use of its reason and that had merely been an extension of its debate remained thoroughly an institution of this very public.” J. Habermas, \textit{Structural Transformation}, 175–76.
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Western public spheres comprise imagined and institutionalized historical transformations in specific local cultures and civilizations by which different forms of publicness emerge in proxy to competing and overlapping transcultural spaces of interaction. Polycentric and fragmented in character, such distinct cultural constitutions in the shaping of multiple public spheres, therefore, should be identified, as S. N. Eisenstaedt and W. Schluchter explain, “not only in terms of their approximation to the West but also in their own terms.”¹¹⁵ The recognition of multiple public spheres within a transcivilizational context requires an anti-developmentalist approach, but it also assumes the culturally grounded notion of collective identities and traditions like folklore or sacred narratives that draw from and blend with the formation of diverse publics and civic spaces.¹¹⁶

This new historical approach finds one of its most sophisticated expressions in the 2001 edited volume *Public Spheres and Collective Identities*. This collection of essays brings to light how non-Western public life emerged in the form of arenas of interaction and sociability wherein new collective identities were forged or contested and new cultural domains and political institutions were made possible in the early modern period. In an important essay in the volume, for example, Subrahmanyam discusses the public sphere in pre-colonial South Asia between 1400 and 1750 and shows how local disputes over public goods such as access were resolved in “keeping with prescriptions from classical, normative and legal texts” on the local level, and not by

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¹¹⁶ By “tradition” I refer to Salvatore’s definition of the term as a form of human action closely connected with practice and reflection. See A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam*, 32–67. For the relationship between public sphere and collective identity, see T. Kohavi, J. Lerner and R. Brayer-Garb, eds., *Collective Identities, Public Sphere and Political Order in Modern and Contemporary Scenes* (Jerusalem: The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2003), 26–32; For a folkloric account of public sphere, see the edited volume by M. D. Muthukumaraswamy and M. Kaushal, eds., *Folklore, Public Sphere and Civil Society*. 
Such local, or what Keane calls “micro-publics,” presented sites of social autonomy through which norms of conduct and conflicts were regulated. According to Sheldon Pollock’s account of the pre-colonial subcontinent, especially in the period between 1000 and 1500, a transformation of the literary public sphere in the vernacular culture developed by which “a more self-conscious voice” appeared in the form of cosmopolitan traditions in its pre-colonial variations. By seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in India, especially in the Bengal and Banaras regions, the presence of flourishing Persianate and Hindi literary and oral cultures testifies to complex clusters of publics that were closely tied to what Sudipta Sen has described as an intense cross-regional marketplace comprised of a vast network of commercial activities that reached into the Indian Ocean and beyond. Closely connected with such regional market zones and developments in distinct urban culture, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ming and Qing China also saw the rise of new publics in the form of spaces of conviviality like the teahouses, as well as production of popular literature and academic currents like the revival of the Donglin Academy, which presented forums of criticism of imperial power.

The case of early modern Japan is more unique. In her original work, *Bonds of Civility*, Ikegami examines the rise of the public sphere under the Tokugawa shogunate in the early modern period, during which aesthetic practices like the so-called floating (ukiyo) world identified new communicative spaces of social networks and counter-publics that produced associational activities and ways of “civility” in

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Japanese society. In many complicated ways, the rise of the early modern Tokugawa public sphere was aided by the rising commercialized urban culture tied with the crystallization of integrated, territorial state-making and market economy that led to what Ikegami calls a “communicative network revolution,” a deep-seated transformation in the way people interacted with one another “outside their immediate social ties, such as in kinship networks, territorial communities, and occupational social relations.” It is precisely in reference to this early modern revolution that I identified earlier the depiction of Muharram in Thévenot’s travel report as a product of an “interconnected publicness,” a contact domain of shifting encounters as a result of increase in commerce, travel or war that enhanced social interaction and, accordingly, proliferation of spheres of publicity in ways unprecedented in human history. While cross-cultural interaction, migration, and imperial expansion have been major themes in world history, the launch of a remarkable series of maritime explorations, imperial expansion, explosion in transoceanic commercial practices, and exchange of goods, ideas, and people introduced the initial instances of integrated or connected social networks with distinct social spaces wherein new imagined communities and vernacular cultures emerged to identify a new age of interconnected publics.

In the case of the Muslim public spheres, from the late ʿAbbasid to the Ottoman periods, the Euro-Mediterranean and Mesopotamian-Iranian complexes, closely connected with subcontinent and east Asian areas, have historically served as transregional loci where new expressions of Islamicate culture led to the creation of distinct official and non-official publics. As Salvatore has shown, it is in this complex Eurasian region where Islam originally emerged as the most “consciously managed manifestation” of axial civilizational breakthrough from which new practices, traditions, and “canonization of prophetic discourse” were produced in shaping models of authority, trust, and

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122 By “civility” Ikegami refers to “a grammar of sociability that is most suitable for less committed social relationships, that is to say, interactions mediated by weak ties.” E. Ikegami, Bonds of Civility, 14.

123 Ibid., 27.

public communication. While moving away from a Habermasian model of public, Salvatore shows how Islamic traditions and their distinct public expressions have thrived in communicative processes that are rooted in practices of rationality that leave Muslim societies with variations of public spheres. Such reworking of public Islams is closely connected with cultural processes that give expression in a manner that allows diverse Muslim publics to imagine and debate over notions of responsibility, justice and the common good and, accordingly, challenge "hegemonic public discourses."

But in respect to such transcultural domain of interaction, a neo-Orientalist trend in contemporary scholarship, mostly in vogue in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially after September 11, 2001, emerged to challenge the view that Muslim societies have (or in some instances can) indeed maintained autonomous spheres of public. Such new scholarship saw its most sophisticated expression in Gellner’s anthropology of Islam. In his *Conditions of Liberty* (1994) Gellner identified Islam as the obstacle to civil society

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125 See A. Salvatore, *The Public Sphere*, especially, 133–71.


127 For a sampling of this position, see the famous yet controversial work of B. Lewis, *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and his “Islam and Liberal Democracy,” *Atlantic Monthly* Feb. 1993; S. Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic,” *Political Science Quarterly* 99, 2 (1984): 193–218. For an overview of the civil society debate and so-called Islamic exceptionalism, see A. B. Sajoo, “Introduction: Civic Quests and Bequests,” in *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. A. B. Sajoo (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 1–34. In the field of Safavid-Iranian studies, the work of Rudi Matthee, *Pursuit of Pleasure*, also reads along the lines of (neo)Orientalist thinking when he writes on the possibility of the early modern Iranian public sphere in the following words: “…to be sure, we must be careful not to push the analogy with developments in Europe too far. After all, the Safavid coffeehouses spawned no debates leading to treaties advocating social and political reform, nor did it contribute to the emergence of a modern press or a novel political consciousness, much less foreshadow norms later associated with nineteenth-century liberalism and its attendant model of civil society.” R. Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005), 296. Though Matthee would not deny the historical possibility of a public sphere in Iran, in this passage he implicitly adopts a Eurocentric developmentalist model that defines the public sphere, in its bourgeois form, as a realm of liberal polity, a point which I challenged in the previous section of the present chapter.
development since it resists secularism as the basis of modernity. In Gellner’s historical anthropology of Islamic societies, the constant tension between tribal and urbanite Islams, the chasm between folk-rural and puritanical sedentary Islam, inhibits the structural life of Islamic societies to a circular process of periodical nomadic invasion in constant resistance from the city. “Tribal Islam” is characteristically egalitarian in kinship and religious heterodoxy in its performance of Sufi saint practices, held together by an intense feeling of social solidarity (‘asabiyya); whereas the urbanite Islamic tradition is puritanical and ascetic in its adherence to scripture and hadith. With the emergence of the “modern world” and the development of new communication systems, Gellner argues, this cyclical process of social support has been disrupted, and now the urban elites, in their puritanical zeal, have become dominant. In important ways, the main problem of Muslim societies lies in the “loose guild of ‘ulama,” the puritanical “high culture” and their advocacy of an “absolute, uncompromising and final revelation” that prevents Muslim societies from developing new communication realms of modern interaction.

In a critical look, Gellner’s analytical division between the rural folk and urban puritans in the context of Khaldunian dialectic between tribe and city can be discarded as too rigidly binary and historically flawed. Gellner, as Asad has argued, overlooks the cross-fertilization patterns of tribal-urban relations in Islamic history and maintains a rigidly analytical framework for a perceived unchanging, dualistic structure of “Muslim society.” In the specific case of Sufism, he neglects the close interaction between some ‘ulama and Sufi brotherhoods, which underlines the diversity of clerical organizations and identities throughout Islamic history. However, the relevance of Gellner’s account in the present discussion is his focus on the consolidation of urban scriptural Islam that ultimately denies pluralism of critical discourse in the formation of dynamic publics in Islamdom. In modern times, according

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to Gellner, Islam as an urban religion constitutes a legal order upheld by the ʿulama who maintain a rigid claim over authority grounded on divine law, therefore defying secularization and modernity with its distinct Weberian model from which it is derived. Islam is too rigid, too puritanical to shape a modern public.

Historically speaking, the separation between “state and church” has been enforced since medieval Islam, during which tense relations between state and clerical establishments protected various publics from the arbitrary interference of rulers. This is most evident in the case of the inquisition (mihna) of the ninth century (833–48). Initiated by Caliph al-Maʾmun in 833 in response to a theological feud between scholastic and traditionalist schools of theological thought, it best represents how discursive interactions between various clerical and state factions led to the formation of a sphere of critical public with distinct expressions of “public opinions.” The early ʿAbbasid era inquisition brings to view the extent to which clashes between clerics and the state underlined the autonomous sphere of theological discourses that transcended state control in the medieval period. Since the late medieval and especially the post-colonial periods, clerical associations emerged to play an active role in the formation of critically charged publics, marked by discursive processes that continued to expand into the twentieth century with the rise of oppositional clerical movements in countries like post-Mossadeq Iran, post-colonial Algeria, Egypt, and (post-Baathist) Iraq. As Salvatore has


134 As al-Maʾmun pushed to institutionalize the rationalist account of the Quran as a created text, at times by means of repression, those clerics who supported the doctrine of the eternity of the Quran challenged state policy by shaping an oppositional public opinion.

135 The inquisition was unleashed by Caliph al-Maʾmun in the year 833 as a gesture of sympathy towards the mutakallimun or scholastic theologians, who defended the Quran as the created rather than eternal word of God. The inquisition lasted for thirteen years and ended with the state’s failure to subdue the public to its version of religious dogma. See N. Hurvitz, “The Mihna (Inquisition) and the Public Sphere,” in The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies, ed. S. N. Eistenstadt, M. Hoexter, N. Levtzion (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 17–63.

136 These “critical publics” do not necessarily imply liberal forums of contestation, though in the twentieth century “liberal Islam” does emerge to present a distinct type of political discourse amid other Muslim publics. For a history of the ʿulama’s contribution to diverse publics, including schools and legal institutions, see S. A. Arjomand, “Islam and the Path to Modernity: Institutions of Higher Learning and Secular and
convincingly argued, these scripturalist publics have reconceptualized sacred law, modalities of education, and perceptions of Islamic normativity in shaping autonomous traditions of rationality.\(^{137}\) The historical formation of other Muslim publics like coffeehouses, guilds, mosque-university complexes, bath houses, soup-kitchens or market places attests to diverse expressions of Muslim publics in contradiction to shifting private lives.\(^{138}\) From the Ottoman coffeehouses in the eighteenth century to Islamic online discussion sites in the twentieth century, they represent a complex set of discourses and practices that encompass a range of actors and groups like “religious scholars, self-ascribed religious authorities, secular intellectuals, Sufi orders, mothers, students, workers, engineers, and many others who make ‘Islam’ or other topics of common good a matter of public debate and civic life.”\(^{139}\)

The case of Sufi brotherhoods provides a fascinating historic expression of “public Islam.” According to Nehemia Levtzion, contrary to Gellner, the Islamic mystical movements with their close associational ties and ritual gatherings at lodges, together with distinct Sufi shaykh-disciple relations in both rural and urban settings, identify unique,
esoteric, hidden publics that formed unofficial spaces of civic interaction. Sufi leaders played a key role as civic leaders, whose autonomous status enabled them to resolve conflict and promote civic action on both local and translocal levels. In close connection with mystical publics, the institution of vaqf or religious endowments provides an example of an economic religious institution by which a distinct notion of public justice, separate from state authority, came to be institutionalized and practiced. The formation of the vaqf is an important testimony to a relatively accessible and public space, as it identifies sanctioned public boundaries distinct from the state in the course of Islamic history. As Shmuel N. Eisenstadt correctly asserts, the vaqf institution mechanism highlights a distinct historical pattern of civilizational experience of “Muslim public spheres,” specifying an aspect in the proliferation of diverse public spaces inherent to Islamic societies.

The crystallization of public Islams in their fragmented forms and in diverse historical settings challenges two significant assumptions. First, it undermines the singular notion of public sphere as a homogeneous model of interactivity based on what Ikegami calls the Occidental process of modernization, which has been a prevalent view in certain historical discourses. Second, the notion of public Islam challenges the view that secularism in the form of a liberal democratic political site is a required condition for the public sphere. The rise of “political

140 There is a long turbulent history of conflict between Sufi brotherhoods and sharia-minded jurists, which reached its dramatic peak with the execution of al-Hallaj in 922. What is important to underline in this long history of conflict is the way in which the post-Caliphate states became, at times, dependent on the public authority of Sufi associations. Muslim rulers sought the favor of saints and built mausoleums for them, even to the point of becoming the disciples (murids) of the shaykhs. The Safavid shahs are, for example, a case in point.


143 E. Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility*.

144 N. Göle, “Snapshots of Islamic Modernities,” in *Multiple Modernities*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 111. For an analysis of the complex relationship between secularism and public Islam, see A. Salvatore and
Islam” and increasing Muslim participation in politics, especially since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, has led to the reconstruction of new civic spaces of contestation over definitions of equality, justice, autonomy, identity, community, and Islam. These new public spaces range from sites of leisure like coffeehouses, concerts, urban parks, theaters, films, to emerging virtual forums of interaction like the internet and satellite TV, from Sufi-inspired political parties (Turkey) to reformist women’s movements (Iran). In many ways, these new public Islams also invoke new understandings of contested publics in the configuration of what José Casanova famously calls the advent of “public religions,” a socio-historical process of “de-privatization” in which faith becomes an expression of deterritorialized subjectivities in the visible “transnational” public life. The Islamicization of the public sphere and the politicization of Islam on a global scale, especially in immigrant spaces like in Europe and North America, bespeak a current that undermines

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the secularization thesis that has remained a central ideological feature of modernization theories, including the theoretical works of thinkers like (largely earlier) Habermas and policymakers.\footnote{See especially essays in A. Salvatore and D. F. Eickelman eds., Public Islam and the Common Good. For the inclusion of religion in Habermas’s later writing, mostly influenced by Hans Joas, see A. Harrington, “Habermas and the ‘Post-Secular Society,'” in European Journal of Social Theory 10, no. 4 (2007): 543–60. For Muslim reshaping of the European public sphere, see for instance the work of O. Cherribi “The Growing Islamization of Europe,” in J. L. Esposito and F. Burgat eds., Modernizing Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 193–213.}

In the case of Iran, such sociabilities that unfolded in various public spaces such as “mosques, madrasahs, public baths, manbars (pulpits), and bazaars, and practiced through religious ceremonies, theatrical rituals (ta’ziyeh), mourning of Imams . . .,” have historically given rise to various civic associational networks and imaginary interactive sites.\footnote{M. Kamali, Revolutionary Iran (Suffolk: Ashgate, 1998), 11. Though he does not provide a detailed historical account, Kamali’s stimulating analysis of nineteenth-century Iranian civil society offers the only systematic study of the Iranian public sphere in relation to the formation of the (post) Qajar state.} The publication of Babayan’s 2004 study of Safavid public culture, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, provides the most original historical account of such sociabilities in the early modern period. According to Babayan, the centralization phase of Safavid rule under the reign of Shah ʿAbbas I marked the ideological and institutional transformation of the Safavids from Qizilbashi (Turkoman religious heterodoxy) to the Imami order (ʿulama shari’a-minded orthodoxy).\footnote{K. Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 349–402. I will expand upon this period in Chapter Three.} The religious landscape of the Qizilbash-Safavid Empire, in its formative ghulat period, underwent considerable changes in the seventeenth century not only at the court but also in the public arenas “such as mosques, the madrasah (theological seminary), the takkiya (cloister), and the qahvahkhana (coffeehouses).”\footnote{K. Babayan, The Waning of the Qizilbash (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1993), 8. See also, K. Babayan, “Sufis, Dervishes and Mullahs: The Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran,” in Safavid Persia, ed. C. Melville (I.B. Tauris, 1996), 117–38.} These public spaces became the intermediate arenas in the conflict between popular and state religious culture that led to deep-seated transformation in the context of state and society relations, changes that eventually gave way to the formation of modern Iran with its complex varieties of institutional forms and everyday interpretative spaces of lived interaction, constantly fluid, incessantly
changing. In broad terms, Babayan’s remarkable achievement lies in the recognition that a distinct type of public sphere emerged from the cultural landscape of an early modern Muslim society as a consequence of tensions between society and state.

By the mid to late nineteenth century, the growth of print media, particularly newspapers, unfolded in the context of major political upheavals in the Qajar period and expedited a distinctively political mode of communication that involved the circulation, distribution and configuration of critical discourses and public culture of journalism across the country and beyond. The post-World War II period witnessed an intense proliferation of numerous new (counter) publics constructed by new leftists and Islamist circles, some of which interacted in relation to emerging anti-state discourses, performances and organizations in the context of postcolonial struggles around the globe. With the gradual consolidation of state power, urbanization and demographic changes in the post-Mossadeq period, such emergent publics expedited the pace of revolutionary discourses in ephemeral spaces of city life or in what Harrison White has called the “Goffman public” or transient mini-publics on the interactional level of daily life, where state control is least effective. The relationship between transient and more durable or traditional publics, like the markets or the mosques, became largely sustained through emerging cognitive and social ties that enabled new actors, based in new urban centers, to move back and forth between these spheres of interaction and accordingly redefine

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153 Transient publics occur in the face-to-face encounters whereby, as Goffman describes it, individuals momentarily escape from their institutional realities in lived networks of interactions. According to Ikegami, the notion of “Goffman public” is based on an unpublished manuscript by H. White, entitled “Where Do Languages Come From?” (1996). See E. Ikegami, Bonds of Civility, 48 and 392.
the socio-political landscape. Yet the extent to which these publics differed, overlapped or came into conflict with one another was (and remains) contingent on the shifting situational settings in which they arose, faded or reemerged in new ways with other publics on the local or transregional scales. In the 1960s and 1970s, such publics became increasingly more durable and broader in domain of interaction with the increasing participation in the political scene of Shi‘i activist clerics, lay intellectuals, leftist activists and university students who competed and at times cooperated in a series of contentious performances and dissident activities with new claims on the common good and state power.\(^\text{154}\) In the pre-revolutionary period, the bazaar as a distinct public with complex spaces of commerce, religion and conviviality like coffeehouses and restaurants exemplified an older open city space wherein a vast range of networks and social ties emerged to mobilize a major political force against the Pahlavi state.\(^\text{155}\) Likewise, the growth of new information and communication forums like cassette tapes carved out alternative social spaces for emerging political actors, in particular university students, in forming new counter-publics of dissent. The combination led to the crystallization of a revolutionary public sphere that gave rise to one of the greatest mass-based revolutions in global history.

By the post-revolutionary period, the fragmentation of Iranian public life grew more complex with increasing attempts by the state to exert an institutional and symbolic hold on the population. With major demographic transformations under way, especially after the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), the post-revolutionary publics grew out of new state-building patterns and shifting paradigms of sociability, including new codes of civility, casual ties, intimacy, or in what Pardis Mahdavi calls the emerging “sexual revolution,” together with shifting values and perceptions underpinning an increasingly globalized Iranian society.\(^\text{156}\) In the wake of the Reformist Movement in 1997, new


\(^{156}\) P. Mahdavi, “Who Will Catch Me If I Fall? Health and the Infrastructure of Risk for Urban Young Iranians,” in *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*, ed.
forms of participation in political life, tied with the burgeoning of civil society associations, generated new publics of distinctly post-Islamist character, some of which, like cyberspace, mobile phone and satellite TV communication, radically changed Iranian political culture.\textsuperscript{157}

Meanwhile, the construction of official memorial spaces that revolved around “formalities of death” such as funeral processions, sanctuaries, mausoleum buildings, martyrdom murals, and the expansion of cemeteries like Tehran’s Behesht-e Zahra operated as cultural frameworks for communicating state power to the people.\textsuperscript{158} These official necropublics were not, however, complete domains of state domination, as they also entailed resilient expressions of dissent, as individuals would fashion new subversive spaces of interaction by forming unofficial publics, some of distinct state oppositional character. As the case of post-election 2009 funeral processions of deceased protesters and dissident political figures like Ayatollah Husayn-ʿAli Montazeri in Qum in December 2009 demonstrate, attitudes and expressions of death in the public are some of the most politically charged processes

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of social interaction. The necro-publics of memorial sites also entail the configuration of clandestine spaces, wherein the motif of death would be staged in subtle and at times visible performances against state power, for instance, in the heavy metal subculture of northern Tehran neighborhoods. The performative expressions of death challenge the boundaries of discourse and practice between the living and the dead, between spaces of dying and living where new (to borrow Foucault’s evocative term) heterotopias are innovatively created.

The process of mainstream institutionalization of official spaces and de-institutionalization of the same spaces in the construction of organized and spontaneous sites of contestation also occurs in most public layers of Iranian society. The building of civic spaces closely connected with the state supported bonyads or foundations, for example, can be juxtaposed with the formation of alternative non-state associations and their publics like family-led charity foundations that seek to carve out new civic spaces of piety. It is precisely this ambiguous and contested life of the publics that I would like to turn my attention as I provide a historical-theoretical account of the Muharram public in the Safavid period. But my aim is not only to give a local, but also a transregional account of the origins of the modern Iranian public, upon which I focus in the next chapter.


As Andrew Newman has correctly observed, the field of Safavid studies, both in Iran and the West, has flourished considerably since the late 1980s, perhaps like Shi‘i Islamic studies partly in response to the proliferation of studies that sought to understand the historical roots of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.\(^1\) Research on the Safavids in many areas of interest ranging from economic to social life has provided considerable insight into this relatively understudied Muslim society. However, with the exception of a few scholarly articles, a lacuna exists with regards to a macro-historical analysis with the aim to uncover the larger processes that led to the Safavids emerging as an imperial force with distinct claims over authority and territorial domains.\(^2\) Equally problematic is the way certain Eurocentric frameworks of analysis in terms of categories such as the “Renaissance” or “Enlightenment” have not only set the standard for historical analysis but more importantly, as Jack Goody argues, denied the multiple historical trajectories of the Eurasian world.\(^3\) In what follows, I want to contextualize Safavid history from the perspective of civilizational theory, which considers the study of plurality of sociabilities in the configurations of broad cultural processes that underline interrelated, adaptable, cross-fertilizing, and dynamic historical forces.\(^4\) The emphasis here is on the

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\(^2\) With regards to these exceptions, I have in mind the historical-sociological works of Arjomand and the Orientalist historical works of Matthee.

\(^3\) J. Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); For a critical study of Eurocentric application of concepts like the “Renaissance” or the “industrial revolution” over claims made on modernity and by extension world history, see G. K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

interconnections of culture and constellations of social orders that take shape in the “diversity of historical experience.”\textsuperscript{5}

As a leading figure in this approach, the late American historian, Marshall Hodgson, whose seminal article “The Interrelations of Societies in History,” published in 1963, registered a ground-breaking argument against the Eurocentric conception of macro-history and Islam in such a historical context. The article traced history in terms of unfolding development from Mesopotamia and Egypt to Greece and Rome and finally to the Christian civilization of northwestern Europe, where medieval life paved the path to modernity.\textsuperscript{6} In it, he posited the claim that from a global historical perspective, the development of civilization is an Asian-based phenomenon. Moreover, the history of the intersecting stretches of agrarian urbanite societies, which extended across the entire Afro-Eurasian complex—what he called, following Toynbee, the Oikoumene—was an interrelational one with persistent and interconnecting traditions, from which interaction between these traditions radiated incessantly into wide regions. According to Hodgson, an understanding of history in interrelational hemispheric terms would allow us to overcome a “classic ethnocentric dichotomy in the main part of the world—ourselves and the others, Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Barbarians, ‘West’ and ‘East.’”\textsuperscript{7} The history of societies understood in interrelational terms acknowledges a mobile yet interactive sphere of a transregional and cross-regional complex, wherein cultures have continuously depended on the course of development of the Afro-Eurasian civilizational complex as a whole.

If we accept the notion of interconnection of societies in history, following Hodgson, there are some good reasons to argue that the period from the ninth/tenth centuries to the thirteenth century marked a crucial phase in the multifaceted increase of global interconnection and integration, involving socio-cultural crystallization of historical significance, which eventually led to the early modern period of interconnective zones of cultural encounters. In her seminal essay of 1994, “Southernization,” Lynda Norene Shaffer argues that the historical roots of this dynamic period in history can be traced back

\textsuperscript{5} Arnason, \textit{Civilizations in Dispute}, 4.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 7.
to fifth century southern Asia, where developments in medicine, sciences, technology, and literary and cultural practices began to spread to China. Through communication, trade, travel, war, and nomadic political formations—including, not the least of them, the histories of migration—in the context of rural and urban relations, the period between the ninth/tenth to the thirteenth centuries encompassed a set of deep-seated transformations across the Afro-Eurasian landmass, which manifested in different forms and yet appeared with an intense degree of mobility and mobilization, fusion, and integration towards the crystallization of a transcultural age of interconnectivity.

The term “transcultural” refers here to liminal complexes that signify an intricate set of interdependent and cross-fertilizing historical processes in the production of public spaces of exchange and negotiation, encounter and communication, travel and migration. The history of transcultural dynamics is an account of global interaction between nomadic rootlessness and urban sedentary complexes, maritime expeditions tied to sedentary patterns of commercial urbanity and development of citied civilizations. The transcultural as a

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10 I borrow the term “transcultural” from A. Höfert and A. Salvatore’s provocative argument that historical flows of people between Europe and the Middle East, inclusive of the elites and the masses, have constructed “transcultural” processes in which identity-alterity structures increasingly become dependent on in-between, liminal situations. They argue that the term “demonstrates the potential to alter the demarcating boundaries, not only in the sense of displacing them, but also through recomposing markers of identity and alterity in a way that makes it impossible, and even irrelevant, to trace back the original root of a certain identity.” See A. Höfert and A. Salvatore, eds., *Between Europe and Islam*, 17.

11 The ideas of encounter and mobility will play a crucial role in this chapter. In general, I posit this claim with a strand of world history that emphasizes discoveries, maritime empires, and nomadic formations, in which spaces of communication encounter and generate polycentric histories. According to this approach, mobility and migration are key points in world history such that the processes of global integration have not simply created homogenization, but produced continuing and ever-renewing
historical process, in particular, underscores patterns of fusion, rather than binary oppositions, between two social complexes in such that encounters between different civilizations lead to processes of identity formation to incorporate different path-dependent collective experiences, cognitive associations and imagined publics as a result.\(^\text{12}\)

In a sense, the age of transcultural interconnection did not mark a sudden or radical redrawing of the outlines of the Eurasian landmass. Rather, it inaugurated a period of gradual—yet uneven—shifts in civilizational dynamics towards hemispheric integration, fusion, and cross-fertilization that brought about an impressive degree of intense creativity and exceptional broadening of cultural horizons that brought about modernity before European colonialism.\(^\text{13}\) Contact between societies and the formation of inter-civilizations as a consequence of encounter between cultures led to the proliferation of myriad forms of public spaces, social organizations, institutions, and political orders, a historical process that unfolded from South and Southeast Asia as a “transregional culture-power sphere” of cosmopolitanism.\(^\text{14}\) Yet the consequence of such a transcultural interactive zone was determined by conflict, rivalry, exchange, encounter, and chronic collision contestations over spatial and cultural composition. Global development, then, lies in a series of overlapping and interrelational regions, each engaged in processes of self-reorganization through encounters with others. For example, see J. H. Bentley, Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-modern Times (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); P. D. Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade in World History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); M. W. Helms, Ulysses’ Sail: An Ethnographic Odyssey of Power, Knowledge and Geographical Distance (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); M. L. Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation; P. Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.

\(^\text{12}\) This assertion may also be viewed in terms of intensification of worldwide social relations of the mélange effect pervading from the center to peripheries. With respect to dynamics of culture, cross-fertilization can also be defined as the way in which civilizations become differentiated from existing practices, fuse and remerge “with new forms in new practices.” W. Rowe and V. Schelling, Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America (London: Verso, 1991), 231. Culture, as syncretic phenomenon, is therefore not a coherent system but an unstable process that is “generated and maintained, transmitted and received, applied, exhibited, remembered, scrutinized and experimented with,” that is, “they are forever cultural work in progress.” U. Hannerz, “The World in Creolisation,” Africa 57, 4 (1987): 546–59.


between competing forms of political orders that, in turn, led the way to complex processes of cross-fertilization and intercivilizational significance along transregional spheres of contact, especially along what Subrahmanyam and Muzaffar Alam regard as the Indo-Persian “cross roads” before European colonialism.15

Condensed and generalized, my task in this chapter is to situate the emergence of the Safavid chieftaincy in the context of this transcultural complex, and, accordingly, highlight its importance as an outcome of intricate historical and global processes. In the following discussion, my primary concern will be the interactive elements of global history, without presuming linearity of historical development of cultural interaction, which laid the foundation for the rise of the Safavid Empire.

1. Southernization and the Afro-Eurasian Complex: From the Ninth/Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries

When in 1137–38, Ramisht, a rich Muslim merchant on his way to Mecca, visited his hometown of Siraf, the bustling Iranian port city on the Persian Gulf represented a cosmopolitan commercial center with a thriving trading base from which merchants traded directly with China and East Africa.16 The port city of Siraf was matched by an abiding ability for commerce to cities, bustling commercial centers, and maritime urbanities like Aden, Alexandria, Baghdad, Cairo, Constantinople, Guangzhou, Kiev, Quanzhou, and Venice, wherein long-distance trade was prevalent in helping shape myriad zones of economic exchange and cultural encounter.

Muslim merchants of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, along with Chinese, Indian, and east/north African merchants, unleashed a global network of commerce, circulation and exchange of ideas, cultural codes, discourses, inventions and people that signaled the increasing integration of the world into common yet diverse commercial networks of production and exchange.17 Whereas links with the

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Mediterranean lands remained sporadic prior to the late ninth century, the centuries that followed the Arab conquest of northern Africa and the Iran-Mesopotamia regions saw a quickening of contacts within the Afro-Eurasian zone of cultivation and urban life, of emergent network ties and cosmopolitanism. Prior to the “rise” of the West to preeminence in the sixteenth century, a system of commerce and cultural interaction emerged in India in the fifth century, which reached its apogee toward the end of the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{18} The Indian and, later, Chinese origins of southernization, under the T’ang (618–906) and Song (960–1279), offer an alternative to the historical conception of “westernization,” which misleadingly identifies modernity’s original developments in medieval and early modern Western Europe, a historical process that eventually spread to other parts of the world. The notion implies that the ascent of Islam, the Caliphates, Mongols and the growth of the Christian Mediterranean regions were largely a result of dramatic changes that occurred in the eastern hemisphere.

The spread of southernization involved a series of hemispheric transformations. First, based in Song China, the eleventh century witnessed the appearance of a “world economy” with ramifications on a transregional scale.\textsuperscript{19} Likewise, between the years circa 1250 and 1350 the regions between China and northwestern Europe saw a period of expanding international commerce, giving way to economic growth and cultural developments in the newly integrated areas. The increase of trade drew Japan, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East closer together, while a rise in the use of camel caravans led to an expansion of communication with sub-Saharan Africa.\textsuperscript{20} In the Asian subcontinent, for instance, extensive commerce reached southern India by land, and mostly around the coastal maritime routes, from the shores of Coromandel, north to the Ganges Delta, to Burma, Vietnam, and beyond. Divided into diverse zones of transactions, mainly defined by language and religion and dominated by imperial and core urban


settings, as well as hinterland-less commercial enclaves, interaction between cities became possible through sea lanes, rivers and caravan routes. Ports, like Siraf, and river-based cities, like Baghdad and Cairo, served the important function of bringing goods and people from long distances, enhancing mobility and interaction.

Second, along with developments of maritime and land trade, an increase of travel, migration, campaigns of imperial expansion, transregional religious war (Crusades), and conversion inaugurated an age of long-distance mobility and transportation, as well as large-scale subordination and conquest. Though the expansion of Europe into northeast Germany was a continuous movement that originated with the campaigns of Charlemagne, the eleventh century marked the religious conversion and political colonization of Baltic European settlements in northwestern and northeastern Europe. From the 1066 Norman conquest of England by Duke William of Normandy to the Spanish campaigns of the Christian knights, from the expedition of the Scandinavian navigators into the northern seas to the Latinization of Hungarians and eastern Europe, the growth of Europe, especially in the twelfth century, identified an age of intense interconnection between Germanic, Slavic, and Latin Mediterranean-based cultures. The birth of Europe as a Eurasian phenomenon in this fashion brought about an integrated Europe made up of northwestern France, Flanders, lowland England, Spain, northern and southern Italy. While travel provided the emerging integrated Europe with the incentive of economic adventure, especially in the thirteenth century (Marco Polo), proliferation in European travel writings reflected the increasing importance of movement across the homeland as a prelude to further conquest of the new territories.

China experienced similar processes of integration under the Song dynasty, as elite culture grew more uniform and political systems

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became more unified with the continued growth of the imperial urban-ite civilization through military-building and international trade. The expansion of the examination system and the growth of bureaucracy saw the concentration of power in the hands of the emperor—a process that accelerated in later dynasties. Yet the remarkable growth of commercialization under the Song dynasty opened up Chinese society to a flow of goods and movement of persons, cultures, and ideas across Eurasia. Similarly, in western Asia, in the tenth century, the Byzantine-Russian complex ceased to be on the defensive and began to aggressively advance its borders east and westwards at the expense of the Bulgars, increasingly heading towards greater cultural integration through contact with neighboring civilizations. Through land and, most important of all, maritime routes that reached Constantinople, the Byzantine-Russian civilization grew closer to the Islamic and Latin Christian cultures.

When in 1279 the Mongols, under the leadership of Genghis Khan’s grandson, Kubla Khan, defeated the last outposts of resistance in Song China, the newly established nomadic empire signaled the emergence of a huge imperial network in the Eurasian landmass. This further connected the Islamic world with Southeast Asian societies, a historical process that eventually led to the Islamization of South Asian regions—like the case of Indonesia in the sixteenth century. Accordingly, in Central and Western Asia before the end of the thirteenth century most of the khans had become Muslim, and hence initiated a process of blending Central Asian shamanistic religions and the Tibetan form of Buddhism with Islamic practices. Although the Mongol conquest of China and Islamdom did not amount to any serious interruption in Chinese and Islamic civilizations, since it remained essentially a military occupation, the Steppe nomad warriors creatively adapted to the traditional Chinese and ʿAbbasid administrative systems. This nomadic imperial development of adaptation is crucial to the transcultural period since it marked a historical event, which ushered in a

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25 Later in the fourteenth century, when the Mongols showed signs of weakening, the emperor reintroduced the examination system and accommodated Chinese participation in bureaucratic positions.
turning point in the construction of a creative synthesis between Central Asiatic, Chinese and Islamic economic and political orders.26

The rise of nomadic empires in this manner played an important role in the age of transregional integration since nomadic imperial orders placed high value on trade and diplomacy, which ultimately resulted in, according to Janet Abu-Lughod, an “explosion” that effectively paved the path to “world history.”27 As Bentley has argued, in the half-millennium from 1000 to 1500, large imperial states, like the Mongols, continued to promote transregional interaction, embarking on a remarkable set of empire-building processes that expanded from the seas of China to the River Nile.28 By linking China with the outside world mainly through trade networks in Central Asia, the Mongol conquest facilitated communication over long distances, as nomadic political orders encouraged the spread of religions, the acquisition of knowledge, and technological exchanges across inner, eastern, and western Asia. In addition, with the centralization of the Mongol state from tributary to sedentary systems of taxation, diverse sectors of the economy, namely, agricultural, commercial, and pastoral, grew closer together with advancements in the size of the military and the centralization of administrative control over both sedentary and rural regions. As Di Cosmo explains, “So called steppe empires created fluid environments, suitable for travel and trade that allowed the peripheral civilizations to come into contact with one another.”29 Nomadic conquests identified a major epoch in the greater interrelation of societies, not only in Eurasian terms, but also on the rural-urban and nomadic-sedentary scales.

As an outcome of trade, migration, conversion, and conquest, such global transformations also involved major breakthroughs of civilizational importance. Similar to the original Axial age civilizational transformation in human reflexivity (roughly from the eighth to the

28 Bentley, “Hemispheric Integration,” 244–45.
fourth/third century BCE), the ninth/tenth to the thirteenth centuries displayed a shift in reflexive consciousness on an Afro-Eurasian scale. The transcultural age identifies a deep transformation on the fundamental basis of human reflexivity, historicity, and spatiality. With the increasing differentiation of consciousness (i.e., modes of reflexivity and communication) through contact, exchange, and conversion, the period saw the emergence of distinct cultures, ethos, and historical consciousness that intensified creative attempts to fuse the gap and, accordingly, overcome the tension between transcendental and mundane realities with the construction and regulation of social interaction.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the gradual appearance of new civilizational complexes in northwestern Europe, in what had previously been a marginal region of Mediterranean-based civilizations, and the expansion of Italian maritime cities inaugurated a revolutionary development of tighter organization of the church, state, and urban areas. The so-called feudal, urban, papal, and intellectual revolutions manifested deep-seated changes in economic, political, and religious institutions that, consequently, entailed cultural shifts of societal epistemic importance. With the rise of universities, for instance, the intellectual revolution not only introduced education to laymen, but also facilitated the acquisition of Greek knowledge through the intellectual advances made by Muslims.

In close connection to the urban revolution and the triumph of the papal monarchy between 1050 and 1300, the growth of “popular culture,” sectarian and monastic orders (like the spread of the Cistercian movement in the twelfth century) ushered in an age of carnivalesque practices and mystical movements, which ultimately culminated in the attempt to fuse the mundane and transcendental worlds within mass-popular and church-autonomous fields of social interaction. Although, as Moore argues, the “revolutionary” characteristics of the period between the ninth and twelfth centuries were profoundly political in nature, the European experience of the transcultural age

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30 By Axial age civilizations, Eisenstadt explains, “We mean those civilizations that crystallized during the half-millennium from 500 BCE to the first century of the Christian era, within which new types of ontological visions, conceptions of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders emerged and were institutionalized in many parts of the world.” S. N. Eisenstadt, “The Civilizational Dimensions in Sociological Analysis,” Thesis Eleven 62, no. 1 (2000): 2.
31 I will return to this point in the first section of Chapter Five.
entailed transformations that went beyond state-organizational and class structural levels.\textsuperscript{32} In this regard, the proliferation of pluralistic institutions—Church, nobility, city-state, and guilds—led to the formation of cultural spaces that increasingly separated the official from the non-official spheres of publicity.

In the Indic world until the late tenth century, Hindu rajas controlled Afghanistan and parts of eastern Persia to the upper Indus, while Gujarat maritime power limited the colonization of Islam from the sea along the shores of the Indian Ocean. But when in the beginning of the eleventh century northern India saw the southward invasion of the Gazna Turks, who owed allegiance to the Samani rulers of Khurasan, the Indic world began to undergo centuries of civilizational fusion. The period from the tenth to the twelfth centuries marked a crucial phase in Southeast Asian civilizations, a period that involved a transition from pan-Indic to three interactive civilizations of Hinduism, Indo-Islam, and Theravada Buddhism.\textsuperscript{33} The transition involved cultural and vernacularization transformation, “a process of change by which the universalistic orders, formations, and practices of the preceding millennium were supplemented and gradually replaced by localized forms.”\textsuperscript{34} This process of vernacularization not only created new localities of distinct vernacular cultures, but also saw an unprecedented growth of textual production that was unique in its “combination of antiquity, continuity, and multicultural interaction.”\textsuperscript{35} Central to this Indic case of civilizational interaction was primarily the exchange of Islamic and Hindu vernacular and material cultures that generated implicit dogmatic, ritualistic and commercial interminglings; the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} See R. I. Moore, \textit{The First European Revolution c. 970–1250} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
\item \textsuperscript{33} J. Krejčí, \textit{The Civilizations of Asia and the Middle East: Before the European Challenge} (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990).
\item \textsuperscript{34} S. Pollock, “India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000–1500,” 41.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 45. As Pollock explains, the expansion of literary and political textual production, which "began in South India, Sri Lanka, and Java around 900 and reached maturity by 1200 occurred in northern India at a somewhat later date under conditions of political change different from what obtained in the south." Ibid., 53. Similarly in China, this process of literary production saw its apogee under Song rule, during which the development of literary vernacular culture marked one of the high points in the history of Chinese literature. Also consider the case of Southeast Asian regions, like Vietnam, that, starting in the 1300s produced similar developments in literary texts. See V. Lieberman, “Transcending East-West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas,” \textit{Modern Asia Studies} 31, no. 3 (1997): 512.
\end{itemize}
eventual emergence of Sikhism in the fifteenth century, for instance would best represent this hybrid historical process. 36

As for China, the Neo-Confucian movement fostered the reaffirmation of the virtues and the continuity of Confucian tradition with its canonical system of belief, in the context of dynamic state centralization processes under the Song dynasty. Central to the movement was the pursuit of the ideals of sainthood and self-cultivation, a spiritual quest that involved the overcoming of selfishness and the enhancement of noble virtues inherent in human status. 37 Also, the synthesis of Buddhist dogma (and Daoist metaphysics) with Confucian philosophy created a new body of thought that underscored the creative yet paradoxical process of preservation of tradition through the transformation of tradition. 38

In the puzzling case of Japan, where the country enjoyed natural protection from foreign nomadic incursions due to its insular position, the Samurai class, the landed lord, and warriors began to develop a distinct form of “honorific culture” in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. 39 During this period, the Samurai’s military pride generated the construction of a community of honor, which set up the tradition of honorific individualism of self-discipline to produce a new consciousness of both individual and collective dimensions. As a consequence of the formation of the Samurai elite collectivity as a formidable ruling class, the emergence of a Samurai honorific culture ushered in the establishment of the Shogunate political order that lasted for the next six and a half centuries (1192–1867). 40

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37 As the Neo-Confucian sage Zhu Xi asserts, the ideal is “constantly to develop and nourish one’s spontaneously good feelings (han-yan) and eliminate selfish ones (hsing ch’ a). Quoted in T. de Bary, The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 62.

38 Consider the case of Zhu Xi. His attempt to synthesize Buddhism and Confucian philosophy highlights interesting similarities to Thomas Aquinas’s fusion of Christian theology with Greek philosophy.


40 Although its systematic study goes well beyond the topic of this chapter, Japan represents a distinct yet complicated case for the age of transcultural hybridity. As a non-Axial civilization, set apart from the Axial ones (mainly China, Europe, India, and the Middle East), the dynamics of Japanese Samurai culture were tied to the cultural transformation of the Samurai elite and the culture of honor, accordingly connected
Perhaps in its most dynamic center of transcultural age, the Mediterranean region emerged to represent a transcultural network of commercial exchanges and cosmopolitanism, marking a cornerstone of this inter-civilizational complex. Inseparable from the European agricultural revolution and the emancipation of the serfs, which resulted in growth of trade and the burgeoning of towns, the budding Mediterranean urbanite civilizations provided an alternative seaborne route of conquest, pilgrimage, and trade in addition to traditional land-based means of transportation. Especially through trade and warfare, the region was characterized by a heightening of long-term structural conflict between vying local powers and complex exchanges of culture and religion. This proliferation of encounter was twofold. First, with the growth of the city-states of Genoa, Pisa, and Venice, and the spread of trade, Christianity saw an increase in contact with Islamdom on the northern African and eastern Mediterranean coastlines. The availability of sea routes not only provided a new means to import “Oriental” artifacts, but it also served to facilitate the development of a shared taste in architecture and cultural practices, vocabularies, meanings, and interests that cut across localities. Second, the pan-European expansionist Crusades, which originally began in France in 1095 and saw its most decisive defeat with the conquest of Acre by the Mamluks in 1291, opened western Europe to the Islamic world by bringing the Iberian Peninsula, Muslim North Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean shores closer together. War and conquest in this fashion brought about commercial activities in such a way that not only supplied war and colonization materials to the warring regions, but also allowed the western Christian forces to take an active part in

to the long-term consequences of Japanese state formation from the medieval to the early modern periods.

The demographic shift in population growth meant a considerable increase in demand for non-European goods, such as spices and luxurious textiles, whose supply provided profitable business for the new urbanite merchant class engaged in maritime trade.


Consider the case of Venice: the Arabic influence on Venetian architecture, which in part was heavily influenced by Byzantine culture, is a powerful reminder of the interregional complex of the Mediterranean regions. See D. Howard, Venice and the East: The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture 1100–1500 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 2–5.

The first Crusade started in Clermont with the speech of Pope Urban II in 1095, calling for the conquest of Jerusalem.
the importation of ideas, texts, and cultural materials from the Muslim Levant to northern and southern Europe.\footnote{As a result of the Crusades, certain Muslim customs spread into late medieval Western Europe. Dress codes and general taste were imported from the Muslim world (mainly Muslim Spain, Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus) to the northern shores of eastern Mediterranean cities. But the momentum of exchange primarily involved ideas, philosophies, and “oriental romance” from “Byzantium, Georgia, Armenia and Arabia/Persia.” F. Cardini, \textit{Europe and Islam}, trans. by C. Beamish (London: Blackwell, 2001), 84. The first translations from Arabic texts into Latin, for instance, were completed around 1150 in Spain. As Cardini notes, this “was to change the face of Western learning.” Ibid., 84.}

At the heart of this Levantine interrelation between South European, North African, and Mesopotamian regions was a greater fusion of Christian and Islamic civilizations, as symbols, rituals, and popular expectations of imminent transformation, in the form of millenarian cultures, spread throughout the region in unprecedented ways. The consequence of this process of exchange by the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as has been noted by Cornell Fleischer, was the interconnection of the northern and southern Mediterranean shores, sharing certain cultural traditions that mainly included common traits of millenarian expectation.\footnote{Since \textit{A Mediterranean Apocalypse} has not yet been published, I refer to Subrahmanyam’s brief description of Fleischer’s work in “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” \textit{Modern Asian Studies} 31, no. 3 (1997): 750.} By extension, as has been argued in a seminal article by Subrahmanyam, the 1500s saw the crystallization of pan-civilizational exchange of millenarian symbols, myths, and traditions that helped to develop imperial projects from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.\footnote{See S. Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” 735–62.} In the first half of the millennium, the Mediterranean domain in a wide sense provided a creative setting for the intermingling of cultures, involving momentous shifts along dimensions of reflexivity in terms of apocalyptic attempts to redefine the relationship between the mundane and transcendental worlds.\footnote{The above remarks will be central to Chapter Four, where I will attempt to link the Muharram rituals to the Catholic ceremonies of self-flagellation performed in the Iberian Peninsula.}

The notion of “connected history,” coined by Subrahmanyam, invites us to consider the circulation of ideas, myths and rituals, in which cultures relentlessly maintain close proximity in hybrid spaces, wherein identity and alterity vie for power with unyielding intensity.
The appearance of the Safavid nomadic chieftaincy on the Eurasian stage is closely tied to such histories of cultural interrelation; histories that would primarily involve a look at the Irano-Mesopotamian encounter with Central Asia. Prior to a historical account of the Safavids, however, let us begin with the broader historical perspective of Islamdom from the ninth/tenth centuries to the thirteenth century, and the importance of Islam in the transcultural age of interconnected histories.

2. The Turko-Persian Ecumene and the Rise of Sufi Brotherhoods

When non-Arabs became the rulers and obtained royal authority and control over the whole Muslim realm, the Arabic language suffered corruption. It would almost have disappeared, if the concern of Muslims with the Qur’ān and the Sunnah, which preserves Islam, had not also preserved the Arabic language. This [concern] became an element in favor of the persistence of the sedentary dialect used in the cities. But when the Tartars and Mongols, who were not Muslims, became the rulers in the East, this element in favor of the Arabic language disappeared, and the Arabic language was absolutely doomed. No trace of it has remained in these Muslim provinces: the non-Arab ʿIrāq, Khurāsān, Southern Persia, eastern and western India, Transoxania, the northern countries, and Anatolia. The Arabic style of poetry and speech has disappeared, save for a [remnant]. Instruction in [what little Arabic is known] is a technical matter using rules learned from the sciences of the Arabs and through memorizing their speech. [It is restricted] to those persons whom God has equipped for it. The sedentary Arabic dialect has largely remained in Egypt, Syria, Spain, and the Maghrib, because Islam still remains and requires it. Therefore, it has been preserved to some degree. But in the provinces of the non-Arab ʿIrāq and beyond to the East, no trace or source of [the Arab language] has remained. Even scientific books have come to be written in the Persian language, which is also used for teaching Arabic in class.49

In this passage Ibn Khaldun articulates a sense of nostalgia over an eroding Arabic literary culture. But what characterizes the above statement is also a recognition of the widespread expansion of the Persianate culture in the fourteenth century, a development that caused Ibn

Khaldun to lament as the popularity of Persian replaced Arabic as the lingua franca of Islamdom. Although, as Ibn Khaldun correctly notes, the Mongol conquest of the mid-thirteenth century greatly helped the ongoing vernacular transformations away from Arabic in the Islamicate world, the shift in the choice of writing literary and political texts in neo-Persian (darik) was, however, first undertaken around the tenth century at the Samani court (819–1004) in Transoxania, which later expanded under the rule of the Buyids (932–1062) and Persianized Turks, like the Ghaznavids (989–1149).\(^5\) The rise of the Muslim Persian states as representatives of an Arab-Iranian cultural synthesis in the post-High Caliphate age (692–945) characterizes a major shift of civilizational importance; this development signaled the extraordinary efflorescence of the Islamized Persianate cosmopolitan culture that expanded over large areas of Anatolia, Transoxania, and western India, where an exemplary instance of Arabic-Persian creolization and vernacularization took place.

Two centuries earlier, Abu-l-Rayhan al-Biruni, the famous Khwarazmian-Iranian scientist, in his *Kitab fi tahqiq ma li-l-Hind*, dates the reign of Sabuktigin at Ghaznah, Afghanistan, as the ‘the days of the Turks’ (‘ayyam at-turk), a term that underlines an increased interconnection between Irano-Mesopotamian, Anatolian-Mediterranean, and Central Asian regions with the gradual migration of the Turks.\(^5\) To all appearances, the eleventh century was a time when relations between the sedentary civilizations and the (semi) nomadic populations of Central Asia crossed a major threshold, whereby migration, conquest, and conversion set off critical socio-political and cultural organizational changes in Islamdom; a process which reached its apogee with the Mongol incursion in the thirteenth century when nomad power reached the full capacity of its political organizational potential in Eurasia.\(^5\) The emergence of the Turkish people, in both their detribalized

\(^5\) Neo-Persian was a simplified literary form of the Pahlavi language (Middle Persian) from the Sassanian era, written mainly in Arabic script. By raising this point, I am not ignoring the Abbasid debt to the Sassanian Persian system of administration and government. Rather, I am merely indicating how indeed it was under the Samani power that the neo-Persian language emerged as the idiom of administration and court literary culture.


(Ghaznavids and Mamluks) and tribalized form (Seljuks), ultimately opened the way for the establishment of the Persianized-Turkic powers, such as the Ottomans and the Safavids, in Asia Minor and Irano-Mesopotamian steppes and the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in the thirteenth century in the Panjab and most of the Gangetic plain (Hindustan).

The appearance of the Turkish and Persianate cultures in the middle period (945–1503), to use Hodgson’s periodization, marks an era of unprecedented political fragmentation and cultural creolization in the context of nomadic and sedentary relations. According to Hodgson, the period of genesis (c. 600–945) saw the replacement of Syriac and Pahlavi (“Irano-Semitic”) traditions by an Arabic culture on post-axial, agrarian, and citied civilization, underpinning an inclusive Muslim community between the Nile and Oxus rivers that developed on this basis. By contrast, the middle period was marked by a widening gap between state and society, the diffusion of Sufism and the expansion of neo-Persian as a literary language in what Richard Frye calls the “Iranian-Islamic Æcumene,” throughout a large part of the Afro-Eurasian landmass. In an article published posthumously in 1970, Hodgson described this period as an age of great cosmopolitan creativity that reached its height by the sixteenth century, when the main region of Islamdom came under the control of empires (Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid), administrated by military patronage states.

In broad terms, the most critical threshold of the transcultural age in the (early) middle period of Islamic history was the Turkish migration from Central Asia. The successive waves of Turkish migration from the steppe grass lands of Central Asia to the settled regions of Anatolia and the Irano-Mesopotamian plateau began in the ninth

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53 Hodgson lists six periods of Islamic history: the formative (to 692), the High Caliphate (to 945), the International Civilization (to 1258), the Age of Mongol Prestige (to 1503), the era of Gunpowder Empires (to c. 1800) and Modern Times, with the emergence of nation-states. The middle period groups together the third and fourth periods of this list. See Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, 98.


55 This was the fifth phase of Islamicate history, namely the era of “Gunpowder Empires.” In this article, Hodgson argues that egalitarian and cosmopolitan elements in Islam, incorporated and institutionalized in the civilization of Irano-Semitic societies, made a lasting impact on interregional developments on a hemispheric-wide base. See Hodgson, “The Role of Islam in World History,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (1970): 99–123.
chapter three

century, when Turkish slaves were recruited in order to create a new military order, loyal to the Byzantine and early Caliphate state. The Turkish socio-military institution, in its various forms, had been in a sense the backbone of the Caliphate at least from the end of the ninth century onwards. With the Ghaznavids, military slave elites of Turkish origin but Persianate culture emerged as heirs to the Caliphate political order. The Seljuks’ suzerainty in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, however, marked the establishment of the first non-slave Turkish nomadic empire that led the way to the revival of Orthodox Sunnism. The establishment of a non-military slave Turkish power with vast expansionist aspirations represents the first major nomadic conquest movement with religious renewalist dimensions.

The migration of tribal Turks to the Anatolian region at the beginning of the eleventh century led to major demographic transformations. This occurred in two major successive historical phases. The Seljuk victory over the Byzantine forces at the battle of Manzikert in 1071 inaugurated the first decisive stage, with major political consequences: the establishment of Turkish-speaking principalities in the western borderland marches as a way to challenge Byzantine control over Anatolia and the Islamic heartland. The ascent of Tughril to the Caliphate seat of Baghdad in 1055, in this context, marked a

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56 Although they served in the Muslim armies as early as 674 CE, the systematic introduction of Turkish slaves into the Caliphate army occurred under the reign of Mansur. D. Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 152. However, the creation of the slave soldier institution consisted of both free mercenaries recruited abroad and captured Turks among the tribes in Transoxania, known in the Muslim world as Mamluks. See P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 74–80.

57 It is important to note that the Persianization of the Turkish people was a process already in the making with the rise of Central Asian trade in the fifth and early sixth centuries, when the Turks were in constant contact with the pre-Islamic Sassanid culture. Apart from pastoral nomads, the pre-Islamic Turkish society was never wholly nomadic; culturally or economically, it also included certain urban elements that had been shaped by commercial interests. See L. Kwanten, *Imperial Nomads* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1979), 32, 39–40; C. Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey: A General Survey of the Material and Spiritual Culture and History c. 1071–1330* (New York: Taplinger, 1968), 5–7; and R. N. Frye and A. Sayili, “Turks in the Middle East before the Saljuqs,” *Journal of Asian and Oriental Studies* 13 (1943): 194–207.

58 Though non-nomadic Turkish settlers were already living in Khurasan, Khwarazm, and Transoxania by the time of the Arab conquest in the seventh and eighth centuries, the most expansive southward migration of the Turks, as settlers and pastoralists, occurred mainly in the eleventh century, which changed the ethnic composition of the Middle East.
combination of decisive leadership and military prowess as well as a deteriorating political and economic situation within the Islamic territories that enabled the first tribal Turks, the Seljuks, to make themselves the masters of the Irano-Mesopotamian plateau. This socio-demographic process, known as “Turkization,” entered a second phase of development with the Mongol invasion of 1258, which intensified Turkish migration to the western regions of Anatolia, replacing the Greek-Christian peasant population with Turkish groups of nomadic origin. Though sporadic movements occurred throughout the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, the fourteenth century highlights the finalization of a major demographical shift in Anatolia that involved radical changes of socio-cultural significance.

The transition from the early to the late middle period, as seen in the context of successive Turkish migrations to Anatolia, can be regarded as a revolutionary phase in two important ways. At one level, the complex process of cross-fertilization of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish cultural elements from the end of the High Caliphate to the establishment of the Ilkhanate era in Iran in the thirteenth century represents a new period of creative cross-cultural fusion and a new stage of the Turko-Persian ecumene. The Turko-Persian Islamicate culture that had crystallized in the eastern Iranian margin in the eleventh century, and was later exported to cultural zones of South Asian India, was a product of intercivilizational encounters and open to further developments of that sort. In the particular case of Turkization of Anatolia from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, the regional mixture of agrarian, nomadic tribal and urban settings was particularly favorable to cultural blending. In a sense, the fusion of Arabic-scriptural, Byzantine-Greek, Turkish-nomadic, and Persianate-lettered traditions of the middle period paved the way for the creation of new cultural complexes.

60 Although Claude Cahen has argued that it is obviously impossible to give any figure for the Turkish migration into Asia Minor, evidence indicates a long-term process of conversion of the natives to Islam with the migration of Turkish Muslims to the region from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. See C. Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey*, 143; and V. L. Ménage, “The Islamization of Anatolia,” in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. N. Levtzion (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 52–67.
At another level, this “mixed borderland civilization” also became a meeting ground of different religious traditions. With regard to the interdependent process of migration and encounter, the blending of steppe (instrumental) religious practices of the Turkish nomads with the world (soteriological) religions of Iran-Semitic and Byzantine-Greek societies represents the crystallization of new cultural milieus, where nomadic and settled civilizations had been amalgamated to some extent; this leveling of cultural and religious capacities opened the way for the breakdown of civilizational frontiers between steppe and sown. With the Islamization of Turks and the Turkization of Islam, shamanist ritual practices, such as performances to attain a trance state in order to communicate with the world of spirits for the purpose of fertility, healing, protection, and aggression, were creatively cross-fertilized with Islamic eschatology and the soteriological notion of divine guidance to pass reckoning on judgment day towards salvation.

From the eleventh century onwards, and especially in the post-Mongol period, the most original expression of this inter-civilizational process was the appearance of Anatolian Sufism, in its distinct shamanistic form of Darvish Islam or “Islamicized shaman” (Baba Islam) as a dominant aspect of the daily life of the Turkish nomadic population, and indeed the main factor for the conversion of rural Asia Minor to Islam. The strong popularity of spiritual leaders called Babas (hence the name Babais for their followers) and spread of mystical architectural

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62 As it has already been noted in Chapter One, the difference between instrumental and soteriological religions is primarily based on their experiential orientation towards the supernatural: whereas the former type represents the belief in salvation manifested in practices directed towards appeasing the supernatural with the aim of redemption, the latter is directed towards making specific things happen in the world through magical practices of shamanism and spirit-possession. In this sense, instrumental religions are not based on faith, but rather on the notions of efficacy of spiritual experience to control the supernatural. See D. N. Gellner, The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 69–72.
63 As Kortepeter notes, the notion of the “Islamized shaman” was also synonymous with the Turkish term of “bagiji” or sorcerer, which could imply the supernatural ability to elicit magic involving the use of medicine to harm others. C. M. Kortepeter, The Ottoman Turks: Nomad Kingdom to World Empire (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1991), 19. For a study of shamanism and Islam, see R. Sultanova, From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), especially 17–27.
and textual practices in what Ethel Sara Wolper has called “interpretive communities” reflected the widespread tendency to combine certain elements of Shi‘i, Sunni, Sufi and Christian beliefs with the Persianate ethos of chivalry (javanmardi), and shamanistic practices, to which Baba Islamist groups like the Bektashi Darvishism best attests.64 The spread of shrines and Sufi lodges or khaneqah served as cosmopolitan meeting places for a growing and dense network of spiritual figures, pilgrims, travelers and merchants as spaces that reflected the changing tastes and urban practices of the period.65 In many ways, as H. R. Roemer describes it, the period was also characterized as an age of spiritual configurations during which a “popular religiosity became widespread… These included a marked willingness to believe in miracles, a cult of saints with the growth of much frequented places of pilgrimage, and even the veneration of ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad…”66 Correspondingly, the popularization of Shi‘i saintly figures, like ‘Ali, as a source of mystical veneration by various Islamic sects, especially the Sufi-Sunni orders, generated what has been called by Cahen the “Shi‘itization of Sunnism.”67 The development of Sufiesque heterodoxies, Shi‘i sectarianism, and millenarian movements in the later middle period can in part be credited to this process of religious cross-fertilization, whereby Shi‘i, Sunni, and

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64 Wolper describes “interpretative communities” as associations that were formed around Sufi saints whose poetry would be the foundation text for their devotees. E. S. Wolper, Cities and Saints: Sufism and the Transformation of Urban Space in Medieval Anatolia (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 19–23. The warrior ethos of javanmardi was an ideal life, involving a chivalrous spirit based on physical masculine strength. Such ethos, originating from pre-Islamic Persianate culture, was later incorporated into the futuvvat fraternal circles of middle period Islamic history. See Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 168–69.


67 Quoting C. Cahen in S. A. Arjomand, Shadow of God, 67.
Sufi practices and creeds intermingled in close proximity and at times overlapped in the shifting spaces of everyday interaction. 68

But it was with the emergence of the Turkish Sufi brotherhood orders—the so-called “ghazi” warriors”—that gave political expression to this civilizational fusion. The origins of these brotherhood associations can be traced back to the urban-based “pure brethren” of the Qaramati movement, which played a great role in the development of the Islamic guilds of the tenth century, and the futuvvat associations that were revived under the reign of Caliph Nasir (1158–1225) in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, as a consequence of the expansion of trade and revival of towns under Seljuk rule. 69 In the early middle periods, these relatively autonomous movements, as popular militia and volunteer Sufi-guild associations, played a crucial role in the local governance of eastern Islamdom, which reached maturity as a political and social force from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. 70 With their own Sufi mystical ceremonies and chivalric ritual practices, the futuvvat associations combined ethical codes of

68 For the best exposition of Sufi history of the later middle period, see S. A. Arjomand, “Religious Extremism (ghuluw), Sufism and Sunnism in Safavid Iran: 1501–1722,” Journal of Asian History 15, no. 1 (1981): 1–35. It is important to note, however, that Sufism and Islamic messianic movements (especially in the Shi‘i form of Mahdism) existed in earlier periods of Islamic history. The histories of the ‘Abbasid and Isma‘ili (Fatimid) revolutions in the eighth and the tenth centuries, for instance, are replete with apocalyptic and messianic beliefs in the Mahdi that “spread widely beyond other extremist Shi‘ite groups.” S. A. Arjomand, “Messianism, Millenialism and Revolution in early Islamic History,” in Imagining the End Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America, ed. A. Amanat and M. T. Bernhardsson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 114.

69 In literal terms, “futuvvat” means youthfulness and by implication chivalry. M. Keyvani, Artisans and Guild Life in the Later Safavid Period: Contributions to the Economic and Social History of Persia, Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, vol. 65 (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1982), 25. See also B. Lewis, “Islamic Guilds,” The Economic History Review 8, no. 1 (1937): 20–37. Although they were consolidated under An-Nasi, according to Arnakis, the futuvvat associations first appeared in the ninth century in the form of “volunteer warrior guilds.” C. G. Arnakis, “Futuwwa Traditions in the Ottoman Empire: Akhis, Bektashi Dervishes, and Craftsmen,” Journal of Near Eastern Studies 12, no. 4 (1953): 322–47. However, as Kashifi explained in his Futuvvatname-yi sultaní, the term is also associated with the Middle Persian word of javanmardi or chivalry. Kashífi, Futuvvatname-yi sultaní (Tehran: Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran, no. 113, 1971), 9. This raises the possibility that the futuvvat were a socio-political development from the late Sassanid period. See M. Zakeri, Sásáníd Solderi in Early Muslim Society: The Origins of ‘Ayyáran and Futuwwa (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995).

70 As Hodgson notes, by the end of the middle period, the futuvvat had become the mystical expression of urbanite guild associations with their own political and religious authority. See M. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, vol. 2, 130–31.
egalitarianism, in the Persianate form of javanmardi and the Mazdaki notions of piety, with a non-egalitarian, charismatic, elitist ethos of master (pir)-disciple and patron-client relations. Ties of blood and kinship affiliations were less important than competition for the sacred status of leadership in the clubs, manifested in the paradoxical notion of “first among equals,” which reflected the character of the associations as spiritual brotherhoods.

Especially in the later middle period (1258–1503) after the Mongol invasion culminating in the conquest of Baghdad in 1258 and the disintegration of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, the futuvvat associations began to merge with the Anatolian-Sufi orders, a process that was begun by Umar Suhrawardi, the chief advisor of Caliph Nasir, and spread further into Islamdom during the fourteenth century with the increasing intermingling of rural and urban relations as a consequence of migration and nomadic incursions. The blending between futuvvat and the Anatolian-Sufi orders created the akhiyat al-fityan or akhi movements, which tended to fuse the horseback warrior culture of Central Asia with the sedentary Iran-Semitic Messianic traditions. Recruited mainly from the craftsmen and composed of associations of young men organized as guilds in Anatolia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the akhis shared the basic rules of futuvvat.

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71 The Mazdakis were a Zoroastrian gnostic movement that emerged as a sectarian movement in sixth century pre-Islamic Persia. They advocated radical egalitarian values with strong this-worldly inclinations. The precise influence of the late Sassanian tradition of javanmardi and Mazdakis on the futuvvat, which also included similar youthful masculinist ritual practices and ethical ideals, is not clear. But if my claim based on a transcultural conception of hybrid civilizational complexes is correct, it is sound to argue that the pre-Islamic Persian tradition also contributed to the populist Sufi brotherhood orders in the middle period. For a brief exposition on the influence of javanmardi tradition in Islamic history, see C. Cahen in The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 4, 320–21. For the best description of the Mazdaki movement, see Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 170 and 265–71.

72 E. Wolper, Cities and Saints, 21; and B. Lewis, “Islamic Guilds,” 27–8. It is important to note that such a process appears to have already occurred with the first wave of Turkish migration to Anatolia and the Irano-Mesopotamian region. The emergence of the Qalandariyah movement in eastern Khurasan and the western parts of central Asia in the tenth century serves as a good example of the rise of Sufi brotherhoods in the early middle period. See A. T. Karamustafa, God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period 1200–1550 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994).

warrior ethos of the steppe regions and the Quranic notion of justice, the brotherhoods lived by a strict code of masculine honor, an ethic of bravery, embedded in a culture of reverence for sacred spiritual persons (shaman) and belief in the potential to unite the mundane with the supernatural world through ritual, ceremony, and, above all, war. Throughout Islamdom, the brotherhood orders began to organize themselves according to a hierarchy, revolving around the charismatic leader, his deputies (khalifah), and ordinary followers (murids). With relative autonomy, they constituted a counter political culture that created its own political conception of Islamic justice, contravention of the shari‘a, distinctive ceremonies (i.e., dance-trance rituals of zikr), clothing, cloister (takkiya), and incorporation of various heterodoxical beliefs and doctrines, based on what Ahmet T. Karamustafa calls “an uncompromising antinomianism.”

The emergence of the Safavid-Sufi brotherhood in the fourteenth century identifies a fascinating example of this civilizational experimentation. In the following discussion, I will concentrate on the cultural aspects of the Safavid origins as a Sufi brotherhood order and akhi association, and its eventual sedentarization into an imperial state. The aim here is to show the ways in which the steppe-Mesopotamian cultural basis of the Safavid movement marked a distinct political event in Islamic history.

3. The Rise of the Safavid-Imami Empire, 1502–1629 CE

In his famous poetical work, “The Divan of Khata‘i,” the first shah of the Safavid dynasty, Isma‘il I (1502–24), uses the word akhiias as one of the designations given to his militant followers of tariqatism. The occurrence of the name, used in a weakened sense in his poem, signifies the origins of the Safavid movement as an urban religious guild, united by the general code of honor and customs of initiation distinctive to all Sufi brotherhoods in Islamdom. As in the futuvvat, the Safavids identified a fraternity association that belonged to the ghazi fighters for the faith, who constituted the militant aspect of the organizations. Though the origins of the associations can be traced to

74 A. T. Karamustafa, God’s Unruly Friends, 17.
the quietist Sufi order, the Safavids grew into a militant revolutionary
force, retaining much of their ghazi tradition as they eventually estab-
lished a centralized imperial state in the early sixteenth century.

Upon entering the Islamic world in the fourteenth century, the Safa-
vid Sufi order, especially in its revolutionary stage, distinguished itself
as a fraternity association based on open membership, composed of a
complex heterogeneous set of people of diverse origins that involved
fragments of various nomadic and settled people united under a char-
ismatic chief. The notion of “sectarian chieftaincy” denotes here the
central role of the chief and a set of political adherents with hetero-
doxical religious tendencies. As Ira M. Lapidus explains, tribes of this
sort “are not familial or ethnic groups but political and religious chief-
taincies whose composition varies greatly.” Relying mainly on an
agglomeration of diverse groups, whom the chieftain unites based on
shared interest in politics and radical creed, this type of associational
organization defies the Ibn Khaldunian definition of tribal organi-
ization as based exclusively on mere kinship and religious feeling
(‘asabiyya). Sectarian-chieftaincy, in contrast, involves an inclusive
and heterogeneous culture that is politically united under a central
authority, namely the chief.

With the sedentarization of the chieftaincy through the pacification
of conquered territories, this chapter argues that the original sectar-
ian tendencies (at least at the state level) diminished as orthodoxy
increased in importance with state formation. On two interrelated
paths of militarization and urbanization, the Safavid Sufi order of the
fifteenth century was transformed into an imperial order with the con-
struction of a unified collective identity that marked the genesis of the
early modern Iranian public sphere.

The origins of the Safavids can be traced back to the Sunni-Sufi
order of the mystic Shaykh Safi al-Din Ishaq of the Ilkhanid period,

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77 This statement is an attempt to go beyond the functionalist notion of segmentary organization, especially as it is used by Ernest Gellner, defined exclusively in terms of lineal descent, with tribal members at each segment of the association equally balanced by others. As has been observed by a number of anthropologists, segmentary lineage theory ignores divergent cultural aspects that involve complex ambiguous relations between the actual groups of a tribe. For an interesting critique of this theory, see A. Hammoudi, “Segmentarity, Social Stratification, Political Power and Sainthood: Reflections on Gellner’s Theses,” Economy and Society 9, no. 3 (1980): 279–83.
whose status as the spiritual head (pir) of the order after the death of Shaykh Zahid (b. 1218) in 1301 gave him leadership status of the movement that gave rise to the label “Safawiyya,” or the Safavid in southern Anatolia and northern Syria, regions overwhelmingly populated by Turkoman tribes.\(^7^8\) In the two centuries prior to Shah Isma’il’s ascent to power in 1502, the Anatolian Irano-Mesopotamian region witnessed a period of decentralization with the fall of the Mongol Ilkhanid rule.\(^7^9\) The rise of various heterodoxical movements with strong Sufesque tendencies identified a cultural climate that shifted centers of political and religious power away from the hands of the traditional bureaucratic elites of the early middle period into the hands of the emerging Sufi circles, like the Safavids. Following the breakdown of the centralization policy of the Ottoman sultan in the aftermath of Timur’s campaigns in the first half of the fifteenth century, the Safavid household (dudman) not only attracted the Turkomans, but also the Mongols who, like the Turks, preferred Sufism over more shari’a-minded Islam. The order gained popularity with the consolidation of Ottoman rule after the conquest of Constantinople and the succeeding expansion of the empire in Anatolia, which led to the disintegration of the quasi-independent Turkoman tribes and an increase in conditions favorable to the success of religious heterodoxy that bore political overtones.

In 1459–60 the Safavid Sufi order evolved into a militant mystical (ghulat) movement with the succession of Shaykh Junayd to power, during which it underwent a momentous transformation from contemplative inner-worldly Sufism to the openly outer-worldly heterodox “extreme Shi’ism” (ghuluww).\(^8^0\) The main feature of this transformation emerged when the Safavid household began to acquire quasi-divine attributes and promoted military aspirations for conquest. During

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\(^7^8\) In particular, the regions of the Tabriz-Caspian axis can also be regarded as fertile ground for movements during the period immediately after the conversion of the Mongols to Islam in the Ilkhan period.


\(^8^0\) According to Michel Mazzaouï, the early history of the Safavids can be divided into three phases: (a) Shaykh Saḥī’s predecessors, (b) the growth of the Sufi order from Shaykh Saḥī to Shaykh Ibrahīm (to 1449), and (c) the Safavid revolutionary movement, from Shaykh Junayd to Shah Isma’il (to 1502). See M. Mazzaouï, *Origins of the Safavids: Ṣīʿism, Ṣūfism, and the Gulāt* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1972), 71–72.
the years of exile spent in eastern Anatolia (Azerbaijan) from 1447 to 1459, Junayd recruited considerable numbers of followers from the Turkoman tribes that associated the extremist beliefs in the divinity of ʿAlī, the first Imam of Shiʿi Islam, with that of himself, as the male descendent of the sacred family. In later years, the heterodoxical claim of divinity played a crucial role in attracting followers for Shah Ismaʿil as a God-chieftain of the Qizilbash groups. The Safavid movement entered the final stages of its revolutionary zeal with the capture of Tabriz in 1502, during which a ruthless religious policy was carried out to eradicate millenarian extremism, popular Sufism, and suppression of Sunnism with the imposition of Imami orthodoxy.

The transformation of the Safavids from the simple and quietist tariqa order to a militant revolutionary force in the mid-fifteenth century represents a crucial period in an escalation of the process of interconnection between the Central Asian and Irano-Semitic civilizations. On the one hand, old shamanistic beliefs continued to be blended with the extremist Shiʿi conception of the notions of divine incarnation of God in man and the Christian belief in the trinity; on the other hand, though closely related, the fusion of certain extremist Shiʿi practices with the Sufi belief in the mystical nature of reality led to the appearances of new heretical movements and millenarian orders, which developed, as Cornell H. Fleischer describes, throughout the “Mediterranean and central Islamdom from the late fifteenth until the late sixteenth centuries.” Along with the advent of Shiʿi Imami Islam, especially during the fourteenth century when various quietist

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81 The Safavid household’s claim to political-religious authority was strengthened by their self-proclaimed prophetic household descent. This was mainly due to a forged genealogy, fabricated in the late ghulat stage of the movement, in which the Safavid chiefs were direct descendants of the Prophet through the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim.


and messianic spiritual movements whose polemics often displayed Alid tendencies, myriad sectarian movements continued to spread throughout Islamdom, including movements that lent themselves to the peaceful growth and development of Sufi orders such as the one founded in Ardabil by Shaykh Safi.85

Two main factors explain these inter-civilizational processes. First, beginning in the thirteenth century, the laissez-faire approach of the Mongol rulers vis-à-vis religion led to the growth of religious heterodoxies that continued to spread well into the fifteenth century.86 The period produced a fluid ambiance of mixed religious practices involving Christianity, extreme Shi’ism, Sunni Islam, and a veritable explosion of Sufi movements with pro-Shi‘i tendencies. Second, the centralization of the Ottoman chieftaincy into an empire with the institutionalization of Sunni orthodoxy, beginning with the reign of Bayazid (1389–1402), led to the growing persecution of heretical religious movements throughout the Ottoman territories. This process was a complement to the imposition of taxes on farming as a source of revenue for the centralizing Ottoman Empire, which were applied both to the peasantry and to semi-nomadic groups. Even though uprisings by Darvish Turkoman groups, like the Baba Ashiq movement in 1241, originally occurred in the first half of the thirteenth century, the greater frequency of revolts in the fifteenth century reflects their stubborn resistance to Ottoman rulers, and not their efforts to subdue the nomadic heretical forces that roamed the peripheral regions of the empire. This also led to the emergence of revolutionary movements from diverse grassroots chieftain groups with their radical ideologies that included mixed revivalist, utopian, and eschatological themes.

It was at this critical historical juncture that chieftain and sectarian identities merged to form the grassroots religious-political foundation of the Safavid revolutionary movement. Seen in this context, the Safavid chieftaincy identified a heterogeneous composition of followers recruited among the tribal groups (known in Central Asia as uymaq or

85 Reference can be made here to the popular movements of the Sarbedars in Khurasan, Isma‘ilis, and various Sufi tariqa orders, like the Hurufis and Baktashis, just to mention a few. It may be noted that popular reverence for the Household of the Prophet, especially ‘Ali, marked a prevalent form of civic and courtly religious life of Sunni populations in the pre-Safavid period. See M. E. Subtelny, Timurids in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran (Boston: Brill, 2007), 192–228.

tribes) located in diverse places like Anatolia, Syria, and Central Asia. Known as Qizilbash or “redheads” after their knightly red caps with twelve scalps, representing the twelve Shi‘i Imams, the followers of the Safavid order mainly consisted of Turkoman nomads, descended from the Seljuk Ghuzz Turks, that faced persecution by the Ottomans as the latter transformed their frontier-chieftaincy into a sedentary empire in the early fifteenth century. With the successive campaigns in Caucasia, Shaykh Junyad (d. 1460) and his son, Shaykh Haydar (d. 1488), also relied on Shi‘i extremist supporters from Anatolia and Syria (Sham), which enabled the sectarian order to attain multi-ethnic features. This was mainly apparent in the non-Qizilbash support for the Sufi household with the loyalty of the Persian-speaking populace, the Tajiks, which gradually transformed the order into a cosmopolitan Sufi (tariqat) movement.

In broad terms, the Safavid-Qizilbashi movement—during its early revolutionary phase—was political by character, representing the last bid for power by the Anatolian and Caspian regions, which had always resisted Islam in its centralized and orthodox form. In terms of creed, the Qizilbash followed Shi‘i traditions in recognizing the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law ʿAli and his descendants as the leaders of the Islamic community. Similar to the Ottomans, on the political organizational level, the movement also identified itself with a ghazi warrior tradition in the context of the Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb ethos of conquest. Under the headship of Shaykh Junyad, the Safavid followers evolved into an organized ghazi order, fighting the non-believers along the Muslim frontiers between eastern Anatolia and Georgia across the Caucasus. Similar to the Ottoman chieftaincy, the organization of a band of spiritual warriors fighting the unbelievers along the frontiers of Islam and carving out territories for their chiefs and their followers was built around what Riza Yildirim calls the “heterodox milieu and the frontier culture” that produced an honorific culture of folk

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87 Among these tribes, generally known as Turks, were namely the Afshar, Rumlu, Bayat, Shamlu, Ustajlu, Dhu’l-Qadr, Qajar, and Takkalu groups that were subdivided into smaller groups. Iskandar Beg Munshi, *History of Shah ʿAbbās the Great by Iskandar Beg Munshi*, trans. by R. M. Savory (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1978), 1087.

88 Although, as Frederick W. Hasluck points out, the name Qizilbash did not refer to any particular “ethnological significance whatever.” F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929), 140.

legendary narratives best articulated in the hagiography (velayat-nameh) literature.\footnote{As I argue elsewhere, the structural makeup of the two chieftaincies differed primarily in their disparate forms of chieftain cultures, identified as knightly-heroic (Ottoman) and millenarian-populist (Safavid), which are essentially tied to two distinctive types of tribal political organizations: frontier-chieftaincy (Ottoman) and sectarian-chieftaincy (Safavid). The ghazi feature of the Qizilbash movement decreased in importance as it was consolidated into a heretical sectarian movement towards the end of the fifteenth century. See B. Rahimi, “Between Chieftaincy and Knighthood: A Comparative Study of Ottoman and Safavid Origins,” \textit{Thesis Eleven} 76, no. 1 (2004): 85–102. For the hagiography literature of Anatolia, see R. Yildirim, \textit{Turkomans Between Two Empires: The Origins of the Qizilbash Identity in Anatolia (1447–1514)} (PhD diss., Bilkent University Ankara, February 2008), 75–87.}

The Qizilbash attributed supernatural qualities to their hereditary leaders, who were believed to hold esoteric knowledge about the ultimate reality. This fusion of diverse sectarian elements served to articulate opposition to Sunni power, represented by the Ottomans and their allies in Central Asia, the Uzbeks. The movement in this regard was radically religious, proposing a heterodox alternative to the existing order. The sectarian ideology of the Safavids involved belief in the heretical doctrine of reincarnation (tanasukh) and the return of the deceased to the world in various forms (recalling certain practices of spirit possession);\footnote{See Babayan, \textit{The Waning of the Qizilbash}, 25–7.} moreover, it also included the belief in transmigration and the oneness of the sacred spirit incarnated in prophets and saints, and now embodied in the Sufi guide. In respect to its strong eschatological element, Safavid-Qizilbashism can therefore be described as a sectarian movement par excellence.

On the one hand, the chieftain dimension of the Safavid-Qizilbash order highlights, as mentioned earlier, the uymaq, a type of political organization based on a “territorially bounded collectivity of groups,” inclusively heterogeneous and composite, where agricultural, pastoral, and commercial (trade) economies coalesced under the charismatic leadership of an urban-based chief.\footnote{R. Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians, and Tribespeople on Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East,” in \textit{Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East}, eds. P. S. Khoury and J. Kostiner (I.B. Tauris, 1992), 68. See also J. Reid, “The Qajar Uymaq in the Safavid Period, 1500–1722,” \textit{Iranian Studies} 11, no. 1–4 (1978): 117–43; J. Reid, “Comments on Tribalism as a Socioeconomic Formation,” \textit{Iranian Studies} 12, no. 3–4 (1979): 275–81.} On the other hand, the Safavid chieftaincy also included the sectarian belief in the supreme charismatic leadership of a single chief, recognized as the divine source of
authority or perfect guide (murshid-i kamil). The political-religious role of the chief, which in practice operated in the idiom of divine persona, is that established by the original founder in which each successor inherits his predecessor’s status and kinship position. This system of perpetual succession maintained the original distribution of chieftain power within the group’s organization.

The term “Dervichism,” coined by Jean Aubin, describes the Safavid chieftaincy as a type of hereditary Sufi brotherhood organization in that “spiritual authority and material organization was passed on, hand to hand, hereditarily, with their morally privileged status and their ancestry promising the social status of the inheritors.” The heretical notion of the transmigration of divine spirit through different human bodies gave a specific flavor to the Safavid version of charismatic leadership that distinguished it from the original Ottoman chiefs as leaders of frontier holy warriors. Accordingly, the hereditary element of chiefly hierarchy adds a distinctive dimension to the Safavid chieftaincy in that, while transcending typical features of kin-based chieftain society, sovereignty is measured by the genealogical distance from a senior line of descent, regardless of sex—although the first-son-to-first-son ranking prevailed throughout the early history of the organization. The Safavid-Qizilbash warriors, in sum, can be primarily identified in regard to their religious-political structure as a dissident association with strong heretical tendencies, built around the perpetual succession of divinely ordained chiefs on hereditary terms.

At the socio-organizational level, the populist, grassroots nature of the Safavid association is most apparent in the social origins of the movement since it was supported by peasants, tribal orders, and discontented groups in Islamdom. In the fifteenth century, when the Sufi organization was gaining momentum, it reconciled its followers from

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95 This popularity was especially apparent in the Bektashi Sufi order, in which followers circulated Isma’il’s religious poetry and recognized him as a sacred person. This became a major problem for the Ottomans in their struggle to wipe out the Safavids from northwestern Iran, since most of the Janissaries, the corps of the Ottoman army, were followers of the Bektashi order. In general terms, popular support from various akhis for the Safavids in Anatolia caused a great deal of problems for the Ottomans in the sixteenth century, as testified by the 1511 Baba Shah-Quli revolt in the province of Tekke on the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia.
both the countryside and the towns. The grassroots origins of the Qizilbash were further reflected in some of the egalitarian features of their power structure. As Babayan has shown, the Qizilbash maintained—during their revolutionary stage—a conception of authority based on the notion of “corporate sovereignty” that recognized the sharing of political power among members, regardless of gender differences. This feature mainly represented the steppe traditions of an egalitarian basis of authority, which tended to erode when the movement began to evolve from chieftaincy into sedentary empire. The sharing of power among the tribal members, however, did not overshadow the sacred leadership of the chief; it only implied that this supreme authority operated in a more egalitarian manner, through a less stratified power structure. Although the gradual process of hierarchization also transformed the Safavid chieftaincy into an increasingly stratified imperial order, the movement was never based on the hierarchy of distinction. The tradition of love for the spiritual guide was a way to preserve the mystical idea of spiritual union on an equal basis, becoming one with the supernatural world with unconditional devotion for the God-chief.

At the socio-cultural level, central to the identity of the Qizilbash and to their symbolic resources in the struggle for power, the Safavid chieftaincy set itself apart as a specific kind of Sufi brotherhood order. This cultural trait of the Qizilbash warriors—especially evident in their extremist stage of development, when they entered the battlefield unarmed in the belief that Shah Isma’īl’s supernatural power would protect them from the enemy—combined the ghazi spirit of holy war with the shamanistic practices of exocannibalism, decapitating the enemy’s body for consumption. The fusion of Sufi and steppe cultures, grounded in sectarian revolutionary zeal, appears to have expanded under the rule of Junayd when the emerging Qizilbash warriors began to combine the devotional practices of reverence for the Sufi master with the Shi’i belief in a messianic figure.

By the late fifteenth century, with the merging of the ethos of honor and the culture of devotion to the chief as a God-chief, the Sufi brotherhood of the Safavid order established itself as a major political power in Anatolia and the (northeastern) Iranian regions. The revolutionary

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96 In Syria, for instance, the Safavids enjoyed a large number of followers and historical accounts report a “party of Ardabil” in the city of Aleppo.

millenarian movement entered a transitional phase when Isma‘il came to power in 1502, making himself the God-chief of the new political order and proclaiming Safavid Shi‘ism with its tradition of Sufi heterodoxy as the official religion of the state.\textsuperscript{98} Though gradually into the sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries the Safavid state saw the imposition of Shi‘i orthodoxy, the intricate cohabitation between heterodoxy and Imami Shi‘ism that was originally institutionalized under Isma‘il continued to define the new political order of the empire.\textsuperscript{99} This creative fusion between competing Shi‘i traditions identified the flexible and enduring characteristic of Safavid politics that involved various state-building measures with rituals playing an integral role in the process.

4. The Safavid (Territorial) Theater State and the Rise of Isfahan, 1590–1666 CE

As the Safavid chieftaincy began to centralize power in the early sixteenth century, a new form of political order emerged that limited legitimacy to the Imami patrilineal line of the eponymous founder of the Safavid house.\textsuperscript{100} Under Shah Tahmasb I (1524–1576), the high bureaucracy headed by the Qizilbash (Turkoman) military elite and staffed by Tajik (Persian) scribes, originally institutionalized by Isma‘il I, helped to consolidate the monarchical office as the God-chief increasingly shifted toward the status of shah.\textsuperscript{101} Although the original


\textsuperscript{100} The first solid evidence of the initial patrilineralization of the Safavid household occurred when Isma‘il I signed his name “Ismail b. Haidar Al-Husayni” in his divan; the second evidence appeared when the linkage between the Safavid household and the seventh Imam Musa Kazim was forged into Safvat al-safa. See Babayan, “Sufis, Dervishes and Mullas,” 123; for similar iconographic practices of presenting the Safavids as direct descendants of Shi‘i Imams, especially Husayn, under Isma‘il see H. L. Rabino di Borgomale, \textit{Coins, Medals, and Seals of the Shahs of Iran} (1500–1941), (Hertford, Eng.: S. Austin and Sons, ltd., Oriental and General Printers, 1945), 26. This introduced an important event in the history of the Safavid chieftaincy, as the sacred household gradually lost its power-sharing features to a more patrimonial conception of divine lineage.

\textsuperscript{101} Tajiks were the “men of the pen” that filled the ranks of the bureaucracy in the Persian tradition of civil servants. They provided civil administrative service, as the Safavid-Qizilbash order gradually incorporated them in the new empire. In 1508, Mir Najm al-Din, a converted Tajik landed elite, masterminded the massacre of Sufis from
sectarianism continued unabated well into the reign of Isma‘il I, under Tahmasb I the loyalty of the Qizilbash to the shah with a call to the Shah-savani (“those who love the shah,” a name adopted later by nomadic tribes in eastern Anatolia) as monarch rather than as God-chief implied the initial routinization of charismatic leadership from sacred to an increasingly temporal this-worldly power.\textsuperscript{102}

Central to the consolidation of the patrimonial office of the shah was the policy of downplaying the heterodox origins of the Safavid movement. This process, first and foremost, entailed the discouragement of Sufi-shamanistic practices and apocalyptic expectations, primarily prevalent in the Safavid-Qizilbash chieftaincy. Under Isma‘il I, the policy of the ritual cursing (tabarra‘iyan) of the enemies of Imam ‘Ali, especially the first three caliphs of early Islam, and Sunnis in general, helped to expedite the conversion of the Sunni population to Shi‘ism.\textsuperscript{103} According to Calmard, under ‘Abbas I, ritual cursing became solely focused on ‘Umar, the second Caliph, whose day of

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\textsuperscript{102} As Tapper has demonstrated, the name of “Shāhsevan” in its earliest form was used to designate tribal groups loyal to the shah, though the actual formation of a tribal confederation was not until the time of Nadir Shah in the early eighteenth century. See R. Tapper, “Shāhsevan in Safavid Persia,” \textit{BSOAS} 37, no. 2 (1974): 321–54.

\textsuperscript{103} The process of the conversion of the Iranian populace was a nominal one at its initial stage, since it involved slight changes in daily religious practices. Sunnism survived well into the formative stage of the empire until the rise of ‘Abbas I to power, during which the process of conversion to Shi‘ism was greatly enhanced. While ritual cursing was made incumbent by ‘Ali Karaki, the public practices were a radical departure from the traditional religious practices of dissimulation, which most Imami clerics endorsed. See A. Jacobs, “Sunni and Shi‘i Perceptions, Boundaries and Affiliations in Late Timurid and Early Safavid Persia: an Examination of Historical and Quasi-Historical Narratives,” unpublished PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 1999, 7; and S. Arjomand, \textit{Shadow of God}, 165–66. With regards to the public character of the rituals, as mentioned in the first chapter, the tabaqa-yi tabarra‘yan, or ritual cursers who pledged themselves to the shah, walked through the streets and bazaars cursing the enemies of ‘Ali. The ritual cursers were also present during Safavid military victory celebrations against the Sunni neighbors. E. Echraqi, “Le Dār al-Saltana de Qazvin, deuxième capital des Safavides,” in \textit{Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society}, ed. C. Melville (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), 109. Although a powerful means of subduction of Sunnism, the shah and his Qizilbash had to be cautious with this anti-Sunni policy in regions previously under Timur, like the city of Herat. See Calmard, “Les Rituels Shi‘ites et le Pouvoir,” 137. For a discussion of ritual cursing, see R. Stanfield-Johnson, “Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities
assassination by a Persian murderer marked a festive occasion during which the rituals would symbolically construct a space of abjection with Sunni Islam as the embodiment of the cursed caliph.\textsuperscript{104} The element of cursing rituals overlapped with other religious ceremonies like Muharram when several effigies of ‘Umar were burnt at major public squares where mourning processions would take place.\textsuperscript{105} In one of its most contentious manifestations, public prayers that ended with ritual cursing replaced the Friday prayers performed in the Sunni communities.\textsuperscript{106} The tabarra’iyan, in a significant way, signified ritual spaces of conviviality and resentment, festivity and hatred in the theater of violence against a perceived Sunni enemy.

In the formative years of Safavid rule, during which what Babaie calls the “Shiʿification project” was at its most volatile stage of development, diverse aesthetic and symbolic strategies, combined with repressive measures, were employed with the aim of consolidating the new Imami monarchy.\textsuperscript{107} The reign of Tahmasb was pivotal in the formation of imperial Persianate Shiʿism. Tahmasb, who enjoyed the longest reign of all the Safavid shahs, continued his father’s policy of suppressing the Sunni populace, as the Sufi orders that remained loyal to Sunnism continued to come under pressure.\textsuperscript{108} Under his reign, Imami Islam was strengthened, while Persianate art forms such as poetry and music that did not praise ‘Ali and the Twelve Imams were prohibited.\textsuperscript{109} Of particular interest was the patronage of shrines of Safavid ancestors, where bestowing of precious material or renovation and construction

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\bibitem{104} J. Calmard, “Shi’i Rituals and Power II,” 161.
\bibitem{105} Ibid., 162.
\bibitem{106} R. Stanfield-Johnson, “Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities during the Reign of Tahmasp I,” 129.
\bibitem{107} S. Babaie, \textit{Isfahan and its Palaces}, 95.
\bibitem{108} Qazvin, for instance, whose Sunni community continued to grow even under the rule of Tahmasb I, faced harsh measures from the shah’s forces. The Naqshbandi are an example of a persecuted Sufi order with Sunni tendencies. See H. Algar, “The Naqshbandi Order: A Preliminary Survey of Its History and Significance,” \textit{Studia Islamica} 44 (1976): 139. The Nuqtavis, as a movement derived from the Hurufis of the earlier century, were also suppressed in cities like Kashan in 1575. Sufism was marginalized as the activities of khaniqah and tariqat centers were kept under supervision and curtailed.
\bibitem{109} R. Stanfield-Johnson, “Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities during the Reign of Tahmasp I”: 126. Tahmasb, however, gave his patronage to calligraphy and painting.
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of architectural structures bolstered the shah’s legitimacy of authority and staged state power in symbols and elaborate memorials of celestial kinship. The most problematic aspect of this patronage practice, however, was the construction or restoration of new congregational mosques. The controversy revolved around the building of congregational Friday prayer mosques, since they were deemed illegitimate during the absence of the Hidden Imam in the eye of Shi’i jurists.110 While Isma‘il and Tahmasb focused their attention on shrines, especially for members of the Prophet’s family in Mashhad and Qum or Shaykh Safi in Ardabil as the loci of spiritual and political legitimacy, the early Safavids deliberately neglected the building of new mosques.112 But this would change under ‘Abbas I when the royal patronage of new ‘Amili jurists, who would endorse the construction of congregational mosques in newly built major urban areas, helped disseminate new socio-cultural mores in emergent collective sacred spaces like the famous Royal Mosque of Isfahan (Masjid-i jadid-i ‘Abbasi).113


113 S. Babaie, Isfahan and Its Palaces, 96; and “Building on the Past: The Shaping of Safavid Architecture, 1501–76,” 42–46. See also, R. J. Abisaab, Converting Persia, 53–87. Mir Damad’s argument that clerics have the authority to lead Friday prayers during the absence of the Imam represented efforts by the pro-Safavid clerics to claim power in the newly expanding imperial order under ‘Abbas I. For Mir Damad’s position, see A. Newman, “Towards a Reconsideration of the Isfahan School of Philosophy:
One of the most salient features of the policy of orthodoxy for the subjection of Sunnism and Sufism entailed the gradual institutionalization of the Shi‘i hierocracy. This policy, mainly successful under Tahmasb I, allowed the pro-Safavid Shi‘i ‘ulama (or mujtahids) to assume religious authority, inaugurating a history of rivalry between the clerical establishment and Sufism throughout Safavid and Qajar rule.\textsuperscript{114} The relentless support of Tahmasb I for the eminent Syrian-Lebanese Shi‘i mujtahid ‘Ali Karaki, who under Isma‘il held a government post in conquered Iraq, and his clerical followers in the form of a religious decree (farman) to designate him as the deputy (na‘ib) of the Imam in 1533 paved the way towards the institutionalization of hierocratic domination.\textsuperscript{115} Since the reign of Isma‘il I, when the Shi‘i

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\textsuperscript{114} In reality, many Arab clerics opposed Safavid Shi‘ism for its claim over political authority in advance of the return of Mahdi. See A. Newman, \textit{Safavid Iran}, 36–38, Also, for a discussion of the Sufi and Safavid Shi‘i conflict, see M. Bayat, “The Rise of the Mujtahid to Power,” in \textit{Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 19–25; and also R. J. Abisaab, \textit{Converting Persia}. It should be also noted that under Shah Isma‘il I, Imami Islam, though nominally the religion of the new state, coexisted with Qizilbash Islam and Sufism. See J. Nurbakhsh, “The Key Features of Early Persian Sufism,” in \textit{The Heritage of Sufism}, vol. I, ed. L. Lewisohn (Oxford: One World Publications, 1999), xvii–xii. In a way, Tahmasb I can be identified as the first Safavid shah to have successfully imposed the policy of orthodoxy in Iran.

\textsuperscript{115} See Arjomand, \textit{The Shadow of God}, 122–59; R. J. Abisaab, \textit{Converting Persia}, 7–29 and 53–61; and A. Newman, \textit{Safavid Iran}, 24. The institutionalization of the hierocratic order corresponded to the crucial loss of institutional power of the clerical notables in that place of fuqaha, which Arjomand calls the “dogmatic party” of Shi‘i scholars. As Arjomand has forcefully argued, the incorporation of the clerical notables that consisted mainly of the pre-Safavid status group of Persian landed elites and sayyids (descendants of the Prophet) in charge of education, judiciary, and administration of religious endowment and the distribution of their revenues, into Isma‘il I’s Qizilbash Turkish empire faced serious challenges with Tahmasb’s royal patronage of Shi‘i religious professionals. Although “struggle for domination” between the two religious elite groups continued to exist throughout the sixteenth century, during which the office of sadr regained importance after Tahmasb’s death in 1576, the institution of Shi‘i hierocratic order was well in place under the reign of ‘Abbas I in 1587. For a note on this apparent struggle, see Arjomand, \textit{The Shadow of God}, 132. For the decline of the post of “Seal of Mujtahid,” a title bestowed upon Karaki, by the sadr function between 1576 and 1587, see Arjomand, “The Mujtahid of the Age and the Mullā Bashi,” in \textit{Authority and Political Culture in Shi‘ism}, ed. S. Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York, 1988), 250–62. For an account of hostilities between Persian clerical notables and the Arab ‘ulama, see E. Glassen, “Schah Isma‘il I und die theologen seiner Zeit,” in \textit{Der Islam} 48, no. 2 (1971–72): 262–63. It should be noted that the office of sadr continued to operate not merely as the post of propagation and administration of religious endowments, but also as the judiciary in the seventeenth
ʿulama of southern Iraq, Damascus, Jabal ʿAmil in Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf were invited to stay in Iran, the initial institutionalization of the new hierocratic order helped to legitimize the political power of the Safavid shahs based on claiming vicegerency (niyabat) of the Hidden Imam, which ultimately safeguarded the shah’s control over political and religious affairs. But in later periods, the Safavid institutionalization of the Imami ʿulama as an official state body gave it the lawful right to exercise monopoly over religious affairs, such as religious endowment (vaqf), imposing legal penalties (iqamat al-hudud), and collection of religious taxes and alms (zakat), aimed, ultimately, to bring an end to the religious zeal of the Shiʿi extremism of the original Sufi culture of the Safavid-Qizibashi chieftaincy. The institutionalization of orthodoxy saw its final successful phase with the accession of the last Safavid shah, Sultan Husayn (1694–1722), when the purist version of Shiʿiism, advocated by Imami ʿulama, was finally installed at the royal court.

116 The migration of the Imami ʿulama to Iran remains a polemical topic among scholars. In his article on “The Myth of Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran,” in Die Welt des Islam, 23 (1993), Newman argues that the migration of the Shiʿi ʿulama might be a myth since there is no evidence to support this claim, due to the fact that Imami scholars never migrated to Iran in large numbers. However, D. J. Stewart criticizes Newman’s claim by arguing that there was in fact a direct “influence of ʿĀmilī scholars in government policies . . . even in the early sixteenth century . . .” He adds that “it cannot be construed as an accident that the leading jurists in the Empire during its first 120 years were all ʿĀmilī.” See D. J. Stewart, “Notes on the Migration of ʿĀmilī Scholars to Safavid Iran,” in Journal of Near Eastern Studies 55, no. 2 (1996): 85; and for a broader discussion of jurist migration, see R. J. Abisaab, Converting Persia. It should also be noted that, despite apparent measures to suppress it, Sufism was used by the Safavid shahs to solidify the legitimacy of Shiʿi political power against Sunnism. For instance, the reparation and construction of many Sufi khaniqahs, the place where the Sufi ceremonies are performed, reflects the attempt to reinforce the cultural authority of the Safavids throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sufism continued to be a dominant faith among the Persian populace until the time of the reign of the last Safavid, Shah Husayn, during which Imami ʿulama, like the most famous one, the younger Baqer Majlisi, violently opposed the practice.

117 By Imami ʿulama I mainly refer to usuli mujtahids of usually non-Iranian descent that gradually won over the akhbarī Imami ʿulama, mainly of Persian descent, at the end of the eighteenth century in Iran. The Akhbarī ʿulama differed from the Usulis mainly because of their rejection of the rationalist principles on which Shiʿi jurisprudence was based. For an elaborate discussion of the akhbarī and usuli conflict, see R. Gleave, Scripturalist Islam: The History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shiʿī School (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1–30.
In conjunction with the institutionalization of orthodoxy, central to this policy was the attempt to tame the unruly Qizilbash chieftaincy. The institutionalization of central bureaucracy, standing armed forces and the advent of the golam in the Safavid household in an effort to subdue the power of the Qizilbash characterized the genesis of the Safavid territorial theater state, operating through patrimonial administration. Here, by “territorial theater state,” I mean a centralized political regime with administrative and financial infrastructure within a territorial boundary that expands to full maturity not only through tribute-taxation and means of coercion, but also constellations of representations of power through various cultural mechanisms. The notion of the Safavid imperium as a territorial state signifies a polity that is confronted by the difficult task of forging popular loyalty and of weakening resistance within the conquered territories, while advancing its hegemony through war over both domestic and external forces.

On the performative level, the territorial state also relies on the theatrical projection of power through ceremonial techniques that render power absolute and boundaries of legitimate authority impermeable.

In her original study of Safavid authority, Babaie shows how such a regime of territoriality was marked by a trajectory of cultural representations of the Persianate tradition of kingship, together with the Imami conceptions of authority and the supervision of golams in the construction of city spaces and ceremonial sites. While palaces and urban spaces of the new Safavid capital, Isfahan, constituted the political-cultural fabric of the Perso-Shiʿi Empire, they also served as stages of power where spatial organization of everyday life would reaffirm state authority over the newly integrated imperial population. In

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118 Following Spruyt, I have chosen the term “territorial state” to identify a new kind of organized polity that emerged, though in varied manifestations, in early modern societies in Eurasia. See H. Spruyt, The Sovereign State and Its Competitors (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). But, following cultural sociological approaches, I have also included the element of performance as a central feature of the early modern states in the Eurasian context. I will expand on this in Chapter Five.

119 In what perhaps can be called a revisionist approach toward Safavid history, Matthee reexamines the postulate that Safavid Iran qualifies as an imperial force comparable to the Ottomans and the Mughals. In the present study, I move away from an expansionist model of empire (building) and focus more on inventive techniques and cultural processes through which an imperial aura is enacted and (re)imagined. See R. Matthee, “Was Safavid Iran an Empire?,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 53, no. 1–2 (2010): 233–65.

120 Babaie, Isfahan and Its Palaces, 2008.
many ways, as Colin Mitchell correctly observes, the Safavid ability to incorporate an amalgamate of “clusters” of textual performative practices of authority from Perso-Islamic and Central Asiatic traditions played a pivotal role in the empire’s span of rule of over two hundred years. The link between city and state-building as a performative process, partly in line with Geertz’s notion of culture as text, provides a new way of thinking about the spatial enunciations of power. This underscores the notion that power requires visibility and its early modern manifestation appears in the urban forums where everyday spaces of interaction become the subject of state construction.

In all due brevity, I will enumerate five foci to structure the ensuing discussion on the imperial construction of new public forums during the Isfahani stage of Safavid rule.

4.1. Coercion and Centralization

During the brief reign of Shah Isma’īl II (1576–77), with an admittedly abortive attempt to return Persia to Sunnism, and the unstable reign of Sultan Muhammad Khudabanda (1578–87), the empire faced continuous internal conflict with Qizilbash tribal warfare. The messianic expectation harbored by the Qizilbash military elite to support the claims by the Safavid household continued to spread conflict within the empire at a domestic level. Not until the reign of Shah ‘Abbas I, however, did the Safavids emerge as one of the most centralized and stable Shi‘i imperial states on the Eurasian landmass. The so-called era of “reformation” (1590–1618) revealed a major shift in the organization of the Safavid household and its Qizilbash chieftaincy from a semi-nomadic to a sedentary political order in the sixteenth century. The era introduced political transformations of a sweeping nature that entailed long-term consequences of major socio-cultural significance.

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122 The Mahdist aura of the Safavid-Qizilbash rise to power dominated the formative age of empire, as even the Imami ‘ulama “initially legitimized Safavi rule... [Thus] Imami clerics implied that Safavi rule was legitimate on the basis of Mahdist rather than shari‘i legitimacy.” Babayan, *The Waning of the Qizilbash*, 38. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Babayan notes, “the messianic yearning remained unfulfilled for those disillusioned Qizilbash whose ancestors had taken up arms to help Isma’il.” Ibid., 40.
In broad terms, the ascent of ʿAbbas I to power in 1587 marked an age of unsurpassing cultural, economic, and political achievements in the systematic institutionalization of a unified Shiʿi Imami imperium with its vernacular and territorially distinct Persian identity. After the second civil war (1576–90), Safavid Persia saw the first systematic attempt to reorganize (or detribalize) the Qizilbash by changing the composition of this military organization against a backdrop of external clashes with the neighboring Ottoman and Uzbek Sunni forces.123

Ever since the declaration of Ismaʿil I as the first shah of the dynasty, the Safavids faced continuous threats from both internal and external forces. Although many of these threats came from the Ottomans at the western frontiers, particularly during the formative period of the empire (1502–87) during which the Safavids maintained an inferior army compared to their opponent’s advanced military technology, the threat of the Uzbeks from the north-eastern frontiers added greater peril to the stability of the newly established Shiʿi state. Internal crises also surfaced in the course of two civil wars (1524–36 and 1576–90) when numerous uprisings waged by the rebellious Qizilbash forces posed a persistent threat. During the formative period, varying intersections between the processes of invasion, coercion for capital, and control of conquered territories with the use of organized violence solidified the strong alliance between the Safavid shah (as the original chief of the Sufi order) and the Qizilbash tribal people, who helped to bring the Safavids to power in 1502. However, the strategic ideological shift from a sectarian Qizilbash Islam towards an orthodox Imami Islam led to the consolidation of a semi-autonomous Shiʿi hierocratic institution made up of the landed ʿulama by the turn of the seventeenth century (establishing the first stately bureaucratic religious institution in Persia since the reign of the Seljuks in the eleventh century). This, accordingly, allowed ʿAbbas I to successfully accommodate diverse measures to safeguard his legitimacy to maintain power.

Central to ʿAbbas I’s policy of centralization of state was the establishment of a robust soldierly institution made up of imported Georgian and Circassian slaves that structured the most important elite

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123 By “detribalization” I mainly refer to the practice of disempowerment of the Qizilbash military order by “breaking up, dispersing, regrouping, and resettling the various tribes,” as a means of marginalizing the influence of rebellious tribal forces. R. Tapper, “Shāhsevan in Safavid Persia,” 330.
section of the Safavid military apparatus. The reformation of the military in the early years of ʿAbbas I’s rule, beginning with the institutionalization of an autonomous cavalry consisting of 15,000 soldiers, coupled with the newly established royal slave regiments and musketeers (tofangchi), introduced a new policy of integrating provincial and royal forces under the control of a centralized state. The new territorial state, which enhanced the significance of the royal court by bringing the Qizilbash fiefdom under its royal control and using land revenues to pay the salaries of the new military, identified the first advanced military order since the establishment of the empire in 1502. This was a drastic shift away from the former feudalistic Qizilbash military organization, in which the old army, consisting primarily of sub-chieftain warlords, whose number did not exceed 60,000, continued to present a threat to the Safavid household in power. While the core elite structure continued to survive in the post-civil war period, which Newman has identified as “Turk-Tajik alliance,” the reformation of the military institution involved the centralization of taxation. The revenues from taxes were used for paying and equipping the new army from the royal treasury. Similarly, the military reformation witnessed an increase in monopoly over the state in the institutional formation of revenue-producing enterprises and fiscal strategies to maintain a standing army.

124 The policy of importing these so-called ghulams or slave soldiers began with Shah Ismaʿil I, when imported Christian slaves were made part of the Safavid army. Although this process intensified under Tahmash’s rule, it was under ʿAbbas I that such a policy led to the marginalization of the Qizilbash military elites with the militarization of 330,000 slaves, captured during the Georgian campaign of 1614–15. Similar though not entirely comparable in size and strength to the Ottoman Janissaries, the new slave soldiers (ghulaman) also infiltrated the Safavid bureaucracy, especially in the mature period of the empire. For an elaborate study of the new ghulams, see S. Babaie, K. Babayan, I. Baghdiantz-McCabe and M. Farhad, Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).


126 According to Newman, the Tajik support for the Safavids in the aftermath of the civil war underlines certain continuities in the elite structure of the Shiʿi polity. See A. Newman, Safavid Iran, especially 41–49.

127 As Tilly observes, fundamental to state-building processes is the attainment of superior fighting prowess, which is derived from access to capital gained through both the urban market and organized military authority over taxpayers. See C. Tilly, Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990–1990 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); The Formation of National States in Western Europe (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Cities and the Rise of States in Europe, AD 1000 to 1800 (Boulder, CO:
While the new military administration proliferated in size along with the expansion of the land-based silk economy, the centralization of treasure, administration, and fiscal structures of the state helped shape the configuration of military power and the pursuit of war.128 These state-building patterns manifested a greater disciplinary need to defend and expand the newly consolidated empire under Š Abbas I against external and domestic threats, such as the rebellious Qizilbash and Sufi-millenarian movements, mainly prevalent in the empire towards the end of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. State formation, in short, became increasingly associated with war-making apparatuses, which in turn required the establishment of an advanced military institution.

4.2. War and Territorialization

The new territorial state of Š Abbas I ushered in a strategic move to pacify unruly tribal forces, primarily accentuating administrative power with the detribalization of the state territories. The year 1604 is indicative of an important juncture in the formation of a new type of reflexively monitored state system and associated substantially with the representation of absolute sovereignty. The year marked a period in which “top-down” processes initiated considerable changes in the reproduction of new sites of power in the context of a widening gap between state and society.

These changes occurred primarily on four important levels. First, similar to the Ottomans and other “absolutist states” in Europe around the same period, the proliferation of organized military institutions reflected a gradual increase in the integration of territorial boundaries (territorialization), tied simultaneously to the expansion of the monopoly on organized violence.129 War and preparation for war involved the

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129 As Weber described it, state-building hinges mainly on the process by which states can monopolize the means of violence or “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” M. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (London: Routledge, 1991), 78. Although variations in the military building process can exist in diverse state formations on a
advancement of large armies and military technologies for domination in the interstices of competing empire-states. At the second level, the deployment of coercive means with the military tenor of the empire followed the centralization of royal authority, as the masculinization of the Safavid court from the semi-nomadic power-sharing (between genders and sub-tribes) towards a more sedentarized primogeniture household advanced the absolutist conception of royal sovereignty. The third level involved the bureaucratization of Qizilbash elites into global basis, it is the deployment of coercive means of domination that plays a crucial role in the construction of a state. See A. Giddens, The Nation-State and Violence (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985), 83–121; and M. Mann, The Sources of Social Power (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 483–95. As a territorial state expands, so grows its sphere of monopolization of coercion and centralization of institutions, it deprives (semi) autonomous subgroups of the right to maintain power. It is at this crucial stage that non-state forms of violence in the form of warfare are considered "illegitimate" and "criminal" with the growing centralization of the state. See C. Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in Bringing the State Back In, eds. P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, and T. Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 295–315.

130 Though much weaker in size and strength in comparison to its European and Ottoman counterparts, the advancement of military technology with the help of the English mission, headed by Sir Robert Sherley, was the adoption of regularized firepower, siege artillery, and city-fortification. In line with the formation of a standing army, the new military technology provided, partly, a counterweight to the Qizilbash cavalries. Although such technological developments failed to create a formidable force to compete against the Ottomans, the technologization of the military under ʿAbbas I reveals a deeper structural transformation of the Safavid army in line with the great military revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; above all, it highlights the self-sustained enhancement of the state’s independence from tribal forces. See R. Matthee, “Unwalled Cities and Restless Nomads,” 389–416; and L. Lockhart, “The Persian Army in the Safavid Period,” Der Islam 39 (1959): 89–98.

131 According to Babayan, the centralization of power under ʿAbbas I highlighted a significant change of political authority from Turko-Mongol tribal order, in its form of gender-sharing within the household, towards a more sedentarized patriarchal order, in which the first male descendent stands dominant as a sovereign figure. The erosion of “internal dynamics of the Safavid revolutionary movement” in the detribalization of state power marked the initial stages of patrimonial domination of the court, mainly manifested in the empowerment of the slaves, concubines, and eunuchs. See K. Babayan, “The Aqaʾid Al-Nisa: A Glimpse at Safavid Women in Local Isfahāni Culture,” in Women in the Medieval Islamic World, ed. G. R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 349–82. See also M. Szuppe, “Status, Knowledge, and Politics: Women in Sixteenth-Century Safavid Iran,” in Women in Iran: From the Rise of Islam to 1800, ed. G. Nashat and L. Beck (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2003), 140–69; also see L. Peirce’s The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), for the transformation of the Ottoman household and especially the harem in the period of Ottoman sedentarization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
the territorial state as a way to diminish their power. Given the consolidation and reorganization of the power structure at the state level, the demilitarization of the Qizilbash through the bureaucracy deprived the Sufi warrior class of the chiliastic spirit that characterized its original political culture. These three interrelated changes reflected the gradual erosion of the revolutionary force of the Safavid-Qizilbash chieftaincy in favor of a conservative Safavid-Imami political order; hence paving the path towards the consolidation of nascent dual elite institutions, namely the hierocratic and the monarchical by the end of the seventeenth century.

Fourth, in connection with the Ottoman-Safavid borderland war campaigns between 1591 and 1609 and commercial developments as a consequence of the expansion of the land-based silk economy, the threat of Ottoman invasion from the eastern borders provided new conditions for major urban transformations with the move of the imperial capital from Qazvin to Isfahan in 1590 and, by extension, with the commencement of the building of the new maydan (1590–91). With Isfahan as the new seat of the consolidated Safavid imperium, the construction of new city-spaces reflected an increasing state-led spatialization of society. As a favored site of militarization and commercialization of the state, the emergence of “new Isfahan” in 1590 represented the ambitious task to consolidate the Safavid territorial state by forming an integrated collective identity as part of a universal empire, one that would inaugurate the new millennium. Seen in this

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132 The rise of the Qizilbash as a new social class possessing a concrete social base for their power, namely of the roaming military lords, saw its first step towards demilitarization under Tahmasb with the appointment of a Shamlu officer, Pir Budaq Beg Qaplan-oghlu, as a writer of nastaʿlīq script, and Sadiqi Beg of the Afshar tribe, a painter at the royal court. R. Savory, “The Qizilbāsh, Education and the Arts,” Turcica 6 (1974): 170. Although the Qizilbash were viewed as essentially warriors and the Persian Tajik officials as men of learning, Tahmasb’s incorporation of the “men of the sword” into his high bureaucratic institution reflects the first stages in the taming of the Qizilbash. It was under ʿAbbas I, however, that the shah “continued on a larger scale Shāh Tamhāsb’s policy of taking Qizilbash into the royal household at an early age for their education,” as a means to weaken their domination of the Safavid state. Ibid., 174. The most remarkable result of this policy was the appointment of a Qizilbash officer as vazir of the Supreme Divan in 1620–21, towards the last phases of state formation under the rule of ʿAbbas I.

133 By “spatialization” I mean the strategic attempt at the construction of public spaces, a process which stabilized and organized individuals capable of productive interaction within a given shared space.

134 Despite Blake’s claim that the transportation of the capital occurred in 1597–98, following Babaie, I take the year 1590 as the point at which Isfahan was envisaged to
light, the changing pace of state and society relations under ʿAbbas I inaugurated changes in which the structuring of new urban spaces highlighted the attempt to create a unified collective identity.

The Isfahani phase of Safavid rule marks a period that commenced in 1590 with what Babaie describes as “a series of momentous architectural interventions” that set the stage to locate state power and configure major metropolitan cultures, whereby new publicities of distinct Shiʿi Persianate character were shaped.135 The period signifies a transformative phase when the construction of new urban spaces placed a strong emphasis on making visible intersecting associational domains and structures of interactions together with a strong tendency to impose ideological formulations on these shifting network connections.136 The connection between visibility, urbanization and state here is about how experiences and expressions of sociability are spatially organized and made visible in public ways that produce performative sites of sociation or in what the German sociologist, Georg Simmel, called the “intensification of emotional life,” which the metropolis accommodates as a way of life.137 With erection of major new squares, parks, gardens, streets and everyday places of conviviality like coffee-houses, the Safavid urbanization served as a monumental performative project that involved the formation of visible sites of collective belonging, social exchange and sensory experiences that constituted a political community of distinct Shiʿi character.

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136 See Babayan, “The Safavid Synthesis.” I will briefly turn to the notion of social networks in Chapter Six.
137 G. Simmel, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. D. N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 325. Simmel’s theory of metropolitan experience is founded upon the notion that modern city life generates constant changes in motivations and subjectivities in that they are intense, aggressive and over-stimulating. While Simmel focused on early twentieth-century European cities like Berlin, here I call attention to a possible reading of early modern cities like Isfahan in terms of a web of emotions with distinct political and social significance.
4.3. Expansionism and Urbanization

I have argued, albeit briefly, that the link between state formation and military building was crucial to the consolidation of the Safavid Empire. Yet I also argue that with the onset of state-building the phenomenon of urbanization began its dynamic development. Urban growth, as a necessary site of capital accumulation and concentration of power, especially in the symbolic attributes of a capital city, in correspondence to an enhanced defense force, served as the means to integrate a population within a territory.

The close connection between territorial-expansion/consolidation and urban construction became largely manifested when in 1598 'Abbas I shifted his attention to the restitution of order and the installation of royal officials throughout Iran. The repression of rebellious amirs and shah’s appointees led to the pacification of regions like Gilan and Luristun from Qizilbash control, while strengthening the power of the shah. With the annexation of Khurasan province from Uzbek hands after the campaign of April 1598, 'Abbas I reclaimed many of the former territories of the empire, while keeping Ottoman forces at bay in the northwestern frontiers. In the south, the search for secure commercial outlets led to the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hormuz and the strategic founding of the port of Bandar 'Abbas in 1622. The systematic (re)conquest of new territories and conversion of provinces (mamalek), such as Mazandaran, to crown lands provided a new source of revenue for the new ghulam troops. In order to curb the power of the Qizilbash warlords, 'Abbas I used income from the crown lands to fund a new army loyal to his crown. This move radically transformed the feudal-military order of the Safavid timar system; consequently, the urban transition took local power away from the Qizilbash amirs and put it into the hands of a centralized tax-tribute state.

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138 In the new territories, state deputies were appointed to collect taxes and remit them directly to the royal treasury. In the long term, the policy proved ineffective, since only a small proportion of the taxes levied in the new royal territories found its way into the treasury, thus weakening the military institution.

139 The Qizilbash elites, whose troops were called up in time of war under the earlier Safavid shahs, had been paid largely by land grants over large territories, rather than directly from the treasury.

140 The case of the conversion of small fortresses (qasabe) into provincial capitals, like the city of Rasht in the province of Gilan, under 'Abbas I highlights the urban expansion of Safavid cities due to military and commercial developments.
With the state control of local power, the 1598 campaign against the Uzbeks resulted in the transfer of the imperial seat from Qazvin to Isfahan, the place to which the shah usually went “for recreation, especially hunting.”\(^{141}\) Having spent the winter of 1597–98 in Isfahan, located about 420 km southeast of Qazvin, the city served as a strategic military location away from the northeastern and northwestern frontiers, where both Ottoman and Uzbek threats posed the greatest danger to the empire.\(^{142}\) As the former capital of the Seljuks, the populated city of Isfahan, with its geographical position in central Iran and its well-watered, fertile location, served as an attractive new imperial capital for 'Abbas I. With the official decision to move the capital to Isfahan in the spring of 1598, a “new order” of absolutism emerged with a series of momentous architectural and urban developments.\(^{143}\)

### 4.4. The New Isfahan

As early as 1590, 'Abbas I had ambitions of a major building campaign to reconstruct the old Isfahan with new gardens, buildings, and avenues for a new quarter north of Zayanda Rud and the garden suburbs to the south. By and large, the new spaces of the capital city identified a radical urbanization project unprecedented since the Seljuks that continued into the late Safavid period.\(^ {144}\) The most significant move

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\(^ {142}\) There is no general consensus on the answer to the question of why 'Abbas I decided to change the capital city. It is highly like that he made this move largely due to strategic military reasons. For an economic and geopolitical explanation of the transfer of the Safavid capital, see M. M. Mazaouï, “From Tabriz to Qazvin to Isfahan: Three Phases of Safavid History,” *ZDMG Supplement* 3, no. 11 (1977): 514–22; and H. Roemer, “Das frühsafawidische Isfahan als historische forschungsaufgabe,” *Iranian Studies* 7, no. 1–2 (1974): 138–63.

\(^ {143}\) Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces*, 89.

\(^ {144}\) As Babaie argues, the Safavid city building program was not a result of a sporadic scheme or an “afterthought” to clean up the old maydan, as suggested by McChesney and supported by Haneda. Rather, it reflected ambiguous urban planning armed with a significant ideological orientation. Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces*, 71. For the “afterthought” approach, see R. D. McChesney, “Four Sources on Shah Abbas’s Building of Isfahan,” 103–34; and M. Haneda, “The Character of the Urbanisation of Isfahan in the Later Safavid Period,” in *Safavid Persia*, ed. C. Melville, 369–387. See also Haneda’s more elaborate study of the square and garden complexes, “Mayden et Bagh. Reflexion à propos de l’urbanisme du Šah ‘Abbas,” in *Documents et Archives provenant de l’Asie Centrale; Actes du colloque franco-japonais*, Kyoto, ed. M. Haneda (Kyoto: Association Franco-Japonaise des Études Orientales, 1990), 87–99. With regard to the name “new
was the decision to make a new maydan. As early as 1590–91, 'Abbas I had ordered a new royal bazaar (Qaysariyya) to be constructed and a larger open piazza to be laid out at its southwestern edge near the palace of Naqsh-i Jahan. The square was envisaged as an extension to the new royal bazaar and the primary outlet for profit from luxury goods, which served partly as income to defray the costs of the new army. The construction of an open maydan, famously known as the “Image of the World Square,” marked a ceremonial space that displayed the theatrical constitution of the new Safavid polity with its distinct millenarian ideology. The new piazza served as a symbolic reminder that the new capital was, in the words of Babayan, the “pivot of the universe from where the expected Mahdi would emerge.” In a metaphorical sense, then, construction of the royal maydan served as the ceremonial staging arena for the Safavid political order, wherein the promise of a future utopia was architecturally performed in an open field.

According to Jalal al-din Munajjim, a Safavid court astrologer, it appears that the shah’s decision to associate the new maydan with the center of his political rule occurred sometime around 1602–3, when 'Abbas I drastically changed his plans to reconstruct the old maydan of Isfahan (Maydan-i Harun) as the center of the empire. Constructed in two successive phases, the new maydan was completed in 1611, providing an official arena for commercial, cultural, military, and religious activities.

Iskandar Bek Munshi, 'Abbas I’s biographer, describes the design of the new city by the shah as the following:

city,” Mirza Junabadi, a Safavid historian, states the following: “Shops and karvansara have been constructed so that now former Isfahan is called the old city and these places and these buildings are the new city.” M. Junabadi, Rawzat al-Safaviyya, ed. by Ghulam-riza Majd Tabatabi (Tehran: Bunyad-e Mawqafat-e Duktur Mahmud Afshar, 1999), Persian Manuscript Collection, or 3388, British Library, London, 315b.

145 Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 230.

146 See Blake, Half the World, 22. Despite the fact that Naqsh-i Jahan Square did not appear to function as the political center of the empire until 1602–3, according to André Godard, the suburban garden retreat served as an important place for the new capital from 1590 onward. Godard identifies two distinct building programs in the construction of the new maydan: (1) 1590–1602, the selection of the maydan area; (2) 1602–11, the “sumptuous” stage, in which projects such as the Royal Mosque marked the end of the construction phase of the piazza. A. D. Godard, “Isfahan,” in Athar-i Iran, Annales du Service Archeologique de l'Iran, vol. 1 (Paris, 1937); see also, E. Galdieri, “Two Building Phases of the Time of Shah 'Abbās I in the Maydan-i Shah of Isfahan, Preliminary Note,” East and West 20, no. 1–2 (1970): 60–9.
In the spring of 1598, he approved plans for the construction of magnificent buildings in the Naqš-e Jahān district, and architects and engineers strove to complete them. From the Darb-e Dowlat, which is the name for the city gate located within the Naqš-e Jahān precincts, he constructed an avenue to the Zāyand-rūd. Four Parks [Chahar Bagh] were laid out on each side of the avenue, and fine buildings adorned each. The avenue was continued across the river as far as the mountains bounding Isfahan to the south. The emirs and officers of state were charged with the creation of parks and the construction of lodges on a royal scale within the parks, each to consist of reception rooms, covered ways, porticos, balconies, finely adorned belvederes, and murals in gold and lapis lazuli. At the southern end of the avenue, there was to be a vast garden, terraced on nine levels, for the pleasure of the king's guests; it was to be known as the ʿAbbāssābād garden. The river was to be spanned by a bridge of special design: it was to have forty arches and, when the river was in spate, water would flow through all of them... On each side of the avenue, water flowed through channels, and trees were planted, pines, and junipers. A stone conduit was also constructed down the center of the avenue to form another channel of water.147

According to this passage, the new suburb of the old city witnessed the construction of avenues, bridges, buildings, and parks that were designed to create a new set of public spaces closely administrated by state officials.148 The approved version of the 1598 plan also included the building of new residential spaces, private gardens, and a royal household, whose east side led into the maydan. The ʿAli Qapu, the new official palace, combined the functions of a royal private lodge and the official government, since from the balcony on the roof of the second story the shah and his guests could monitor the public activities of the grand public piazza—though still under construction at this date—from a viewing platform. The construction of the new royal palace identifies a new spatialization of authority by fusing the private life and the public office of the shah into an architecturally fixed space, wherein the absolute rule of the monarch is put on display.

The most striking section of the above passage is the part where Munshi makes note of the role of amirs and state officers in the creation of parks and construction of lodges for royal functions. The passage illustrates how the new bureaucratic elites of the new centralized

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147 Munshi, History of Shah ʿAbbas the Great, 724.
148 For a list of names of buildings, see Haneda, “The Character of the Urbanisation of Isfahan in the Later Safavid Period,” 378–82.
state closely monitored the building of the new spaces, underscoring the direct role of the state in their design.

4.5. Integrated and Visible Public Spaces

The new Isfahan represented the formal seat of a universal imperial order. Accordingly, the creation of new palaces, streets, parks and pavilions conformed to a progressively more unified spatial core, conceived along an architecturally assimilative attempt to integrate public spaces with visual significance. The interconnection between integration and visibility as a spatial performative process registers a metropolitan setting wherein meanings, emotions, or lifestyles become localized, shared and mobilized in an urban landscape of seeing. As Babaie has convincingly shown, the restructuring of Isfahan revolved around two types of visual settings: public squares (e.g., courtly, commercial, religious) and promenade or passageways (e.g., streets, parks, gardens). The spatial clusters of these two kinds of visual settings are characteristically about extension of various royal and civic buildings in the form of ayvan porches that face and open up onto a public space, overlooking the main square, streets or riverfronts. The staging of sight in these distinct architectural loci formed a ceremonial representation of urban interaction.

Moreover, the mural decorative art and pictorial culture, mostly present in the form of multi-figural and narrative depictions of Safavid and European characters at various public and semi-public sites like the audience hall at the Chihil Sutun and the entrance gate into the Qaysariyya Bazaar, reflect the “cosmopolitan” culture of the Isfahani regime of seeing, in which European travelers also actively participated and formed inter-publicities of distinct European-Safavid character.

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The reference to homoerotic and sexual themes with depiction of European and Persian characters in some of the paintings, many of them fairly visible to the everyday public, signify imagined spaces of cosmopolitanism that overlapped with other urban spaces like the coffeehouses (qahvekhanehs) as sites of conviviality, largely frequented by artists, poets, storytellers, magicians with certain homoerotic themes and practices. Isfahani visual spaces as performative sites communicated ways of sociability that reflect the publicity of sight, a publicity in which the community could be imagined and felt. The intermingling of such city spaces underlines the relationship between being seen and encountered in an urban context where performative processes dictate access and control over public spaces. The following examples serve as a brief overview of the complexity of the Isfahani publicity. The royal

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152 Space constraints preclude my offering a more comprehensive study of all the Safavid urban spaces, which would include spatial complexes like public baths (ham-mam), bridges (e.g., Pul-i Khwaju), Sufi lodges (takkiya), religious endowment institutions (vaqf), religious schools (madrasah), shrines, and sport clubs (zurkhaneh). The Safavid zurkhaneh (also known as “house of strength”), for instance, provided a gymnastic spatial complex for male athletes to train their bodies in prodigious feats of strength in harmony with the mystic chant of a musician, namely the “murshid,” and the beat of his drum. Members of these sport clubs were most likely associated with one of the religious urban guilds, namely the Haydari and Nimatullahi factions. See P. Rochard, “The Identities of the Iranian Zūrkhānah,” Iranian Studies 35, no. 4 (2002): 313–40. For a description of these two guilds, see the second section of Chapter Six. The case of vaqf, charitable trust institutions in which a person, with the intention of committing a pious deed, declared part of his or her property for public beneficiaries, however, served as the most vital urban site for the Safavid religious community. As perhaps one of the most complex public spaces, the vaqf finance system funded the building of public baths, mosques (such as the famous Masjīd-i Shah), religious schools, and contributed to the urban development of Isfahan under ‘Abbas I; especially under Qajar rule, the ta’zīyeh ceremonies were also funded through the vaqf finance system. Under ‘Abbas I, the vaqf institution expanded in a fundamental way, mainly in terms of centralizing funding for the creation of diverse public spaces, like holy shrines (especially Shi‘i saints of chahardeh ma‘sum), public baths, and religious schools. In fact, the entire maydan was drawn as a royal vaqf. See S. Arjomand, “Coffeehouses, Guilds and Oriental Despotism: Government and Civil Society in Late 17th to Early 18th Century Istanbul and Isfahan, and as seen from Paris and London,” Archives européennes de sociologie/European Journal of Sociology 45, 1 (2004): 35–37; and M. Sifatgol, “Safavid Administration of Avqāf: Structure, Changes and Functions, 1077–1135/1666–1722,” in Society and Culture in the Early Modern Middle East: Studies on Iran in the Safavid Period, ed. A. J. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 397–408. In addition to central urban spaces, we should also include suburban areas stretched along the south bank of the Zayanda Rud, such as Julfa, which accommodated the Armenian
bazaar, running over a mile to the north within the city, comprised the most significant integrated public space in the Isfahani phase of Safavid rule. The market was a reminder of the imperial policy of promoting commerce on a transregional level. A public space of distinct holdings, the new bazaar contained a rectangular complex of lanes, spacious shops, coffeehouses, shrines, religious schools (madrasah), sumptuous travel lodges (caravanserai), sport clubs (zurkhaneh), bathhouses (hammam), mosques, and even residential apartments (manazil) connecting the main city gates at either end of the city. The royal bazaar in this regard provided a plurality of urban spaces in the form of an integrated cluster of arenas of conviviality and network, wherein consumption, production, exchanges, negotiations, and ceremonial interaction of heterogeneous, institutionalized, associational networks created resources for the generation of multiple and intermingling publics. Likewise, the intersection of commerce and residence underlined the overlap of daily (commerce) and nightly (residence) life, a spatial organization of the ordinary sense of public time.

The visual structure of the royal bazaar served as a power symbol of clustered spaces of interaction. But this assembly of spaces strategically looked onto a wider, open (rectangular) space of visibility, the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan, the central stage where most significant public places like caravansaries, the bathhouses or coffeehouses closely intermingled. The maydan identified a civic-state public stage where almost daily official (military parades, religious ceremonies or commercial activities) and almost nightly unofficial (ram and cock-fighting, wrestling, brawling, music and dancing) activities would take place. In the civic sense of public space, denizens could interact with the possibility of audience. Sight, again, plays a pivotal role in the theatrics of publicity

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of the maydan. Such dramaturgical architecture would find its most pronounced expression in official buildings around the maydan.

At the north end of the maydan, the monumental portals of Qaysariyya (1617–8), with its mural decorations, marked a ceremonial entrance to the maydan. The visuality of entrance into a huge civic space where everyone can interact served as a reminder that the “public” can be accessed only through a visible royal marker, which the monument represented. On the western side, the Ali-Qapu palace, constructed between 1590/1 and 1615 as a gateway into the royal gardens, marks the performative stage of royal power, “a singular expression of that authority in architecture,” where state power would be vertically discernable as a royal seat, as a “threshold” between state and public domains. Sitting on a two-story base, the magnificent columned terrace, the grand talar, (added to the palace in 1644) overlooks the maydan as a reminder of the imperial distance of the Safavid royal that would “soar” in front of the civic public and serve as a ceremonial stage for the court to view the public and, conversely, be seen by the public. With the construction of the Royal Mosque (begun in 1611) and the royal chapel-mosque of Shaykh Lotf-Allah (built in 1617), the new maydan epitomize an integrated new Isfahani space of commerce, civic, religious and political interaction.

In close connection to the construction of the royal bazaar, the rapid proliferation of urban inns (caravanserai) and later integration of these public sites with other civic spaces as a madrasah-bazaar-caravanserai complex under the reign of Shah Sultan Husayn, is indicative of a systematic attempt to create a source of income for the mosque and madrasah, while providing temporary protection and food for wayfarers. Although its expansion, due to the growth of an economy dependent largely on exportation of silk, continued well through the seventeenth century, the caravanserai identified the most important economic and cultural building complex with the important function of security for commerce in the Safavid Empire and, in particular, the city of Isfahan. As a distinct site of encounter between native and foreign merchants and travelers, the caravanserais were domains of transcultural interaction par excellence, wherein individuals connected in

155 S. Babaie, Isfahan and Its Palaces, 148–49.
156 See Ibid., 145–46.
a curious space that was both everywhere and nowhere. Unlike the monumental type of spaces like the palaces and the mosques, caravanserais represented the most civic expressions of interaction, existing by the virtue of transiency of sociability in shaping mini-publics of interactivity, spatial arrangements of crossroads of identities and relations.

Although they first appeared under the reign of Tahmasb I, the construction of new coffeehouses in the Isfahani phase of Safavid rule, clustered mainly along the north side of the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan, provided a popular meeting place for the (male) artists, artisans, clerics, entertainers, merchants, musicians, poets, scholars, and students. Open from morning until late at night, the coffeehouses, as mostly homosocial spaces, successfully provided the male urbanite with a place of conviviality, games, theatrical performances of oral literature and the epic poetry recitation of Shahnameh, principally for the most part deemed immoral by the religious authorities. Likewise, the

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158 It is not possible here to provide a more comprehensive theoretical study of the caravanserais. It is important to note, however, that the urban inns also served as shelters for the sick, students, and scholars near seminaries or mosques, or for pious devotees near a holy shrine; they performed different functions according to their size, location, and ownership. For a general discussion, see M. Y. Kiani, *Iranian Caravanserais with Particular Reference to the Safavid Period* (Tokyo, 1978); Blake, *Half the World*, 117–36; and W. Kleiss, “Safavid Caravanserais,” in *Safavid Art and Architecture*, ed. S. R. Canby (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 27–31. For a description of different types of caravanserais, see M. Kheirabadi, *Iranian Cities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 96–100.


160 Here, the notion of “homosocial spaces” does not necessarily imply sites of homoerotic practices, though prostitution and homosexuality were also associated with Isfahani coffeehouses. See R. Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 169–70. For a
aesthetic ambiance of the coffeehouses, with its water basin and lamp lights, offered a social space of relaxation for urbanites. Rumors, news, and gossip also circulated between coffeehouses, constituting the styles and types of communication that generated diverse communicative publics, relatively removed from the supervision of the state. As a corollary to such unofficial publicity, the Sufi cultural presence in the coffeehouses served as an “oppositional discourse” to the official Imami culture, while, in turn, leading figures like Shaykh Bahai and Mir Damad competed in the promotion of Shi’i orthodox publicity with the production of sermons, philosophical tracts, mobilized Friday prayer practices and devotional rituals, especially in relation with pilgrimage to shrines. The eventual clamp down on coffeehouses by Sultan Husayn with the edict of 1695 is indicative of the increasing degree of freedom and autonomy the coffeehouses attained in the post-Isfahani phase of Safavid rule, especially proliferating throughout the city beyond the maydan in the late seventeenth century, and suggests

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social history of homosexuality in the Safavid period, see W. Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2008), 321–34. Also, the tradition of the popular recital of *Shahnameh*, or the “Book of Kings,” written by Ferdowsi in the tenth century, appears to have begun under ‘Abbas I. In reference to the travel reports of John Fryer and Raphaël du Mans, as Matthee notes, the coffeehouses were “often arranged in an amphitheater form.” See Matthee, “Coffee in Safavid Iran,” 25. This highlights the additional element of theatrical facade and dramatic performance in the development of Safavid qahvehans. For the leisure culture of Safavid coffeehouses, see also Y. Azhand, *Namayish dar dawrah-yi Safavi* (Tehran: Farhangistan-i Hunar, 2006), 199–203. It is precisely because of the theatricality of such urban spaces, in particular the aesthetic and cultures of sensuality, that the ulama saw them as domains of “evil.” See R. Jafarian, *Siyasat va farhang-i ruzgar-i Safavi*, vol. 2 (Tehran: ‘Elm, 2009), 1190–92; and S. Babaie, “The Sound of the Image/ The Image of the Sound: Narrativity in Persian Art of the 17th Century,” 150–51.


162 Ibid., 166. ‘Abbas I attempted to extend his control over the coffeehouses by sending mullas of Imami faith to preach orthodoxy to the Sufiesque circles that frequented these public places. This policy was continued by Shah Safi. See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 442–43; and McChesney, “The Four Sources on Shah Abbas’s Building of Isfahan,” 109.

163 See A. Newman, *Safavid Iran*, 69–72; and also R. Gleave, “The Ritual Life of the Shriners,” in *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, ed. S. R. Canby (London: The British Museum Press, 2009), 88–97. It is important to note that the so-called Isfahani school of thought, with leading figures like Mulla Sadra (d. 1635–33) and Sayyid Ahmad ‘Alavi (d. 1644), also represented the cosmopolitan public culture in this period, with Isfahan as “the center of learning and practically all the thinkers had at some time studied there.” S. H. Rizvi, *Mullā Sadrā Shirāzī: His Life and Works and the Sources for Safavid Philosophy* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 2007), 140.
the threat they posed to authorities as places of social transgression, hidden from the supervision of the state.164

In a broad theoretical sense, the construction of new urban sites bespeaks the intricate relationship between state-building and spatial practices in the context of centralized urbanization and, by extension, in the formation of collective identities. The production of power through space underscores the mechanism through which everyday life is shaped in the medium of new integrated sites, wherein state power is often made highly visible in the presence of denizens as the audience. Yet the new urban spaces of Isfahan underscore how diverse publics can be formed in practices, sociabilities and contentious performances by those who momentarily congregate, inhabit or travel through such visible or hidden spaces of interaction. While the designated spaces of social life can be state products, the sociability that emerges from spaces like the coffeehouses are hardly determined by the landscape of state power.

In light of the divergences and dynamics of urban public life, the evolution of Isfahan from a provincial center into an imperial center, thanks to ʿAbbas I’s economic, political, and military reforms, would set the socio-economic and socio-political basis for the emergence of Muharram publicity in the early seventeenth century. The expansion of Muharram ceremonies under the reign of ʿAbbas I can be recognized as part and parcel to the production of spatial practices unleashed with the building of Isfahan. What separates Muharram from the other Isfahani spaces, however, are, first, the temporal rather than the spatial significance of the commemorative rituals, which officially only occur once a year, and, second, the intensity of the social spaces of mourning, wherein daily life is reconfigured into an extraordinary event of shared experiences of both conformity and transgression. How does Muharram as a distinct urban space of sociability involve both features of power and resistance? How is Muharram a social space of distinct urban character? Before proceeding with my theoretical survey, however, a historical account of the Shiʿi ceremonies would be useful at this point.

164 See Ibid., 83–84; and Babayan, ”Sufis, Dervishes and Mullas,” 117–38.
CHAPTER FOUR
A HISTORY OF (SAFAVID) MUHARRAM RITUALS

On the eve of ‘Ashura in 1604, while the Ottoman Sharif Pasha could hear the mournful cry of Muharram performers from the Safavid military camp, Shah ‘Abbas I and his troops prepared for the final phase of the conquest of the fortress of Erivan. Clad in black and determined to take revenge for their “Prince of Martyrs” as they performed the ceremonies, the shah and the newly established corps of Caucasian slaves (ghulaman), along with his Qizilbash troops, so impressed the Ottoman soldiers that they persuaded Sharif Pasha to surrender the fortress. According to Munshi, in an earlier military campaign on the banks of the Khatab River in June of 1602, ‘Abbas I also celebrated Muharram prior to a difficult battle against his sworn Sunni enemies, the Uzbeks.

In another Safavid source, Munajjim describes the ceremonies in the light of their carnival-like processions. In the extensive construction phase of Isfahan after the capital city had moved from Qazvin, Muharram was observed in the Naqsh-i Jahan Garden seventeen days after the Persian New Year (Nowruz) in May 1609. The ceremonies followed eleven days and nights of the festival of illuminations (chiraghani), which also included the ceremony of wine drinking in the garden. In August–September 1596, in the former capital city of

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1 Munshi, History of Shah ‘Abbas the Great, vol. 2, 846. According to Munshi, the siege of the fortress of Erivan is indicative of the ongoing military campaign of ‘Abbas I that began in 1602 for the reconquest of Safavid territories from Ottoman and Uzbek forces. Having annexed eastern and northern territories, like Gilan and Mazandaran, the shah eventually turned his attention to northwestern Qarabagh, where Erivan is located. The seizure of the fortress allowed a new military launch pad to be established for the eventual seizure of Shirvan, thus paving the way towards the complete recovery of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

2 Ibid., 817.

3 As a reminder, it was in 1590–91 when ‘Abbas I laid the foundation for the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan, as the headquarters of his new imperial court.

4 J. Munajjim Yazdi, Tarikh-i Abbasi ya ruznama-yi Mulla Jalal, 360. The festival of chiraghani, which according to Calmard was “revived or reintroduced in Persia” by ‘Abbas I, consisted of the burning of lights for several days and nights; it was sometimes accompanied by fireworks. See J. Calmard, "Ritual Power II," 148.
Qazvin, two bears were staged playfully entertaining the ritual participants during the festivals following the ceremonies.\(^5\)

The account continues to describe a major urban fight. On ‘Ashura 1602 in the city of Isfahan, fights broke out between “Isfahanian” or rival groups in the city;\(^6\) following the ceremonies, festivals of chiraghani and fireworks (atash-bazi) were performed.\(^7\) In the year of 1604, after hearing the news of an uprising in the town of Lar, southeast of the city of Shiraz, the shah is said to have insisted on performing the “marasim-i ta’ziyeh Imam Husayn” before heading south to subdue the rebel forces.\(^8\) The monarch, according to Munajjim’s account, appears to have recognized both the festive and militaristic appeal of the rituals, qualities that serve as a central theme in the Safavid historical accounts of Muharram in the period when the new Isfahan was under construction.

For the most part, Persian descriptions of the ceremonies describe the popular practice of Muharram within the everyday fabric of Isfahani society and the Safavid military order. The descriptions are revealing insofar as they underscore the presence of the shah in the celebration of Muharram rituals. Here, the central role of the monarch in the ceremonies is indicative of the importance of royal patronage in the development of the rituals under Safavid rule. But the accounts also underline the close connection between Safavid war campaigns and the collective ritual performances organized by the new military order, which had emerged to replace the Qizilbash tribal confederacy by the turn of the seventeenth century. Persian sources also underscore the fascinating practice of the jubilant festivals that followed the commemorative ceremonies during a period in the construction of the new Isfahan that involved a massive state-led effort to transform

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\(^{5}\) Munijjim, *Tarikh-\’i Abbasi ya ruznama-ye Mulla Jalal*, 150. The bears, brought in by “Urus” or Russians, were unleashed in the river, fishing for a few hours in the water.

\(^{6}\) Munijjim is not clear about the exact name of these factions. But, according to the Portuguese traveler Antonio de Gouvea, who visited another royal city, Shiraz, in 1604, the factional strife most likely could have been between Haidari and Nimatullahi groups. I will return to this in Chapter Six.

\(^{7}\) Ibid., 243–44. The uprising was orchestrated by the local rebels of Lar, headed by Zahid Yaghub and Haji Hasan, who murdered the official judge of the town. Immediately after hearing about the murder, ‘Abbas I sent his ghulaman troops to the city, under Imam Quli Khan, the governor of Lar. The town was recaptured after the rebels fled to the mountains; the leaders were caught and later executed.
Safavid society into a more distinct social order. Under ʿAbbas, Muharram became a major public event, an event that reflected the intricate relations between state and society and how the latter would gradually undergo a major transformation as a result of the spread of ritual culture that the state had promoted in the first place.

While its pomp and spectacle appealed to both the Safavid population and foreign travelers, particularly Europeans, the pre-Safavid versions of the Muharram ceremonies were never entirely tied to state power, nor were they originally organized in the form of an elaborate public event. During their long history of development, Muharram rites appear to have been limited to particular groups, sects or factions that were either persecuted by the Sunni-dominated state or were conducted as private events, exclusive to those Shiʿi members who felt the need to perform the ceremonies as a way to show communal solidarity against a majority Sunni population.

The post-Mongol period, however, witnessed a major development in the ceremonies. As the rituals became increasingly a public affair, Muharram began to transcend sectarian factionalism as Shiʿism gradually spread throughout Anatolia and the subcontinent. The Safavid Muharram rituals began as an esoteric-sectarian phenomenon and developed in this long historical process into predominately (though relatively) cross-sectarian public events in the late Timurid period.

The following overview of the history of Muharram has the limited ambition of showing the development of the ceremonies from the formative period of Islamic history to the Safavid era. In addition to tracing the symbolic and performative developments, this chapter seeks to answer several questions. How did Muharram develop from an esoteric devotional practice after the seventh century into a major public procession under the Safavids in the seventeenth century? How did social transformations on a transcultural level influence the development of the rituals? What significant feature distinguished early practice of the ceremonies from Safavid Muharram rituals?

1. The Muharram Rituals from the Caliphate to the Middle Period 680–1501

While the evidence we have on the corpus of Muharram rituals (reaching their climax on the tenth day of the lunar month, ʿAshura) from the early to the middle period of Islamic history does not permit us to
reconstruct a detailed study of the ceremonies, a brief description does allow us an overview. By doing this, the present study aims to show how the ceremonies have undergone several historical transformations that critically affected the relationship between state and society in the centuries that preceded the rise of the Safavids to power. But a historical account of Muharram must first begin with a history of Karbala, a history that was originally narrated by Abu Mikhnaf Lut b. Yahya (d. 744), an Umayyad historian who first produced a comprehensive account of the events that led to the battle of Karbala.

According to Abu Mikhnaf, when Hasan, the older brother of Husayn and the son of ʿAli, abdicated the caliphate in 661 in favor of Muʿawiyah (661–680), who established the Umayyad dynasty, the household of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt) faced a serious challenge to its authority. Muʿawiyah, who had a firm grip on the Islamic empire, continued to rule as the first Umayyad caliph based on a signed agreement with Hasan, who maintained a quietist approach toward politics and lived in Medina until his death in 669. The death of Hasan, who is believed to have been assassinated by Muʿawiyah, opened the way for his younger brother, Husayn, to become the head of the household of the Prophet, a position the Shiʿis believe is ordained only upon the divinely-chosen Imam. For eleven years Husayn held off any attempt to challenge Muʿawiyah’s claim to the caliphate. It was the invitation of the Kufans, who were growing increasingly restless under the stern Umayyad rule until the death of Muʿawiyah in 680, that compelled Husayn to leave Mecca to Kufa on a military campaign to ensure the succession of the household of the Prophet against Muʿawiyah’s son, Yazid (680–83).

On 2 Muharram 680, after learning of the Kufans’ betrayal of him and his efforts to restore the legitimate authority of the family of the Prophet over Yazid, Husayn along with his family and a small band of

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9 The Aramaic term of “ʿAshura” originally denotes a day of fasting on the tenth of Muharram following the Jewish custom, which the Prophet replaced in the second year of Hijra with the Ramadan fasting ceremonies. See A. J. Wensinck, “Ashūrā,” EI2.


11 Hasan’s abdication was largely a result of the disintegration of his Kufan army, as he faced the advancing Syrian army under the leadership of Muʿawiyah. The peace treaty with Hasan gave Muʿawiyah the necessary justification to seize and maintain power.

12 The common belief among Shiʿis, and even some Sunni historians, is that the wife of Hasan poisoned him under the direct order of Muʿawiyah.
followers on their way to Kufa faced the Umayyad army on the plains of Karbala. For ten days Husayn and his followers were denied water in the burning desert, as they continued to fight and refused to swear oaths of allegiance to Yazid. At noon on Friday the tenth of Muharram (ʿAshura), along with seventy-two of his men, Husayn was murdered in cold blood, his body trampled under the horses’ hoofs and abandoned, his head cut off and sent to Damascus. As prisoners of Yazid, the women and children of the Imam’s family were taken to Kufa and later to Damascus. Forty days after ʿAshura, the body of Husayn along with his half-brother, ʿAbbas, was buried at Karbala, marking the day of Arbaʿin.14

The first recorded account of Muharram mourning appears immediately following the defeat of Husayn at Karbala. According to Tabari, a Quranic commentator and one of the first historians to record a detail history of Karbala, women “shrieked and tore at their faces,” as they passed the decapitated body of Husayn that was carried off to Kufa. At Kufa, the people of the city beat their chests and heads, “weeping in deep remorse for their own treachery.”16 The leading figure in performing these ceremonies appears to have been Husayn’s sister, Zaynab, who, while captive in Damascus, famously gave a speech condemning her brother’s murders and recited perhaps the first elegy on behalf of Husayn after the battle of Karbala.17 The speech was so

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13 Tabari, one of the main Arab historians who had relied on Abu Mikhnaf’s account, writes the following, “Seventy-two men of the followers of al-Husayn were killed. Some of Banu Asad, who dwelt at al-Ghādiriyyah, buried al-Husayn and his followers a day after they had been killed. Eighty-eight men of the followers of ʿUmar b. Saʿd were killed apart from those who were wounded. ʿUmar b. Saʿd prayed over them and buried them.” See Tabari, The History of Tabari: The Caliphate of Yazid b. Muʿawiyah A.D. 680–683/A.H. 60–64, vol. 19, translated and annotated by I. K. A. Howard (Albany: New York State University Press, 1990), 163.

14 In its ceremonial form, Arbaʿin is the observation of the fortieth day after Husayn’s martyrdom, the twentieth and twenty-first of Safar, a part of the corpus of Muharram ceremonies. See M. Ayoub, “Arbaʿin,” in ER. As a public Muharram event, a description of the Safavid version of Arbaʿin practice can be found in Raphaël du Mans’s travel report in the mid to later seventeenth century.

15 Al-Tabari, The History of al-Tabari, 164. It is worth noting that after the massacre, the body of Husayn was denied a proper burial by the Umayyad commander. This incident will play an important role in Chapter Six.

16 Ayoub, Redemptive Suffering in Islam, 152.

moving that even the soldiers and the family of Yazid joined the household of the Prophet in mourning the martyrdom of the Imam and his followers. Although in the Sunni tradition the Prophet is said to have prohibited the pre-Islamic ritual of lamenting the dead (al-niyah ‘ala’l-myyit), the Shi‘i Imams encouraged and fervently practiced the ceremonies of mourning. In fact, according to Shi‘i traditions, it was Muhammad who first wept over Husayn when he was born and, while he was an infant, ordered a mournful assembly for the martyrdom of his beloved grandson and his companions.

The first Shi‘i Imam to encourage the commemoration of Husayn’s death was ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin, the son of the martyred Imam and the

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18 According to Ayoub, the ceremonies would last for seven days. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 152. See also Hussain, “The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning,” 80.

19 There is no consensus about the historical origins of Muharram. In the late nineteenth century, B. D. Eerdmans attributed Muharram to a combination of the ancient cult of the slain Spring God Tammuz (Adonis) with Muharram customs, a ritual that was practiced in northern Mesopotamia until the eleventh century. B. D. Eerdmans, “Der Ursprung der Ceremonien des Hosein-Festes,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 9 (1894): 280–307. For a critical look at Eerdmans’ account, see J. Robson, “The Muharram Ceremonies,” *The Hibbert Journal* 54 (1955): 267–74. Theodor Gaster describes the ritual wailing for the dead youth as widespread in the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian regions. Among these ritual laments, he mentions the Egyptian mourning rites of Isis, the lamentations for Osiris and Demeter and Kore ceremonies among the Greeks. T. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Norton and Co, 1977), 30–34. It is interesting to note that women were the primary performers of these rituals, as the source of pollution. See S. P. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortal Speak* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 162–65. This gender dimension will play an important role in Chapters Five and Six. Also, a nationalistic ideological tendency in certain academic discourses assumes that the rituals, especially in their eighteenth century form of ritual theater or ta‘ziyeh and shabi-khwani ceremonies, are essentially an extension of pre-Islamic Persian festivals, such as the festivals of Farvardigan and Savushun ceremonies performed by the cult of kings and heroes. The Manichean ritual of pardeh-khwani, which persisted throughout the Sassanian period, has also been recognized as a precursor to ta‘ziyeh. The general point is that the rituals resembled various pre-Islamic ceremonies, which highlights the possible interaction between different civilizations across the Afro-Mesopotamian and Iranian landmass; they were not, however, a mere continuation of a pre-Islamic “national” festival. For a good study of the pre-Islamic Persian origins of Muharram rituals, see E. Yarshater, “Ta‘ziya and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rites in Iran,” in *Ta‘ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P. J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 88–94. See also H. Dabashi’s “The Sight of the Invisible World: The Cinema of Bahram Beiza'i,” in *Close Up Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 76–111, on the Sassanian rituals of pardeh-khwani. For the Prophet’s prohibition of the pre-Islamic rituals of lamentation, see M. Abdesselem, *Le thème de la mort* (Tunis: Publication de l’ Université de Tunis, 1977), 97–104.

fourth Imam, declaring “whoever weeps for the death of his father, Husayn, son of 'Ali, God would grant him large mansions in paradise to live therein eternally.”

At Medina, where Husayn’s mother, Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet is buried, 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin is reported to have observed the memory of Husayn’s martyrdom, performed acts of lamentation (nowheh-khwani) and recited stories (maqatil) of the ordeal of his father at Karbala. The tradition continued with the encouragement of other Imams. As Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam of Twelver Shi‘ism, declared in the late seventh century, “for those who cannot visit his [Husayn] shrine, they should lament and wail and command their families to cry for Husayn in their houses, organize gatherings to meet and mourn.”

In broad theo-cosmological terms, for Shi‘i Imams the tragic martyrdom of Husayn identified the day of ‘Ashura as an event of meta-historical importance. The drama of Karbala not only represented a sinister event in history, but also the dawn of a community of remembrance that annually commemorates the unjust martyrdom of Husayn under the oppressive rule of the Umayyad dynasty, serving as a strong symbolic basis for unity in the Shi‘i community.

For most of the early Umayyad period, Muharram rituals were most likely clandestine events, practiced by minority Shi‘i groups during a period when the caliphate in power represented the culprits of the

21 Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, 143.
23 J. Mohaddesi, *Farhang-i 'Ashura* (Qum: Maruf, 2002), 338. The lamentation ritual was also strongly encouraged by Ja‘far al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam. According to Sadiq, the only religiously sanctioned form of wailing is the one for Husayn. Ibid., 412–13. It was under the sixth Imam that the doctrine of taqiyya (religious dissimulation) was developed, further encouraging the celebration of Muharram ceremonies in houses rather than in public.
24 Ibid., 413.
26 I will return to this point later in Chapters Five and Six.
tragedy of Karbala. Considering the fact that there are no significant historical descriptions of the annual rituals of ‘Ashura during the first three centuries after the death of Husayn, it may be safe to suggest that the public commemorations of Muharram were mostly limited to Shi‘i factions in major urban areas that held messianic aspirations for political change. The first pro-Husayn Tawwabun (or Penitents) movement, led by the Kufan Sulayman ibn Surad al-Khaza‘i, who sought revenge for the death of Husayn, mourned for a day at the grave of Husayn at Karbala in 680 before their military campaign against the caliph and practiced the mourning ceremonies underground until 683. The other pro-Husayn chiliastic factions, known as the Kaysaniyya movements, headed by Mukhtar b. Abi ‘Ubayd al-Thaqafi who led the revolt against the Umayyad dynasty, were most likely performing the ceremonies in private and perhaps organizing public gatherings in the last decade of the seventh century. It is highly likely that in the years following the events of Karbala the ceremonies were primarily limited to private domains, esoteric in characteristic and away from the watchful eyes of the Umayyad state.

The tradition of lamentation for the martyred Imam, however, continued under the reign of the Umayyads in the form of secret memorial services (majalis) in the homes of the Imams, direct male descendants of Husayn, and their followers. In the early eighth century, when the Umayyad dynasty saw an increase in dissent against its religious authority, the majalis circles became increasingly public, with popular preachers reciting sermons and narrating the story of Karbala in mosques. Although still limited in their activities, majalis preachers like Hasan Basri aroused emotional responses from audiences who would celebrate ‘Ashura both at home and in public.

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28 For an account of Kaysaniyya, see W. Madelung, “Kaysaniyya,” EI2. The affinity between the tradition of ‘Ashura and the doctrine of Mahdism, as advocated by Shi‘i Imams, is remarkable. According to A. Sachedina, “The year by year commemoration of the ‘Ashura’ by the Shi‘i community indicates not only their sorrow for the affictions suffered by the family of the Prophet, but also their yearning for the descendant of this Imam to rise against unbearable social circumstances and establish the rule of justice and equity.” A. Sachedina, Islamic Messianism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 157.
30 For a brief description of Umayyad majalis ceremonies, see T. M. Howarth, The Twelver Shi‘a (London: Routledge, 2005), 5.
During early ‘Abbasid rule, the mourning processions were celebrated and encouraged by the caliphs, although they were still largely limited to household gathering processions. Despite the fact that Caliph Mansur (754–75) harassed and even put in prison the sixth Imam, Ja’far Sadiq, in Kufa, the ceremonies flourished in the domestic domain, providing a basis for the ‘Abbasids to legitimate their authority among the Shi‘is.31 Since ‘Abbasid rule had its roots in messianic expectations, the redemptive symbolic role of Husayn, enacted through the rituals, served to reinforce the dynasty’s claim to power as a representative body of the Prophet’s household. The main figure advancing the ceremonies under the ‘Abbasids was Ja’far Sadiq, who used the brief freedom provided by the new dynasty to develop the lamentation recitation and poetry and make it into a communal event.32 The participation of female and male mourners in the house, though separated by a curtain across the hall in which gatherings were held, could be described as the first instance of an inter-gender public event that advanced the ceremonies into a major Shi‘i community event.33

It was, however, under the Buyid ruler Mu‘izz al-Dawlah in 963 that the Muharram celebration made its first appearance as an official public event, during which the ritual lamentations for Husayn attained the patronage of the caliphate. Dramatic and mournful, the ceremonies appear to have consisted primarily of wailing women, walking around in the markets, weeping and slapping their faces.34 Ibn al-Kathir describes the Buyid version of the ceremonies as a major public mourning spectacle. He writes, “On the tenth of Moharram of this year, Mu‘izz ad-Dawla Ibn Buwayh, may God disgrace him, ordered that the markets be closed, and that the women should wear coarse woolen hair cloth, and that they should go into the markets with their faces uncovered/unveiled and their hair disheveled, beating their faces

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and wailing over Hussein Ibn Abi Talib.”\(^{35}\) The interesting theme in this early account is the way that the level of regime involvement in the organization and promotion of the events. This is possibly the first instance of the ceremonies being incorporated into the regime apparatus as both a means for political legitimization and theatrical pomp that would represent state power through street and market performances of mourning processions.

However, the core of Muharram activities continued to take place at the majalis in the form of sermons conveying poetic stories about Karbala. With popular preachers like Ibn Babuya, the ceremonies were advanced in their majalis form, with the proliferation of Imami stories that depicted the suffering of other Imams whose deaths were also described like Husayn’s in terms of betrayal and martyrdom.\(^{36}\) By the middle of the tenth century, the genre of Muharram martyrologies would become more complex in narrative structure. Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967), a Zaydi Shi’i preacher, for instance, wrote a poetic account of the Prophet and his descendents that would include a long list of 189 individuals who were martyred by Sunni rulers.\(^{37}\) As David Cook explains, “For al-Isfahani, the overall theme is the suffering of the entire family of the Prophet whatever the cause, rather than the specific focus upon one branch of this family.”\(^{38}\) Yet such narratives advanced the image of a celestial bond between the martyrs of Karbala and martyrs of the Shi’i community, evoking the tale of sacrificial victims with much passion and sorrow and thus creating an imaginary community of suffering and self-sacrifice.

In the beginning of Fatimid rule from 969–1021, especially under Al-ʿAziz and Al-Hakim in the late tenth century, Muharram was popularly performed in Egypt along with the Festival of Ghadir Khumm (ʿid al-ghadir), celebrating the Prophet’s declaration of ʿAli’s position as his successor and his farewell pilgrimage.\(^{39}\) During this period, the

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., 60.

rituals spread in Islamdom with the construction of special houses for the lamentation celebrations, known as Husayniyyat, in the cities of Aleppo (Halab), Baghdad, and Cairo in the ninth to tenth centuries. Muharram observances developed into an integral part of Shiʿi devotional culture with the appearance of ceremonial visits (ziyarat) to the shrines of Imams and their families, as an alternative to the visitation of Mecca and Medina. In the early tenth century Shiʿi holy sites, like the cities of Karbala, Mashhad, Najaf, and Qum, became central places of pilgrimage, where the ceremonies were performed as processional events. As the place of `Ali’s burial, the city of Najaf gained increasing importance as a central place of visitation and commemoration of the Imams with the construction of a shrine by the Buyid caliph, ‘Adud’d-Dawla, in the tenth century. The city of Karbala, the burial place of Husayn, saw the construction of a number of monumental shrines under Fatimid rule, during which Muharram ceremonies were performed in public. In 1154–55 the head of Husayn was transferred to Cairo where it was to become a focus of Sunni pilgrimage and Muharram rituals, lasting to the present day.

In Syria, the former headquarters of the Umayyad caliphate, the ceremonies were also performed in their distinctive chant elegies and processional forms in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In Iraq, Muharram rituals in the ongoing Sunni-Shiʿi conflict gained so much

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41 The shrine was later reconstructed by Shah Safi (1629–42) in the early seventeenth century.
42 The first shrine at Karbala appears to have been built under the Umayyads. J. Mohaddesi, Farhang-i `Ashura, 380. The earliest pilgrimage to Husayn’s tomb was conducted in 684–85, when visitors spent days and nights in praying, wailing, and weeping. Ahmad b. Abi Ya’qub b. Ja’far b. Wahb Al-Ya’qubi, Tarikh-i al-Ya’qubi, ed. Muhammad Sadiq Bahr al-‘Ulm (Najaf: Haydariyya Press, 1964), 231–32. The original shrine was later destroyed by ‘Abbasid Caliph Mutawakkil in 850, and after his death another shrine was erected. Although his head was originally buried in Damascus, where a shrine was constructed for it during the Fatimid era, the head of Husayn was taken to Cairo in the twelfth century. See the following footnote.
43 The history of the burial place of Husayn’s head after his martyrdom is shrouded in mystery. According to some Arab historians, the head of the martyred Imam was rescued by al-Salah Talal’i, a Fatimid vazir, from the Crusaders in Damascus and later transported to the “Emerald Palace in Cairo, where it was sanctified.” J. W. Meri, The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria, 193.
44 This is based on a report by the famous mystic and poet, Mulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, who observed a Muharram processions in Aleppo. H. Halm, Shi’a Islam: From Religion to Revolution, 44.
popularity in Baghdad that the Sunni Caliph al-Qadir (991–1031) was forced to organize Sunni festivals to rival the Shi’i ceremonies. In the twelfth century, when Shi’ism and the cults of saints continued to spread in the Mesopotamian landmass, Muharram rituals were also observed on the Iranian plateau, in cities like Qazvin, Qum, Varamin, and, especially, in the northeastern cities of Nishapur, Sabzavar, and Tus. Their popularity appears to have spread so wide in Iran that collective lamentation and elegy recitation on the martyrs of Karbala were even recorded to occur in the zealot Sunni cities of Hamadan, where the Shi’is celebrated “Āshūrā in a way that would surprise [even] the people of Qum.” By the thirteenth century, Muharram preachers were found not only throughout Mesopotamia and Iran, but also northern India, where the sermons were recited in mosques and during military campaigns by Sufi mystics as well as Ismaili Shi’i preachers.

The most significant development in the ceremonies occurred in correlation with three deep-seated societal transformations in Islamdom from the eleventh to the fifteenth century: (i) conversion of Turkish steppe peoples to Islam; (ii) the appearance of the Sufi brotherhood; and (iii) the advent of heterodoxical movements. As I argued in Chapter Three, with the conversion of the Turks from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries, the Sufi urbanite chivalry culture of the futuvvat orders, with their code of conduct and initiation ceremonies, was fused with the shamanistic religions of the steppe people, especially in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. This convergence of popular urban Mesopotamian and nomadic rural steppe religions marks a major shift in the development and spread of the ceremonies. The fusion of ascetic, aesthetic initiation rites and mystical and shamanistic

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46 Most likely, the city of Mashhad, where the shrine of the eighth Imam is located, also witnessed the performance of the ceremonies. Also, towns around the shores of the Caspian Sea can be added to this list.


rites practiced among the akhi-darvish orders, introduced new symbolic and performative themes to the Shi‘i practices that conveyed non-soteriological dimensions. With the emergence of Sufism after the breakup of the 'Abbasid empire by the end of the tenth to the eleventh centuries, the ritual of zikr, consisting of practices of meditation and trance through silence and/or chant, music, and dance, merged with the 'Abbasid version of Muharram rituals and added a new mystical, and at times violent, dimension to the performances as practiced by the Sufi orders.49

In his travel journals, the famous Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battuta, described an akhi association in Anatolia that celebrated 'Ashura as mystical communion with the divine spirit, in the form of trance performances. On 13 October 1331, at the city of Bursa, he also witnessed the death of a man in the course of a zikr performance during Muharram ceremonies.50 Although the extent of violence used in the zikr practices in the course of akhi Muharram rituals is not clear, Ibn Battuta’s description offers the first recorded account of the ceremonies as intense performances in the midst of emotional outbursts. As zikr became an increasingly integral part of Muharram rituals, the Sufi-tariqat sectarian orders, like the Bakhtashis, the Naqshbandis, and the Shabak, spread the ceremonies throughout the Anatolian and western Mesopotamian regions in the later middle period.51 Also of importance is the development of rituals of communal consumption, like the “Ashura Merasimi,” practiced especially among the Bakhtashi order that consisted of a dish offered for consumption to the community of mourners at the end of the Muharram ceremonies.52 With shamanism, spirit-possession and ritual consumption became a central feature of the Muharram processions, the later middle periods saw an interesting development in the ongoing fusion between instrumental

49 For a general description of the Sufi rituals, see L. Gardet, “Dhikr,” EI 2.
50 Ibn Battuta also adds that while lodged in the hospice of one of the akhi houses, he spent the night of the fast of 'Ashura listening to Quran as the brethren sang hymns. R. Dunn, The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 152–53.
51 The fusion of Turkish-Sufi zikr rituals and Irano-Mesopotamian lamentation (nowheh) performances is considered an important development that requires a more in-depth study.
52 J. K. Birge, The Bektashi Order of Dervishes (Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary Press, 1937), 169–70. The ritual of wine drinking was also, possibly, an integral part of the ceremonies, since the Sufi orders usually closed their rituals with dancing and drinking wine. A. H. Al-Sarraf, Al-Shabak (Baghdad: Matbaat al-Maarif, 1954), 97.
and soteriological religious practices as such civilizational encounters resulted in new cultural manifestations to create innovative transcultural practices on the local level.\textsuperscript{53}

The advent of militant ghulat and ghuluww movements in the fourteenth century may have enhanced the role of violence (both physical and symbolic) in the collective performance of Muharram. Although evidence remains scant, the element of bodily injuries, caused by the ritual participants or members in the group on a new member, might have played a central role in the worldview of the fifteenth century ghulat organizations. Self-inflicted or group-inflicted violence would have provided something more solidifying to the powerful element of emotional zeal in these groups. The role of violence most likely had the significance of a worldview, a way of seeing oneself in relation to others who are viewed as outsiders. In this sense, Muharram is likely to have been identified as one of the initiation rituals for the militant Sufi orders like the early Safavid movement—although, once more, the lack of evidence forces us to make this claim only in conjecture.\textsuperscript{54}

The spread of Muharram in Islamdom, in correlation with the rituals of visitation to shrines and the crystallization of sectarian communities with their distinct ritual practices, coincided with the expansion of the cult of saints and performances of penitential processions in the southern Euro-Mediterranean regions. After the First Crusades, followed by the reform movements and the pontificate of Gregory VII, the Mediterranean saw an outburst of religious vitality, involving the rise of new monastic orders and revivalist movements. By around 1100, monasteries encouraged the veneration of the relics of local saints, fostering ceremonies of pilgrimage and customs of reverence similar to Islamdom. This growth not only meant that there was a breakdown of the church institution, but also indicated an increasing

\textsuperscript{53} I will expand upon this point when I offer an interpretation of the Safavid camel sacrifice rites in Chapter Five.

\textsuperscript{54} By initiation rites I am mainly referring to rites of passage, primarily performed by male participants, involving some kind of physical and symbolic violence, as an initiatory experience with the ordeal and emotional intensity cementing group loyalty. For the ceremony of initiation among the Bakhtashis, Shabak, and Safavids, see M. Moosa, Extremist Shiites, 138–42. For an account of an early Safavid initiation ritual, see A. H. Morton, "The Chūb-i-tariq and Qizilbāsh in Safavid Period," in Études Safavides, ed. J. Calmard (Paris: Institute Français de Recherche en Iran, 1993), 225–45.
decentralization of public ritual with the emergence in Europe of new forms of popular religious practices with strong millenarian motifs.

At this historical intercivilizational junction, the enormous explosion in the popularity of penitential processions of flagellants, originating in Perugia in 1260, continued to expand in the fourteenth century throughout central and northern Italy and other parts of central and southern Europe, reaching its apogee with the rise of Beghard and Wyclif millenarian movements in the early fifteenth century. As I argued in the first section of Chapter Three, through war and commerce, the Mediterranean complex in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries opened southern European regions to Islamdom by bringing the Iberian Peninsula, Muslim North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean shores closer together. Recalling Subrahmanyam’s notion of “connected history,” I also argued how the circulation of ideas, myths, and rituals allowed Euro-Mediterranean cultures to maintain close proximity of interconnected spaces. The appearance of the self-flagellation rituals, entailing millenarian ceremonies of high mystical ascetic and grotesque aesthetic ferocity, in southern Europe and Islamdom attests to an interactive field of civilizational interrelation, in which cultures encounter, exchange, and, as a result, cross-fertilize in diverse ways.

But to what extent did the twelfth and thirteenth centuries advance an era of cross-fertilization of Christian and Muslim ritual flagellation performances in the Euro-Mediterranean regions? According to Nakash, the Muharram practice of flagellation and other forms of self-injurious practices could have been transmitted from Italy into eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, where they were later incorporated into the ghulat Muharram ceremonies. Though there is no concrete evidence to back up this claim, Nakash is correct to highlight the reports of travelers, like Evliya Çelebi, Etienne (Stefan) Kakash, and Olearius, whose travel accounts

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55 F. J. Courtney, “Flagellation,” in NCE.

56 We could also consider the more popular feasts of Corpus Christi, which in the fourteenth and fifteenth century became one of the most important calendrical rites of the year in Christian Europe. The great outbreak of various popular Christian rituals, like the Christian Eucharist as the commemoration of the Lord’s Supper from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries is not only indicative of increased bureaucratic rationalization and formation of a civic sphere in the new Mediterranean urban centers, but also increasing importance of the (in)formalized rituals of the body in both the carnival motifs and formalized behavior in the cultural everyday life that was shared by all classes in the Middle Ages.

to Anatolia confirm a number of self-injurious performances in the course of Muharram ceremonies, a practice relatively absent (or not central) in the rituals performed in central and southern Safavid cities, such as Isfahan and Shiraz.\textsuperscript{58} It is likely that the origins of self-injurious performances in the Turkish Shi‘i regions of Anatolia, with its emphasis on the body as a medium of symbolic enactment, underscored the shamanistic element in controlling both the mundane and the supernatural world.\textsuperscript{59} But Muharram could have also been blended with the Mediterranean Christian self-flagellation rituals, as Anatolia saw an increase in the assimilation of Christian esoteric cultural elements among the ghulat, the ghuluww, and the Sufi orders in the later middle period of Islamic history.\textsuperscript{60} This is not simply an indication of a Christian influence on Muharram ceremonies, as Nakash argues, but rather, a cross-fertilization process between the three intermingling civilizations, as Mediterranean Christian, Anatolian, and Mesopotamian Muslim encounters led to the adaption, circulation, and spread of practices and cultural manifestations in various contact zones through commerce, migration, and war.

Furthermore, the merging of zikr rituals with Muharram ceremonies coincided with literary vernacularization, most notably the Persianization of maqtal devotional literature in the fifteenth century. Although the origins of maqtal ceremonies can be traced back to the pre-Islamic era, the rituals saw the growth of devotional manuals, written mostly in Arabic for the dramatic portrayal of the events of Karbala and in the form of martyrrology recitations on the death of the Imams as early as the Buyid and Seljuk periods.\textsuperscript{61} The development of the ceremonies in the form of elegy performances made its first major mark with the

\textsuperscript{58} Henri Massé has also commented on this point. Although incorrect to suggest that it reached southern Iran in the nineteenth century, Massé explains how the element of self-inflicted injuries was primarily evident in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. See H. Massé, \textit{Croyances et Coutumes Persanes}, vol. 2 (Paris: Libraire Orientale et Américaine, 1938), 135–36.

\textsuperscript{59} According to Ya‘qub Azhand, various self-inflicting customs were mostly practiced in eastern Anatolia, specifically in Ardabil, the heartland of the Qizilbash. Azhand, \textit{Namayish dar dawrah-yi Safavi}, 81.

\textsuperscript{60} M. Moosa, \textit{Extremist Shiites}, 40–43.

\textsuperscript{61} J. Calmard, “Le Chi‘isme imamite en Iran à l’époque seldjoukide d’après le Kitâb al-Naqd,” \textit{Le Monde Iranien et l’Islam} 1 (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1971), 64. In the Arabian Peninsula, Stetkevych argues pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry was a form of ritual performance, tied with other nonnarrative festivals like the rites of passage and sacrifice. See S. P. Stetkevych, \textit{The Mute Immortals Speak}. On the Iranian plateau, elegy recitation and storytellers were evidently present from the time of Alexander to the
appearance of Abdul al-Jalil’s maqtal, *Al-Naqs*, in 1151. This martyrology on the death of Husayn mainly included a narrative of the events of Karbala and the tragic fate of the Imam in the form of dramatic portrayals. The martyrology genre reached peak popularity in the early sixteenth century with the appearance of the famous book of Kashifi, *Rawzat al-shuhada* (Meadow of the Martyrs). Published in historical juncture with the rise of the Safavids to power in 1502 and written in Persian in a seemingly Sunni milieu in the city of Herat, *Rawzat al-shuhada* enjoyed a wide readership throughout the Persian-speaking world. In the Safavid period, parts of the text were delivered in the form of sermons and poetry recitation in public gatherings, revolving around the events of Karbala and its aftermath. The significance of *Rawzat al-shuhada* consisted of the development of folklore and mythology in Muharram ceremonies, which is mainly derived from Kashifi’s astrological and cabalistic belief of “transfer,” signifying the privileged status of being spiritually related in lineage to the household of the Prophet.

The above historical description attests to three developmental stages of Muharram ritual performances: (a) lamentation processions, consisting of beating chests, slapping the face, and wailing; (b) elegy recitation (marthiya or nowheh) in public gatherings (majalis); (c) acts of self-mortification, consisting of ascetic mystical performances that entail some sort of self-injury as a result of intense emotional outbursts; and (d) literary vernacular and mythological genre. It is in respect to the historical concatenation of these four important developments that the Muharram ritual witnessed an increase in the politicization of its performative and symbolic dynamics under Safavid rule.

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64 Space precludes me from expanding upon this. It is, however, most likely that the work of Kashifi, a Sunni Nurbakhshi from present day northwestern Afghanistan, reflects the intense mixture of religious practices between Sufism and Shi’i soteriological beliefs in salvation through the mystical poetics of the holy Imams. I will briefly discuss *Rawzat al-shuhada* in the second section of Chapter Six.
By the rise of Isma’il I to power in the early sixteenth century, Muharram had spread not only into the Anatolia-Mesopotamian regions but also to the subcontinent. As early as 1398, Timur is believed to have introduced various Shi’i rituals, including Muharram, to India, as he crossed the Indus and captured Delhi to spread the religion of Islam to the subcontinent. The ceremonies were observed in India well into the early sixteenth century, during which independent Shi’i dynasties and the Mughal emperors bestowed patronage on Muharram until the eighteenth century. As in pre-Safavid Iran, Muharram was celebrated in the Timurid period, especially among the ‘Alids and other (ghuluww) Shi’i groups, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as mentioned earlier. Though the pre-Safavid Iranian population was predominately Sunni, the Turkoman tribe of Qaraquyunlu, with their

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65 This date is based on a legendary account, although it is possible that the ceremonies were practiced under the Delhi sultanate in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century. With regard to the legendary account of Timur’s importation of Muharram to India, see J. Calmard, “Le Patronage des Ta’ziyeh: Eléments pour une Etude Globale,” in Ta’ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran, ed. P. J. Chekalowski (New York: New York University Press and Soroust, 1979), 126; F. J. Korom, Hosay Trinidad, 54; and V. Schubel, Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam, 110. For Timur’s use of Shi’i symbols, especially shrines, in Iran and beyond, see also M. E. Subtelny, Timurids in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 192–234. For a critical study of Timur’s legendary account that he introduced the tradition to North India, see A. Rizvi, A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isnā ‘Ashari Shi’is in India, vol. 2 (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986), 292–99.

66 Though adherent to Sunni Islam, the Mughal state accommodated certain Shi’i cultural practices until their overthrow in 1737.

67 As Mahnaz Shayesteh-Far has demonstrated, evidence from Timurid artistic artifacts reveals that Shi’ism was widely accepted by the Sunni Timurid dynasty in Persia. M. Shayesteh-Far, Shi‘ah Artistic Elements in the Timurid and the Early Safavid Periods: Book Illustrations and Inscriptions (BookExtra, 1999). Although this does not suggest that they were officially sanctioned by the Sunni dynasty, the claim, however, indicates a strong possibility that Shi’i devotional ceremonies were tolerated in the Timurid period. This is mostly evident, I suggest, with Timur’s conquest of Ardabil in the fourteenth century. Timur granted the city and the rural areas to the Safavid household, hence indicating the status of the tariqat order even under Sunni rule. Shah Rukh’s visit to Mashhad’s holy shrines of the local sayyids in Muharram from 1406 to 1436 demonstrates that saint visitation rituals and the celebration of ‘Ashura could have been observed together in the fifteenth century at an official level. See B. S. Amoretti, “Religion in the Timurid and Safavid Periods,” in The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 6, ed. P. Jackson and L. Lockhart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 615–16.
ostensible pro-Shi’i tendencies, may have also officially encouraged Muharram in the northwestern regions of the country.\textsuperscript{68}

The mourning procession, however, saw its main phase of expansion in the form of official public events in the sixteenth century under Safavid rule. The declaration of Imami Shi’i Islam as the state religion of Iran in 1502 put into effect a systematic attempt by the new regime to introduce what John R. Perry calls the “territorialization of a state cult.”\textsuperscript{69} As a symbol of their veneration for the Imams and partly in a way to curtail Sunni influence, under Isma’il I the Safavid-Qizilbash regime initiated numerous symbolic strategies, such as ritual cursing (sabb and la’nat) of the first three usurper caliphs, Abu Bakr, ’Umar, and ’Uthman, as discussed in the previous chapter. Under Tahmasb, the promotion of Shi’i symbolic practices like iconographic ensembles in various public spaces like shrines and madrasah reflected the systematic yet subtle attempt by the state to emphasize the Safavid genealogical relations to the Imams, as the source of both spiritual and political authority.\textsuperscript{70} As a consequence of Tahmasb I’s decision to move the imperial court from Tabriz to Qazvin after the 29 May 1555 Ottoman-Safavid peace negotiation (Treaty of Amasya), Muharram appears to have attained increasing importance in the expansion of Shi’i practices, as the shah turned to the further strengthening of Imami institutions in his new empire. Though difficult to determine, it was most likely under Tahmasb I and his expansive religious policy of imposition of orthodoxy due to his personal puritanism that Muharram became a major official event of the Safavid state.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{68} For a study of pro-Shi’i leanings of the Qaraquyunlu, see V. Minorsky, “Shah-Jihan Qara-qoyunlu and His Poetry,” \textit{BSOAS} 16, no. 2 (1954): 271–97. Such pro-Shi’i leanings underscored the blurred and cross-sectarian religious landscape of the region prior to the Safavid era. See J. E. Woods, \textit{The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire} (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), 83.


\textsuperscript{70} See S. Babaie, “Epigraphy, iv: Safavid and Later Inscriptions,” in \textit{ER}.

\textsuperscript{71} For much of his reign, especially the first twenty years, the shah was supportive of the arts, which included literature. But as a result of a mystical dream of the eighth Imam, ‘Ali Riza, in 1532–33, Tahmasb’s conversion to a lifestyle of piety opened the royal court and in fact the entire empire to the spread of religious art and poetry. Iskandar Beg Munshi in his \textit{History of Shah Abbas the Great} writes, “During the latter part of his life, however, when the Shah took more seriously the Qur’anic injunctions to ‘do what is right and eschew evil,’ he no longer counted poets pious and upright men because of the known addiction of many of them to the bottle. He ceased to
In broad terms, Tahmasb’s patronage of religiously inclined practices, like Muharram, added a new political performative complexity to the mourning ceremonies such as dramatic public processions (shabih) and the initiation of radical changes in the symbolic dynamics. Similar to developments in Ottoman circumcision festivals and Palm Sunday celebrations during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, Safavid Muharram ceremonies became increasingly sophisticated in enactments and representation of political power towards the mid-sixteenth century under Tahmasb I. In this period, the rituals not only saw an increase of state patronage, but also expanded in their accommodation of diverse religious practices. Consequently, the dependence of the Safavid household on the Qizilbash until the second civil war contributed to the development of Muharram as a political festival, in which elements of Qizilbash Islam, and by extension its shamanistic tendencies, were fused with Imami practices.

It is not clear if the ceremonies were officially performed under Isma’il I. For instance, no indication of Muharram is found in the travel reports of Caterino Zino in 1500. Even in the early years of Tahmasb I’s rule, the travel reports of Giovan Mario Angrollelo in 1524 and the Venetian ambassador Vincentio D’Alessandri in 1527 do not mention anything about the ceremonies. It only suggests that the rituals might have been regarded with favor, and refused to allow them to present him with occasional pieces and eulogistic odes.” I. Munshi, *History of Shah ’Abbas the Great*, 274–75.

The reliance on the singing of devotional poetry during Muharram in the later Safavid period in Muhtasham Kashani’s *Haft band*, a mid-sixteenth century poetry text on the martyrdom of Husayn, indicates new developments in Muharram performances. It also underscores the importance of Tahmasb’s patronage of Shi’i court poets and literati in the promotion of the ceremonies under his reign. However, at this stage, it appears that devotional poetry (marsiya) was primarily a courtly religious activity. See the introduction to *Divan-i Mulana Mutasham Kashani*, introduction by S. H. Sadat-i Naseri and edited by M. A. Gurgani (Tehran: Senani, 1998), 15–16; and K. G. Ruffle, “Verses Dripping Blood,” 18–24.

It also suggests, if practiced, they simply did not grasp the attention of the travelers who visited Safavid Persia. For instance, Robert Stodart, visiting Persia from 1628 to 1629, failed to give an account of the ceremonies that had fallen on September of the year 1628. However, we do know that they were publicly performed, as
performed in less visible public forums, limited to selected gatherings by sectarian Shi'i groups, quite similar to their observation in the city of Damascus in 1501, the same year that the Safavids came to power. Thus, for the early sixteenth century, it remains difficult to determine whether European travelers simply failed to describe Muharram or that the celebrations were primarily practiced in less public and exclusive group gatherings and largely performed by Sufi sectarian groups, like the Qizilbash. This is a critical point since it also underscores the problem of merely relying on the European narratives as the “window” into Safavid social life, and that perhaps the absence of Muharram accounts in these reports might well tell something about how they were performed under the early Safavids in comparison to the later periods.

The travel report on May 19, 1540 of Michele Membré, the Venetian diplomat who described the celebrations at Tabriz, marks the earliest recorded testimony of the ceremonies in the Safavid period. Membré describes the following:

In the month of May they perform the passion of a son of 'Ali, wherefore they call him Imam Husain, who fought with a certain race which they call Yazid, and had his head cut off; for that martyrdom they perform the passion for ten days, and for it they all wear black, black turbans and black black cloths. For those ten days the Shah does not come forth from his house. From evening to one hour of the night the companies go around through the city and through the mosques chanting in Persian the passion of the said Imam Husain. This they call 'Ashura, that is Ακιορνα. And that began on 1 May, up to the tenth. I saw young men make their bodies black and go naked on the earth. I saw another thing on the square which they call after Begum, someone make a hole underground like a well, and put himself in it naked and leave only his head out, with all the rest in the hole, packed in with earth up to the throat; and that was to perform that passion. This I saw with my own eyes. In the evening all the ladies betake themselves to their mosques and a preacher preaches the passion of the said son of 'Ali, and the ladies weep bitterly.
This illuminating description provides a rare glimpse of the role of self-inflicted violence and new developments in the course of the ceremonies, relatively absent in the pre-Safavid form of Muharram rituals. First, performed over the course of ten days, mourning is displayed in black paint and dark clothes; male ritual participants wear black attire, including turban-cloths.\(^{78}\) Secondly, the shah is not present nor does he appear to be officially endorsing the ceremonies throughout the ten days of mourning processions. This element indicates the possibility that the ceremonies were still a relatively unofficial (although public) ceremony. Third, the element of violence is predominantly present in the performance of bodily self-injuries, especially in the burial ritual of Begum on the city square, consisting of digging underground holes wherein the performer is buried “up to the throat.” This new development emphasizes the element of self-inflicted injury in the form of self-burial as an important motif of the performances. Nowhere in the pre-Safavid version of the ceremonies were these practices present. Accordingly, the account of male nude mourners, painted in black as a sign of lamentation evokes features of performative symbolic expression of self-renunciation in the course of the ceremonies, as male ritual participants continue to dance in sorrow, apparently separate from the female ritual participants. Fourth, the two ceremonies of chanting “in Persian the passion of the said Imam Husain” during the daytime and elegy-oration by the preacher (mulla) at night underlines the two combined elements of formalized speech (passion oration performed by males) and frenzied noise (wailing performed by females) in the course of the 1540 version of the ceremonies. In Membré’s description, Muharram ends in a melancholic mood, with female participants howling “bitterly” into the night.

The absence of European travel reports on the ceremonies from 1576 to 1602–04 is indicative of a domestic crisis in the pre-Isfahani phase of Safavid rule. The profound tribal conflict that had been simmering

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\(^{78}\) As Calmard notes in “Ritual and Power II,” the described ten days of ceremonies differs from the twelve days of celebrations, usually associated with Qizilbash heterodoxical custom. If true, this could highlight the possibility that the ceremonies were increasingly being transformed into an Imami ritual practice under Tahmasb I’s rule, though surely certain Qizilbash elements continued to be present in Muharram performances. For the twelve days of celebration of Muharram by the Qizilbash, see I. Mélikoff, “Le Problème Kizilbaș,” *Turcica* 6 (1975): 49–67.
in the empire prior to Tahmasb’s succession in 1524 intensified and became manifest after his death in 1576. The public performance of the ceremonies went unnoticed, as the Safavid throne faced serious threats from the rebellious Qizilbash chieftains. The accession of ʿAbbas I as the “restorer” of the Safavid dynasty in 1587–90, however, not only created an increasingly stabilized political milieu for Muharram to be officially reintroduced to the empire, but also provided commercial security and diplomatic expansion for Europeans to travel and depict the development of the rituals in ways unprecedented in Safavid history. As noted in the previous chapter, in this context of economic and political developments, the reign of ʿAbbas identifies a period of dramatic changes in transforming the scale and scope of existing cultural institutional arrangements. Along with the renovation and reconstruction of the Shiʿi holy shrine of Imam Riza in Mashhad and the expansion of Ghadir Khumm festivals, the patronage of Muharram rituals by the shah marks an important civilizing step in the crystallization of a Shiʿi Safavid collectivity.

In 1602–04, simultaneous with the first construction phase of the new Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan in Isfahan, the Portuguese traveler, António de Gouveia, provides the first fascinating description of the public mourning ceremonies in the southern city of Shiraz. According to de Gouveia, the festival of “Chauçem or Achur,” was performed in the square of the city, where the governor (“Gouverneur”) riding on a horse accompanied the mourning procession amidst a boisterous crowd and discordant music. With ten days of fasting and refraining from work, men and women came together in the maydan and marched toward the Grand Mosque. The procession comprised a representation of the characters of Karbala, empty coffins, and a large quantity of camels covered with blue sheets, as children and women, seated on the animals, cry and wail. Along with the realistic representation of

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79 This is not to say that they were not performed on a more private or household level. As K. Ruffle explains, the Persian marsiya or devotional poetries, especially the Karbala-{Nameh of Muhtasham Kashani, were highly popular among the Safavid Shiʿi population under the reign of Tahmasb. This may indicate that during these years of turmoil Muharram could have been limited to private gatherings. See Ruffle, “Verses Dripping Blood,” 19–22.

80 I will turn to the theoretical aspect in the next chapter.

wounds on the ritual participants’ heads and bloody faces, men performed ritual battles with long painted sticks.82 In the course of these ritual combats, participants fought to the point of death, their corpses left on the square. Here, like Membré's description, self-burial rituals, nudity, and ritual funeral oration continued to be present in the course of the processions until the end of the ceremonies.83

However, this report brings into view two radical new developments in the ceremonies. Assuming that Membré’s 1540 description of the ceremonies offers an overall depiction of early Safavid Muharram practices, the 1602–04 ritual combats between urban factions highlight a new violent and factional feature in the course of the processions. Accordingly, the strange occurrence of volley-firing of arquebus (“deschargeans leur arquebuses”) fired by a number of male participants parading in front of the empty coffins inaugurates a new chapter in the history of Muharram rituals: the element of carnival military procession. The carnival-like spectacle brings to light the mixture of melancholic sights and scenes of carnival pleasure and joy; this so impressed the Portuguese traveler that he wrote, “I could never understand whether this feast was for pleasure or for lamentation, since some people laughed, danced and sang, whereas others cried and wailed.”84 On this development, the traveler makes note that under the reign of ʿAbbas I the elimination of some of the components and the creation of new performative elements in the rituals were a way to abolish certain customs while keeping others alive, since it would have been dangerous to abolish all the old customs at the same time.

Similar to the (very sketchy) account of Kakash in Azerbaijan in 1603–04, the 1618–19 testimony of the ceremonies by Della Valle, nearly sixteen years after the report of de Gouvea, further exhibits the role of rituals of self-violence with the relative absence of the

82 These ritual battles were fought between Haydari and Nimatullahi factions. Hereafter by “ritual fights” or “combat fights” I mean Haydari and Nimatullahi factional fights. I will elaborate on this ritual performance in the first section of Chapter Six.
83 Though performed at the Grand Mosque, it is not clear when exactly (day or night) the lamentation sermons by the preachers were performed.
84 “Feste estoit de resiouissance, ou de tristesse.” A. de Gouvea, Relation de grandes guerres et victoires obtenues par le roi de Perse Chah Abbas, French translation (Rouen, 1646), 75–77.
When I was still in Isfahan, after the Mohammedans had seen the new moon the previous evening (since they are accustomed to start their days from sunset the day before), they were celebrating the first day of their month of Moharram. This is the start of their lunar year, which is the year of 1027 of the egira, that is to say the flight, or going forth, of Mohammed from Mecca to Medina. The same day was the first day of the asciur, namely of the ten days in which, starting from the first of the month concerned until the tenth, the Persians ceaselessly lament, with public demonstrations of grief, the unhappy death of Hussein, the son of their Ali, and of Fatima, the only daughter of Mohammad. This Hussein is regarded to the point of folly by all the Mohammedans as a great saint; but by the Persians of the Shia belief also as the legitimate Imam and supreme head of their sect (from whom the kings of Persia today claim descent)... The ceremonies with which they celebrate the asciur and lament this death is as follows. They all live in a state of dejection; they all in fact dress sadly, and many wear black, which otherwise they rarely put on; no one shaves head or beard; no one takes a bath; and they all abstain, not only from what is thought sinful, but also from every kind of enjoyment. Many poor people, too, are in the habit of burying themselves in busy streets up to the neck and even part of their heads in earthenware jars, wide all around from the feet and narrow to fit the head at the top. And these are sunk into the ground, out of sight, holding back the earth all about from the men who crouch inside, seeming as if they are really buried. And they remain like this from sunrise to nightfall, each keeping another poor wretch sitting down nearby, saying prayers and asking for alms from all the passers-by. Others place themselves in the square and move through the streets and houses (where there are people) all naked except for their shameful parts which they cover with a little black cloth, or a big, dark coloured bag; and these paint themselves dark from head to foot, so that they look like so many gleaming black devils, varnished as are the hilts of our swords and other weapons. And this denotes the misery felt over the death of Hussein. In company with them go others, also naked, who are coloured not black but red, to signify blood and the violent death that was inflicted on Hussein. And all of them together go singing a dirge in his praise about the way he died, and beating time with castanets of bone and wood, which they hold in their hands to create a mournful sound, while gesticulating and moving their bodies to suggest great melancholy. They perform in front of everyone in the middle of a circle, like mountebanks or like teams of

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85 The brief description of the ceremonies by Kakash is limited to the element of head and body self-inflicting injury rituals and, in its most violent form, burning of hands with cotton dipped in oil.
tumblers doing their tricks on the public square; and in this guise they make money, which the bystanders give to them as alms. Also, where people circulate in the square, towards noon every day one of their mullahs preaches about Hussein, recounting his praises and his death. This is usually carried out by one of those from the generation of Mohamet (who are neither called emirs, as in Constantinople, nor shereefs, as in Egypt, but, by the Persians in Arabic, seidi or lords), wearing a green turban on the head, such as I have never seen here at other times (contrary to Turkey, where those of the same breed wear one constantly). And he sits on a slightly raised seat, encircled by an audience of men and women, some standing, some on the ground or on lowstanding benches. And from time to time he shows some painted figures illustrating what he is recounting; and, in brief, in every way he endeavours as much as he can to move the onlookers to tears. Such preaching are heard every day in the mosque, and also at night in the public streets, in certain recognized places which they purposely adorn with many lights and with funeral displays; and the preaching is accompanied by the moans and groans of the hearers, and particularly the women, who beat their breast and make piteous gestures, often answering grief-stricken with these last words from some of their hymns: Vah Hussein! Sciah Hussein! Meaning 'Ah Hussein! King Hussein!' Della Valle continues his account with a depiction of the final day of the ceremonies, which, according to Italian travelers, Persians call “catl” (or qatl, meaning slaughter). Similar to de Gouvea’s report, combat fights occurred between the city guilds, as the male participants fought among each other with long spears (“picche”) and swords. They also carried flags or banners (or “alam” in Persian, signifying Husayn’s banners and weapons used at Karbala), horses bridled (“bardati”), and arms and turbans covering them. Camels carried empty coffins, boxes clad in dark cloth and turban. Three or four boys, representing the sons of the martyred Imam, chanted sad songs. Swords and trophies of arms (“trofie di arm”) were carried on top of the male mourners. The mournful music of “cembali” or cymbals invited the participants

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to dance in circles. The procession of dancers and groups of fighters blended together in an attempt to recall the martyrdom of Husayn.

Armed men carried bizarre spears with flamboyant decoration, namely ʿalam, plumes, and other unusual features. In the course of ritual combat between the city guilds, ritual fighters accompanied and assisted the royal vizier and officials to the center of the square, where they split into two camps, preparing for a battle. In the daytime, the ritual combats began not at the square, but near the palace of the shah and in the streets, where male fighters conducted skirmishes even to the point of injury and death.\(^87\) The winning faction carried the trophies and banners into the royal palace; the defeated faction was greatly disgraced (“vergogna grande”). On the night of ʿAshura, the ritual participants publicly burned the effigy of ʿUmar, the second caliph of early Islam, believed by Shiʿis to be the great usurper of ʿAli’s rightful leadership after the death of the Prophet, and other leaders of the Sunni religion, who, they believe, were responsible for the death of Husayn.\(^88\)

This extraordinary description of what one might call necro-ritual performances contains a number of elements. First, combined with the ceremonies of elegy recitation, the 1618–19 processions clearly bring to light the increasingly representational dramatic developments of the ceremonies. The display of ritual representative objects, like banners, turbans, and ceremonial armory, marks a major development from the 1540 version of the ceremonies, in which symbolic practices primarily appeared to rely on corporeal self-injury performances of the ritual participants.\(^89\) The enhancement of the representational dimension also reinforces the increasing importance of violence from the representationally physical to a more symbolic, abstract one, manifested mainly through the dramatic display of coffins and bloody faces. Although

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\(^{87}\) Della Valle remarks that Persians believe that in these holy days “the doors of paradise are always open,” and that death during Muharram is a promise of direct entry to paradise. Also, the places of combat are pre-arranged by the guilds.\(^{88}\) Della Valle notes that he did not witness the public cursing (“esecrationi maledicono”) ceremony, suggesting that the description is based on another person’s (European or Persian) account. Also, he adds that, though similar to the festival of Ghadir Khumm celebrated by the Safavid Persians, Muharram processions included more popular participation and were performed in a serious and passionate sense, especially in the case of ritual combats.\(^{89}\) By this I am mainly referring to the decreasing importance of the display of violence through bodily acts of self-violence and a trend towards an increasing significance of symbolic violence. I will return to this point in the next chapter.
ritual self-burial processions and nudity continue to be present, the representational depiction of Karbala even appears in the elegy-singing rituals. More importantly, mourning performances and self-injurious violence appear to be more organized, as the performers sing, dance, and knock pieces of sticks and bones in a display of unmelodic noise. The appearance of what Willem Floor calls “professional entertainers” as men painted in black or red, who would receive money for their performances, also underscores the increasing commercialization of the ceremonies in the later period of ʿAbbas’s rule.90

Secondly, the element of mutual-injury combat rituals is conducted in a more coherent and organized fashion even if resulting in injuries and death, to the point that they appear to end with not only a winning and losing team, but also an official trophy that is taken to the shah, an element virtually absent in the 1540 version of the ceremonies. This marks growing official participation in the ceremonies, as the shah himself not only (though absent) participates in the ceremonies at his palace, but also, as noted by de Gouvea in his 1602–04 description, personally sets the rules for the ritual gaming.

Thirdly, the increasing institutionalization of the ceremonies immediately follows new or more elaborate ceremonial elements, such as guild combat and scapegoat rituals. What Della Valle’s account demonstrates is the increasing significance of the ritualized emotions of hate and vengeance projected towards a physical domestic (urban factional groups) and a representational foreign enemy, manifested in the effigy of ʿUmar. Strangely, the carnivalesque elements of military parades do not appear to be present in Della Valle’s description.

The 1618–19 testimony of Garcia de Silva y Figueroa, reporting from the capital city, provides an account of a new development in the body of rituals.91 Describing the ceremonies during the height of ʿAbbas’ reign, the Spanish diplomat reports a camel being ceremoniously taken outside of the city and sacrificed on the final day of the ceremonies.92 A description of the sacrificial procession is as follows.

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92 This sacrificial ceremony should be distinguished from the traditional Feast of Sacrifice (ʿid-i qurban), which is celebrated by Muslims on the tenth of Zu’l-Hajja. Though both ceremonies share a similar origin in pre-Islamic times, the distinction between the two animal sacrifice rituals is that the Feast of Sacrifice is mainly a shariʿi-based ritual, whereas the Muharram camel-sacrifice ceremony was invented under the reign of Shah ʿAbbas I. I will elaborate on this “inventiveness” in the next chapter.
First, the most beautiful and well-bred female camel, embellished with flowers, herbs, garlands of leaves, silk sheet, plates of gold, bells, and carpets, is walked through the city.93 As the participants furiously beat themselves, the darugha (chief of police) of Isfahan and other officials, accompanied by an armed crowd of noisy men, gather on a large plain near the river outside of the city.94 They make a circle around the animal and, as the camel lies on the ground with its legs tied, the darugha strikes a lance in the camel. Immediately a boisterous crowd, with sharp swords, rips the animal into pieces. Some are injured, others are killed, as mourners continue to fight among themselves for the flesh of the animal.95 Once a piece of the slaughtered meat is obtained, some participants take it to the cemetery, while others run around the city beating themselves, shouting and crying.96 The aggressiveness and the fury of the people are so intense that the darugha and his men fail to control the crowd. The city is then given license to liberty, as the ceremony leads to great rage and fury.97 The ritual appears to end at this stage.

93 The following description is a brief account of the ceremonies performed in their Feast of Sacrifice form. See travel reports of Della Valle, I Viaggi di Pietro della Valle, 117–18; J. Chardin, Voyages du Chevalier Chardin en Perse, et autres lieux de l’Orient, vol. 8 (Paris: Le Normant, Imprimeur-Libraire, 1810–11), 98; E. Kaempfer, Am Hofe des Persischen Grosskönigs 1684–1685, 148; N. Sanson, Voyage ou relation de l’état présent du royaume de Perse (Paris: Chez la Veuve Mabre Cramois, 1694), 207–09; J. B. Tavernier, Voyages en Perse, vol. 2 (Paris: Club des Libraires de France, 1964), 88–89; J. Struys, The Voyages and Travels of John Struys, ed. and trans. J. Morrison (London: Swalle, 1684), 305–06; D’Armainville Poulet, Relations Nouvelles Du Levant (Paris, 1668), 200–01; P. R. du Mans, Estat de la Perse en 1660, ed. C. Schefer (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1890), 73–75. For the most part, it is not clear from the travel reports if the choice to use a female camel was made in reference to an older (Iranian or Islamic) tradition. Also, it is not clear if the camel was one or two-humped, though I suppose it might have been a hybrid one, admired for its strength and great size. See R. Tapper, “One Hump or Two? Hybrid Camels and Pastoral Cultures,” Production Pastorale et Société 16 (1985): 67. It is difficult to be certain if the Feast of Sacrifice and Muharram form of the camel sacrifice ceremonies were performed in a precisely similar manner, however, as Figueroa’s report describes, they most likely shared similar and basic ceremonial traits. This is mainly evident in that the camel is taken out of the city for the performance of slaughter.

94 It is important to note that this peculiar ceremony does not appear in any cities, Figueroa explains, other than the capital city. The mentioned river is most likely the Zayanda Rud.

95 The slaughter meat was most likely distributed to each quarter of the city. As Tavernier’s 1667 report shows, the meat was divided into twelve parts and they were distributed to each quarter of the city.

96 The cemetery is most likely the Takht-i Pulad.

97 That is, “...porque el tal dia le es permitida esta licencia, como no vesen de otras armas, desculpandolos todos por creer que la mucha deuoçion los tiene del todo furiosos y fuera de si.”
According to Figueroa, at the time of slaughter, the crowd disperses into the cemetery and the city. The clash over the meat immediately follows the performance of slaughter and does not appear to be organized in the form of ritual battles within the city. Interestingly, though represented by the darugha, the shah is absent in the course of the processions. Here, each participant scatters after the performance of slaughter in a state of fury and rage, creating a chaotic apocalyptic scene. Although self-injurious performances in the form of self-burial continue to be present, the element of ceremonial sacrifice of an animal underscores the enhanced importance of representational violence projected towards an external object (camel) in the course of the rituals.

The absence of European travel reports on the ceremonies from 1576 to 1602–04 is indicative of a domestic crisis in the pre-Isfahani phase of Safavid rule. From Fedot Afanasievich Kotov (1624) to Adam Olearius (1637), descriptions of the rituals remain relatively consistent, though some new developments can be spotted. The 1624 ceremonies of Muharram (or “Bairam Oshur”) are performed in the maydan at Isfahan. They involve similar features of nudity, bloody faces, black painted bodies, performance of knocking stones, various forms of self-injury (slashing parts of the body with a blade), including chain beating and elaborate representations of martyrs in the form of coffins; a manikin of “a man” stuffed with straw is cursed, spit at, and finally burnt with naphtha by men, as children and women watch the burning procession. In 1628, once again at Isfahan, self-mortification acts, along with burning an effigy of Shemr (the murderer of Husayn

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98 This is not to say that during this period (and after) Muharram was not celebrated in other major Shi’i populated regions outside of the Safavid realm like southeast Anatolia or southern Iraq under the Ottomans. See C. H. Imber, “The Persecution of the Ottoman Shi’ites According to the Mühimme Defterleri, 1565–1585,” Der Islam 56, 2 (1979): 245–73. For a later historical account, see M. Salati, “Toleration, Persecution and Local Realities: Observations on the Shiism in the Holy Places and the Bilād al-Shām (16th–17th Centuries),” Convegno sul Tema: La Shi’a nell’impero Ottomano (Roma, April 15, 1991): 144.

99 Contrary to Calmard’s description in his table detailing the content of the ceremonies in “Ritual and Power II,” the camel sacrifice rituals were not performed at the end of the ceremonies. Kotov clearly distinguishes the Feast of Sacrifice (“bariam kurban”), occurring in September, from the Muharram ceremonies (“bariam oshur”), taking place on the first of November; the Muharram ceremonies were separated by two months from the Feast of Sacrifice. See F. A. Kotov in Russian Travelers to India and Persia [1624–1798]: Kotov, Yefremov, Danibegov, ed. and trans. P. M. Kemp (Dehli: Jiwan Prakashan, 1959), 31–33.
at Karbala), are performed; men and women cry “Husayn, Husayn” in a melancholy manner, and dervishes and other ritual participants dance together in a frenzied way. On the tenth day, an “imaginary” figure of Husayn is carried off to a grave, where he is put to rest till the ceremonies the following year. In 1637, in the northeastern city of Ardabil, the ceremonies, performed before the governor and ambassadors, also comprised an imaginary burial procession. It included nocturnal sermons and nude male mourners, mostly painted in black, who performed various activities, such as ritual dancing, knocking stones, and self-inflicted injuries. In this case, like 1596–1609 accounts of Munajjim, Muharram includes a final ceremony of firework and carnival-like performances.

Nearly thirteen years after Herbert’s account at Isfahan, Muharram appears to have attained its first and most elaborate and public official celebration as described in the travel report of de Montheron. According to the French traveler, the 1641 version of the ceremonies at the capital city were mainly concentrated in the grand maydan; for ten days and nights, Shah Safi I, the successor of ʿAbbas I, and officials of the royal government gave audience to the celebrations. In his account, the familiar scenes of disheveled men dancing in the nude and painted in black, armed with big sticks and screaming and running in frenzy, blend with the ritually enhanced dramatic representations of Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala. The representational ceremonial artifacts of Husayn, such as “arrows, shields, scimitars, feathers and other similar ornaments,” are also used along with small coffins and “children artificially attired with hides [of animals] newly skinned, pierced with arrows and smeared with blood.” Women scream and wail, as if “one were wanting to skin them.” Before the shah, the “principal mulla,” of the royal court seated on a chair loudly narrates the events of Karbala, “mixing it sometimes with praises and prayers for the present king.”

100 T. Herbert, Travels in Persia, 268.
102 According to de Montheron, the 1641 celebration of Muharram was conducted before Shah Safi I and possibly, as Calmard notes, at the ʿAli Qapu.
Another mulla performs a similar sermon at the other end of the maydan for the female participants, hiding under a “cotton shroud.”

In his report, de Montheron notes that the ceremonies were practiced in many provincial towns and cities of the empire; although varied in performance, the natives of several towns were “ordered” by the shah to celebrate. He also makes an important remark on how the natives identified the ceremonies as “Thahmachaa y Maaodisa” [tamasha-yi muhaditha], meaning “spectacle of grief.” The Persian use of the term “Thahmachaa” or spectacle highlights the consolidation of the dramatic visual component of the ceremonies in a sequential stage-setting process enacted in the main city square. It also underscores the diminishing significance of physical self-injurious violence, being replaced by dramatic representations. Though violence continues to be present in his report, the self-mortification rituals of self-burial, effigy burning, and camel sacrifice appear to be absent. Ritual fights at nighttime continue to be practiced, though de Montheron fails to give a detail description of their performance. More importantly, the position of the shah appears to be more proactive in the course of the 1641 ceremonies. The monarch and his officials (and European visitors) play a central role in the processions, as the official preachers associate the shah with the martyred Husayn in their elegy recitation.

Of travelers who passed through Isfahan in the seventeenth century, from Raphaël du Mans (1647–96?) to Jean Chardin (1666–67/1669/1673–77), from J. Thévenot (1665) to Engelbert Kæmpfer (1684–85), the ceremonies are described in an integrated and organized format with regard to an increasing elaboration of visual performative practices. The Turkish traveler, Evliya Çelebi, in 1647

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105 This “sequences of the stage-setting,” Calmard explains, entails the following: “successive entries of (i) the ‘Arabs’ (probably acting penitents with turbans) desperately looking for Husain; (ii) simulated Husain’s horses; (iii) simulated Husain’s camels and plundered baggage, with naked despairing penitents around; (iv) machines or biers surrounded (or covered?) with trophies, some of them being apparently similar to the boxes carried by men on their heads observed by Olearius.” See Calmard, Ibid., 177.
and 1655 draws attention to the processional mock representation of martyred characters of Karbala, performed in the northeastern city of Tabriz.\footnote{E. Çelebi, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa*, vol. 2, trans. J. von Hammer-Purgstall (London, 1834–50, Reprint New York, 1968), 138.} Du Mans, reporting from Isfahan, describes the processional transport of decorated coffins, prepared by the city guilds, in the course of the celebrations.\footnote{It is in this travel report that we see the emergence of the new ritual of *ser o ten*, a feast performed forty days after the death of Husayn on *Ashura*. See R. du Mans, *Estat de la Perse en 1660*, 54–56.} In Gabriel de Chinon’s account, once more, Muharram continues to include visual representational artifacts (such as coffins) by the city guilds.\footnote{G. de Chinon, *Relations Nouvelles du Levant: ou traités de la religion, du gouvernement et des coutumes des Perse, des Armeniens, and des Gaures* (Lyon: Jean Thioly, 1671), 97–104.} In 1666, J. Chardin offers an account of the ceremonies performed at the Talar-i Tavile or Hall of Stables, a site for major civic events like Nowruz and royal ceremonies like the coronation of Shah Sulayman (1666–94) that underscored the increasing association of Muharram with both civic and state rituals.\footnote{S. Babaie, *Isfahan and Its Palaces*, 160 and 233.} J. B. Tavernier’s 1667 report at Isfahan highlights the carnival features of elaborate spectacles, dramatic performances by each quarter, and even the show of exotic animals, like elephants, accordingly identifying the growing uniformity of dramatic displays in Muharram.\footnote{J. B. Tavernier, *Voyages en Perse*, 84–89.} By the late seventeenth century, Muharram had become a spectacular event of public and state significance.

In broad historical terms, the expansion of the dramatic, elaborate, representational, official public forms of celebration advanced in tandem with the conception of the capital city and continued to be consolidated in the centralized age post-ʿAbbas I. As the Qizilbash military order gradually eroded with the increasing divide between the uymaq and the Safavid dudman, the Imami elites most likely attempted to further unify the rituals by sanctioning them in accordance with Islamic shariʿa laws in the late seventeenth century.\footnote{According to Nakash, “The spread of the shabīh in Iran in the seventh century may be gathered from Shiʿi sources, which relate that the Mujtahid Muhammad Baqir Majlesi consolidated the *shabīh* at a time when this carnival-play was only beginning to take shape.” Y. Nakash, “The Origins of the Rituals of ʿAshūrā,” 171. He also argues how Majlesi attempted to unify the rituals into a more orthodox Imami ceremony. However, as described in the report of the Carmelite mission by Father Vincent in 1621, the orthodoxation of Muharram, overseen by the ʿulama, was most}
source of legitimacy for the expansion of the rituals appears to have been rooted in its popularity as a powerful form of dramatic representational ceremony under Shah Husayn (1694–1722). In 1704, Muharram saw its apogee as the most officially organized, elaborate, publicly performed, and dramatic display in Isfahan under Safavid rule.¹¹³

At the historical juncture of the post-Isfahani stage of Safavid rule in 1641, Muharram drastically evolved into a more dramatic or theatrical form of ritual performance, manifesting the more dramatic representational element of ritual symbolic communication. From Munajjim (1596) to de Montheron (1641), one can detect three crucial incorporated developmental patterns of carnival themes, like animal and fire shows, in the course of the annual ceremonies, relatively missing in earlier accounts of the rituals. From Della Valle (1618–19) to Herbert (1628), one can, furthermore, identify a growth in the importance of elaborate scapegoat ceremonies, such as animal sacrifice and effigy burning rites. From de Gouvea (1602–04) to de Montheron (1641), visual representational displays proliferate as the rituals begin to be increasingly identified as official ceremonies under Saﬁ I. In this regard, Muharram in its pageantry form can be described in close connection with other Safavid rituals of conviviality and feasting practices, as Babaie has convincingly described in her work.¹¹⁴ The connection between carnival-like spectacles of mourning and ritual feastings lies in collective performances of consumption like the camel sacrifice rituals, which played an integral part in the formation of a Perso-Shiʿi collective identity in the seventeenth century.¹¹⁵ Likewise, increasing overlap of ceremonial space like the palaces, where feasting rituals would take places with public rituals like Muharram, underlines the theatricality of the Safavid state in the late seventeenth century. Subsequently, the appearance of theater-drama plays of taʿziyeh in the eighteenth century and its proliferation in the nineteenth century under the Qajars,

likely initiated under ʿAbbas I. According to this travel report, during which Father Vincent met the shah and his court at Isfahan, “penitential exercises” were recognized to be closely associated with other orthodox practices such as fasting and prayers, “recommended in the law of Moses, in the Gospel, and the Quran, and in fine by all the prophets.” H. G. Chick, ed., A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia: The Safavids and the Papal Mission of the 17th and 18th Centuries, vol. 1 (London: Eyre and Spottswoode, 1939), 250.

¹¹³ See C. de Bruyn, Voyages de Corneille le Bruyn par la Moscovie, en Perse et aux Indes Orientales I (Amsterdam: Chez les Freres Wetstein, 1718), 217–21.
¹¹⁵ I will discuss in detail the camel sacrifice ceremonies in the next chapter.
solidifies an extension of this remarkable development of the ceremonies in terms of dramatic and representational performances that initially originated in the Isfahani phase of Safavid rule. The proliferation of carnivalesque type of theatrical plays like taʿziyeh mozhek (comic) in the nineteenth century highlights the festive clusters within post-Safavid Muharram culture, reflecting perhaps an enduring grotesque tradition of dalqak (buffoon) culture, in both courtly and popular domains, since the pre-Islamic periods.

The progressive expansion of Muharram rites from 1641 to 1714 led to the diversification, popularization, and, hence, carnivalization of the rituals, performed within relational settings and social interactive ties, that is: networks of socio-professional groups, urban quarters, professional guilds (asnaf), futuvvat, and especially the poor sector of Safavid society. The travel reports of Tavernier (1667), Chardin (1667; 1673), Bedik (1670–75), Struys (1671), Kæmpfer (1684–85), Careri (1694), Gaudereau (1695), de Bruyn (1704) and Krusinski (1714) demonstrate not only how Muharram grew in importance as a state ritual, but how the ceremonies also became a progressively common and familiar seasonal event of everyday Safavid life. This is mostly noticeable in the travel accounts of de Bruyn and Krusinski, in which the ceremonies appear to consist of countless participants and are performed in a dramatic fashion, unprecedented in the history of the ceremonies to that point. These later accounts also testify to the growth of ritual strategies (such as spectacularization) that underscore the consolidation of the sedentary Safavid Empire, operating as a “theater state” based on pomp and pageantry.

116 The taʿziyeh or shabih-khwani ceremony was first reported by William Francklin in 1787 in Shiraz. See W. Francklin, Observations Made on a Tour from Bengal to Persia in the Years 1786–87 (1790; reprint, Tehran: Imperial Organization for Social Service, 1976), 174–79.


119 According to the Jesuit missionary, Krusinski, Muharram was “celebrate[d] with the same pomp, and the same disorders in all the towns of Persia,” which underlines the spread of its popularity throughout the empire. See T. J. Krusinski, The History of the Late Revolutions of Persia, vol. 1 (London: J. Pemberton, 1740), 93. This is also noticeable in accounts of Salmon and Van Goch in 1737, fifteen years after the collapse of the Safavid dynasty. See Salmon and Van Goch, Die heutige historie und geographie oder der gegenwärtige staat vom königreich Persien (Flensburg and Altona:
What I am arguing, then, is that with increasing ritualization of Safavid society through ceremonies like Muharram, the rituals became intensely carnivalesque and, accordingly, the growth of relatively state-independent public ritual spaces increased. The crystallization of this process became patently ostensible with the declaration of the 1695 Edict of Repentance (tawba), a decree that prohibited public behavior that the shah’s regime, now greatly under the influence of Imami hierocracy, defined as irreligious and contrary to the teachings of orthodox Shi’i Islam. The importance of this ceremonial edict lies in the attempt by the shari‘a-minded ‘ulama, endorsed by the royal court, to curtail the increasing rise of unruly public spaces in Isfahani Safavid society. The closing down of coffeehouses, prohibition of music, dance, prostitution, gambling, and opium, and the clamp down on association with various Sufi brotherhoods, along with the free movement of women (nisvan) in public places, not only reflected the increasing monopolization of the Imami hierocracy, rather, it reveals the consolidation of the Isfahani social landscape in which publics of a heteroglot kind emerged to struggle over the definition of everyday life against the official culture.

At this point, however, certain theoretical questions are in order. What is the significance of self-inflicted injuries and ritual fights in the crystallization of the Isfahani stage of Safavid rule? How can we understand the sudden appearance of the communal consumption rituals of camel sacrifice in the later period of ‘Abbas I’s reign? And, in particular, how can we recognize the symbolic implication of slaughter and consumption of the camel as performed outside the city? What is the symbolic importance of wailing, the display of nudity, banners, spears, the self-burial practices of Begum, cursing ceremonies, feast festivities, and dramatic representations of Karbala in the evolution of the ceremonies from a strictly melancholic to a more carnivalized form of ritual performance? And, finally, how does the increasing carnivalization of Muharram underscore (if any) significant transformations in Safavid state and society relations from the reign of ‘Abbas I to Safi I? I consider these questions in the next chapter.

Im Verlag der Gebrüder Korte, 1739), 249–53. I will expand on the “theater state” in the next chapter.
In Chapter Three, I argued that due to certain state-led urbanization, Safavid Iran saw the rise of integrated public spaces that largely gave way to a distinct imperial polity, albeit a nascent one. In Chapter Two, I further argued that public space, especially in its urban form, cannot be separated from spectacles of power. My discussion of Arendt’s emphasis on the correlation of space and memory and ways through which discourses of identity and reality are produced was intended to lay the theoretical grounds for the dynamics of the socio-historical formation of urban spaces in Safavid Isfahani society. While Safavid urbanization in the context of Mediterranean regions never quite reached the cosmopolitan level of a city like Istanbul, largely due to the mountainous conditions and long geographic distances, the building of the new Isfahan crystallized representations and formations of civic and ceremonial spaces that played a prominent role in the spatialization and, by extension, visualization of royal authority and presence of state power. As Babaie puts it, the imperial urban expansion of Isfahan “communicated a charismatic practice of absolutism where access to the king and his personal engagement, even if illusory, were paramount.”

Individual participation in symbolic practices associated with royal power fostered emotions of imperial incorporation in that imaginings of belonging would be forged.

The main aim of this chapter is to take a theoretical look at the multifaceted performances of Safavid Muharram (primarily from 1602–04 to 1641) in an urban setting by showing how individual perceptions and behaviors can be, partly, socially appropriated and politically conditioned in the intricate interplay of the emotions of grief, collective memories, visual representations of loss, and social melancholic imaginaries. I approach this from a performative perspective on the mortuary ritual practices, here defined as collective symbolic performances

1 Babaie, Isfahan and Its Palaces, 12.
of burial processions aimed at dealing with the horror of the demise of a member of an imagined community. The term “social death” here signifies socially constructed experiences of drastic transformation in the biological process of death, as a process of birth, maturing, aging, and dying, in which mortality appears to be no longer a matter of individual loss, but an event of renewal, a regeneration of collective significance. The Isfahani Muharram rituals represent a repertoire of dramatic performances that build state power in the aesthetics of sacred death and conquest of vitality of a perceived enemy. In death power is born.

The focus on corporeality is in a way to draw attention on lived sites of interactions where the relationship between ritual and production of identity becomes a disciplinary practice as a matter of building stabilizing selves capable of interacting with each other, hence constructing a collective identity. In this way, I seek to uncover some of the possible implicit socio-political aspects of Isfahani Muharram rituals, operating on a seasonal basis through dramatic spectacles, pageantries, sacrificial ceremonies, and sermons in order to reinterpret state power in early seventeenth-century Safavid society. I will focus therefore on how Muharram marks emotive social spaces wherein the revered Husayn is mourned, collective memories of the tragic events of Karbala are (re)imagined and (re)asserted through bodily mutilation and visual representations, and how solidarity is renewed and ritual participants distinguish themselves from the “Other” through

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2 B. Rahimi, “Social Death and War: US Media Representations of Sacrifice in the Iraq War,” Bad Subjects 63 (April 2003), accessed 1 November 2010, http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2003/63/rahimi.html. This definition leans toward the position of Bloch and Jonathan Parry. See especially the introduction of M. Bloch and J. Parry’s *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Social death also involves the collective attempt to make individuals “ritually incorporated as the permanent enemy on the inside—the ‘domestic enemy,’ in a given community to the point of making them non-beings or socially dead. They go on living, but collectively they are, in Orlando Patterson’s words, “as living affront to the local gods, an intruder in the sacred space.” See O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 38–45. The alterity aspect of social death will be briefly covered in the section on “purification.”

acts of consumption and sacrifice. In all due brevity, the ensuing accounts of the four spatial dynamics of Muharram, (i) spectacularization, (ii) corporeality, (iii) purification, and (iv) sermonization, describe not only the fluid, overlapping, and permeable spatial dimensions of ritual action, but also the political aspects of ritualization as a process in which the political body, visual representation, shared collective sense of loss, and its oratorical articulation through sermons are intrinsically interrelated. Here, the recognition of Muharram as a reinstalled space signifies a place where in an immortal community of a transcendent entity is enacted and imagined through sensual collective performances of ritual interaction.

1. Politics as Ritual Performance

As I showed in Chapter One, most theorists would agree that ritual is a formalized, collective, symbolic kind of repetitive behavior that renders action meaningful. They communicate sensibilities, sociabilities, shaping spaces of aesthetic and symbolic interaction whereby identities and accordingly worldviews are made and challenged. But in an existentialist sense, rituals as pragmatic expressions of human action also provide solutions for matters that remain irresolvable in the course of human life. In a sense, ritual is partly about the construction of human experience in relation to the nasty problem of death and how the living can come to terms with its threat to life. Dramatic performances, remembrance of the deceased, violent acts of self-mortification, and enactment of cherished myths in the context of vying forces of sacred and profane realms are, in a way, to foster a sense of continuity in time and space, a feeling of transcendence in a world that is perpetually in a state of disintegration. The relationship between ritual and death lies in discipling of emotions and perceptions directed to maintain social order in the context of the ordinary sense of transience of life.

In the Durkheimian sense, ritual can be defined as the “rule of conduct” that directs human action in the idiom of special knowledge, in which classification of all things, real and imaginary, is divided into distinct spheres of profane and sacred existence. Although contingent

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4 The notion of “social space” here is akin to Smith’s description: a “sense of social location, of genealogy, kinship, authority, superordination, and subordination,” J. Z. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual, 46.
on specific historical and social settings, ritual participants experience their social reality to the extent to which rituals necessarily hold together societies through such formalized categorical classifications of the world by which feelings of solidarity are made. As Kertzer explains, “it is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves to be in unison,” involving an ossifying effect on social relations and marinating societal cohesion.5 Rituals bring people together, sanctifying their collectivity with an intricate interplay between the external constraints for social order and internal emotions and imaginations of individual actors.

In a similar way, Turner, following Arnold Van Gennep, defined ritual as a dynamic collective process. Ritual, he argued, is not a static social institution, but a dramatic practice or rite of passage, involving a three-state dialectical process: (i) separation from the mundanity of the world—in which the participants are separated from their normal, ordinary status in the social order; (ii) liminality or a middle stage—in which participants enter an ambiguous in-between state; and, finally; (iii) incorporation back to the social world, this time affirming a new structural identity in the form of reaggregation.6 Though at heart he remained Durkheimian with his three-stage model of ritual action, Turner was successful in redefining ritual as a creative symbolic type of formalized action, entailing spontaneity of great power to move and transform its participants.

But it is with Bloch’s influential theory of “rebound violence” that the presence of violence in rituals, both physical and symbolic, receives its most intriguing interpretation. According to Bloch, the final third stage of the ritual process, as indicated in the Turnerian three-stage model, inherently leads to violence. This is, he argues, due to a dynamic thrust towards conquest of vitality in a symbolic attempt to transcend the biological reality of existence, defined in terms of birth, maturing, reproducing, aging, and death. Ritual is about the reorganization of life from a natural putrefying process into the construction of experience built around the transcendental yearning for regeneration and permanence. This occurs in a progressive symbolic course of the ritual

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process: the first two stages involve the act of detachment from mundane existence, followed by entry to an in-between stage of a transcendental world existence; the third stage, however, consists of a symbolic violent return to the world.

In Bloch’s view, the role of violence is central to the ritual process in the final stage of a symbolic return to the world, during which the loss of vitality in the first stage is regained “from outside beings, usually animals, but sometimes plants, other people or women.” It is precisely in this third phase that ritual becomes a political phenomenon since the symbolic return to the world requires a violent attack projected on the living elements in the world. The symbolism of political authority is, therefore, manifested in the medium of violent subordination of external objects for the legitimation of power. Whether considering rituals of sacrifice, initiation, liturgies, marriage or funeral rituals, the politics of ritual involve a process in the conquest of vitality, a rebounding violence “which creates an idiom and a legitimating for aggression and military expansionism.”

In mortuary rituals specifically, however, the relationship between ritual process and politics draws attention to the role of conquest of life in ceremonial patterns, devising customs and traditions of disposal that facilitate parameters such as funeral representation and burial material to deal with the deceased. Following Durkheim’s 1897 study of suicide, in his classic study of mortuary practices of the Malayo-Polynesian population, Robert Hertz sets out to show how collective representations of death are not only a social but also a processional phenomenon. According to Hertz, mortuary rituals consist of double funeral sequences that, first, separate the dead from the world of the living (the disaggregation phase) prior to the proper burial of the deceased. Since the pollution caused by the corpse or remains of the deceased in the first stage continues to threaten the living world for a liminal or intermediary period, a second stage follows. In the secondary stage, the reinstallation phase, the final performance of burial displays a triumph of the collectivity over death. The significance of

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the reinstallation stage, in Hertz’s view, is to undermine the threat of death to society while entailing a social transformation that ritual participants undergo in terms of their collective identity.9

Recent research has further expanded upon Hertz’s notion of mortuary practices by showing how these ceremonies provide public sites of communication, especially in secondary rites, on a historical and cross-regional basis.10 Archaeological and anthropological approaches tend to agree on how social memories, produced through the memorialization of the dead, can display expressions of identity and how these diverse identities denote complex spatial socio-cultural structures of power relations and authority within societies. In broad terms, the social experience of death is sustained by shared memories created or enhanced by ways in which the dead is revered through the intensity of interpersonal mortuary rituals, with the key features of performance and collective drama.11 Likewise, the relationship between death ritual and political power is marked in the material or symbolic ways in which the deceased is buried, commemorated, and glorified (or in contrast demonized in the case of enemies) within visible expressions of the stability and identity of a given community.12

Consequently, the mortuary ritual enactments are public arenas for communication and mortuary expressions maintain social memory by transcending the threat of the dead and outsiders (enemies) that mark the boundaries between “us” and “them.” In a sense, the spatial dimension of mortuary practices involves representations of death in the creation or maintenance of collective memories of the deceased to express life strategies of a community ritually creating a real or

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11 Metcalf and Huntington, Celebration of Death, 6.

imaginary boundary. An actual or an imagined death, therefore, occurs in a fixed and/or ephemeral place, while mortuary rituals deal with its polluting biological threat by constructing and orchestrating boundaries as much as orchestrating actions that reciprocally create new practices.

In her 1960s examination of the notions of pollution and taboo, Mary Douglas demonstrated how individuals, on a universal basis, create systems of classification that categorize objects of ambiguous nature as sources of pollution. This is most pertinent in the case of a corpse, regardless of it being real or imaginary. In a sense, polluting objects like corpses are not always ignored or denied, but considered a tacit recognition of the “potency of disorder.” Mortuary rituals, by confronting potential polluting objects, harness the power of contamination to express the danger of disorder. While carrying the potential of danger to the community, the corpse identifies an ambiguous non-living object; it is clearly human in appearance, yet also clearly non-human. Meanwhile, the release of certain corporeal products associated with the polluting nature of the corpse (particularly blood) can be identified as a taboo that represents the liminal stage in the mortuary rituals at which society undergoes the process of decontamination. The display of a bloody body in the course of mortuary practices underscores the extent to which the ritual participants continue to experience the pollution caused by the death of a member of the community.

Douglas draws attention to the powerful role of mortuary rituals in shaping collective identity through the symbolism attributed to the corpse. The body of the deceased can stand as both signifier and signified for a “bounded system” that represents boundaries that are threatened by the invasion of the pollution. In the idiom of mortuary ceremonies, a community mourns not only to commemorate the loss of a person, but also to sustain intact boundaries that are symbolically expressed through the body of ritual participants in the course of mortuary processes in purifying the community ritually responding to the threat of death. The ceremonial display of corpses by the living persons in mourning serves as a metaphor for constructing symbolic

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14 Ibid., 94.
15 Ibid., 115.
boundaries upon which the order of things, in particularly state and society relations, is based.

Historically, the relationship between ceremonial spaces, death, and power has been profound. The ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Persians, for instance, have all left behind memorial sites where regal burial spaces are marked as ceremonial expressions of imperial state power. The Roman public spectacles of death, most famously in the form of gladiatorial combats, partly served as social expressions of solidarity with the state, as spectators watched the threat of incivility in the contained arena of the coliseum guarded by the state.16 While war was itself a bloody spectacle of violence, which largely occurred outside of the city, depictions and representations of war largely took place within the confines of the city, where they could be enjoyed by city dwellers in the form of spectacles and narratives of power through which the state could legitimize and display its pomp, making ritual the core of state power.

With the rise of cities in the Mediterranean regions in the late medieval and early modern periods, however, a dynamic shift in the practice of spatialization of death as a display of state power occurred. In close correlation with the advent of communes, in city-states like Florence, Genova, San Gimignano, Sienna, and Venice, the growth in popularity of political rituals performed in commemoration of deceased saints and spiritual patrons, together with the premise of the body-church entity, bespoke new ways of legitimizing power in more glorious and sumptuous pomp. Like other cities in England, France, Germany, the Low Countries, and Russia where political rituals also flourished in various forms of processions, the state emerged as a living collectivity introducing the new concept of “body politic,” which later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, played a central ideological role in nationalism.17 Such corporeal imagery saw its most elaborate expression in civic rituals, where in cities like Florence and Venice spiritual loyalty was ritually staged in elaborate and symbolically-rich civic parades in Piazza San Marco and was closely connected with urban

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governance.\textsuperscript{18} In the southern Mediterranean regions, the Ottoman imperial circumcision rituals developed into rich civic ceremonies from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, as city guilds and merchants actively participated in the symbolic celebration of imperial authority, primarily represented in the phallic symbol of Nahil, in street-level performances.\textsuperscript{19}

In other Eurasian settings, political rituals also grew either independently or concurrently with their Euro-Mediterranean counterparts. In the 1500s the rise of global trade, migration, demographic shifts, and state-building led to the development of new integrated urban spaces in regions from western to Southeast Asia. Under the Ming (1368–1644), for instance, China’s imperial site, the palace complex, Zijin Cheng (or the “Forbidden City”), built between 1406–20, served as a complex ceremonial display of imperial might amid Beijing’s bustling urban ambience.\textsuperscript{20} The building was partly a reminder that even after the death of an emperor, state power continues to exist as a micro-cosmic transient entity and in close connection with the supernatural world. The new capital, Liaoyang, (1621–25), of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) also saw the growth of new urban sites where ritual commemoration of “perfect Buddha monarchs,” whose funeral processions would affirm their affinity with the Tibetan and Mongol religious hierarchies and allow imperial subjects to participate in the immortality of the state.\textsuperscript{21} The expansion of political rituals, especially the type that would affirm the bonds between regal and civic power, became most evident in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when, in regions like pre-colonial India, rulers would be associated with civic spaces in the course of elaborate spectacles and public processions during


\textsuperscript{20} The construction of Tiananmen Square in 1651 under the Qing testifies to the growing accommodation of imperial citizenship as a more inclusive space of interaction, in addition to the palace, as an exclusive, ceremonial site for the emperor, his elites, and family.

funeral (and birth) ceremonies that marked the formation of distinct ritual theater states.  

The notion of “theater state” is in reference to Geertz’s study of Balinese rituals and how states enact and represent power in the medium of ritual performances. The theater state denotes visual performances in the form of ritual processes that rationalize power relations between the symbolic center and the periphery, between authority and the subject, constructing a socio-political order that transcends ordinary time and space, where death is always a spectacle of power. Ritual plays an integral role in the way performances have been invented and reinvented. Dramatic spectacles and representations are more about the ceremonial constitution of state power than merely legitimizing elite power. Seen in this way, the state becomes a matter of public concern: staged, performed symbolically, displayed and theatrically visualized in an open space, visible and acknowledged by all. The staging of state performances in public is central to the rise of early modern states, especially in the Eurasian context, as sovereignty materializes in the construction of spectacular arenas of visibility like palaces,

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25 Although primarily referring to the work of E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), the notion of “inventiveness” refers to the creative process of reshaping older traditions with newer concepts. As I noted earlier on Rappaport’s observation, every ritual is performed with reference to established practices, sanctioned by custom and tradition; otherwise, if the participants come to the realization that they are “invented,” the rituals would cease to be credible. See R. Rappaport, Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity, 32–3. The inventiveness of ritual, however, is found in creative rearrangements of practices while concurrently performed in reference to previous, pre-existing tradition as something lasting and permanent. As Turner has explained, “new” rituals are likely to be primarily created out of elements taken from established and older rituals. V. Turner, “Symbols in African Ritual,” Science 179 (1973): 1100–05. Accordingly, as noted in de Gouvea’s travel report, the 1602–04 Muharram rituals were clearly a continuation of older practices combined with new additional elements in the political ritual landscape of Safavid political culture.
memorial sites, ceremonial spaces, theatrical displays, and military parades, whereby communities feel, desire, share, celebrate, and participate in the rituality of state power. The Safavids were no exception to this early modern dynamic, as Muharram state rituals staged a distinct imperial symbolic practice in close connection with urban spaces of the newly expanded Isfahan.

2. Safavid Muharram as Mortuary Urban Spaces

In the narrative of the death of Husayn and other martyrs of Karbala, expressed in the performative idioms of Muharram processions, the Safavids identified unique public spaces of power in the ceremonial spaces of new Isfahan. Although Muharram, across history and social settings, shares the common practice of the primary phase of burial disaggregation, represented by the temporary disposal of the physical body of Husayn (after ‘Ashura) or an imagined one (later in Islamic history), the most striking feature of Muharram is that it entails ambiguous mortuary customs in order to settle the secondary burial phase of the ritual process. This important element of ambiguity can be primarily associated with the various ritual processes to properly dispose of Husayn’s beheaded corpse and incorporate the martyred Imam back into the community of believers in a proper way through a second, proper burial, during which the collectivity of mourners can readjust to the death of their sacred member. Unlike Christ whose body (although mutilated and put on a cross) was properly buried after being crucified, the chopped up and separated body parts of Husayn (in particularly his head) were transported and buried in different locations.26

How would, then, a proper burial procession be carried out after such a violent death? From the cult of Husayn to the official state commemoration of Husayn under the Safavids, the ceremonies of Muharram show diverse attempts to solve this major problem of coming to terms with the trauma caused by the death of Husayn. In fact, the history of Muharram has been a manifestation of the creative ways

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26 After crucifixion, the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross and buried before sunset, an honorable burial that primarily consisted of washing, wrapping in linen and transporting the body of the deceased to a sepulcher. See Peter 6:23–4. This practice was performed according to Jewish law stated in Deuteronomy 21:22–3.
devotees attempt to deal with this significant problem, and find ways to reinstall the corpse of Husayn, while perpetually experiencing a state of deep suspended mourning in the liminal, in-between stage of the first and second burial procession. The annual nature of the funerary celebrations, in a sense, puts to rest or defers the liminal state of affairs of the mourners caused by the horror of Husayn’s death on a temporary basis, as the devotees find new imaginative alternatives for burying the corpse of their Imam.

However Safavid Muharram ceremonies, particularly performed in the Isfahani stage of Safavid rule, introduce new orchestrated mortuary strategies in the context of deep-seated political transformations in Safavid society. The growing official staging of mortuary rituals provides ingenious solutions to the problem of secondary burial with the invention of various symbolic dramas. My starting point is the theatrical aspects.

2.1. Spectacularization

The sudden appearance of the dramatic organization of Muharram in the course of the Isfahani-phase of Safavid rule reveals two crucial developments in mortuary practices. Firstly, display of realistic representations of martyrs (de Gouvea, Della Valle, Kotov, Olearius, and de Montheron), volley-firing of arquebus and pageantry (Olearius, de Gouvea), and elaborate processions underline the inventiveness of an extraordinarily rich repertoire of political rituals devoted to creating a ritual theater state in connection with the construction of the new imperial city. These dramatized ritual developments, originally introduced in 1602–04, indicate how the officialization of the ceremonies coincided with developments in centralization of the state and urbanization processes, especially, with the second phase of the building of Maydan-i Shah of Isfahan.

Crucial to these dramatic displays are enactments designed to promote harmony and coordinate displays of grief through representational objects and pageantry in the course of the primary ceremonial burial stage. At first glance, the remarkable organization of elaborate representations and pageantry processions singles out official attempts to incorporate the formation of the new army, with its new military technology, into the ceremonies, further highlighting the rituals as political events rather than mere devotional practices. However, the introduction of new visual displays of mortuary practices points to a more complex symbolic process in the making. Although Calmard
classifies the pageantry or “ambulatory phase” in distinct terms in contrast to what he calls the “static phase” of the ceremonies, describing “dramatic acts performed apparently without substantial ‘dialogues’ in front of participants,” there appears to be a gradual and coherent growth in the use of representational armory objects combined with funeral artifacts in a display of carnival military processions.27 Closer inspection, however, can shed light on more symbolically intricate developments in this form of procession.

The parade of camels carrying children and wailing women, the exhibition of “painted figures illustrating” [Della Valle] the preacher’s narrative of Karbala, and the orchestration of dancers and fighters serve to illustrate the staging strategies used to visually exhibit the death of Husayn so as to combine the emotions of grief with narratives of death, violence, and war.28 The transportation of empty coffins of martyrs of Karbala indicates the organization of powerful emotions of mourning and loss in the medium of burial imageries that evoke the presence of the martyred Imam within the living community of devotees. The show of armory covered with turbans, flags or banners, and weapons believed to be used at Karbala and put on display in the course of the ceremonies is a key illustration of how metaphors of martyrdom and sacrifice are staged to produce a ritual space of death where monumental shrines and graves are replaced by ephemeral objects, portable artifacts displayed in a memorial for the dead. But in a significant way, such symbolic representations of the deceased also provide clues as to how the transience of time can be symbolically frozen through the ritual display of memorial artifacts of the martyrs of Karbala in a steady state form, present and visible, portable and publicized, sacred entities that unite the past with the present for the community of the living. The increasing stylization and standardization of such memorial objects (ʿalam) in the late seventeenth century underscores how such memorial objects were sanctioned and made more official with the increasing power of religious orthodoxy at the Safavid court.29

28 I will examine the symbolic significance of ritual battles in Chapter Six.
Likewise, the display of imaginary corpses through portable coffins enhances the authority of death in an exaggerated fashion to dramatize the presence of the undead or yet to-be-buried martyred Husayn. In such instances, the show of imagined corpses through empty coffins further emphasizes the continual difficulty of finalizing the secondary burial stage, as the deceased remain in a portable object put on display by participants without involving burial in a final laying-out in a monumental space, like a grave. The presence of coffins reminds the community of mourners how phantoms of the dead can continue to wander in the community of the living, further illustrating the authority of memorial objects as a communicative medium through which the living can contact the dead through ritual acts of mourning. The crucial point here is that the invention of new visual strategies and the proliferation of ornate paraphernalia constructed new dramatic ritual sites, wherein the events of Karbala were fetishized as manifestations of the sacred. This, henceforth, provided a common imaginary space for ritual participants to share grief over the violent death of Husayn and his revered companions at Karbala in the form of a sacred memory.

The important factor is not the extent to which a solution to the secondary burial stage can be achieved (a stage that is irresolvable due to the physical absence of Husayn’s corpse), but rather the dramatic ways in which the ritual participants tend to associate themselves with funeral effigies that represent Husayn: images which can be ritually revered as if they were Husayn. This is important since the invention of highly dramatic artifacts and elaborate paraphernalia representing Husayn opens up new ritual imaginary spaces to create intense emotions of solidarity for individual participants. The elaborate visualization effects of Muharram in its 1641 form, as described by de Montheron, bestows on this dramatic space of funeral objects even greater organization, as it was performed in front of the main portal of the royal palace in the main maydan. The Persian use of the term “tamasha” or “spectacles of grief,” a term coined by de Montheron, best describes the growth of the spectacularization of Muharram when the mortuary ceremony achieved its first most organized and sequential performances in the presence of Shah Safi I in 1641. The appearance of other advanced representative objects such as “biers surrounded with trophies, bows, quivers full of arrows, shields, scimitars, feathers and other similar ornaments,” [de Montheron] replicated horses and camels of Husayn in the midst of a processional stage-setting of spectacles carried out by male participants in the main maydan emphasizes the
proliferation of memorial visual spaces matched with the escalation in significance of Muharram as a state ritual from the mid sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries.30

Secondly, whereas the 1540 ceremonies, as described by Membré, emphasize the violent performances of mourning and self-mortifying acts, mainly associated with the primary burial processions, the sudden appearance of dramatic carnival-like events towards the end of the ceremonies, especially in 1602–04, mark a puzzling addition. Both de Gouvea and Munajjim, for instance, are quick to point out the mixture of joy with grief during the ceremonies and the use of fireworks or festivities after the processions. The 1637 report of Olearius also indicates a festive reception after ‘Ashura that was followed by fireworks.

This new carnival feature provides us with clues as to how the ceremonies were closely tied to the two building stages of the grand maydan, since they were performed in the newly constructed city-spaces of Isfahan. The added carnival-like events could have been an attempt to stage celebrations to create new royal and public urban spaces. But the carnivalization of Muharram by the turn of the seventeenth century can also demonstrate how the added festive elements were used to underplay the apocalyptic and violent patterns of the ceremonies, as described by Membré in the 1540 version. The element of festivity could also provide us with clues as to how the new officialized spectacle spaces tamed the presence of the danger of pollution, inherent to Muharram mortuary rites, frozen in the liminal burial phase.

But at another level, these festive events draw attention to the yearning for an eventual completion of the secondary burial—marked primarily by the promise of the inevitable return of Mahdi, as the avenger of Husayn’s death. In a sense, thus, the invented carnival-like events were not merely intended for the burial processional, but were symbolic narrative strategies that helped to shape the schematic thinking of ritual participants, regardless of class, gender, or status, to believe in

30 As Herbert’s account serves to testify, the effigy was later buried in a grave. T. Herbert, *Travels in Persia*, 268. In other cases, it is most likely that these funeral effigies were later buried in graves (perhaps at shrines). This has also been observed in various Muharram ceremonies on a cross-regional scale. The burial of effigies identifies an important element in the finalizing stages of the annual ceremonies. For an early account of this performance in Bombay, see Colonel Sir L. Pelly, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain* (London: W.H. Allen and Co, 1879), xvii–xxiv; for a contemporary one in Iraq, E.W. Fernea, *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (New York: Doubleday, 1989.), 211–12.
the durability of the state and community in time. The element of the-ater state, therefore, is marked by increasing dramatization, abstraction, and glorification of the death of Husayn, in which power was manifested through ceremonial processions. Accordingly, it underlined the permanence of the state through invented traditions and customs as something that transcends the particular life of individual mourners who participate in the ceremonies. The merit of emphasizing the spectacular power of Muharram lies in its communicative efficacy in evoking the permanence of the state through the visual representation of carnival-like events and memorial objects representing the immortal presence of sacred beings that remind the community how, inevitably, it will triumph over the temporality of time and the horror of demise.

2.2. Corporeality

Closely tied to the spectacles of sacrifice and death in the medium of burial effigies is the ritual display of self-violence. Mourning involves the symbolic enactment of self-abnegation, a subjective process through which individual participants experience and imagine the inability to fully negotiate the trauma caused by the death of a member of the community and of the difficulty of fully restoring both the living and the dead. In what can be called the melancholic imagination, performances of self-mutilation bring forth collective emotive spaces where the body mediates between the world of the living and the dead, where the body becomes an imagined site of luminal significance.

The saliency of the corporeal dimension of Muharram is not that it simply displays performances of self-violence, but that it serves as a medium for the internalization and recreation of constructed traditions and values, and the constitution of both social relations and collective identity. The ritualization of the body in the course of Muharram mortuary practices, I argue, highlights the symbolic ways in which processions of self-injury impose the narrative of the violent death of Husayn, built around the ethos of sacrifice, on the individual ritual participants in a frenzied orchestrated manner to legitimize a unified body politic. The notion of “body politics” here carries the assumption that symbols of violence foster strategic modes of socialization of one’s most basic physical sense of identity in terms of denying the biological for an abstract social body, amalgamated in symbols of transcendental power. Asad describes such ritual techniques that revolve around
the body as embodied practices, performances that entail disciplinary powers in shaping self and truth.\textsuperscript{31} The enactment of self-violence by Muharram participants signifies a symbolic means by which the continuity of the community of mourners can be affirmed. Violence is a type of performance that memorializes and ossifies the tragedy of Karbala, so allowing individuals to share the immortality of a spiritual truth that the state claims to represent.

In his famous study of prisons, Foucault demonstrated how rituals of penal discipline correlate with particular practices of power and developments of technology to construct identity. The relationship between identity and disciplinary rituals takes place through the body as “political field,” where “power relations have an immediate hold upon” creating a political body.\textsuperscript{32} As an organized public event, Muharram performances of self-violence also serve as a symbolic medium for the internalization of gender differentiations, class, ethnic, and status hierarchy in what one may call the production of ritualized, docile bodies that open up corporeal spaces that identify a distinct awareness of constructed social identities with respect to the body of other ritual participants. Seen in this light, Muharram corporeal ritualization, in terms of a strategic mode of symbolic production of a body politic, designates the internalization of social death that occurs in the interaction of bodies ritually positioned in the course of the ceremonies.

A noteworthy feature of Muharram internalization processes is the gender implication of self-violent performances. In the case of male participants, physical self-violence is enacted in the form of injuries caused by blades, inflicted on the head, hands or armpits, and burning hands with cotton dipped in grease. [Kakash] These performances, along with the self-burial rituals, highlight the distinctiveness of a type of self-violent ritual that involves the voluntary acceptance of individuated, biological death, through the performance of self-injury (including self-burial), to assure a rite of passage of reinstalling the dead Imam within the world of living devotees, to ultimately achieve redemption from the liminal existence that the ritual participants experience. Likewise, nudity serves not as a mere representation, but as an \textit{embodiment} of death. Through such enactments of demise, the male

ritual participants communicate the pollution caused by the death of their Imam by symbolically internalizing a shared collective experience of death, as the show of nudity attests. Accordingly, male actors perform ritualized public identities by displaying symbols of violence, and therefore controlling access to public spaces based on gender domination. The masculine aspects of self-violent performances are marked by the attempt to show readiness to accept biological death in order to attain reassertion of life in the face of death by means of ritual empowerment. Central to this act is the creation of official spaces of violence that display a terrifying closeness to death for the living male performers that arouses a feeling of daring and gallantry to affirm fraternal solidarity. This spatial order is internalized, structuring perceptions of the world as official sites of interaction.

Female Muharram participants wail and weep so as to ritually articulate their distinct (official) social identity as public mourners for the male martyrs. Their role in the political body outside of the household domain, as biological reproducers and potential mothers, appears to remain stable in officially recognized public acts of lamentation and emotional outbursts of wailing. Lamentation defines women’s collective identity in bodily acts of weeping as gender-specific ritualized performances. The ritual organization of physical acts of sorrow by female participants further internalizes their individual and social identity as mourners, as they carry death around with them with their black dresses, covering up their public physical presence during the rituals. Women can thus enter masculine public spaces only by remaining outside of the arenas of blood, remaining shielded by the outbursts of wailing that render them invisible, though audible, in the streets, maydan, and the mosque where the rituals are performed. They become collective non-beings by physically joining the social body in the shape of invisible mourners, interiorized and domesticated, audible only through weeping and crying.

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33 In the second section of Chapter Six, I will show the agonistic and factionalist organization of these fraternal ritual spaces.
34 By this point, therefore, I also acknowledge the unofficial dimension of gender interaction through ritual processes, which is largely absent from view in the official domains of public life. I will return to this critical point in the next chapter.
The rich symbolism of male blood further stresses the liminal burial stage that Muharram processions identify. Moreover, we could also argue, following Douglas, that performances of spilling blood represent territorial-making and the maintenance of bodily boundaries that metaphorically express how the act of cutting skin and orifices can produce a space through which a community of mourners can distinguish themselves from the outside world. Blood, therefore, plays an important role in this internalization process by identifying the violent death of Husayn with the living Muharram mourners to metaphorically create a social body, with its distinct death-related symbolic boundaries that unite the dead with the living, that transcend history and physical space.

The increasing orchestration of self-inflicted injury rituals in the course of a hundred years of Safavid rule, from 1541 to 1641, indicates the growing significance of organized symbolic violence. Accordingly, it crystallized the embodiment of the ideal community in a perpetual state of deep suspended animation to transcend death through voluntarily acts of self-violence. Here, the internalization of death manifested in the ritual formation of identity in performative patterns links a collective shared experience of death to the construction of a transient entity. The morbid politics of Muharram idealize disembodiment over the body, transcendental over physical, self-violence over self-pleasure within a set of necro-bodily spaces that stabilize a death-like state within the ritual participant so as to foster a sense of collectivity. This sort of body politic rests not on the physical existence of the members, but on their willingness to sacrifice their individual bodies to join a community of mourners as an imagined transient non-physical entity.

2.3. Purification

The peculiar appearance of camel sacrifice, usually celebrated on the tenth of Zu’l-Hajja as the Feast of Sacrifice (‘id-i qurban), in the corpus of the rituals, as described in the travel report of Figueroa, adds a new symbolic performative dimension to Muharram as a political ritual. After inquiring from the natives about the origins of the rituals, Figueroa, who was the first (and only) traveler to describe the Muharram version occurring in ‘Ashura of 1618–19, explains that sacrificial practices were part of a pagan (“gentilidad”) custom, dating back to
the pre-Islamic era.\footnote{36} According to Figueroa, it appears that the ceremonies were incorporated into Muharram under ‘Abbas I.\footnote{37} In its Muharram form, however, the Spanish diplomat notes that camel sacrifice was celebrated only in Isfahan, and, as described in the previous chapter, it ended in a state of fury, hostility, and chaos, unlike the festive nature of the Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies, demonstrating that they were distinct ritual practices.\footnote{38}

\footnote{36} Figueroa, Comentarios, 351. The historical roots of sacrificial performances can be traced back to the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism. A. V. W. Jackson, Persia: Past and Present: A Book of Travel and Research (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 162. The religious theme tied to the ceremonies in the Zoroastrian religion, however, remains unknown. See, M. Omidsalar, “Sotor-qorbānī” in ER; and E. Edwards, “Sacrifice (Iranian),” in EREL. The ceremonies could have had their origins in the ancient Indo-Iranian horse sacrifice rituals, although little evidence can be produced to support this. The horse sacrifice, one of the most imposing sacrifice ceremonies of ancient Persia, and one of the most sophisticated manifestations of royal authority, had the character of magical rite, the purpose of which was not only to secure glory for the king, but also to secure victory at war and harvest to the land. See W. F. Albright and P. E. Dumont, “A Parallel Between Indic and Babylonian Sacrificial Ritual,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 54, no. 2 (1934): 107–28; and W. Doniger, “The Tail of the Indo-European Horse Sacrifices,” Incognita 1, no. 1 (1990): 18–37. With the gradual migration of the Turkish tribes to the oasis regions of Central Asia and, later, the Anatolian-Mesopotamian landmass, the Central Asian steppe tradition of horse and sheep sacrifice, ritually performed for the sky god, to ancestors, and to the forces of nature during the first month of the year at the royal palace, symbolizing the means by which the participant was transported to heaven, could have also contributed to the evolution of the camel sacrifice rituals—though, once more, there is little evidence to support this claim. See C. M. Kortepeter, The Ottoman Turks: Nomad Kingdom to World Empire, 19–21.

\footnote{37} Munajjim describes the story of an old man that stubbornly refused to sell his house to the shah, for he lived on the premises where ‘Abbas I planned to construct the new congregational mosque of Isfahan. The house of the old man, Munajjim explains, was the place where camels were kept for slaughter on the day of ceremonies. J. Munajjim Yazdi, Tarikh-i ‘Abbasi ya ruznama-yi Mulla Jalal, 411–13. The story testifies that the ceremonies were performed prior to spring of 1611, though its initial introduction remains unknown. Also, Chardin, who witnessed the Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies in the latter half of the seventeenth century, notes that the Muharram version of the ceremonies was introduced under ‘Abbas I and given patronage in all the royal cities. The ruling was made, Chardin explains, after a high-ranking cleric in the court made the suggestion that the shah follow the tradition of the Prophet. J. Chardin, Voyages du Chevalier en Perse, 14. It is most likely that this high-ranking cleric was the famous Baha’ al-Din ‘Amili, who helped revive the rituals of Friday prayer after 1593–94. However, since the practice of slaughter was conducted while the camel lay on the ground, instead of standing up, as required by shari’a law, the performance caused considerable problems for the clerical establishment. Della Valle, I Viaggi di Pietro Della Valle, 117–18.

\footnote{38} It is worth the reminder that other travelers who encountered Muharram in Isfahan, both prior to and after Figueroa’s visit, failed to give an account of the performances. This is mainly evident in Kotov’s 1618–19 description of Muharram in
In historical terms, this new development could suggest that, in their one (and only) appearance, the performances were orchestrated in a strategic way to serve a particular purpose. Though it is difficult to determine the precise circumstances that led to their introduction, one should consider that the rituals appeared not only amidst the second building phase of the new Isfahan, but also in the expansion of the empire’s economic sphere and coinciding with measures to secure the imperial territories after peace was made with the Ottomans. The peaceful economic and political environment, I suggest, fostered new stable political conditions to further expand the ceremonies with the aim of constructing a stabilized community. Though it is not clear why the sacrifice ceremonies were later abandoned (at least in their official form) after their sudden occurrence in 1618–19, this addition reflects new mediums of ritualization as the empire expanded on both economic and political levels.

In theoretical terms, the significance of Muharram camel sacrifice rites lies in the correlation between pollution and violence and the ritual dynamics to foster a greater sense of communal identity by taming the potential threat of an imagined and felt enemy envisaged in the course of animal sacrificial ceremonies. How does the procession of ritual slaughter produce a communal sense of solidarity among ritual participants? And how does the consumption of the camel help to tame an enemy? In an attempt to answer these questions, I begin my discussion with perhaps the only ethnographical account of the rituals found in the travel account of Figueroa. When asked about the significance of violence and the implication of slaughter and consumption of the camel, people attending the ceremony informed Figueroa that the reason behind the rituals was to show their hatred for the Sunni enemies and affirm vengeance by cutting the camel into pieces.39 Unbeknownst even to the ritual performers, as Figueroa notes, the main reason for the performance of slaughtering the animal was to represent the desire for revenge against those believed to be responsible for the death of Husayn.40

Isfahan, which does not mention anything about the performances; Kotov, however, describes the Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies that followed Muharram.

39 Figueroa, Comentarios, 352.
40 It is interesting to note that the camel was also used to represent both domestic and foreign Sunni adversaries in the earlier Safavid practices of public cursing rituals of the enemies of ‘Ali. Mirza Sharif, the appointed sadr under Isma’il II, describes the ritual cursing performances of tabarra’ as a method of publically denouncing and dis-
Recalling here Bloch’s three-stage notion of ritual, the camel sacrifice procession marks an allegorical hunting game in three distinct spatial ritual passages: first, emerging from the realm of the sacred (the city), second, proceeding towards a violent assault against the pollution embodied in the camel (outskirts), and ending with the performances of slaughter and consumption as the conquest over an imagined adversary in terms of expansion into aggression and war (between the city and outskirts). Within this process, the camel is symbolically transformed from a sacred into a profane object. The final performance entails the act of slaughter, consumption, and the (unequal) distribution of the camel’s vitality among the male hunters and female wailers of the urban community. State power is produced not merely in the violent act of slaughter, but also in the feasting, in which the futuvvat member participants enjoy and share the pleasure of the camel’s magical strength to restore the vitality lost in the second stage of the ritual process. In a sense, the ritual hunt constitutes a spiritual journey in the performative medium of consumption as a form of symbolic solidarity between the human and the sacred world.

The significance of this ritual narrative process of the hunting expedition is twofold. First, the performance of aggression, in the form of the bodily mutilation of the camel, is directed towards the symbolic embodiment of a perceived enemy and also, more importantly, to the continuity of the entire community as a transcendent political entity. Second, the act of sacrifice entails an ambivalent performative consumption of an imagined enemy in an attempt to regenerate sacred vitality. In the final third stage, an ambiguity can be identified in the symbolic ritual process in the consumption of the sacrificial camel. This ambivalence is interpreted here as the conquest of sacred vitality that embodies both elements of consecrated and profane existence, manifesting certain millenarian features inherent in the ceremonies that fail to actualize the three-stage ritual process. The sequential three stages are as follows.

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avowing the enemies of the regime with the ritual recitation of Sunni names in public, namely known as “jar al-qitar.” As Stanfield-Johnson notes, one meaning for this term is “dragging a train of camel.” Here, similar to the camel sacrificial ceremonies, the camel represents something demeaning and humiliating as the abusive term “drag” clearly signifies. See R. Stanfield-Johnson, "Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran," 130.
2.3.1. *Domain of the sanctity of vitality*

The Muharram camel sacrifice procession begins in the magical realm of the city, the homegrown domain for native vitality, wherein the life of the community requires the perpetual defense of purity from pollution caused by the outside world. Within the city domain, the ornamented camel signifies the sacredness of the animal. Participants dance and play music in front of the camel in order to celebrate its blessedness, as though performing a bridal procession during a wedding. But the occasion is also taken to celebrate the call for a future war and the inevitable triumph over the enemy residing outside of the city boundaries. Here, the multifaceted symbolic aspect of purity maintains an element of ambiguity. The animal not only identifies purity but also the promise of a triumphal consumption of a weaker enemy, embodied in the female camel. The interplay of gender relations between the masculine community (yet-to-be consumers) and the female camel (yet-to-be consumed) is crucial here. On one hand, the ritual decoration of the camel identifies the female camel as potential prey for the male hunters. The domesticated aspect of the camel, closely associated with subordination, serves to represent identification.

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41 What defines the city as a sacred domain? According to Babayan, the capital city, Isfahan, represented “the seat of a universal empire, one that inaugurated the new Muslim millennium.” Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 230. Accordingly, the new imperial capital was conceived as an imperial place wherein the holy Mahdi would one day return. My theoretical assumption of the city as sacred territory, however, is based on the boundary-making demarcating ways in which a home domain is imagined as a homeland site, distinct from an external, profane domain found in the city outskirts. The festive symbolism involving the bridal processions of the camel sacrifice ceremony best illustrates the sacred significance of the city, wherein a symbolic wedding as a form of blessing takes place. In his “Four Sources on Shah ʿAbbas’s Building of Isfahan,” for instance, McChesney makes use of chronicles that describe the magical features and wonder-exciting aspects of Isfahan, especially with regard to the paintings and gardens along the maydan. See McChesney, “Four Sources on Shah ʿAbbas’s Building of Isfahan,” especially 107–09.

42 In the Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies, N. Sanson describes, the animal was especially delivered from Mecca. Du Mans, Chardin and Kæmpfer note that the camel was taken from the royal stable. According to Adam Olearius, the royal camels were of a special breed called “shutri baad” or “wind-camels.” A. Olearius, *The Voyages and Travels*, 307. This point further emphasizes the element of vitality (royalty) and strength (wind) present in the animal. See also Calmard on Sanson’s account of the Meccan origin of the camel. J. Calmard, “Ritual and Power II,” 186, footnote 53.

43 Space precludes me from elaborating upon the relationship between marriage and sacrifice at this initial stage of the ceremony. For a general account of this symbolic relationship, see Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*, 65–84.

44 As noted in Chapter Four, the chosen camel for both the Muharram and Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies was of the female sex.
with the promise of a celebration of a future killing and victory over enemies. Similar to the Ottoman circumcision rituals, elements of ritual mockery and ridicule of the opponent in the form of a female figure appear to play an important role in the ceremonies. In this sense, the embodiment of Sunni enemies, both domestic and foreign, manifested in the form of a female camel underpins the feebleness of the opponent, submissive and passive to the greater power of the native (male) hunters.

The association of the animal with feminine features could identify another ambiguous symbolic complication. In a sense, the camel represents femininity in close association with the threat of putrescence, while the ornamentation could signify the fertility power of the female sex as the source of pollution. By this I mean that the female sex of the camel, which symbolically stands for the source of fertility, provides an opposition to the earth-transcending power of the sacred; symbolically, it is the association of fertility with the female animal that dramatically establishes the death-giving source of impurity in the animal. In another sense, however, the association of the camel with the royal stable or the holy cities implies the masculine trait of kingly strength, signifying a divine patrilineal significance of the shah who is a descendent of the Imams (particularly Husayn), united in blood kinship in the Ibrahimic line. This second symbolic aspect is significant at this initial stage since, in spite of its potential for death, the camel appears to also carry the gift of life, the promise of sacred vitality as opposed to the pollution caused by the animal’s sex, both in the biological and the ornamental sense. At this initial stage, the profane and the sacred intertwine with implacable ferocity.


46 The choice of a female camel is the best evidence of the partially profane character of the sacrificial beast. For symbolism of various animals in pre-Islamic Iran, see M. Moazami, "Evil Animals in the Zoroastrian Religion," *History of Religions* 44 (2005): 300–17. For the symbolic relationship between fertility and female sexuality, see M. Bloch and J. Parry, eds., *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, 18–27.

47 I will expand on this symbolic ambiguity in my account of the final stage of the ritual process.

48 As in the case of Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies, this perhaps explains why the participants have mixed reactions to the presence of the camel in the city: at one point the animal is surrounded in festivities and celebrations; at another point it is
2.3.2. Transgressive defilement

The expedition begins once the participants transgress the city boundaries in the form of a hunt procession, as hunters make their way, noisily and furiously, toward the front lines, where they expect a confrontation with the enemy. The fury marks the beginning of the hunt as armed hunters leave the city, while the female participants follow accordingly. The female participants maintain their role as mourners for the future male martyrs, while men carry their swords and sticks, along with ornamental lances and axes, towards an imaginary battlefield near the river. The hierarchy of status continues through the ceremonial hunting procession as the participants accompany them out of the city according to their social standings. At this point, the processional movement away from the city causes a transformation in the symbolic status of the camel. At the moment of leaving the city, the camel’s chastity is dramatically desecrated as it approaches the boundary that separates the city from the outer plains. At this point, it is important to articulate the symbolic ambiguity of the camel.

In the course of Islamic history, the camel (irrespective of its sex) has maintained the symbolic meaning of mystical solidarity between the human and the sacred world. But, whereas in the Arabian Peninsula and Tigris-Euphrates settings the camel has been revered as a blessed beast, on the Iranian plateau, it has signified both elements of strength violently attacked. The increasing attacks against the animal underscore the increase in its defilement with the approaching day of sacrifice in the second ritual stage. Since this custom does not appear to be gender specific, it is difficult to discern other possible symbolic implications this performance may have maintained in the course of the rituals. Once more, the lack of ethnographic data prevents a more thorough interpretation.

Although the symbolic significance of the ornamental lances and axes is not clear, the ceremonial objects may have been used as part of the futuvvat initiation ceremonies. In *Futuvvatname-yi sultani*, we encounter various rituals that the mystic guild order engaged in for the sake of group solidarity. It could have been the case that the axe and the lance represented symbolic battlefield (ma‘rika) objects that displayed the chivalrous strength of the fraternal urban guilds. For the futuvvat’s ritual battles and wrestling matches, see Kashifi, *Futuvvatname-yi sultani*, 276.

With the spread of Islam, the status of the camel as a sacrificial beast grew in importance as the new religion broke away from the Israelite ritual dietary laws. Unlike the pig, viewed an unclean domesticated beast, the camel, cud-chewing though not ruminant, produces milk, hide, and wool, qualifying its flesh as a source of energy and health. With the new dietary regulations, the animal was therefore liable to pass on to the status of purity with magical instincts of sacred quality. According to tradition, it was the camel of the Prophet that laid the foundation for the first mosque when it knelt-down at the site now known as the Prophet’s mosque.
and risk, purity and danger, at times even being associated with death.\textsuperscript{51} Since the spread of the one-humped camel to Iran in the seventh century, the importance of the animal has been associated with its domesticated strength to transport and carry goods through the dry desert.\textsuperscript{52} But by moving away from an animal used for drawing wagons (in its two-humped form) towards a more instrument-independent source of transportation (in both its non-hybrid one-hump and hybrid forms), the camel came to represent both life-giving and death-giving spiritual qualities.\textsuperscript{53} This ambiguity could be interpreted in the symbolic association of wetness with the camel in its semen quality to protect life in the context of the dried up desert; meanwhile the masculine features of self-sacrifice and endurance signifies the sacred vitality of dryness.\textsuperscript{54} The association of the animal with a regenerative force can be detected with the belief in the camel’s magical ability to induce pregnancy in women.\textsuperscript{55} However, it is in the instinct for resentment and vengeance that the camel has also been associated with putrescence and profanity. The popular Persian expression of “kine-e shutori,” dating

\textsuperscript{51} It is interesting to note that in the ancient sacred book of Avesta, flying camels are guardians of Earthly Paradise. The element of death identified with the camel, however, recalls similar symbolic identifications in various Indo-Mesopotamian cultures. In Leviticus (9:4) the camel is described as an unclean animal, while in Hindu iconography the camel represents wicked death. See J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. J. Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin, 1996), 149–50.

\textsuperscript{52} According to R. W. Bulliet, it was due to experimentation with camel hybridization under the Sassanids that the one-humped camel gradually replaced (albeit not extinguishing) the two-humped camel in the Iranian plateau—especially west of northeastern Afghanistan and the Oxus River in Central Asia. See R. W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 141–75.

\textsuperscript{53} This is, of course, a hypothetical postulate, though the following argument serves to support this claim.

\textsuperscript{54} The (pre-) Safavid Persian mythological accounts of the camel are scant. I make this generic assumption in reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s study of Bororo and Shrenté mythologies of water and death. Though surely discrepancies remain between the Safavid Persian and South American Indian practices, my Straussian take is that there is a universal feature in symbols that carry binary opposition between wetness and dryness on a cross-regional basis. See C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, trans. J. and D. Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 192. It is noteworthy that the Persian name for camel, “šotor,” has its etymological root in the Indo-Iranian word *ushtra*, meaning, “to be wet,” in reference to ejaculation of semen. See M. Omidsalar, “Šotor-qorbānī,” *ER*.

\textsuperscript{55} In nineteenth century accounts of Persia, the connection to childbirth has been observed during pregnancy when the mother walks under a camel or consumes the flesh of the animal to ensure a successful delivery. See B. A. Donaldson, *The Wilde Rue: A Study of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran* (London: Luzac & Co. 1938), 26.
back to the Safavid era, implies the rancorous character of the camel, remembering its enemy for future retaliation. Such vengeful features display a paradoxical interplay of symbols of strength and loss, as the camel is perceived to be both odious and life giving. The symbolic makeup of the camel signifies, in a sense, an ambivalence between wet and dry characteristics inherent in the animal that manifest an interplay between endurance and resentment, self-sacrifice and vengeance, blessing and curse, life and death.

In respect to this symbolic ambiguity, the significance of the second stage is that the sacred life-giving quality of the camel is easily transformed into a profane one the moment the male hunters march out of the city and approach the ritual space of slaughter. In this symbolic transformation, the camel does not become representative of an impure outside world, but its very embodiment; it attains the feature of interstitial space of in-between existence where sacredness is, temporally, lost to the profane, outside world. Accordingly, the female participants begin their mournful cries with the event of transgression of the sacred identity present in the animal, as it was identified in the city domain, reflecting the embodiment of death and the pollution caused by the symbolic defilement of the camel. What causes both the male and female participants to wail and mourn once the camel departs from the city is the display of an allegorical performance of the martyrdom of Husayn with the entry of the animal into the plains outside of the city, representing the polluted plain of Karbala. At this juncture, the ritual participants share the loss of sacred vitality patent in the first stage of the ritual. The outskirts identify an in-between space of liminality, representing a transgressive site of impurity near the cemetery and the river. The ambush occurs at the slaughter place, where

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56 As Olearius described it, the camel was believed by Persians to have a resentful instinct to remember and even attack a person that had harmed it in the past. Olearius, *The Voyages and Travel*, 308.

57 Also, consider Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi’s description of the camel in his *Hilyat al-mutaqin* (Tehran: Payman, 2002), 319–20. While referring to a hadith of the Prophet, Majlisi explains that since the camel is a hardworking beast and it demands a great deal of care by its owners, the animal is therefore a “neighbor of Satan” that carries a bad omen for its owner, and only the wretched and the unfortunate can take care of such a beast. Majlisi’s description further underscores the notion that the camel was conceived to embody elements of pollution.

58 The association of the Zayanda Rud with pollution can be explained by the fact that the Indian inhabitants of Isfahan cremated their dead near its south bank, close to the place of the slaughter. See S. Blake, *Half the World*, 188.
the camel is positioned for submission in the presence of armed men, while women watch from a distance.59 The camel now faces Mecca, signifying symbolic reentry into the sacred world, though it still continues to embody the pollution acquired once departing the city.60 It is with the performance of besieging the camel in a circle, however, that the participants experience a foretaste of war. The place of slaughter now embodies both sacred and profane characteristics.

2.3.3. Rebounding conquest
The most significant juncture in the symbolic conquest of the perceived enemy, embodied in the camel at this stage, is the liturgical oration performed by the mulla, a feature typically associated with the Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies.61 The attack of the transcendental speech performance over a profane this-worldly camel occurs once the invocation of prayer pronounces the collective return of the participants into the world with the actual act of violence toward the animal. In a symbolic return from a liminal stage to order, while armed with the power gained in an encounter with the pollution of the supernatural external world, the performance of slaughter commences the actualization of violence.

As the camel is slaughtered with the ceremonial lance by the darugha, the person in charge of punishing the enemy, indicates that justice, manifested in the form of vengeance, is carried out and that the other participants can now share the subjugated vitality of the ambushed camel. As in the case of Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies, the camel is ripped apart and its head, the prime symbol of its virile strength, is taken to the shah as a show of victory in a successful hunt against the conquered enemy. There, once again, the performance of the prayer

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59 It is precisely in the context of this peculiar ritual narrative moment that the performance of slaughter could not have been performed if the camel was slaughtered standing up. Why? This is so, I suggest, because when the animal lies down, with its legs tied up, prior to the act of slaughter, it demonstrates the subjection of the camel to the male hunters. This crucial point defies a shar‘ia-based, doctrinal interpretation, hence highlighting a more instrumental religious practice (shamanistic) rather than a soteriological one.

60 This form of performative slaughter in the shar‘ia sense can highlight the interesting way in which the hunting procession is fused with the Islamic orthodox practice of purity in a sacred sacrificial performance, perhaps in order to legitimize the slaughter as a legally sanctioned act.

61 For instance, see F. A. Kotov, Russian Travelers to India and Persia [1642–1798], 28–29.
by the shah further dramatizes victory of the incorporeal over the terrestrial enemy. Although now the meat depresses the weakened and vanquished animal, the sacrificed flesh is transformed into a regenerative sacred force. This time, however, the vitality of the meat is not homegrown, but a supernatural power attained through an enhanced external vitality extracted from the slaughtered animal. The element of rage, which emerges from the collective grief over the imagined deceased Husayn, enables the community to claim a sense of stability.62 Yet the solidity is a process in making. Here ritual fights between two futuvvat factions over the slaughtered flesh symbolize the final event of a successful military hunt, as the fraternal guilds turn their remaining aggression towards each other.63 The factions fight among themselves in the theater of war to display their art (hunar) and knowledge, in which the chivalrous members attain nobility and discover cosmic secrets in the ma’rika.64 They battle in a display of preparedness for an eventual conflict in the form of “supernatural warfare,” and also to show their readiness for self-sacrifice in actual performances of violence, a part of a greater journey of individual renunciation of the ideal of transcendence, an occult power to elude the world of nature.65

The boundary between the bodies of participants according to their guild association is blurred with the communal consumption of the sacrificial meat. The magical effect of the flesh on the participants is revealing in three important ways. First, the meat, as a source of strength and vitality extracted from a vanquished external entity, is collectively devoured to assure the continuity of the community,


63 The ritual combatants that fought on the square were most likely the futuvvat members of the ma’rika, mainly responsible for showing strength (zur) and playing (bazi) on the battlefield. They differed from the “handle-tool users” (ahl-i ghabzah) artisan members of the brotherhoods, primarily made up of blacksmiths, shoemakers, and tailors. See Babayan, Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs, 213.

64 According to Kashifi in his chivalric manual, these ritual battlefields were mystical mediums for the futuvvat in order to attain esoteric knowledge about the sacred. The combat ceremonies were spiritual exercises, as fraternal circles fought together in unison in the medium of factional strife. See Kashifi, Futuvvatname-yi sultani, 276, 307–08, for the relationship between knowledge and strength (zur).

changing the identity of the participants as a result. The slaughtered flesh is distributed to each quarter of the city in an unequal fashion, as the mutilated camel, its legs, body and head, is shared according to the hierarchy of rank, status, and gender. Second, the strength gained from the vanquished animal serves as a form of magical cure to repel pollution. Significantly, the conservation of the sacrificed meat, as it appears in the Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies and most likely in the Muharram version, marks a shamanistic element, in which the participants ritually consume the newly conquered strength to control the evil spirits and heal maladies that inhabit the seen and unseen worlds. Third, while the initial stage marks active cooperation in the loss of vitality, the final stage enables the participants to regain the strength lost in the symbolic transformation of the camel, embodied now in the form of holy personas. This is primarily manifested in the patrilineal ties of the sacred figures of the Imams (Husayn) and the Prophets (Ibrahim), which the futuvvat circles believed they maintained a kinship with in terms of spiritual javanmardi. Reminiscent of the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist as the commemoration of the Lord’s Supper, at the third stage the meat is divided into twelve to six parts, hence signifying the symbolic entry of the celestial vitality of the Imams from the flesh of the camel into the body of the participants in the ritual performances of consumption. This, I suggest, resembles an interesting element of spirit possession in the camel sacrifice ceremony that could possibly have its origins in the Mongol-Turkish steppe religions.

The striking difference between the Feast of Sacrifice and the Muharram form of camel sacrifice lies primarily in the final stage of the ritual performances. In the former case, the third stage ends in joviality over

66 The ritual of preservation of the sacrificed meat is a common practice in the Iranian Shi’i ceremonies. The flesh of the slaughtered camel, as a form of blessing (barakat), is used as a cure for sickness or a source of healing power. This particular shamanistic performance was also detected by Ivar Lassy’s classic study of Muharram ceremonies in Azerbaijan, pointing to its possible origins in the Mongol-Turkish steppe regions. See I. Lassy, Muharram Mysteries Among the Azerbaijani Turks of Caucasia: An Academical Dissertation (Helsingfors: Lillius and Hertzberg, Ltd, 1916).

67 Ibrahim represents the spiritual father of the mystic brotherhoods; he was believed to personify the code of ethics and the mystical kinship ties of the fraternal circles. Kashifi, Futuvvatname-yi sultani, 132.

God’s promise of immortality to Ibrahim through the act of sacrifice. In the Muharram version, ceremonies of consumption end in wailing, distress, and violent fights. Why? As Bloch explains, the most peculiar aspect of millenarian ceremonies is their inability to finalize the three-stage ritual process. If the participants refuse to proceed to the final stage, as appears to be the case in the Muharram sacrifice ceremonies, at that point they become conquered by the pollution caused in the second stage.\(^6\) Since the funeral rites of Muharram ultimately aim to come to terms with the death of Husayn, the final stage of the burial procession fails to occur because of the continuing threat of pollution caused by the unburied body of Husayn.\(^7\) This explains why participants are expected to mourn the death of Husayn within the liminal stage of in-between worlds, the shadowy realm of the dead and the living, wherein they remain in a state of death-like existence. The annual mourning ceremonies could, therefore, signify an attempt to ward off the return of the sacred deceased and protect the community from perpetual haunting by the dwelling phantoms and the threat of pollution caused by the death of the revered Imam, his family, and companions.

The unpredictability of the eventual apocalyptic confrontation with profane forces causes the continuous lamentation of the females, displaced from their everyday domestic domain, and clashes among the males, at times fighting even to the point of death in the ultimate display of javanmardi on the square, representing the battlefield. Consumption of the sacrificed meat at the cemetery highlights the death-like state of the participants, where the dead and the living meet in the act of consumption of the slaughtered flesh. It is precisely in this ambiguous symbolic performance of eating both the enemy and the sacred persona, in the interplay of profane and sacred vitality, that violence is *internalized* within the male and female participants. In contrast to the Ottoman imperial circumcision ceremonies, which provided an initiation rite to regain the blessing of the imagined ancestors of the community in the ritual performance of royal

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7 This problem is partially resolved with the invention of the ser o ten or ŠArba’in ceremony in the latter half of the seventeenth century, when the miraculous union of the head and the body of Husayn takes place forty days after his martyrdom. This marks another (invented) ritual attempt to terminate the first burial stage, displayed in a symbolic performative way.
circumcision, Muharram camel sacrifice rituals represent violent body politics of self-mortification and mourning in shaping a ritual community built around the ethos of loss, vengeance, and martyrdom. In what Turner calls the “apocalyptic communitas,” here the making of a ritual collective identity is to a degree based upon the element of anticipation of future disaster, war or a catastrophic end to the world.

The necro-politics of Safavid rituals of camel sacrifice, manifested in its form of futuvvat religiosity, are ultimately tied to the symbolic spatialization of conquest and war. In the context of the construction of urban spaces in the final building stages of the royal capital in 1617–24, the infamous “tower of skulls” is a striking reminder of the centrality of ritual spatialization of sacrifice. Although its origins date back to the Mongol invasion of 1258, the tower stood tall and visible in the capital city among other new urban spaces in the district of Dere-dekhteh, symbolizing the celebration of a successful royal hunt. What identifies the central connection between the monumentalization of conquest and the rituals of animal sacrifice is that most probably the head of the camel was placed among other animal skulls at the tower at the end of the ceremonies.\(^{71}\) The salient point here is that the tower identifies the final moment of the ritual hunt in the symbolic display of conquest over the animal. The tower spatializes what other temporally sequenced rituals of Muharram cannot: it visualizes a victorious war over an imagined enemy embodied in the most virtual part of the animal, its skull, as a central architecturally based urban display of aggression and war; spatializing the triumph of an immortal state as a transcendent entity over an impermanent enemy represented by the decapitated hunted animals, consumed in parts by the community.

The most striking characteristic of the camel sacrifice is the symbolic way in which the performance of slaughter marks an attempt to advance the primary burial procession to the second stage. Though still an incomplete process since the martyred Husayn remains in the world in-between the dead and the living, the act of slaughter of an imagined enemy assures a sense of an eventual reinstallation. Nonetheless, it is striking, but not altogether surprising, that the incorporation of

\(^{71}\) Although there is no mention of this in any of the European travel reports, Jackson notes that in the city of Hamadan the skull of the slaughtered camel was placed on the tower at the end of the performances in the Qajar version of the ceremonies—which in fact the tower was named after. See A. V. W. Jackson, _Persia Past and Present_, 162.
animal sacrifice performances in Muharram entailed a close consideration of pollution caused by an imagined enemy embodied in the camel. It also indicates the performative attempts to purify the social body by inventing new boundary-making rituals to encourage individuals to feel as though they were participating in the state. This is also evident in the appearance of the public ritual burning of ʿUmar’s effigies in 1618–19, appearing along with the performance of camel sacrifice ceremonies. Through the orchestration of components of sacrifice and effigy-burning entreaties for the living and the dead, a distinction between “us” and “them,” the hunters and the hunted, the burners and the burned impressed upon participants a variety of schemes and values, strategies for avenging oneself on imagined enemies. This, accordingly, manifests in channeling violence, legitimizing social hierarchy, and acknowledging a transcendental unified community.

2.4. Sermonization

In my account of the animal sacrifice ceremonies, I drew attention to the role of liturgical oration as a significant component in the final stage of rebounding conquest. I argued that the use of transcendental speech in the form of invocation of prayer pronouncements was essential for a symbolic return to the world. Central to transcendental speech is its narrative style used in the form of a metalanguage of sentiments to create an iconography of emotions drawn by recitation of melancholic words to resurrect the presence of the dead in the world of the living. Through hearing arranged narratives of past events involving ethical ideals, abstract meanings, and the ethos of action, sermons help to mold emotional, experiential, imaginary, and subjective knowledge of belonging and locality. The idiom of storytelling provides a narrative space for a shared basis of remembering, comprehending an officially recognized past by designating cosmological imageries for the everyday life of the commemorators. Accordingly, the officialization of a narrative hagiography suggests the overlapping of languages of sentiments and emotions generated by state organized commemorative events.

The expansion of the oratorical ceremonies of rawzekhwani, originally advanced through royal patronage under Safavid rule, presents a discursive ritual site of the narrative of Karbala through folkloric performances such as storytelling or songs. The emergence of the vernacular Persian genre of maqtal from the sixteenth to the early
seventeenth centuries as a literary medium for retelling the story of the martyrs of Karbala offers keys to understanding innovative ritual processes that, as authorized narratives of history, open up discursive spaces of death created as a memorial to the mythical tale of original violence on which the state is founded. This is achieved, I contend, when a dramatic aural performance is sanctioned to transmit a metanarrative of the death of Husayn to which the participants can relate and associate themselves so as to produce traditions and knowledge of a natural and eternally preexisting order.

Perhaps nowhere is this more strikingly evident than in the travel report of de Montheron. In its most public official form, the rawzehkh-wani sermons of Muharram 1641 show a remarkably integrated form of aural literary performance for conveying the tragedy of Husayn in close connection to the state. In the grand maydan of Isfahan, de Montheron describes how the “principal mulla,” together with another mulla, seated close to the shah and the court officials, narrates in a loud voice the story of Karbala in front of an attentive crowd (mainly female participants). Performed in monological utterances, the most striking feature of this account appears when the preacher recounts the death of Husayn by mixing his sermon “with the praises and prayers for the present King, to which the people answer amin.” Here is an account that explicitly coalesces the territorial bounded political status of the shah with the transcendental authority of Husayn.

The blending of the meta-imagery of Husayn, his sacred authority as a holy persona unto death and transformed into the abstraction of the thing-in-itself, garnered through monological rehearsal oration with the shah, further legitimizes the Safavid household as descendants of the holy Imams, born of Ṣaḥḥāḥ’s seed, which was earlier (during the revolutionary phase, 1447–1502) forged in the hagiography of the founder of the Safavid dynasty—the Safvat al-Safa. By the same token, the overlapping of the holy persona of Husayn and his violent death at Karbala with the shah, demonstrated by his presence at the ceremonies as the spiritual authority of the ritual community in the medium of oratory performances, is indicative of a metanarrative of the past to legitimize royal power by producing traditional authority rooted in an appeal to the past. The key point here is the way in which monological oration, as a form of official discourse concerning the synthesis of the past with the present, demonstrates a meta-imagery representation of royal authority that affirms sovereignty seen in the form of an extension of history in a narrative space of formal
speech. This immateriality is borne in the efficacy of the formalization of ritual speech that encourages the belief that the foundation of the state is based on the tragic death of the spiritual father of the Safavid regime. This, in return, legitimizes the shah as the present embodiment of Husayn, the redeemer of the community of mourners, which signals the binding of the drama of Karbala with the royal court that represents the Imam.

Most significantly, however, the death of Husayn also denotes the imaginary discourse of a “first death,” a mythically invented first victim, which fosters a feeling of being threatened by his violent death due to an unjust war, and yet an aggressive desire for vengeance toward an imagined enemy responsible for his death.72 The significance of sermonization and the formalization of narratives of the past is not merely verbalization in order to valorize an invented tradition, but to maximize consensus as to how the past is linked to the present, how Husayn, his victimization and sacred death in the idiom of martyrdom, is reincarnated into Safavid royalty. In a sense, this process does not suggest that the shah is a mere representative, but rather the shadowy manifestation of Husayn through the idioms of prayer and praise. Likewise, it is not so much what is represented as how it is personified and embodied through the monological eulogies and storytelling of Karbala that posits the importance of the spatialization of authorized words to evoke a sense of traditional authority among ritual participants. Here is where a violent death, mediating the ethos of martyrdom and the spirit of the state with the ritual participants lamenting at hearing melancholic sermons, affirms the possibility of obtaining a transient community of remembrance of (dead) things past and (eternally alive) things to come; it provides a sensational, extraordinary feeling of perpetual existence, as the violent death of Husayn and his companions is recounted to produce shared memories that harmonize tales, synthesizing a grand collective purpose. Here we see all the ingredients of patriarchy offering society a form of immortality via a monological discourse of official culture.

72 I borrow the notion of “first death” from Elias Canetti’s discussion on the dynamics of war and sensations that arise as a result of a belief in the death of a victimized person, as the founder or the spiritual figurehead of the “crowd” in the form of a “lamenting pack.” See E. Canetti, Crowds and Power, trans. C. Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 138–40. On the relationship between memorialization and the narrative of an original violent death of a spiritual head persona see M. Taussig’s The Magic of the State (London: Routledge, 1997), 77–86.
In this chapter, I have been broadly interested in showing how death rituals play a central role in affirming a site wherein the state, and by extension, official norms of behavior can be affirmed in relation to shaping a shared emotive sense of community. In subtle ways, the chapter draws attention to how symbols of death carry considerable political implications for ritual participation, involving both the Safavid elites and the ordinary population. The elites were defined as dependent on the dynamics of these symbols not only to legitimize their claim to authority, but also as participants (obviously safeguarding an important role) in a grander project to create a political body. Accordingly, the present discussion also underscores the gradual changes in the symbols of death in constructing experiential processional spaces in the course of Muharram mortuary rites; the ways in which the dead remain among the living, and the ways the living experience the dead.

In contrast to the other public spaces listed in Chapter Three, the crucial feature of Muharram official public spaces lies in the processional and non-architectural domain of creating imaginary ways that transform and integrate the everyday life of the participants into a collective body. Moreover, unlike other mortuary rituals, the remarkable attribute of Isfahani Muharram rituals lies in the failure to produce a reinstalled monumental space to immortalize the death of Husayn. In its appeal to the past, it displays a processional mourning space of annual commemoration in that power relations are articulated and identities become embodied practices in a ritually integrative fashion. In its strategy of interplay between instrumental and soteriological practices, Muharram ultimately fails to finalize the secondary burial process, hence living with the phantoms of the dead. The event of reinstallation, though nearly achieved in symbolic terms, is never completely attained, but merely postponed to the following year, during which the threat of Husayn's demise returns though his presence continues to haunt the community in mourning. The implication of this element of deferment highlights the ultimate breakdown, the disintegrative force of Muharram as a form of organized public space. This, I suggest, underscores a millenarian element in the Safavid political order, which could have partly led to the collapse of the empire in 1722. In a sense, the empire remained at risk in affirming an absolute symbolic and emotive sense of permanency among its members, since it operated in accordance with a millenarian ritual culture.
Finally, Muharram rituals are not just ascribed here as the invention of traditional religious authority or customs. Rather, Muharram involves the making of an imagined community that is evoked, enacted, expressed, and experienced in a processional spatial ritualization. In a Durkheimian sense, one can describe Muharram rituality as designated ceremonial spaces by which individual perceptions are socially appropriated in that a necessary interaction between shared representations of social life and individual experiences is shaped and made to endure in the repetition of rituals. The basis of the mourning spaces of Muharram is, in this regard, to create a heightened sense of collectivity by the unique social reality that reigns in social death: participants whose bodies, thoughts, and emotions are played out to lend an aura of collective reality through the death of a revered saint in the building of an imagined immortal state.

But to what extent do ritual participants internalize the ritual processes in making the state a transcendent entity with which they can associate? Can the theater state succeed in making its audience act as performers of its spectacles of power? In the next chapter, I will underscore carnivalesque patterns through which ritual space of official culture is interrupted and hence subverted into something other than that seen in the visible public.
In the previous chapter, I argued that the Safavid theater state was performed as a set of official spaces where power is dramatized and, accordingly, meaning is constructed with an aim to communicate belonging and identity. Death played a central role in the process of marking state power. The notion of “almost reinstalled space” was coined with reference to the claim that, although invariably caught up with various officially sanctioned mortuary processes, Safavid Muharram performances involved an impossible attempt to attain closure. This culminated in the uncertainty of performative outcomes with respect to what the ritual aimed ultimately to achieve: finalizing a proper burial of a (imaginary) deceased saintly symbolic head of the community.

Manifested in the panoply of a theater state in the performance of consumption of an imaginary enemy embodied in a sacrificed animal, this approximation of ritual spatiality gave way to the formation of a type of public space marked according to a perpetual endeavor to reinvent ritual processes to conclude the second burial stage, regardless of the fact that such attempts proved to be futile. The entropic millenarian tendencies of the official performances of Muharram inherently involved, in short, the element of disorder or randomness in the ritual process; unpredictable and unsettled, their sanctioned meaning conjured up to “the point of faltering.”\(^1\) Such performances strongly resemble rituals that, in the words of P. Metcalf and R. Huntington, “may make a show of power, but they run the same risk as other shows: They may fail.”\(^2\)

This element of ritual failure is central to the ensuing discussion, since it stresses the liminal dynamics of Muharram in which new associations or alternative conceptions of self and reality can be reasserted primarily through *contorting* the formalized and orchestrated sense of

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1 Bloch, *Prey into Hunter*, 85.
reality produced by the ritual, officially endorsed by state patronage. In this light, it is argued here that funerary processes of Muharram, in the transitional spaces in which various activities are juxtaposed and fused, also involve carnivalesque patterns in such that by bringing grotesque processes into public recognition, certain taboo-breaking experiences and rule-breaking spaces are manifested, resisting ritualization complexes that attempt to stabilize a coherent communal identity. As described in Chapter Two, the notion of the grotesque and the carnivalesque that Bakhtin so assiduously studied in his *Rabelais and His World* is relevant to the following discussion to the extent that such a theory provides a certain set of critical conceptual tools for the analyses of the official performances of Muharram *vis-à-vis* deviant, unofficial practices. In this regard, I will not offer an overall Bakhtinian interpretation of Muharram, but rather stress the principle of inversion of the carnivalesque in order to elaborate upon the counter-publicity of Safavid Muharram practices.

My main focus here will be on certain carnivalesque performances as a form of camouflage practice that recognizes the social agents and ritual participants as producers of hidden public spaces, unnoticed sites of resistance inserted within officially visible spaces that surpass ritual norms, tied to the political order. Here, the proposed idea of interruptive space insinuates subtle parodies, covert, satirical, grotesque complexes and dialogical communions in the medium of unlicensed transgressive behavior, embedded in official ceremonies in the harmonization of identity and finalization of public space to define self and other relations that serve to challenge a dominant social order. For the most part, such counter-official publicity of interruptive spaces is identified in terms of latently complex modes of subversive communicative sites, displaced spaces manifested in mourning practices of self-mortification in costuming, feast, battle, song, and dance.

It is important to note here that such camouflage practices are not the manifestation of a grand social upheaval, a discernible form of resistance as may appear in mass rebellions and revolutions; but rather implicit moments of (un)conscious defiance of dominant norms that are being continuously negotiated, reformulated, and transgressed to affirm autonomy and subjectivity. The present study of anti-structural features of Muharram, encompassing interrelated performative and textual dimensions, thus seeks to articulate the ways in which ritual space can also resist encoding, objectifications, fetishizations, and standardizations of the symbolic plane of commonality after being
remembered in the public imagination as a transcendent entity, a “tradition.” As a counter-public, these hidden spaces are described as transgressive and evanescent spaces of dissent.

1. Grotesque Realism and the Carnival Body

In Chapter Two I described how, in his study of medieval and Renaissance humor and the world of popular carnival, Bakhtin identified the carnivalesque modes of communication in terms of dialogical, “unfinished” voices of unofficial festive culture that transcend the uniformity of discourse sanctioned by religious orthodoxy and official state culture. In its multiform and dialogical expressions, its manifestation of parodic idiom of forms and symbols, the carnivalesque force of public carnival events lies in the logic of transfiguration, reversals by turning a “world inside out,” an experience that “opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense all immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms.” In its irruption of the normative sense of time and space, an inverted world of existence, formalized ritual, and discipline are relaxed; hopes and aspirations for an entirely different world are expressed, fostering a sense of fearlessness that constitutes a festive-comic mode of distrust of official truth by shaping sites of misrule or unofficial forms of behavior.

Carnival defies ritual formalization of social relations (interactional ritual), hierarchical rank, privileges, and prohibitions through travesties, deformities, perversions, role reversals, a suspension of order monitored and properly orchestrated by visible official and licensed performative actions. “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.” Inclusive, universal, and ambivalent, carnival liberates humanity from all forms of seriousness and pretense of transcendental meaning; it accordingly bolsters a reality of regeneration via a celebration of a festive collective body.

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4 Ibid., 7.
In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies this regenerative force of carnival action as “grotesque realism.” According to Bakhtin, the carnival body signifies a collectivized conception of social interaction of a transindividual dimension; the private body in this regard is not merely presented in its biological individual form but as something communal and universal. According to the principle of grotesque realism, the carnival body is not a disconnected unit, separate from its environment, nor a vehicle for ritual performance, but an intercorporeal aspect of existence, an expression of the cosmology of perpetual renewal, “blended with the world, with animals, with objects.” The collectivity of blood-and-flesh is a clutter of protuberances, body parts such as anuses, bellies, breasts, flared nostrils, legs, mouths, noses, arms, and so on, in which what belongs to whom is undetermined, in that who is who and what is what is mixed and disfigured. In a significant way, the grotesqueness of the carnivalesque functions to reverse the estrangement of humanity from nature fostered by hierarchical order, to (re)familiarize human beings with the natural world (including human nature) and thereby bring it “closer to man.” It is the defiling quality of the carnival that allows festive exuberance to represent the corporeal as reality, and degrade and lower all that is abstract and idealized by the enactment of symbols that are material and profane, thus underscoring the unity of earth and body.

In Bakhtin’s schema, the body is cosmic, manifesting the entire physical world as the absolute lower stratum, a site of regeneration in that individuals are continually growing and being renewed through festive laughter. In his remarks on Rabelais’s writing, Bakhtin argues that the grotesque includes a parodied series of bodily performances that exposes its essential connectivity with the “heterogeneous world of things.” This world-linkage is aimed at “destroying the established hierarchy of values, at bringing down the high and raising up the low, at destroying every nook and cranny of the habitual picture of the world.” But the grotesque also entails an affirmative quality to the extent that the vulgar and the “earthy” embody the world of lived experiences, popular sensuous spaces of “folk-festive” culture of the

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6 Ibid., 26.
people that rejuvenate a unified collectivity of cosmic and universal forces composed of flesh-and-blood.

Although in an imperative sense, the grotesque is primarily about the shaping of transgressive space, carnival also constitutes an unofficial particularity of being through degradation, decaying and deformed flesh, disasters and the blurring of symbolic boundaries that divide death and life, affirming life in a state of disintegration. This ambiguity is central to the ways in which transgression becomes manifest in the outgrowing limits of corporeal boundaries through festive misrule, defying the prescriptive sense of individual relations in their ritual sense of permissible interaction. In its haziness of meaning, the grotesque principle provides a symbolic source for parodic inversion and transgression of ceaseless excess where all is hybrid and degraded. It materializes in exaggerations and hyperbolizations that detach the physical body from a death-independent existence into a degraded state of bodily drama: eating, drinking, defecation, pregnancy, corpulent excess, dismemberment, and even violence, swallowing up another body that rips open the limits of the corporeal to others and the world. Correspondingly, the carnival body becomes grandiose and an unfinished phenomenon that constantly destroys, rips, and lets it be “swallowed” by others and the earth to outgrow its own individual body. Since the carnival body sees the finality of the collective in creating an absolute political body as merely conditional, the festive performance, therefore, marks the process of perpetual shifting of boundaries of self and other into a potent inversion of power relations.

It is particularly significant for the direction of my overall argument to note that the employment of Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque lies not in its emphasis on the universalistic conception of a primordial, folkloric collectivity, what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White call Bakhtin’s self-consciously utopian “cosmic populism” nor the cosmological idealism (and perhaps mysticism) of cosmic regeneration implying a crypto-metaphysical conception of carnival. The emphasis

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8 See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 151.
here will be on the subversive potential of ritual action that through carnivalesque patterns challenges official establishment through parody of gestures and absurd representations of officially sanctioned performances. The following application of the grotesque principle will provide us with a significant analytical tool to rearticulate the body performances embedded in ritualization in that, even in the apparently somber form of mortuary ceremonies, techniques of exaggeration, excess, self-penetration, and degradation downplay, contradict, and challenge official meanings that are ascribed and attributed to stylized behavior and formalized action. I want to bring this point to the foreground because, as it will be argued, public ceremonies of Muharram also include such subversive strategies of tremendous symbolic power to combat officialdom.

1.1. Muharram and Spaces of Degradation

Although in a generic sense Shi‘i mourning processions may appear far removed from the Rabelaisian world of carnival merriment that Bakhtin claimed to have proliferated in European history since the Middle Ages—a claim whose historical accuracy remains questionable—the rise of Isfahani-Muharram ceremonies in the early seventeenth century is clearly indicative of certain carnival motifs.\(^{10}\) As described in Chapter Five, Munajjim’s description of the ceremonies in the form of festivities and displays of fireworks at Isfahan highlights a curious image of merriment, relatively devoid of sullen features following the mourning processions. Likewise, the travel report of de Gouvea serves as a fascinating testimony to the ostensible carnival-like performances celebrated alongside the mourning processions. As mentioned earlier, Muharram of 1602–04 appears to comprise strong elements of carnival performances in the course of which, as de Gouvea noted in his report, expressions “for pleasure or for lamentation” intertwined since “some people laughed, danced and sang, whereas

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\(^{10}\) A number of historians have questioned the relationship between historical carnival as a social event, closely tied to economic and political structure, and its literary analogues in the works of Boccaccio, Rabelais, and Shakespeare, as argued by Bakhtin. But the relationship between social carnival and literary carnivalesque is evident in the ways in which writers of the Middle Ages and, especially, the Renaissance had direct contact with carnival as a major social event.
others cried and wailed.”\textsuperscript{11} The description brings to mind images of carnival celebrations that transgress the usual norms and rules that govern the more routinized and orchestrated aspects of the ritual, and in doing so represent a life turned inside out by combining pleasure with lamentation and the profane with the sacred. Although one may argue that the display of pleasure reflects the promise of salvation that, according to a soteriological account, Muharram primarily sustains for ritual participants, in an alternative sense the show of joy underscores an unusual manifestation of carnival themes inextricably intertwined with processions that are meant to be melancholic in disposition.

In its dynamic course of evolution in the post-Isfahani Safavid period, the carnivalization of Muharram proliferated in various displays of performances as the empire grew into a major political force, vying for regional power until its collapse in 1722. From festivities of fireworks for the ambassador’s reception following the mourning ceremonies [Olearius (1637)] to an elaborate display of pageantry [Tavernier (1667); Chardin (1673–77); Struys (1671); and de Bruyn (1704)] and colorful spectacles, the expansion of Muharram in the form of carnival celebrations in the latter half of the seventeenth century demonstrates how elements of festive culture were authorized and indeed sponsored by the authorities. This posits that despite the fact that festive celebrations were performed as part of the mourning rites, they also sustained those very official norms that authorized their public display. The carnivalization of Muharram in its apparent celebratory performances constitutes an integral feature of the theater state culture, in which the modality of visual carnival displays informs the ways of festive being that ultimately maintain and support the established official order.

In their critique of Bakhtin, Terry Eagleton and Umberto Eco, for instance, have argued that, even for a brief period, carnival processes interrupt the accepted hierarchies of social relations and traditions of behavior, and yet rituals of reversal rarely present a serious threat to the power structure. Eagleton argues that, though conservative as well as disruptive, carnival remains primarily a “licensed affair . . . a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing

\textsuperscript{11} De Gouvea, \textit{Relations de grandes}, 75–7. Similar observations were also made in the reports of Chardin and Tavernier.
and relatively ineffectual as a work of art.”

Eco further argues, “carnival can exist only as an authorized transgression (which in fact represents a blatant case of contradiction in adjectio or of happy double binding—capable of curing instead of producing neurosis)…Comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule.”

Known as a “safety valve,” carnival rituals are able to break the rules on a particular designated day or week every year in order to vent anxieties and aggravations by allowing the participants to return to a more “normal life” after the ceremonies. Festive occasions, therefore, cannot break the boundaries, the set power relations (gender, class, patriarchy) that forms of social protest aim to challenge. In this view, the sanctioned license of carnival ritual is a form of social or political control of the mass public by the “high” political regime, which in a complicated way serves the interests of that precise official culture it seemingly opposes.

From a neo-Marxian perspective, Bloch has also argued that the very flexibility of ideology, noticeable in official rituals, its “vagueness and a-logicality” provides the perplexity of effects in the ritualization of action. In a sense, ideology can “both affirm and deny at the same time.”

With the denial of “time,” or time out of time since festive space is temporally out of time understood in its ordinary, everyday sense, politicized carnivals, like Muharram for instance, foster contradictory emotions (like mourning and joy), leading to further confusion and tension that ultimately distort the critical perception of ritual participants. This heightened tension explains much of the exhilarating emotional tone of the carnival aspects of Muharram, in which the participants are in an electrified, at times hysterical, state of mind for the duration of the ceremonies. For Bloch, carnival reveals an alternative ritualized strategy to mask contradictions upon which an official order is ultimately grounded. Carnival imageries are more complicated than mere acts of rebellion. They are more like cultural paradigms that.

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can be easily co-opted by the dominant culture, transforming it into a space in which power is reproduced in festive ways.

But does the process of “carnivalization” entail the event of the carnivalesque? The significance of this question lies in how carnival-like performances could be discernable from the unauthorized carnivalesque strategies of public ritual to the extent that neither “carnival” nor the “carnivalesque” can be simply identified as the same. In fact, one could argue, authorizing carnival events is in its very nature a de-carnivalesque activity, for the authorial sponsor of festive events is against the whole spirit of inversion. The carnivalesque must not be confused then with mere holiday play. In its ability to revel, operating even in the course of ritualization in which ways of action are organized and orchestrated in accordance with an official order, the carnivalesque aspect of carnival marks the ever-renewed capacity to surprise and open a negative space, a parody of activities that in the negation of established norms affirms autonomy. Since this negative space represents a gap in the fabric of a ritual community, constructed according to a dominant ideology that seeks to author the social order as a unified and permanent entity, the carnivalesque life of carnival poses a constant threat to the official emphasis on the past, a state so complete that it affirms a transcendental reality.

Stallybrass and White, who have correctly criticized Bakhtin for his uncritical populism or “folkloric” approach, have shown that the apparent dichotomist notion of carnival as safety valve or social protest is misleading since “it actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are intrinsically radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression.”15 To move away from such polarized viewpoints is to acknowledge that, despite the fact that carnival can entail the potential to affirm the dominant symbolic order, it can also negate the official order as a “site of actual and symbolic struggle.”16 Central to this perspective is the understanding that carnival as an event of effervescent zest is a space of conflictual complexes. It is precisely here where power and empowerment conjoin. In this respect, Peter Burke has also drawn attention to the connection between ritual and protest as “switching of

15 Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 11–14.
16 Ibid., 12.
codes, from the language of ritual to the language of rebellion.” He argues that “to move from the point of view of the authorities to that, more elusive, of ordinary people, it may well have been that some of those excluded from power saw Carnival as an opportunity to make their view known and so bring about change.” Such is a basic feature of carnival spectacles, as performed in early modern Europe, that the participants do not always react in the way that officials would usually expect the carnival rituals to be performed, and they also did not necessarily understand or interpret the ceremonies in the same way as the authorities.

The difficulty with the “safety valve” thesis is that it focuses too much on the elites and too little on the creative, subtle ways in which the carnivalesque force of the carnival, in its unauthorized transgressive dimension, could in fact oppose the very order that legitimizes its performance. The main problem of this approach is that it fails to recognize the possibility of rebellion as momentary spaces of misrule that negate authority in unnoticeable ways. This is crucial since the notion of oppositional space that will be advocated here is the sort that appears in most unexpected, unnoticed and, at times, trivial manners.

The question I will be addressing throughout the present study of carnivalesque patterns of Muharram is: how does transgression manifest itself as a form of unauthorized act of misrule? There are many unauthorized motifs of transgression and more than one level that can be detected in Isfahani-Muharram processions. They are as follows:

1.2. Grotesque Self-Mortification

Considering the accounts of Muharram from 1540 to 1641, the description of the bodily drama of self-mortification serves as a fascinating starting point in the decoding of carnivalesque spaces. Though for the most part an officially sanctioned performance, the show of self-mutilation also incorporates a transgressive and subversive dimension, disguised in the unfolding of the ritual process. Despite the absence of ethnographical data about the participants, we can identify various

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18 Ibid., 210.
19 Ibid., 198.
implications of the acts of self-injury that break down prevailing truths about spatial corporeal relations of the participants and gender identity. In contrast to ritualization, the carnivalization of the male body involves interruption in the process of socialization through the very act of violence that makes the body visible in the ceremonies. The paradox here is that although, as argued in the previous chapter, performances of self-violence serve as a medium for the internalization of traditions and values that constitute a social order, such practices can also contradict the very sense of immortality of an unearthly transcendent entity in which the Muharram mourners are expected to participate.

The bloody rituals of head and body cuts with razors [Kakash] or performances of chain beating [Kotov], for instance, testify to how the acts of self-violence could interrupt the masculinity of the ritual body by disfiguring it, opening its physical spatiality into a temporary instance of dismemberment, practices that undermine the physical boundaries of the male participants as a unified collectivity of mourners. Perhaps as an unconscious test to the rigidly defined sense of masculinity in the social structure of ordinary space and time, the anti-structural force of the performances, spontaneous as they might be to generate high emotions, stand in stark contrast to the normative masculine conception of the male body in terms of a stable and permanent entity, prepared for the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. The self-mortified body affirms, in a sense, an act of negation, a rejection of the socially accepted and officially sanctioned notion of masculinity that associates the male participant with an unchanging, transcendental identity.

For the most part, the carnivalesque male body of Muharram remains impure: protuberant, disproportionate, a symbolic filth, an entity out of place, revolving around the breakup of flesh and dissolution of body parts (arm, armpit, chest, forehead, hand) and materiality. The Muharram carnival body is invoked because self-violence is not simply a processional mourning image but constitutive of the defiling categorical sets through which male participants can make sense of the world as a transitory and fleeting realm in a perpetual state of disintegration. The enactment of death, manifested in self-mutilation of the body, stresses how boundaries between the physical self and the material world are blurred and how violence can lead to the internalization of pollution caused by the biological realm of demise. But more importantly, symbolic enactments of sacrifice can also challenge the spiritual body, the immortal entity of the official culture that
permits and orchestrates practices of self-mortification. In this light, the symbols of violence can also defy the very idea of the immateriality of selfhood, which signals the impossibility of a unified collectivity in regards to its symbolic emphasis on fragmentation and dislocation of the physical. The carnivalesque body of Muharram largely remains a phenomenon of ruination, nude and bloody, a life of here-and-now, the profane existence of disintegration that challenges the boundaries between self and other, the physical body and the material world. Since the carnivalesque corporeal imagery of Muharram consists of mutilation and the opening of flesh that present a newly conceived body, a body open to the potential of breakdown, the act of symbolic violence in the corrosion of the physical, therefore, identifies the transgressive and unfinished characteristics of the performances that challenge the ultimate claim of officialdom to cohesion and unity.

Of all the features of self-injury performances, female wailing plays an integral part in the grotesque imagery of the Muharram carnival body. The performance of lamentation by the female participants implies a carnivalesque instance, as the extraordinary and chaotic feats of sobs and howls transgress the patriarchal conception of woman as a domesticated and modest being. Physical display of affliction through the performance of wailing emphasizes how the ritualization of the female body in mourning on behalf of the (physical or imaginary) male martyrs can be interrupted in a loud cry, a disorderly, at times incomprehensible, noisy performance that allows the participant to express herself, freely, in a frenzy of emotions, regardless of what the act is meant to express. In other words, lamentation can be recognized here not as a mere official act of bereavement, but as a subversive performance that enables the female members of a ritual community to leave their domesticated private space for a visibly frenzied public space in the form of a loud shrieking expression.

Wailing then becomes an act of contestation, a performance of detachment from ritual norms to which its exhibition is confined. Whereas blood serves to symbolize the male carnival body following an act of self-injury, vocal performances of sobbing and howling trans-figures the female body in the carnivalesque process of transgression. It is in the show of lamentation that the female body symbolically displays its potential failure as a reproductive organic being. In other terms, since the female participants also partake in the disaggregation phase of the burial procession, the central element of pollution caused by the death of Husayn, mainly associated with the mourning
processions, undermines the characteristics of women as mothers, as opposed to the male participants, who are represented as being more concerned with the physical act of self-sacrifice or martyrdom. This ironically destabilizes the patriarchal conception of the female body in the household terms of the reproductive force of fertility, as its ritualized manifestation in the performance of wailing continues to evoke the imagery of pollution caused by the death of Husayn. In this complicated manner, the unofficial event of transgression becomes apparent as the ritualized female identity defies the officially assigned domestic vitality of women as mothers to the male-dominated community of mourners in the course of lamentation performances.

The bodily life of Muharram expresses not just momentary negation but affirmation as well. The carnivalesque dimension of Muharram is not the dissipation of the here-and-now but time filled with profound experiences. The body of the ritual participants on the main city square in the ceremonies is aware of its limitation in time. The mourning crowd is not merely experiencing a mindless plunge into unconscious, religiously sanctioned action, but a highly aware, interactive sense of vitality in experienced time towards mortality. The participants do not perceive a path-dependent, unified image of their collectivity, officially sanctioned by the regime, but instead through the performance of self-mortification, recognize the discontinuity of their being and the ceaseless presence of death in the drama of Karbala. The carnivalesque force of social death lies in the regenerative thrust of life through demise, reminding the participants that death in itself is a comedy of life, a turning upside down of a biological process that experientially affirms the annihilation of vitality, the frightful force of non-being.

The carnivalesque characteristic of self-mortification is perhaps Muharram’s greatest triumph, for the very ambivalence of action in terms of promise for salvation and display of degradation echoes the unfinished thrust of the carnival body. Carnivalesque Muharram signals the inevitable loss of the individual physical body and the ways in which ritual participants define themselves in expectation of an individuated death, while remaining in the pollution caused by the demise of an imagined saintly being. In this manner a specific carnivalesque experience is conflictually connected to a specific ritualization experience. This intertwining of contradictory themes is symbolized by the ritual dance of death during ceremonies, as reinstallation of the dead within the world of the living undermines the very consolidation of purity and eternity that the state and its official culture aim to attain.
Through this reversal of reality, carnivalesque Muharram becomes the representation of another fuzzy world outside and beyond representation; and this other world, constituted of a disfigured self-Other relation, fails to conceptualize a transient entity because it does not have to be restricted to the disciplinary strategies that ritualization entails. Crucially, what self-mortification performances reveal in their carnivalesque configuration is that norms, identities, and the social order can be destabilized as relations of misrule are played out within momentary processes that entail close involvement with an officially sanctioned conception of the performances.

1.3. The Grotesque Feast of Camel Consumption

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the Muharram ritual of camel sacrifice could be recognized as an allegorical hunting game in a three-stage ritual process. In the third stage of the ceremonies, “rebounding conquest,” I argued how the communal guild-based consumption of the animal signified the symbolic act of conquest of an imagined enemy manifested in the camel. The significance of this ceremony lay in the consumption of the camel’s flesh, since the performance blurred the bodies of the participants in the distribution of the parts of the camel shared among guild members.

There are two important carnivalesque motifs here that I would like to analyze. On a religious institutional level, it could be argued that the performative patterns of shamanism and spirit-possession in the course of the Muharram ceremonies challenge the institutional domination of Imami orthodoxy. Since they came under the partial disapproval of the ʿulama, the animal sacrifice ceremonies transgressed their normative orthodox meaning, understood in the soteriological religious sense, by including strong elements of instrumental religious practices. The non-shari’a act of slaughter (when the animal is forced to lie down instead of standing), for instance, is a clear indication of a structural symbolic tension in the rituals, as elements of orthodox Imami and Qizilbashi shamanist Islam appear to have conflicted, overlapped, and fused in complicated ways. The central point here is that, though apparently officially licensed by the state, such non-soteriological practices defy attempts at consolidation of the Imami religious culture in the everyday public spaces of Safavid Isfahani society, in which all-encompassing unitary ritual symbols lead to their self-erosion, a
collapse of its determinate boundaries and, hence, to its loss of official meaning. For the most part, the ritual life of seventeenth-century Safavid society retained elements of both instrumental and soteriological religions, constituting a public realm of symbolic hybrids and cross-fertilized practices.

At a more symbolically grotesque level, the act of communal consumption identifies a carnivalesque expression of destruction in the idiom of slaughter, consumption, digestion, and defecation. The camel represents the externality of the enemy as an earthly object, an entity to be conquered and consumed. But the animal also signifies the earthy element of vitality that includes the threat of material decomposition. Void of a transcendental characteristic, the consumption of the meat signifies the final defeat of life in the act of eating an earthy object and the inevitability of defecation, the breakdown of vitality that is grotesquely dejected of the promise of renewal. As the meat is consumed, the safe boundaries between the body of the participants and the outer world are disrupted as the devouring of the dismembered camel epitomizes the struggle between the constraints of official culture and the expanding body of the grotesque ritual community in a move to fuse the body and the material world rather than to deny its physical existence.

The flesh of the animal in a sense protrudes against the transcendental realm of official vitality through eruptions of bodily fluids into the sacred space, wherein the immortality of the community and the state can be confirmed. Accordingly, the carnivalesque motif of the ceremony lies in the way the grotesque act of consumption interrupts the ritualized internalization of a collective identity as an immortal and unified entity. Symbolically, the sharing of food involves an important occasion as the consumption of an imagined enemy allows the profane to enter the bellies of the ritual participants, exposing the ritual community to the threat of biological ruination. Although the act of consumption assumes the ability to destroy the pollution of the camel, the flesh of the animal nevertheless retains elements of the profaneness, in which divisions between the bodies of the participants dissolve with the communal act of devouring the earth, the camel. The total conquest of the enemy in this final symbolic violent act is distorted since the slaughtered meat retains some of its pollution within the ritual consumers. But more importantly, the consuming mourners solidify a carnivalesque identity in one dense corporeal atmosphere of eruptions
of bodily fluids and defecation that connects and unifies their bodies in the form of an earthy, degenerate, and liminal entity, a community of destruction and death.

Moreover, the consumption of the camel’s flesh reveals the body as open, unfinished. Its connection with the material world is most fully revealed because the bodies of participants transgress their own physical limits by assimilating the material world in devouring an external being, the camel, sharing the same physical world in the act of consumption, digestion, and defecation. Here lies the ultimate defeat of the transcendental entity, the community and the state: perpetual exposure to the threat of demise by facing the earthly enemy (camel) that legitimizes its political existence in the first place.

1.4. The Parody of Mourning: Masking and Deritualization

If transgression can be displayed in disguise, then how can parody appear in the form of mourning? Consider the travel report of Figueroa. In his description of the ceremonies, written by a secretary at the embassy, the Spanish diplomat recalls an unusual incident in the self-burial performances of Begum:20

During the ten to twelve days of mourning, near the ambassador’s house an old man was buried underground for repentance and devotion, and while the ambassador passed the place on his way to the church of Saint Augustin he was astonished to see how the old man can endure the cold season in this state of dejection, and later discovered that the deceitful man, prior to entering the hole, went inside a basket matched with his body size, and in the basket he covered himself up to the neck, and after placing himself in the hole, he covered the outer parts of the basket with dirt all the way up to his beard and in the afternoon with the help of his friend he came out of the basket and at night he ate and rested, and in the morning, before the sunrise, he returned to the basket and continued this until the final day of the ceremonies, and on that day with the admiration of the spectators he ended this act; and of course, his show of devotion was well awarded since like the other thousands of deceiving imposters [impostors] performing similar acts in the name of piety and devotion he tricked people and collected plenty of alms.21

Here, on a descriptive level, Figueroa blurs his own prejudices—his ethnocentric take on the ceremonies as a non-Christian practice—

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20 For a brief history of Figueroa’s travel report, see M. Bernardini, “Figueroa,” ER.
21 Figueroa, Comentarios, 349–50.
with the subjectivity and the intentionality of the Muharram participant, the old man and the “thousands of deceiving imposters” like him. On a quasi-ethnographic level, however, Figueroa (unintentionally) brings to view a side of the ceremonies that is for the most part absent in other European descriptions of Muharram. I call attention here to what might simply be dismissed, in the words of Calmard, as the “degree of sincerity,” were it not indicative of a more significant aspect of the ceremonies.22

There is something satirically salubrious in Figueroa’s description, and that is the way the performance of self-mortification is turned upside down with the “deceitful” behavior of the old man. The intricate game to maintain the sorrowful imagery of the self-burial practice, while failing to sustain its proper performance, occurs mainly at nighttime, indicating the way ritualization is interrupted when the old man successfully conceals his subversive actions during the hours of darkness. The old man consciously transgresses his assigned role by placing himself in the burial space in a dramatic way to disguise his act of misconduct, his failure to properly perform the ritual during the dark hours of nighttime. Here, the night serves as a masking temporal strategy through which the old man hides his act of misbehavior in order to escape the possibility of punishment; but the night also provides a temporary opportunity to release the participant from the male-specific ritual obligation to participate in a state of dejection in the form of self-burial, involving the profane practice of consumption, rest, and relaxation. The act of nocturnal consumption becomes a carnivalesque moment since such misbehavior breaks down the pedantic ritual regime of ascetic discipline that constitutes an integral part of the ten to twelve days of the ceremonies.

The moment of entering the basket reveals a humorous, carnivalesque incident as well. The symbolic act of self-renunciation displayed in the form of self-burial is cancelled out as the basket helps to keep the old man warm and clean inside the hole. The parody here lies in the very display of mourning and the actual show of self-mortification. With the self-burial parade of mourning the old man creatively disguises his desire for comfort in a warm basket while appearing to uphold the norms of the ritual as a state of suffering. Accordingly, the burial space, wherein the old man buries himself up to the neck,

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becomes Muharram’s carnival theater: it represents the potential gap or failure in the ritual orchestration of mourning processions, properly expected to be performed by the male mourners. Though the basket appears to have been a customary ritual artifact of the ceremonies, noted also by Della Valle in 1618–19, the use of protective objects during the self-burial ceremony reveals an ironic occasion that challenges the very authorial purpose of the performances, which is to experience hardship and suffering as Husayn did on the plains of Karbala.

The role of the audience too reveals a comical moment. The old man successfully puts on a performative show of self-burial in front of other mourners while at the same time failing to perform the practice in the proper way, keeping the inappropriate out of sight under the disguise of his performance within the burial space itself, inside the basket. In this view, although the presentation of self and the spectacle of performance in public appear to match up to the norms of ritual process, the performance simultaneously fails to adhere to the correct or appropriate manner of conduct. Throughout the remainder of Figueroa’s description, there is a continual sense of ridicule and mockery, an ingredient of the ceremony that the Spanish traveler is quick to disregard and even belittle.

The account of the English traveler, Thomas Herbert, provides us with another fascinating carnivalesque case. In private funerals, Herbert reports, professional female mourners would use onions to shed tears for the deceased.23 The purpose of this artificially dramatized show of tears and shrieks was to provoke and encourage others to lament. Though it is difficult to determine if the female participants also used onions for the demonstrations of grief in Muharram, it is reasonable to assume that rituals of wailing, performed mainly by women, were occasionally conducted in a similarly exaggerated fashion in the course of the processions. Throughout the travel testimonies of the Isfahani-Muharram celebrations, we can detect a strong sense of an organized show of weeping by the female participants that indicates the possibility of “insincere” behavior. According to the travel report of Figueroa, for instance, during the camel sacrifice ceremonies the female mourners suddenly began to lament in loud cries and shouts.24 The sudden

23 In this passage, Herbert draws attention to the likeness of this particular custom with the ancient Roman female mourners, performing similar tasks during funeral ceremonies. See Herbert, *Travels to Persia*, 254–55.

24 A similar description can also be observed in the account of Kotov.
switching from merriment inside the city to the noisy act of mourning when the camel leaves the city is indicative of a very conscious show of grief in an exaggerated mode of behavior, to the extent to which one can clearly question the spontaneous quality of remorse on behalf of the female mourners. In 1671 Struys also observed an exaggerated show of grief by the female participants, a feature of the ceremonies that continues to appear in contemporary versions of Muharram.25

How can an act of exaggeration signify a carnivalesque motif? If wailing is limited to the show of mourning that the act aims to display, then how can it also imply a carnivalesque performance? An answer to this question lies in the practice of mimicry as an inherently masking practice of reversal and detachment from social norms. In his seminal essay, “The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” the French psychologist Jacques Lacan argued how mimicry constitutes a reality that is behind what is being imitated, and that what is being revealed can be recognized as a “camouflage” practice whereby what is being imitated is not merely a projection of oneself, but a manifestation of a disguising practice. “Mimicry,” Lacan argues, “reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called and itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of being mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.”26 The point here is not to pay attention to the imitated subject, but rather to the creative ways in which the imitating person mimics images that mark a “significance of space,” a mark within the spots of different shades of social interaction.27 In this intricate sense, there lies a greater gap between what is being mimicked and the person performing the act of mimicry. Strategic uses of masking practices, appearing to be something else in performance, acts of exaggeration and the hyper-real all mark means of inserting oneself (“inscribed in the picture”) in a context of social relations.

27 Ibid., 95.
Dramatic mimicry of mourning is more complex than mere enactment of emotions; rather it can be seen as a masquerade performance, a display of subversion in the context of a set of shifting power relations. By not subscribing to simplistic functionalist and theological accounts that reduce wailing to an expressive or mechanistic action with a well-defined purpose, I mean to reiterate that Muharram participants have the power to confirm a creative act of self-determination. This means that they are capable of unofficial access to conceptualize the symbolic norms in alternative, more subjective terms, which hide and at times contradict the purpose of the mourning performances. Here lies the crux of an idea that recognizes mourning as a kind of masking practice, a performance through which autonomy can be affirmed. Ritualized wailing is a display of a masking practice since it enables the female participants to step outside of their normative sense of being into an extraordinarily exaggerated and hyper-real sense of existence: the wailing mourners in the liminal state of dejection, where normal identity is dislodged.

Temporarily released from her structural identity, the female mourner is able to reflect and performatively question the dominant symbols that give meaning to social reality in an experiential sense of existence. This subjective ability at masking in its liminal characteristics of suspension assists the female participant to performatively create a gap within her structural identity, wherein a new and unofficial space of subjectivity is disclosed. Since death represents the absence of life, an imagery of non-existence in the here-and-now, wailing represents the demasking of the grotesque, suggesting a perverted imagery of oneself as a person. By demasking I mean the performative ways in which a ritual agent can transcend his or her constructed identity by facilitating (un)conscious acts that interrupt its complete realization. Reversely, then, lamentation also reflects the symbolic expression of decay of self as a living breathing being, performatively communicating the death of personhood and the disbelief in immortality as a human folly.

What lies at stake in this engagement is not only how anti-structural subjectivities are affirmed through acts of mimicry, but also, in a larger collective framework, how such acts interrupt the distinction between the various intentions and the diverse expressions that the performances provide ritual participants for the possibility of repelling the prescribed codes regarding what behaviors ought to be emulated. In this view, subjectivity of ritual participants is affirmed through
masking performances, practices independent of official meaning. The
symbolic inversion of masking occurs as the act of wailing breaks up
the boundaries or mixes up elements of contradictory features that
are supposed to be kept separate: such as formality and spontane-
ity, impulsivity (bereavement), and hyperbolity (exaggerated show of
grief), official and non-official meanings of a performative expression
of symbols—also a familiar scene in contemporary performances of
Muharram.

Acts of misrule, as a genre of mourning performance that makes
strong use of the theme of transgression, capture what all occurrences
of wailing have in common: an attempt to mimic the sensation of loss
as representative of the actual or physical martyrs of Karbala. The par-
ody of the mourning ritual lies in the impossibility of authenticating a
representation of an imagined past through the performative means of
lamentation. The comedy of wailing in this regard is the failure to rep-
resent the events of Karbala, as they occurred in 680, since they involve
subjectivities that create sacred spaces in the here-and-now. It is not
that the subjective fails to accommodate an “objective reality” of an
imagined historical event of religious significance, but rather that the
nature of imagination is indefinable and multi-faceted and therefore
grief can be expressed in various individual and collective forms. This
ultimately maintains the potential to form a multiplicity of meanings
and symbolic representations that do not necessarily match the con-
ventional and normative performances licensed by the official culture.

The inter-subjective dimension of lamentation performances is ren-
dered even more immediate and absorbing as the ordinary problems of
the participants are expressed amid various public ritual enactments.
When a female Muharram participant wails, she not only grieves for
a revered saint, but also for her personal sorrows. Sorrow could be
expressed in respect to an oppressive life at home, stress caused by
being a parent or a wife, escape from a life confined to the house, loss
of a love, or even, in a more profound sense, the unbearable anguish
of being a human, which constitutes the existential fabric of everyday
life. In this creative way, the mixture of various personal reasons for
public ritual expression of grief is camouflaged by the official show of
lamentation. The masking practice maintains the authorized demon-
stration of grief while inserting the unofficial and subjective display of
intentions in the performative cloak of the official ceremonies.

The most visible carnivalesque aspect of Muharram, however, lies
in the opportunity for female participants of various social statuses
to temporarily abandon their domesticated boundaries and enter the ritual public sphere with a relatively free space of movement, which was normally prohibited in the male-dominated Safavid society. The ceremonies, Tavernier reports for instance, provided the best occasion for women to meet their lovers and engage in sexual acts under the disguise of the frenzied atmosphere of the celebrations. It is very likely that similar activities also existed prior to the 1667 version of the processions and can also be observed in contemporary celebrations of Muharram in Iran in the post-revolutionary period. In many other instances, female prostitutes, Figueroa reports, walked around unveiled, dressed in colorful clothes instead of the ritually assigned dark clothes. Though it can be correctly argued that such an act of misrule represented a licensed form of transgression, it nonetheless provided a rare occasion for the marginalized female members of Safavid society to step outside their everyday professional life and participate in the ceremonies like others.

Central to the above account of transgressive strategies is that mostly subordinated groups such as the poor (e.g., the old man) vagabonds, drifters and women, who were stigmatized as underclass and outcasts in official public spaces, tended to perform these acts. In many ways, Muharram provided an opportunity to make public misbehaviors deemed immoral especially by the official religious class, including the consumptions and vending of drugs and narcotics. At issue here is the way that Muharram provided a rare temporal ritual space for the disadvantaged and the dispossessed to participate in an underworld of public celebrations. More particularly, they underline the existence of

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28 Of interest here is also the ability of female members of the elite groups to freely leave their houses during the holidays and attend the public ceremonies. According to numerous travel accounts, upper-class Safavid women were usually confined to the house under the supervision of eunuchs since their husbands would not allow them to be visible in public. See, for example, J. Cartwright, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London: Thomas Osborne, 1745), 616.

29 Figueroa, *Comentarios*, 345–46. Protected by the royal court, the prostitutes of Isfahan were also visibly present at certain public gatherings throughout the ten days of the ceremonies. A balcony of the great mosque of Isfahan, for instance, was reserved for the principal “public women” since the shah gave them great privileges for profits they provided him and their usefulness for the royal army. For a study of Safavid prostitutes, see R. Matthee, “Prostitutes, Courtesans, and Dancing Girls: Women Entertainers in Safavid Iran,” in *Iran and Beyond*, ed. R. Matthee and B. Baron (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2000), 121–50.


31 Ibid., 84.
transgressive spaces, wherein inversion can be manifested through acts of misrule in (un)conscious displays of subtle mockery of established norms, performatively degraded and dramatically defiled.

2. The Multivocal Karbala Narrative and Dialogical Space

Subversion plays a critical role in the carnivalesque expressions of Muharram and the transgressive vitality of Shi‘i ceremonies. In contrast to the Habermasian notion of public sphere that identifies argumentative discourse as a way to foster a consensus-based public, detached from everyday tensions and conflicts of interests, I begin this final section by examining the maydan as a public ritual space. This space is defined as the staging of a network of expressions, free from the hyperrational conception of reason and open to the possibility of carnivalesque rational modes of communication in terms of *public emotion* (as opposed to the notion of “public opinion”), which are performatively conflictual and, as I argue here, textually dialogical. Central to this section is to show the significance of dialogical modes of communication as performatively lived and literary textual manifestations in the prosaic form of the mourning ceremonies, and the way these discursive processes remain hidden in the public utterances licensed by officialdom.

As earlier explained, for Bakhtin, language is a dialogical discourse and a set of uneven and conflictual social processes that involve multiple viewpoints. In particular, a monological language of the official culture produces discourses based on a single point of view (epic and history). In this ambiguous sense, the dialogic identifies the in-between and the becoming, the contested and the resistance to appropriating words as the property of one speaker because of its social and multivocal nature. Language in a way then lies “on the border line between oneself and the other,” between the speaker and the listener, since the word in language “is half someone else’s,” as Bakhtin explains. Carnivalesque discourses, in particular, best reflect this dialogical element particularly since they entail the mixing of incongruous themes in diverse performative and textual forms like the grotesque, masquerade, and the emergence of the novel in modern times (i.e., after

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32 M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 293.
the eighteenth century). However if voice represents language in its ordinary sense, then public spaces of everyday life are a disorderly mixture of intersecting groups and different ideologies, a living thing with belief systems, histories, and contested perspectives, since each point of view can be articulated in particular ways that embody a set of values that are multivocal.

Unlike the monovocal characteristics of an authorized official speech, which always references legitimized power, dialogic discourse is closed into an intense relationship with the word of another, an in-between of discursive practice on the everyday level. Perpetually dissenting, dialogic discourse validates differences and defies the singular, celebrating the contingency of the self and other relations in which the voices of differences or polyphony challenge the official voice of singularity. In their diversely concrete and relentlessly “heteroglot” forms, expressions of a multiplicity of various ideological, occupational groups, and persons, all co-existing as speakers and listeners, create meanings in contextual and contested ways. What is presented in heteroglossia is that language, in its configurations of lexis, grammar, and style, has a way to produce various tastes, sensibilities, and most importantly genres of intersecting expressions by which individuals live their socially charged lives. All of which contributes to the claim that the true function of language, best represented in the novel, is not to maintain already existing styles, but create new ones in diverse socio-linguistic forms of communication. “Thus at any given moment of its historical existence,” Bakhtin writes, “language is heteroglot from top to bottom…,” and it is never unitary in nature.33

Stated in such general terms here, Bakhtin’s theory of language is nevertheless complicated, and a thorough study of his ideas goes well beyond the present study. I have merely alluded to certain features of his dialogical conception of language and society in order to provide a theoretical basis for expanding my carnivalesque reading of the Shi‘i Safavid rituals. The dialogical discursive dimensions of Muharram rituals, are as follows.

2.1. The Maydan as an Agonistic and Heteroglot Ritual Space

In historical terms, especially nearing the end of the seventeenth century, we witness an increase in the degree of (male and female)
participation in Muharram rituals of prostitutes, socio-professional groups, guilds, merchants, and the poor population (vagabonds and beggars) of the capital city. During the reign of Safi I, as de Montheron observed, the ceremonies appeared to stage their first expansive phase with the degree of participation among ordinary people based on gender and class. With the completion of the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan in 1617–24, the publicity of Muharram was consolidated as the new royal square facilitated staging of the rituals in a most spectacular and dramatic fashion, virtually unprecedented in pre-Isfahani Islamic history. With descriptions of grand participation in Muharram rituals in 1667 by Chardin and Tavernier, the expansion in the publicness of the mourning rites testifies to the advent of a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic imperial culture; and moreover the consolidation of the ceremonies as a form of state ritual with the increase in the number of European travelers as spectators. The increase in mass participation in Muharram rituals was to a certain extent a major historical development, forcing European travelers like Petrus Bedik to describe the Muharram participants in 1670–75 as “a sea of all Persians” flooding the streets of Isfahan.

With the expanded urban spaces tied to the developing economy and the cosmopolitan intra/intercivilizational influences, the escalation of participation in the ceremonies reflects the diversification of interpretations and multiplication of meanings attributed to the symbols, as a bewildering diversity of ritual idioms in what Bakhtin refers to as the formation of heteroglossia.

2.2. The Unruly Maydan

Similar to Goffman’s public and his notion of “social occasion” during which individuals “come into each other’s immediate presence” as participants, the maydan too serves as a meeting point wherein the square becomes an occasion for meetings often conducive to diverse communicative sites that do not necessarily overlap with the norms of ritual language. By this I mean that, as I argued in Chapter Two, the
practice of ordinary, informal conversations, trivial utterances, emotive responses to subtle jokes, sarcasm or polite compliments and gossip are also part of the structure of the linguistic world of Muharram performed in the maydan. In this view, the maydan can be recognized as a heteroglot space in terms of a lesser noticeable field of interaction wherein publics encounter on the basis of intersecting expressions of perspectives and at times trivial discourses, such as casual contacts, rumors, and gossip. Responsive and noisy, the square accommodates the unusual and the strange, publicities that are at times considered transient according to the whims of time or deviant according to the upsurge of travesties emergent on the spur of the moment during the ceremonies.

But such lesser publics can also become manifest in the course of the most official discursive expressions. In public lamentation in the maydan, for instance, many shouts clamor for expression. Expressions of sorrow in the form of wailing, weeping, and loud cries of grief essentially include the rupture of multiple noises, demonstrations of divergent and uneven echoes of mourning (regardless of it being pretended or “authentic”) that involve the expression of various emotions, experiences, intentions, and meanings. The polyvocality of public displays of grief disentangles the orchestrated show of wailing by contradicting the visible, pervasive, authorial function of the practice by attributing it to one voice, intended to be performed in unison for one purpose, that is, a (both female and male) collective lamentation for the martyred Husayn. The act of wailing locates individual interpretations in various sorts of reciprocal and dialogical contexts, and it obliges the female participants to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated spaces of mourning as multisubjective, contradictory, and incongruent.

The salient point here is that such heteroglot reality creates conditions that make possible subpublics as new cultural properties within the official ceremonies performed in the maydan. What I am arguing, then, is that with an increase in the diversification of vocalities, according to the degree of participation in the ceremonies, crystallization of complex ritual publicities increased, leading to greater changes in the field of publics as a result of the expansion of the rituals. The

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as the appropriate and (often) official or intended one...” E. Goffman, Behavior in Public Spaces: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings, (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 18.
emergence of new subpublics often brings about an incline in the transformative course of ritual action, and the ways in which such changes may encourage the emergence of counterpublics that maintain an alternative conception of the symbols enacted in a disguised manner in the official rituals. Since participants tend to suspend their ritualized, constructed identity through the carnivalesque patterns of the ceremonies and temporarily assume the identity of unofficial publics, the formation of such enclaves could pose a threat to officialdom.

But the most notable carnivalesque aspect of the maydan is its ability to defy homophonic official speech by opening up to the multiplicity of vocalities. The integration, fusion, and the emergence of multiple voices of publics challenge any attempt to unify the public in a singular naturalized sense. In other words, the multivocal world of the public maydan makes it increasingly hard to conceive of the prevalence of the monological official culture as constituting dominance over relatively independent fields of interaction in specific self-Other relations. The significance of the situational creation of intersubjectivity and the role of dialogue of styles based on heterology is evident here. This type of ritual publicity provides a social situation of dialogical interaction whereby gatherings are likely to form, dissolve, and recreate new interactive spaces of emotive assemblies and intimate associations on an organized and, at times, a casual basis. The maydan in this regard, as Bakhtin puts it, becomes “two-leveled and ambivalent” as “meeting and contact-points for heterogeneous people,” appearing from mosques, streets, and houses to take on a festive mode of interaction.\footnote{Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 128.}

The unruly interactive nature of the performances in the maydan can also lead to the breakdown of associational relations. The ever-present potential of violence as a result of conflict inherent to the public square highlights the impossible task of the construction of a stable collective identity.

2.3. Ritual Fights as Agonistic Spaces

The futuvvat urban guilds of Haydaris, named after a Sufi, Sultan Qutb al-Din Haydar (d. ca. 1426), and the Nimatullahis, named after a prominent Darvish poet, Sayyid Nimatullah Vali (d. 1430 or 1431), were an important ingredient of Iranian cities from the middle of
the sixteenth century and, especially, the early seventeenth century up to the middle of the twentieth century. According to European travelers, the cultic-Sufi urban guilds were widespread across the empire, and they divided the Safavid cities into two groupings of factional antagonism. As Arjomand notes, in the sixteenth century the Nimatullahis were probably the most organized of the two Sufi guilds and they congregated in takkiya in northwestern Iranian cities like Tabriz. The organizational consolidation of Haydari-Nimatullahi guilds in the formative stage of Safavid rule is indicative of the consolidation of the Sufi brotherhood into urban associations in the later middle period of Islamic history, which underscored the sedentarization of cultic-Sufi associations into sectarian urban organizations.

With ’Abbas I’s centralizing policies and the creation of new Isfahan in the early seventeenth century, economic and political developments led to an increase in membership of the urban guilds as a result

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40 For instance, the diplomat Vincenzo d’Alessandri in 1571 described the city of Tabriz as divided into Haydari-Nimatullahi rival futuvvat factions, made up of nine wards that remained hostile towards each other. G. Berchet, La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia (Torino: Tipografia G. B. Paravia E Comp, 1865), 178–79. It is noteworthy that these two Safavid guilds, similar to other akhi organizations, had their historical roots in the Islamic futuvvat tradition and youth (javānmardī) organizations of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. M. Keyvani, Artisans and Guild Life in the Later Safavid Period, 22. This is not to deny, though, their professional occupational characteristics, but only to demonstrate that such associations revolved around certain Mahdist symbols and cultic tariqat that were not exclusively based on mere economic interests. For the most part, they were loosely organized male associations and met only a couple of times a year. W. M. Floor, “The Guilds in Iran: an Overview from the Earliest Beginnings till 1972,” in ZDMG 125 (1975): 107. The guilds of Isfahan, however, appear to have developed into more occupational associations or corporate organizations, in terms of taxation and ownership of markets, under the Qajars in the nineteenth century. See T. Philipp, “Isfahan 1881–1891: A Close-up View of Guilds and Production,” Iranian Studies 17, no. 4 (1984): 391–411.

41 Arjomand, The Shadow of God, 117.

42 Although this point is akin to the claim that the origin of the Haydari-Nimatullahi conflict was rooted in the fourteenth century, I distance my argument from H. Mirjafari’s assertion that these rituals were in fact an outcome of Shi‘i-Sunni sectarian rivalry. In my view, these rituals were primarily a creation of urbanization rather than mere sectarian factionalism. See H. Mirjafari, “The Haydari-Ni’mati Conflicts in Iran,” 142–43.
of the construction of new city spaces, a process of continual growth manifested in the long decline of the Safavid Empire throughout the seventeenth century.\(^{43}\) As ‘Abbās I’s centralization policy helped transform the factional guild groups into major urban organizations, the two futuvvats became increasingly political entities, representing the public associational life of the empire in its most segmentary form.\(^{44}\)

The Haydari and Nimatullahi guilds of Isfahan acted out their local hostilities in the medium of ritual fights during public sport festivities, cock-fighting, bull-fighting, and elaborate religious celebrations, a phenomenon which appears to have expanded under ‘Abbās I.\(^{45}\) At times, these combat ceremonies involved young toughs and loyal male members of the guilds challenging each other on public holidays to displays of arts (hunar) such as wrestling matches; and at other times, pitched battles would occur taking the maydan for a ma’rika or battlefield between the factions with a hundred combatants on either side, sometimes fighting to the point of death.\(^{46}\) As described in the previous chapter, however, these bloody rituals were mainly orchestrated alongside other major state ceremonies. In 1595, Munajjim reports, for instance, that the ritual fights between the two factions were ceremonially organized during the Muharram festivities by ‘Abbās I at Qazvin.\(^{47}\) Later in 1617, Della Valle testified to a sumptuous display of ritual combat under the patronage of the shah during the commemorative...

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\(^{43}\) The increase of membership in futuvvats also has to do with the egalitarian nature of the spiritual brotherhoods, which claimed that every man according to his ability could benefit from the organization. According to Kashifi, futuvvats represented organizational bodies that encouraged perfection and strength through love and service to the brotherhood and family. Kashifi, \textit{Futuvvatname-yi sultani}, 29–30.

\(^{44}\) Babayan writes, “as ‘Abbās I appropriated the socio-religious function of the Muharram rituals, he severed the connections between the crafts and local sufi orders.” Babayan, \textit{Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs}, 226. Making her assertion based on a comment by a late historian, Zarrinkub, she argues that the two futuvvats had become more of a “tool” under the shah, which reduced them to “frozen gestures devoid of spirituality.”

\(^{45}\) The first description of ritual combats during Muharram was first reported in the travel account of de Gouvea in 1602–04.

\(^{46}\) According to Kashifi, the battlefield (ma’rika) marked a special, though ambiguous, space in futuvvat associational culture. It represented monotheism (tawhid) and polytheism (shirk), modesty (tavazaw) and pride (takabbur). In this respect, fractional strife on the battlefield was a spiritual exercise to enhance the strength (zur) of the male members of the groups. See Kashifi, \textit{Futuvvatname-yi sultani}, 276 and 307.

\(^{47}\) The combat between the two urban factions was organized according to a royal decree on the Maydan-i Sa’adat at Qazvin, and a second fight was later prepared at the local shrine of Shahzada Husayn. J. Munajjim Yazdi, \textit{Tarikh-i ‘Abbasi ya ruznama-yi Mulla Jalal}, 131.
observations of the martyrdom of Imam 'Ali.\textsuperscript{48} As the description of Kotov (1624–25) and other travelers in the latter half of the seventeenth century testify, these rituals were also performed during the elaborate Feast of Sacrifice ceremonies and Muharram mourning rites.

Similar to the Roman gladiatorial games, the ritual fights were partly an expression of militarism and imperialism, as were the mock-battles that affirmed the military and masculine strength of the Safavid political order by encouraging an ethos of patriotism and masculine strength for male citizens. The violent spectacles symbolized the empire’s readiness for territorial expansion and war, as the blood games served as a surrogate for war—especially during periods of peace. In a Foucaultian sense, the rituals reflected confirmation of political and social order as symbolic demonstrations of performances of power.\textsuperscript{49} However, they differed from gladiatorial games since the object of violence was not an external, foreign object, but the community itself, that is, primarily the guild public (male) fighters: in associative relations divided into two urban quarters and officially united as a collective body. In these dramas of urban rivalries, factional fights served to symbolically imitate vengeance against the enemies of the slain Husayn, in which each group would associate with the other.\textsuperscript{50} But more importantly, they provided an annual occasion for the chivalrous fighters, as devotees of the house of the Prophet, to renew their loyalty and undergo an experience of re-initiation through rituals like Muharram.\textsuperscript{51} Such battles, then, underscored a ritualized expression of conflict that worked to sacralize the established social order through group initiation. By extension, the dramatizations of conflict through ritual combat led

\textsuperscript{48} P. Della Valle, \textit{I Viaggi . . .}, \textit{Lettere dalla Persia}, 84.

\textsuperscript{49} For instance, compare the Safavid rituals performed in the maydan to the Roman amphitheaters. In a similar way, the Roman amphitheaters, as symbolic urban spaces, housed death ritual in a show of integration that communicated hierarchical order and domination. See M. Clavel-Lévêque, “Rituels de mort et consommation de gladiateurs: Images de domination et pratiques imperialistes de reproduction,” in \textit{Hommages à Lucien Lerat}, ed. H. Walter (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1984), 189–208. The major difference between the Roman and Safavid theater states is that the latter is essentially a millenarian order, a feature which the Haydari-Nimatullahi ritual fights best demonstrate.

\textsuperscript{50} In fact, the shedding of blood and death was considered an act of martyrdom in the course of the ceremonies.

\textsuperscript{51} For an account of futuvvat initiation processions, see Kashifi, \textit{Futuvvatname-yi sultani}, 137–38.
to the socialization of conflict upon which, ironically, social order is based.52

This factionalism of Haydari-Nimatullahi guilds, manifested in the form of ritual fights during Muharram, has been so far construed as a political device used by the elites to gain support and to appease the masses under their control.53 A less elite-minded and more grassroots based theoretical model, however, should illustrate that the relationship is not simply one-dimensional manipulation. In a way which is somewhat similar to what has been argued with regard to the other carnivalesque dimensions of Muharram, rituals of guild rivalries were not always straightforward; nor were the performative results in terms of meaning and enactment of authority and of aggression so easily predictable. Despite measures by the regime to control local rivalries between the wards in staging the Muharram processions, the enactment of ritual clashes between the Haydari and Nimatullahi factions would occasionally lead to serious violence, even to the death of the combatants to the extent that even the “the king nor any other (could) put a stop to it.”54 Why?

In a significant way, this feature of the guild rituals reveals a collective procession of misrule, social acts of subversion that spontaneously get out of hand in a way that contradicts the very formalized settings in which acts of ritual performances are expected to ensue. The factional battles in this fashion create a social space of ritual action in its full carnivalesque form, as a site of tension that encompasses the perpetual breakdown of norms, hierarchies, and official meaning through intergroup societal conflict.

First, the misrule of ceremonial combats represents a direct show of defiance against norms of ritual conduct, disobeying sanctioned rules of behavior set up and authorized by the royal court. True, the

52 I raise this point in reference to Max Gluckman’s theory of “social system,” defined as fields of tension between social-structural organizations, institutions, and individuals. According to Gluckman, the institutionalization of tension in the form of hostilities within a community and dramatizations of conflicts (i.e., ritual fights) are in fact a way to maintain social order rather than to challenge norms of an established system. See M. Gluckman, Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa (New York: Free Press, 1963), especially 135–36.
53 For example, see Calmard’s “Ritual and Power II,” 145; and J. R. Perry’s “Toward a Theory of Iranian Urban Moieties,” 52–53.
54 Calmard, “Ritual and Power II,” 145. See also Kæmpfer, Am Hofe de Persischen Grosskönigs, 111. Consider Figueroa’s description of uncontrollable pitched battles that would follow the camel sacrifice rituals. See Figueroa, Comentarios, 349.
ceremonies display an effervescent zest in expressing emotions for the sacred object, namely, the martyred Husayn. But they also involve an act of transgression since such behaviors represent the externalization of an intersubjective chaotic state, which now has experiential internal effects on the participants, effects that go beyond the control of any norm of conductivity, upsetting, as a result, the stage-pattern of the ritual process. This experiential space allows the (male) ritual participants to break away from the theatrical frames within which state power affirms itself through an orchestrated display of group acts of violence. These cases of ritual misrule in a sense point out the assertiveness of ritual participants and the vulnerability of authority.

The force of these transgressive behaviors rests in the collective movements of the effervescence that creates sparkles of juxtaposed antitheses and various modes of exuberance, transporting the actors into a “special world” wherein the unleashed emotions are so intense and, as Durkheim explains, “so far outside the ordinary conditions of life, and so conscious of that fact, that they feel a certain need to set themselves above and beyond ordinary morality.” The rituals in this show of “hyperexcitement of physical and mental life” provide an exceptional intensity that fosters a sense of reaching a qualitatively different state of being. For the most part, then, the participants feel and act in new and unpredictable ways so much that such behaviors challenge the norms of an official ritual culture.

Secondly, equally unstable, they also serve as theaters of group violence that primarily constitute conflictual complexes. With all the deafening noises, wild movements, and transgressions, the rituals affirm the unsteady basis of collective identity that is structurally divided into factions and ferociously aggressive in association. In the realm of ritual fight, the awareness of the ritual participants’ sense of interaction is combined with a deep attentive nearness to individual and group mortality, vehemently exposed to correction of individual identity in the ritual medium of combative violence. But this realization gives rise to the realization that established authority and its claim to immortality are relative and ambiguous, and that a community of immortal devotees is also exposed to the threat of demise. The display of group violence, henceforth, marks the breakdown of a single and united collective identity, defined in a given urban territoriality,

whereby the sense of community is weakened in accordance to the fractionalization of collective identity at the battlefield.

At a dramatic mythical level, the ceremonies narrate collective reality divided into two heterogeneous mutually incompatible worlds, internally represented in segmentary terms by the guilds, while externally in a confrontational stand against domestic and foreign Sunni enemies. The significance of this is that a narrative of collective identity cannot penetrate into each factional group without at once entering into relations with an extraordinary sense of conflict that would move the participants to the point of frenzied tension. In this regard, collective identity is sustained in a fractional arrangement that primarily requires a belief in the nature of self and community in terms of war and destruction. But this conflictual aspect is not a mere contradiction in terms, but the occurrence of a dynamic event, which is constitutive of the specificity of a political form of Safavid Isfahani society as apocalyptically unstable and precariously conflictual. The Haydari-Nimatullahi fights testify to the millenarian culture of the associational life that hinders the successful enactment of ritual procession for the achievement of permanence and the immortality of a transcendent entity, namely, the state.

Third, in a significant way the rituals suggest that life in a state of war is carnivalesque, since destruction of oneself and the Other is an extension of everyday life, and there is little gap between the normality of existence and a chivalrous life as soldiers on the battlefield. Here, ironically, the drama of war and the display of intergroup violence reverse the triumphant symbolism of the official culture since the apocalyptic nature of the rituals confirms death and destruction as the prevailing element of life. Correspondingly, as Kippenberg has observed, the segmentary nature of the guild fights demonstrates how death is particularly honored as a result of a conscious act.\(^{56}\) The awareness of the significance of symbols and ethos like bravery (shuja‘at) and generosity (sikhavati) challenges a homogenized collective sense of identity, since such sentiments are enacted in accordance with honor and loyalty to the futuvvat clubs, and not for the state, claiming a united collective body as an empire of spiritual warriors.

With the internalization of symbols associated with death, the continuity of the community as a unified whole is replaced with the confirmation of group loyalty in a state of discord and tension in relation to other vying groups. This segmentarism is crucial since it allows the male ritual fighters of each futuvvat to internalize the symbolism of sacrifice according to their own associational sense of solidarity, challenging the absolutist conceptions encouraged by the official authorities as a result. The death of a guild member accordingly can be viewed both as success and failure, a form of ambiguous death that reverses an unwavering sense of triumphalism fostered by the state into a factional defeatism. What lies salient here is that defeat and success in the display of guild battles are made ambiguous and the hierarchy of state power is undermined in the medium of combative ritual processes that enable the participants to reverse social norms.

Fourth, the mixture of culinary and military images also evokes a grotesque fusion of violence and consumption. Similar to medieval and early modern European carnival processions, acts of aggression against vying guild factions or external objects such as animals are manifested amidst a festive environment, especially during or after heavy consumption of food (in particular red meat). The combined elements of food and blood attribute a grotesque quality to the ritual fights that depicts a community in a state of consumption, utilization, degradation, break-up, and perpetual ruination. The mock-war therefore is an event of carnivalesque performance since it brings a deep awareness that nothing is stable and no entity permanent.

Finally, what is of particular importance here is that these rituals mark the breakdown of a coherent authorial narrative of Karbala into a form of dramatic display of dereliction. The ritual narrative construction of future time is perceived either as an essentially indifferent extension of the present state of remorse, in the form of mourning for the death of Husayn, or as an end, a final annihilation, a catastrophe in which the male fighters need to ritually exhibit their willingness for sacrifice in the form of intergroup violence. They find expression by means of violent ruptures of the normal language of the maydan or as a turning away from language altogether, to delve into the unspoken noise of a bloody battle devoid of identity, a resorting to physical force.

In this view, the unofficial transgressive aspects of the Haydari-i-Nimatullahi ritual fights identify radical spaces of centrifugal performances, utopias of apocalypse.

2.4. The Multivocality of Rawzat al-shuhada

Thus far I have examined the performative aspects of Muharram that in the course of carnivalesque practices diffuse the construction of official spaces, using techniques of misrule and heteroglossic mediums of interaction to (un)consciously defy a centripetal ritual sphere. But this carnivalesque reading of Muharram directs us to a realm of the dialogic not only at the non-verbal performative stage, but pervading all levels of ritual communication. At the textual level, the carnivalesque can be expressed in a literary fashion as well, in which the novel, according to Bakhtin, represents the most “carnivalized” genre to embody the spirit of anti-monological parody. Implicit in this claim is that carnivalesquized textualities share the logic of travesties since they make sense of nonsense and nonsense of sense; and consequently turn the world upside down in the form of a literary narrative construction of the everyday world. Popular folkloric texts, like Rabelais and Renaissance literature, are in essence representations of “diversity of social speech types” or a mix of diverse and at times opposing voices that contest the conventionality of all norms and incorporate the dialogic speech genre of everyday life into the text.58

Seen in this light, the growing Persianization of the Shiʿi martyrdom narratives and the flourishing of hagiographic literature like Kashifi’s Rawzat al-shuhada [hereafter Rawzat] in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries bespeaks a literary carnivalization of major historical significance.59 This is so, I contend, at two interconnected levels. First, the development of Persian devotional literature in the hagiographic genre articulated the increasing vernacularization of religious oral tradition into folkloric textual practices in the late middle period.60 The

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58 M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, 262.
59 As Bakhtin notes, Christian hagiographic literature was also subject to carnivalization, a process that in fact began in the first century. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 135.
60 It is noteworthy that this devotional literary vernacularization was not limited to Persian. For the development of Turkish hagiographic literature in the middle period see I. Mélikoff, “Le Drame de Kerbela dans la littérature épique Turque,” Revue des Etudes Islamiques 34 (1966): 133–48.
dissemination of the late Timurid martyrological text in the form of Persian maqṭal in the post-Safavid era, even as late as the 1979 Islamic Revolution, underscores the production of vernacular literary culture that originally came into prominence in the later middle period of Islamic history; the texts remained porous and resilient, but, above all, spread because of popular preaching and storytelling practices.\(^{61}\) The diminishing prestige of Arabic, the language that had monopolized the world of literary production for the preceding centuries since the rise of Islam in the seventh century, testified to an age when Persian, now increasingly influenced by Arabic with the expansion of the madrasah system under Seljuk rule, reached its maturity and popularity among Muslims of various creeds participating in Muharram rites.\(^{62}\)

This cultural transformation in literary vernacularization identifies a process of change by which the advent of localized discursive practices ultimately paved the way for perhaps the earliest representation of the Iranian national language under the Safavids—which originally began with the renaissance of Persian literature under the Samanids in the tenth century. But more importantly, it led the way to the growing popularization or fragmentation of sacred literature, which arguably came to life with the appearance of popular preaching and storytelling of epic histories, like the *Abu Muslimnama*, in the early middle period.\(^{63}\) The growth in popularity of rectors (nazm khwanan),

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61 It is perhaps interesting to note that, the *Rawzat* continues to enjoy popularity even in post-revolutionary Iran.


63 As noted in the introduction, Abu Muslim was a revolutionary figure from Khurasan who overthrew the Umayyad caliphs and put into power the ’Abbasid dynasty. Later in Shi’i (and Mazdakite) history, Abu Muslim became the symbol of opposition, a precursor of the Mahdi in the popular imagination, upon which the epic history of *Abu Muslimnama* was based. The epic is mainly about Abu Muslim’s heroic and religious achievements. As Babayan explains, the *Abu Muslimnama* later became an important propaganda text for the Safavids in the ghulat-inspired phase of their movement. See Babayan, “Sufis, Dervishes and Mullahs,” 121–22; and *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 13–14 and 121–50. In this respect, the expansion of Islamic sermonization practices in the form of popular preaching and storytelling, among both Sunni and Shi’i communities, took place in a political context of the middle period. As Makdisi has shown, for instance, sermons played a significant role in the restoration of Sunnism in Baghdad in the eleventh century, during which Nizam al-Mulk invited preachers from the Ash’ari school of thought to preach in the city. See G. Makdisi, *Ibn ʿAqīl et la resurgence de l’Islam traditionaliste au XIe siècle (Ve siècle de l’Hégire)* (Damascus: Institute Français de Damas, 1963), 340–75; and “Muslim Institutions of Learning in Eleventh-Century Baghdad,” *BSOAS* 24, no. 1 (1961): 46–47. In Mamluk Egypt of the early fourteenth century, Sufi orders also utilized sermons and
eulogists, and storytellers in Islamdom in this period identifies the
decline of monological sacred literature and the ascent of everyday
dialogic stylistic developments. In this vernacularization context, as
Amanat has argued, Rawzat’s accessible and spoken prose represents
an important stage in the Persianization of Shi’ism (and also Shi’ism of
Persia) in the (post)Safavid period, marking the emergence of proto-
novelistic discourse in the form of historical drama.

The Rawzat, written by a Herati poet, is a dramatic tale of the Kar-
bala tragedy, a “crypto-Shi’i” tale punctuated by aphoristic, emotional,
didactic and imaginative narratives in reference to Arabic and Persian
sources like eulogies, histories, prophecies, hadith and Quran. The
moving description of the sufferings and the death of Husayn and
other martyrs at Karbala in the Rawzat represents the type of textual-
ization of oral vernacular in which the everyday folkloric literary tradi-
tion is expressed in complex poetic rhetorical devices. In conjunction
with the development of satirical ghazal poetry as a direct challenge
to the clerical and Sufi establishments of the fourteenth century, the
emerging vernacular maqtal literary tradition accentuated the ways in
which the “…language of the streets crept into poetry and robbed it of

storytelling to advance their religious and political influence. J. C. Garcin, “Histoire,
opposition politique et piétisme traditionaliste dans le Husn al-Muhādarat de Suyuti,”
Annales Islamologiques 7 (1967): 81–82. By the time of the Safavid rise to power in
1502, storytelling was a popular form of Sufism, called Silsilah-i Ḏajam (Persian order),
which was maintained in the guild and even the bureaucratic state apparatus. See
M. J. Mahjoub, “Mutali‘ah dar baray-i dastan-ha-yi ‘amianah-yi Iran,” Majali-yi

Kashifi refers to such people as true carriers of the words and sayings of the holy
Imams, which otherwise “would not be known to everyone.” Kashifi, Futuvvatname-yi
Sultani, 281.

See A. Amanat, “Meadow of the Martyrs: Kashifi’s Persianization of the Shi’i
Martyrdom Narrative in the Late Timūrid Herat,” Culture and Memory in Medieval
terms, the simultaneous appearance of Rawzat with the rise of the Safavid-Qizilbash
ciefs to power reflects a rising tide of sectarianism and vernacular movements,
which appear to have become more widespread throughout Islamdom in the later
middle period. See also Adam Jacobs’ chapter on Kashifi, where he compares the
Rawzat to the Medieval Christian European ‘sermo humilis,’ a popular literary genre
that combined hagiography with everyday “sublime” language. See A. Jacobs, “Sunni
and Shi’i Perceptions, Boundaries and Affiliations in Late Timurid and early Safavid
Persia,” 56.

A. Amanat, “Meadow of the Martyrs,” 254; 262.

The religious affiliation of Kashifi remains a topic of debate. For the most part,
though sympathetic to Shi’ism, Kashifi was a Sunni of Naqshbandi-Sufi adherence.
He is perhaps the best representative of the transcultural age of the later middle period of
Islamic history: a cross-fertilized religious persona of high literary achievement.
its more elegant and musical diction,” which was predominately characteristic of classical Persian literature. In other words, as Chelkowski has noted, “whereas previously poetry had been court-oriented, it then became centered upon the Shi’ite martyrs and saints,” in which elegies by poets like Kashani and Riza Juhar Isfahani inaugurated a period of increased Imamization of Persian literature in the realm of non-courtly civic associations.

Such literary development operated as a way to extend the community of mourners’ experience of Karbala to include the orators, readers, and especially ordinary listeners at public sermons. The Rawzat, along with Kashani’s elegy, Karbala-nameh, became standard fare in the commemorative ceremonies held during Muharram. Suffice it to say that Rawzat gradually became the most prominent literary narrative of Imami Islam, primarily focusing on the miracles, virtues, and martyrdom of ‘Ali and his family, in particular Husayn, as an extension of the genre of hadith literature known as maqtal-niwiš. With its doctrinal emphasis on the necessity of the Imams’ existence and the extolled virtues of their sacred miracles and sufferings, the martyrology of Rawzat represents the most salient example of this sort of literary genre, the writing of which coincided with the first year of Safavid rule.


69 P. Chelkowski, “Bibliographical Spectrum,” in Ta’ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran, ed. P. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 256. By “non-courtly civic” literature, I mean an increase in texts published and written for a public audience, rather than exclusively for the royal court. Notwithstanding that, these works were not of “high” literary quality, they mainly emerged from the non-courtly spheres of society, the “dispossessed’ section of the Safavid social order with strong leanings toward ‘populist values.” A. Tamimdari, Irfan va adab dar ‘asr-i Safavi, vol. 1 (Tehran: Hekmat, 1994), 107.

70 The genre of maqtal-niwiš tradition stressed the legitimate authority of each Imam by referring to the sunna of the Prophet, interpreted in Imami doctrinal terms. In the course of Shi’i history, especially in the later Safavid period, the daughter of the Prophet, Fatimah, was also added to the composition of this form of maqtal tradition. A. Amanat, “Meadow of the Martyrs, 251. But this point misses the broader civilizational context during which the Persianization of literary
In his famous lectures on the significance of Husayn’s martyrdom, “Hemasi-yi Husayni,” Morteza Mutahhari, the renowned Shi‘i theologian and philosopher, who is known for his activities in the 1979 Revolution, critically scrutinizes Kashifi’s martyrology by arguing that the text is a literary fabrication. The characters that enter and exit Kashifi’s narrative of Karbala are sustained only as fictitious and mythical subjects, and therefore resemble a work of imagination rather than a historical description of ethical significance. For the most part, Mutahhari’s objection echoes critical remarks made by Qajar-era clerics like Ali ibn Muhammad Taqi Ghazvini, who in 1323/1905 described the popular genre of martyrology as “lies and constructs” that harm the Household of the Prophet and religion in general. In this critical posture, Mutahhari’s theological formulation presents a dogmatic-ethical interpretation of the story of Karbala in terms of a conceptual opposition between two views: one that considers Husayn’s martyrdom as a spiritual act of moral worth in a mundane or historical setting, and a mythical claim that sees the everyday as a transformative, magical event of spirituality. Yet one important critical point that Mutahhari identifies in the Rawzat is its non-chronological narrative structure, a literary configuration that lacks coherence and a directional flow within its narrative. In other words, Rawzat is a sort of non-historical account of a historical event that combines myth and morality by depicting a major event of sacred significance, and this Mutahhari finds highly problematic in Kashifi’s work, as it denies historical realism. But this anti-structural literary narrative character of Kashifi’s text is what forces the flow of the narrative into the shape of

genre had already set the stage for the development of Rawzat. The development of such literary text should be viewed in relation with the advent of what Bakhtin calls the “dialogized hybrid” cultures and languages, mostly prominent in the post-Mongol period. M. M. Bakhtin, Dialogical Imagination, 76.


73 For an account of Safavid period clerical objections to the Muharram storytelling culture, see R. Ja‘fariyan, Siyasat va farhang-i ruzegar-i Safavi, vol. 2, 1193–95.

74 Mutahhari’s interpretation of Karbala reflects an ethos of martyrdom as a political act, a view that was prevalent among revolutionary militant clerics in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s like Mahmud Taleqani and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. For an elaborate study of Mutahhari’s political theology of martyrdom, see Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala, 72–74, 99–102, and 107–10.
a transgressive mode of expression, the communication of the curious, strange and grotesque in a novelistic complex.

Divided into ten sections, plus a conclusion, and composed in both Persian poetry and prose, along with some Arabic poetry, the Rawzat can be recognized as both a theological and a numinous historical text, a sort of salvation narrative of mystical (ʿirfan) quality, representing the Karbala tragedy and its characters by describing their emotions and responses to events leading up to, during, and after the battle. Such salvational and mystical history is devoid of an austere sequential narrative strategy since it aims to describe the martyrdom of sacred figures based upon the doctrine of intercession. By this I mean to suggest that the martyrological narrative is discursively arranged in such a way that, through the described events of the battle of Karbala, deliverance from sin on the day of resurrection is promised to the orators and the audience of the text; through their miraculous role as intercessors with God for the forgiveness of sins, the recitation of the narratives serves as a medium for the redemption of devotees. Combined with the element of mysticism, this soteriological aspect constitutes a central motif in the Rawzat of Kashifi. 75

For the most part, Mutahhari’s realist bias fails to recognize the creative significance of Kashifi’s hagiography as a type of performative text that carves out spaces of commemoration through which invented stories of the Karbala tragedy can be narrated, reconstructed, and relived in changing historical and social contexts. This free-floating textual space enables each reader-listener to reenact Husayn’s martyrdom and his suffering at Karbala in creatively subjective ways, substituting the story within their everyday situational realities. The Shiʿi devotees, in a specific historical and social setting, can narrate and listen, revive the past in the present, and recall the future in the past by disrupting the ordinary sense of time and space.76 Because of the didactic nature

75 The role of mysticism in Kashifi’s martyrlogy is a complicated matter to elaborate on here. In broad terms, it highlights the fusion of the ideals of Shiʿism, Sunnism, and Sufism, best illustrated in Kashifi’s other books on astrology, ethics, wide-ranging descriptions of the chivalrous futuvvat tradition, and exegesis of the Quran. I will briefly expand upon the mystical dimension of the Rawzat in the ensuing discussion.

76 According to Kashifi’s Futuvvatname-yi sultani there are three different kinds of narrators of stories: (a) storytellers (hikayat guyan); (b) story-verse singers (afsanah or qisah khwanan); and (c) lyric reciters (nazm khwanan). In this system of classification, maqatil-khwani could be classified with storytellers rather than with other kinds of singers. Since the stories of the Imams and the Prophet, including his daughter, Fatimah, engage in the recitation of sacred stories, the maqatil narratives are mainly
of the martyrological text, the Rawzat creates a discursive space that transports the community of readers, listeners, and orators into a subversive world of liminal reality that defies the defiled world of everyday existence. This transgressive textual process is integral to the Rawzat since the oratory performance of recitation requires the performers (narrator and listener) to experience and relive an extraordinary past (ʿAshura) that is lost in ordinary time, but recaptured in ritual time, marking a new understanding of self and reality in the tropes of salvation and a reinvention of the experience of suffering. With the opening of new channels of ritual interaction through the sermons, the Rawzat provides a shared textual space of interaction that facilitates a community of remembrance; a community identified in terms of multiple voices of sorrow and transgressive symbols that redefine the present in terms of a metaphysical conception of time and space.

There are a number of literary features to Rawzat that merit serious attention. In the first place, the language of Rawzat is interwoven with vivid though shifting prose and verses with melodic overtones of melancholic character. The language reflects a heteroglot paradigm of an imagined, mythical world of Karbala. Using a dramatic device, the narrative of Karbala merges incongruent incidents of events, characters or places related to Husayn’s martyrdom and in metaphoric and often deliberately esoteric ways transgress boundaries between genres. The phenomenon of dialogization of narrative facilitates various descriptions and powerful emotions, in which voices and characters confront one another in free and equal, though conflictual, dialogues. In multi-themed prose, similar to the ghazal genre of lyrical love poetry, the intricate mélange of poetical and prose narratives, at times lucid and at other times obscure, transpire into a dramatic descriptive plot of aesthetic importance. By mediating between the profane and the sacred world, the text restores a dynamic of intertextuality to the reading or listening ritual participants, allowing them to freely interpret symbols and myths, and relive the disparity between this-worldly and otherworldly realities throughout the narrative.

While nesting intertwined stories into one another, Kashifi creates distance from the narration by qualifying the story as both a description of Karbala and a symbolic journey into a memorialized past. In

about the trials and tribulations of the saintly figures that are meant to open the eyes unto divine power. See Kashifi, Futuvvatname-yi sultani, 304–05.
this manner, and similar to other hagiographic narratives, the Rawzat presents a world that serves “as a bridge linking the historical and mythical worlds of Karbala.” This literary strategy to mythologize the past finds its extreme expression in metaphorical images that are further compressed and cast as complex symbols; the narration of which either opens up a new imaginative world or results in the fusion of the here-and-now with the mythical world.

Consider the following brief description found in section ten of the text:

It should be known that there is no time in the shattered heart of time that is more upsetting than the event of the martyrdom of the Household of the Prophet (Ahl al-bayt). And in no time or era has such an image more excruciating than the event of Karbala been presented...Every time that the month of Muharram returns this agony will be drawn on the heart of Muslims, and the devotees of the Prophet of mankind. From the tongue of a veiled mourner, the declaration of the transient world will read the attentive ear of those who grieve for the Ahl al-bayt and share in their misery.

You beloved, cry in sadness for the grandson of the Prophet
Devour your chest from the burning of the Shah of Karbala.

On search of that thirsty lip, shed your tears on dirt,
In midst of your cries, learn by heart that laughing lip.
While remembering him lying in his own blood and dirt,
Like the clouds, shed a rain of bloody tears from your eyes.

Water his tall palm tree [nakhl-e gadash] from the stream of your tears,
And make floral gardens within the hours that he departed.

While longing to see his face, you can then see the face of a rose,
You will mourn like a nightingale [bolbolan] with a heart overflowing with sorrow.
If you recognize a fragrance from the hyacinth in the stream
Recall that sweet weave and that musk-aromatic hair.

There is something uplifting in this metaphorical and descriptive depiction of Karbala in decorative and yet symbolically somber terms that appear frequently in the Rawzat discourse. The description begins here with the meta-historical significance of the events of Karbala, moves

78 Kashifi, Rawzat al-shuhada (Tehran: Islami-yi, 1983), 354. I would like to acknowledge Karen Ruffle’s translation of the text, which I have mostly adopted here.
on to the community of mourners for the holy family of the Prophet, and concludes with a poetical call to remembrance of sacred things past and their presence in things presently near and sensual. In this sense, throughout the remainder of this narrative there is a continual blurring of the martyrdom of Husayn and the natural world of transient existence, the realm of consumption, instant death, sensuality, desire, and loss. In both grotesque and sublime terms, Husayn can be seen through earthy images like the palm tree (sublime), the “fragrance from the hyacinth in the stream” or the dirt (grotesque), by which the mourners can reimagine the decapitated and bloody body of their saint. The grotesque and sublime reveal Husayn as a displaced character in the upside down world of Karbala, where death is life and life is death, where mourning is indeed another expression of ecstasy.

In the emotional narrative, the role of metaphor and symbolism is crucial here. It is through such rhetorical tactics that the listener, the reader, and the orator are able to emotionally enter the meta-historical world of Karbala through metaphors that transfigure everyday life into an event of extraordinary significance. The symbolism of pouring water on “his tall palm tree from the stream” of one’s tears, for instance, not only implies the universal sadness caused by the martyrdom of Husayn, but also the loss of something valuable, something of high stature that requires us to find a way to resurrect it from the dust of the earth right to heaven, that is, back to life. Since tall palm trees (nakhl) as funeral biers represent a highly valued object in the Mesopotamian regions, it is through our suffering and empathy for the Imam, recalling his martyrdom at Karbala, that Husayn represented as a palm tree can find life within us, amongst us and our existing world. Accordingly, the world of the dead and the living amalgamate through metaphors and symbols of loss and grief. Here, we have the discursive creation of a textually evocative threshold space, a liminal realm whereby structure of time and space remains indiscernible and indeterminate. Only by acknowledging the metaphorical symbolic overtone of this passage do we get a sense of the liminal richness, and, hence, carnivalesque makeup of the Rawzat’s martyrological narrative.

79 For a study of the symbolic importance of palm trees, see F. J. Korom, Hosay Trinidad, 47–49. I am grateful to K. Ruffle for bringing this interesting point to my attention.
Second, in a significant way the theme of redemption operates as a transgressive paradigm through which discursively an inverted world of “here is there” and “the past is now” or a mythologized reality is constructed, a fictive domain that evokes the past in the present. The confrontation between the textual and the lived worlds of the reader or the listener causes the narrative arrangement to spill over into the reconfiguration of time by narrative. This narrative reconfiguration marks a literary opening up of imaginary realities, wherein alternative worlds of existence become inhabited through the communicative transformation of life-world and the reconfiguration of ordinary temporality. Time attains a monumental significance through the narrative of redemption in the symbolism of self-abnegation and martyrdom.

Consequently, with this redemptive quality to narratively construct temporal time to appear monumental, a sense of parodic-travestying comes into light. The transgressive characteristic of “time-space” or “chronotope” of the Rawzat, in which every entry into the sphere of meaning can be attained, is defined in terms of the social world in which the narrated characters emerge. This social world is shaped by the possibility of meta-historical action, the subversive performance of martyrdom that the succession of thoughts and choices in the course of narrative ultimately leads to, and consequently the way such an account is organized for the fundamental narrative event of the hagiography, which is the promise of redemption after martyrdom. Here the ritual listener or reader of the Rawzat experiences the chronotope of the narrative in the sensual world of existence. But this sensual world is not dead, it is communicating, signifying; he or she not only sees and perceives it, but finds a voice, a perception, a conception of self and the world in it, or, as it were, a narrowing of time in terms of a connecting of the chronological chasm. Correspondingly, the mourner is presented with a text that discursively spatializes a place of remembrance of the past that forms the depth of temporal existence. The chronotope of the Rawzat is unlike that of, say, the romantic epic, a mere abstraction; but rather it is a folkloric everyday conception of

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80 According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is the variation of genres that tends to conceptualize time and space in distinctive ways. They are “mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace, or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships... The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are dialogical (in the broadest sense of the word).” Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 252.
death as regeneration, evoked in terms of a source of beginning, an event for rebirth that only a divine life in the form of sacrifice can produce. The narrative representation of the death of a saintly figure in this sense becomes both a this-worldly event, in terms of the potential threat of pollution and destruction, and otherworldly, with the promise of salvation and permanence with the martyrdom of Husayn.\(^{81}\) As Bakhtin would put it, here death is re-evaluated into a relative phenomenon, revealing the comic nature of death with the birth of a new life, depicted in the narrative the dead martyr who triumphantly transcends the grotesque plane of Karbala.\(^{82}\)

In this passage and in fact throughout his *Rawzat*, Kashifi’s characters live out their destinies, manifesting their dramatic essential qualities though randomness and chance, although eventually realizing their true, essential, permanent existence in the course of the narrative. Metaphorical time forges everything new, and everything new stands still in eternal truth. Time becomes in a sense palpable and perceptible, while the *Rawzat*’s chronotope makes the narrative event of martyrdom, as described in metaphorical terms of “palm tree,” “floral gardens,” and “nightingale” a matter of concrete reality by formulating an imagined world of existence in the sensual realm of life and garmenting it with symbols of highly complex depth.

Third, Kashifi’s characters are not voices of authorial identity, but displaced otherness, since alterity is their reality as mythical beings. Central figures manifest in diverse forms, both earthly and celestial, defying rigid meaning or determinate form. In this vein, the dialogical narrative aspect of Kashifi’s hagiographic interpretation tends to dictate the *Rawzat*, especially when there is a description of Husayn. Of considerable interest here is the way Husayn attains a multivocal symbolic quality.\(^{83}\) The symbols of Husayn throughout the *Rawzat*

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81 This folkloric aspect identifies a major theme in the maqta literature. The element of regeneration in such a literary genre is closely associated with apocalyptic expectations, pervasive among the ghulat and Sufi orders in the late middle period.

82 For a study of the multivocality aspect of the symbol of Husayn in contemporary Shi’i Iran, see Thaiss, “Unity and Discord: The Symbol of Husayn in Iran,” 111–19. Although the present approach to the notion of multivocality differs from Thaiss’s existential anthropological perspective, the symbolism of Husayn in this multivocal term embodies what I shall later call in the conclusion a cultural basis for the Shi’i Iranian public sphere. See also his *Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain*.
narrative remain a shared metaphor of diverse meanings, in which multivocal symbols are communicated to assorted social groups that recite to create an auditory space evocative of Karbala. This aspect of multivocality is essential to the narrativity of Kashifi’s text since it accommodates various interpretations and diverse meanings within its reading, hearing or narrating public in which both consensus as well as disagreement arise, hence, on a textual basis defying any form of absolutism of official culture as a result.

Finally, the absence of a single perspective throughout the Rawzat leads to the incompleteness of context and polyvocality of content over possession of meaning. A discursive model of hagiographic practice brings into prominence the intersubjectivity of all textual production, along with its immediate performative context. In an anti-Chomskian sense, the martyrological literary genre produced by Kashifi indicates a carnivalized linguistic process to which the actual behavior of speaker or writer may differ from the rules of the linguistic system, whereby the exchange between speaker and listener, the writer and reader is converted and distorted from the fluid metaphorical shifts of attention and multivocality of symbols embodied in the discourse. Surely, though a shared system or set of rules of words could exist, the discursive production of meanings remains indeterminate and open-ended, a powerful mystical appeal in the text.

What the Rawzat embodies is the language of the past perceived as both an essentially indifferent continuation of the present and the completion of time, a cosmic catastrophe that the tragic event of Karbala bestowed on humanity and a sacred heritage to be recalled in the profane present. Its conception of time and space through the martyrdom plot is the joining together of all the listening ritual participants, which involves the fusion of each group’s dialogical stratum into a heteroglossic festival of symbolic language. The Rawzat presents a literary proto-novelistic achievement like those texts, as Bakhtin wrote in his The Dialogic Imagination, that “continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation... they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth.”84 And it is precisely in the creative transportation of such novelistic sensibility that Muharram literary culture

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84 Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 422.
has flourished in many places, producing various forms of literary and oratory publics throughout the Persianate world.

In this chapter I have primarily focused on the subversive dimensions of Muharram at the two levels of performance and text. I explored the possibility of mourning rites as carnivalesque processes that turn the world of the ordinary upside down. While it should be fairly obvious from my argument thus far that I would be too disciplined to make excessively grand claims about the “autonomy” of Muharram from the state, I use this conclusion to clarify my main position by stressing that the rituals, even in their carnivalized form, have historically maintained an ambiguous reality. That is, they are both an extension of power and the affirmation of empowerment in terms of subversion of official culture.

Two crucial points are in order here. First, I have avoided alluding to the dogmatic theological discourse of redemptive suffering and its methodological and theoretical poverty for the very reason that emphasizing such notions can ultimately lead to a sort of essentialization of ritual action. Muharram, in its diverse practices, cannot be regarded simply as an essentially meaningful intention to express ethical values and religious ideals, but ambiguous communicative processes; processes that are at times straightforward in their meaning and at other times ambiguous in signification. It must be stressed that there is no question here of subscribing to the common view that the rituals maintain strong and visible soteriological elements. But the social force of the ceremonies is too complex to characterize them with austere reference to monolithic characteristics in theological terms of redemption and salvation.

From a theoretical perspective, the second important conclusion here is that the carnivalesque expressions of Muharram should not be seen simply as doing or accomplishing something (as maintained mainly by functionalist approaches); nor should it be conceptualized as either articulating or affirming something emotively and symbolically universal (theo-doctrinal approaches). The carnivalesque life of Muharram is in the manifestation of an anomaly, a fluid ambiguous dynamic that says without saying and does without doing. In this view, the commemorative ceremony can be regarded as lying somewhere between action and expression. And since it also publicly manifests itself in the form of reversals of action and expression, it cannot therefore be regarded as either. In this regard, the carnivalesque patterns appear precisely as ritualization clears the space in which communicative
and emotive ambiguity can take place. That is, the creation of dis-
jointed ritual spaces for the interplay of permanence and temporality,
deinternalization and socialization in the very disposition of grotesque
bodies interacting in the communicative medium of performative sites
in which they are embedded. It is precisely in this liminal and con-
flictual space wherein the carnival aspects of Muharram accommodate
all forms of values in the transgressive narrative of Karbala, leaving
monological discourse shattered, replaced by assorted narrativizations
of historical social reality.

All in all, the reading of the emotional valence of a carnivalesque in
ritual action corresponds to the emotions aroused within participants
to create a hazy sense of publicity to which the presence and absence
of certain ritual gestures, subversive forms to potentially invert societal
norms can, in subtle or even at times comical ways, highlight resis-
tance against an official culture. To treat Muharram as a public car-
nivalesque site is, therefore, to shift the perspective of enquiry away
from “mechanism” of action to creativity of interaction, away from
the dogmatism of higher and ultimate values and ideals to subtle shad-
ings, reversals, transgressions, deflections, and indeterminacies of lived
and textual spaces that constitute the carnivalesque dynamics of ritual
sphere in the social field of interaction.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION: THE ISFAHANI PUBLIC SPHERE

In the preceding six chapters, I discussed the close relationship between power and ritual with a focus on how political inscriptions of rituality can be both normative and transgressive and, ultimately, how ritual can be (or become) a contested public. My discussion of Safavid Muharram is motivated by the assumption that the rituals represent shifting public spaces wherein ambiguous dialogical communication takes place to form a relationally contentious field of interaction. In theoretical terms, Muharram is essentially recognized in terms of a prevailing communicative site wherein enactment of symbolic images, gestures, and discourses exercise a particularly persuasive effect on the ritual participant’s sense of identity and social reality. As a set of performances where power is openly dramatized and resistance expressed in subtle ways, Safavid Muharram identifies diverse publics that involve indeterminate shifting patterns of interaction. These publics identify a dynamic set of performative processes that shape unstable and protean sites, entailing a deep dynamic fission and fusion of a complex set of dominations and subversions, manifested in the ritual spatial construction of everyday life.

On the broader historical level, one of the key issues that the above discussion raises is the theatrical character of the Safavid state, mainly manifested through ceremonial processions by which official norms of behavior are affirmed in relation to shaping a shared emotive bond of collective identity. But more importantly, in a move away from an elite-oriented approach, which sees political authority largely through the prism of elite relations, this study stresses the performative dimension of the shared experience of mourning and its carnivalesque aspects in the production or resistance to power. What the Isfahani-Muharram rites represent, I specifically tried to show, is the complexity of dramatic representations and enactment of rebounding violence in the idiom of (self)sacrifice that underlie the mythical foundation of the Safavid political order. Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala embodies the dramatic spirit of the Safavid state in the yet-to-be sacrificed bodies of the (male)ritual participants; the task of giving life to the coming of a new millennium and the birth of a new world order.
On the symbolic-performative level, the two notions of reinstalled and carnivalesque spaces, manifested in the symbolic production of both power and transgression, underlie the millenarian component of the Safavid theater state, one that remained unstable for the duration of over two centuries of imperial rule. In many ways, I suggest, the official Safavid Muharram was not a straightforward process to the ritual participants; nor was it a permanent answer to the problem of the transience of biological life, in which state power claims to transcend and achieve an immortal reality. In these ceremonial sites, the produced and institutionalized symbolic meanings have always been on the point of faltering, a sort of carnivalesque event of failure inserted within the ritual process, in particular towards the final stage. In the interruptive spaces of Muharram, the Safavid state realized its full potential, that is, the lurch of political reality into the abyss of nothingness, the realm in which the spirit of the state in the myth of Husayn lingers in expectation of the eventual return of Mahdi. Here, in the Muharram procession, death becomes the central feature of this state-making apparatus, where apocalyptic expectations and the hope for a new millennium intermingle.

My approach to political ritual borrows heavily from performative theory and, by extension, theories of transgression. Accordingly, I described Muharram and its refractory dramatic performances as a social field of action, as a multi-dimensional space of overlapping and conflicting activities, such that every actual performance can be defined in terms of a multi-faceted relation of coordinates, whose dynamics correspond and at the same time negate assigned and formalized values. Muharram spaces of mourning and the carnivalesque are two sides of the same coin since they foster open interpretive and performative social spaces, whereby imaginary friends (e.g., futuvvat) and foes (e.g., Ottomans), fractured collective memories, games (e.g., combat and hunting), festivities, feasts, sensations of rivalry, grotesque behaviors, and solidarities of individuals that are brought together to enact the funeral procession of a revered saint are fluidly interfused.

The kinetic and oscillating socio-spatial dimensions of Muharram, manifested in both carnivalesque and mourning performances, serve to undermine technologies of power in place of reflexive and innovative processes of subtle resistance. Such ambivalence expresses neither a monotone mechanism of rebellion nor one of mere acceptance of domination, but one that manifests paradoxes of identity and power. For the ordinary Safavid actors who regularly frequented the ceremonies that the regime appropriated, Muharram served as both constricted
and disclosed social space, where new identities and bonds of solidarity were \( (de \text{ and } re) \) constructed, whilst facing the penetration of the oppressive political and social order of the participants’ sense of self and reality within the political order.

The central, insoluble conundrum proposed here is that Muharram publics can be simultaneously the symbolic sites for and the result of state-building that ultimately, in the most concealed ways, defy the very powers that give patronage to their official existence. Such a conundrum punctuates the relationship between society and state in terms of an ensemble of performances that both reproduce and destabilize power in complex ways. In this regard, Muharram can be partial and manifold; not a single event in the form of a mere devotional rite, but liquid-like, aqueous spaces of interaction in generating and changing state and society relations in the span of distinctive yet intermingling spheres of life. Nor is Muharram an empty space of manipulation, a mere “mechanism” for ideological consolidation, but rather lived arenas of performative possibilities, continually being rebuilt and torn down, over and over again, on a calendrical basis, with everyday contingencies at the root of its publicity in which identity shifting takes place.

In historic terms, Muharram as a significant expression of Imami culture has played a critical role in the formation of “modern Iran.” The increasingly bureaucratized and Imamized Safavid regime, especially in the second half of the seventeenth century, marked institutional tendencies for the construction of a homogenized collective national identity. In this period, practices of collective selfhood in close formation of ritual and urban spaces, shaping a feeling of Shi’i Irananness, began to crystallize, which eventually laid the cultural foundation for modern Iranian identity in the Qajar period. Iranization and Imamification of the empire’s ritualized everyday life correspondingly accompanied the carnivalization of early modern Iranian society and Imamification of heteroglot publics.\(^1\) With the final consolidation of the Isfahani era of Safavid rule in 1666, such transformation led to a greater cleft between state and society, leading to a more congruent spatial formation of a collective identity in the post-Safavid period.

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\(^1\) Repressive policies to make society more homogenized consequently lead to the growth of hidden, camouflaged spaces that, in subtle ways, challenge official culture. This is mostly apparent in the case of societies under authoritarian rule, in which public spaces, independent of officialdom, innovatively form counterpublics disguised as official spaces.
At the state level, as a result of centralizing reforms, with the waning of Sufi cult culture, the Qizilbash military order, and mystically minded 'ulama, the expanding territorial state saw the rationalization of power for greater domination on a legal and religious basis. As the court became more urbanized and sedentarized, the Turco-Mongol and Sufi paradigms of Safavid royal authority were transformed from a sacred-persona figure, present in the public domain (as the case of 'Abbas I best illustrates), into a more representative office of sacred authority, secluded in the harem and hidden from the public—especially with the accession of Shah Sulayman Safi in 1666 (recrowned in 1668). With this important shift, the formative era in the Safavid gender-sharing of power had lapsed, and the new territorial state was now consolidated into a patriarchally structured and bureaucratically monitored political organization of theatrical sophistication.

At the socio-cultural level, in its larger and more organized form, Muharram not only has formed cognitive and social networks and sites of communication, but also the potential for transgressive spaces of carnivalesque sociability. On the civic associational level, what Muharram rituals have contributed to Iranian history, as it emerged in the new Isfahan, is the marriage of opposites and the loose alliance of diverse social groups (e.g., artisans, merchants, Sufis, women, the poor) and their urban organizations (e.g., asnaf, futuvvat, zurkhaneh) within ritual spaces that in performative and textually complex ways expressed inversion, not just of everyday rules, but also of the dominant symbolic order. This “marriage of opposites” in the course of the ceremonies highlights the utmost significance of Muharram as a dynamic space of civic interaction.

This civic dimension is mainly evident in the way social network dynamics have been created through segmentation processes, primarily displayed in ritual battles between Haydari and Nimatullahi factions. As Kippenberg has argued, this significant aspect of the ceremonies underscores the formation of social relations based on a client-system (“klientensystem”), in which the street and maydan fights reveal a network of social ties that constantly struggle as competing groups.2 In reality, these social ties underscore the loosely networked set of

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relations in many forms of public that take place on the street and maydan levels, as relatively autonomous social spaces, agonistic publicities of the sort that through segmentation constantly undermine the stability of power relations. In the Qajar period, the expansion of Haydari-Nimatullahi factional strife throughout various Iranian towns not only demonstrated the proliferation of Muharram in post-Safavid Iranian society, but also the network development of the ritual segmentation of everyday life. In this period, the division of cities into these two wards saw the spread of Muharramization of Iranian society in ways that grounded the organization of urban communities in close association with the organization of mourning processions.

Under Qajar rule, the phenomenon of lutis as members of neighborhood futuvvat associations, who organized the Muharram ceremonies in major cities, identified a new development in the organized networks of segmentary associations.3 Closely attached to various public spaces such as zurkhaneh and bazaar, the Qajar lutis expanded the futuvvat codes of chivalric ethics, along the lines of Sufiesque cultural milieu, whilst strengthening the occupational guild divisions during Muharram by organizing ritual fights in the major city-spaces throughout Shiʿi populated regions in Iran. The interconnectivity of various public places, like the coffeehouses or the mosques, in which male guild fighters were recruited to join each ward, extended the influence of dramatic symbols of Karbala in the everyday life of Qajar society.4 The hay’ats or committees that arranged the Muharram processions further strengthened client and kinship ties between merchants, guild members, and clerics, as the urban quarters brought together individuals that associated themselves with symbols of self-sacrifice and identified (male) group loyalty in the form of dastehs, or individual groups in the procession.5

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and prior to the 1906–11 Constitutional Revolution, the formation of a nascent Iranian civil society, crystallized in the shape of political organizations rooted in the anjumans or the grassroots popular associations, composed

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3 For a study of lutis, see W. Floor, “Luti,” in ER.
4 For a brief study of lutis in the Qajar period, see E. Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, 22–23.
5 For a history of various socio-economic groups and their networks under the Qajar, see W. Floor, Guilds, Merchants, and Ulama in Nineteenth-Century Iran (Washington D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2009).
of artisans, religious dissidents, women, merchants, urban workers, peasants, and diverse ethnic groups, that emerged as inseparable from this system of segmentary network connections. In this social context, Muharram identified a set of ritual spaces wherein the performative culture of Karbala, and by its extension its complex set of carnivalesque and mourning practices, involved various expressions of political dissent and antagonism—as the 1908–09 ritual fights between the constitutionalist and the monarchist sides in the city of Tabriz best illustrate.6

The autocratic modernization under the Pahlavi regime in the twentieth century further set the stage for the formation of Muharram’s potential as a ritual space of contestation, though not always with political implications. As performative sites of communication, pre-revolutionary Muharram emerged in the reconstruction of millenarian ideals, honorific culture, and multivocal symbols of courage, dissent, and sacrifice by various actors, including Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries.7 The political role of the ceremonies in the 1979 Islamic Revolution lay mainly in the ritualization of street politics and the ideologization of ritual performances in which, through mass demonstrations, the everyday became increasingly identified with spaces of transgression and misrule, as Foucault famously described in his journalistic reports in 1978. In the postrevolutionary period, Muharram has continued to play a significant socio-political role in the everyday reconfiguration of established concepts and norms, a process that has seen more complex changes since the 2009 presidential elections, especially during the December 2009 ‘Ashura protests when various Karbala symbols were redefined in opposition to the Islamic Republic as the self-proclaimed defender of Husayn’s legacy.

As a contested ritual, post-Safavid Muharram identifies social spaces where stories of justice and self-sacrifice, performances of mourning and misrule, grotesque sensibilities and dialogical interactions are (re)enacted with multiple meanings. The multiplicity of meaning is at the core of how power has been and continues to be exercised or resisted by men and women in relation to how legitimacy can be attained (or denied) through a set of spatial practices of symbolic

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7 For an account of pre-revolutionary Communist reinterpretation of Muharram, see Dabashi, Shi’ism, 73–75.
significance. But meaning is also limited in the ways a performance is effectively carried out in expression and communication of ideas and values, always with the potential for politics. It is in this ambivalence that Iranian Muharram takes the form of a distinct public reality, a public connected with other sites of social relations that make up a multiplex network of transregional character. From the hidden transvestite publics of nightly Shiraz to underground rock concerts in affluent northern Tehran, from feminist literary circles in Isfahan to women’s Quran-reading gatherings in the shrine-city of Mashhad, from youth organizations in Bushehr to Azari poetry circles in Ardabil, from sports clubs in impoverished southern Tehran to dissident virtual activists in diaspora, the contemporary Iranian public is closely tied with complex local and global processes in the formation of dynamic spheres of communication and interconnection. Amid such a transnational public square of multiple voices, Muharram represents a contested public that always carries the possibility of carnival in the transfiguration of the everyday.
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