

## CHAPTER 5 CULTURE AND TRADITIONAL FORMS OF SYMBOLIC PROTEST IN IRANIAN HISTORY

Movement actors use symbolic action to frame social movement activity. Often, movement tactics are anchored to existing cultural traditions. These practices can be conceived of as a cultural “tool kit” of protest strategies that are repeatedly used by movements (Swidler 1986). Past movement strategies, whose symbolic content is already known to a society, can help facilitate new movements when they use the symbols from these past periods of protest. During the period surveyed in this work, the *Moharam* ceremonies—which mark the martyrdom of the Imam Hossein—were often used as an occasion for protest. The other Iranian traditions chronicled in this chapter, *bast* and *taqiyeh*, are longstanding practices in Iranian history.

*Bast* is the act of symbolically asking for sanctuary, usually in a mosque or shrine, to protest the behavior of the state. This was a prominent movement strategy in Iran during the 1906-09 Constitutional revolution. *Taqiyeh* is the dissimulation of religious belief. It was sanctioned by Shi’i religious authorities during periods of religious persecution and allows for Moslems to disavow their faith in order to preserve their safety.

### ***Symbolic Action Accompanying the Moharam Processions***

The *Moharam* processions are lamentation rituals concerning the martyrdom of the Imam Hossein that recreate the ten days in which Hossein confronted Yazid’s army at Karbala. The most dramatic event is the processional of men who self-flagellate themselves, usually with chains struck upon the back, during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> days of *Moharam*. In the past, it was not uncommon for the men to also make small cuts on their foreheads and draw blood, which symbolically represented the blood drawn at Karbala, and symbolically placed the participants among those martyred with Hossein. In the past, the *Moharam* were also

accompanied by passion plays which recreated the story of Hossein's death. Esteemed religious leaders gave sermons following the processions. Likewise, grand feasts were held throughout *Moharam*. At times, there was tension between those who performed in the "popular" celebrations of the *Moharam* and the clerical elite who resented that the story of Hossein's martyrdom was being expropriated for "popular" entertainment. In an account by Tancoigne (1820), he describes the ceremonies accompanying *Moharam* as follows:

During those days of mourning, all the mosques are hung in black, the public squares and crossways are covered with large awnings, and at regular distances are placed stands, ornamented with vases of flowers, small bells of every kind. The Mollahs stationed in the pulpits sing in a mournful voice sacred hymns and lamentations, and the whole auditory respond to them with tears and deep sighs....

The procession was closed by two or three hundred of the common people in tatters, who struck their breasts, and drove two round pieces of wood with violence against each other, crying 'Hassan, Hossein! Ali!' lastly by the Mollahs, each carrying a large torch of yellow wax candlestick (Tancoigne in Moomen 1985:241-42).

Primarily, the month of *Moharam*, in both the popular and religious culture of Iran, is a symbolic demonstration that indicates the remorse that the community of believers shares as it relates to their inability to prevent Hossein's martyrdom. On the other hand, it also places people within the Karbala narrative itself, where the blood spilled on the tenth day—and the blood drawn by the men in the procession—is linked together. During the 10 days of the *Moharam* ceremonies, each day includes a ritual recreation of the day the Hossein and his

followers were surrounded at Karbala by Yazid. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Moharam* was both a community and religious event. Currently, the *Moharam* processions, while still dramatic, have become modified in modern times. This trend began when Reza Shah (1924-41) outlawed much of the bloodletting that was accompanied by the processions. At the same time, the processions—despite modern adaptations—are still emotionally charged events where the religious community recognizes the importance of the martyrdom of Hossein, and experiences the event in personal terms (see Chelkowsi 1979; Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999).

*Passion Plays (Ta'ziyeh) and Storytellers (Rawda-khwan)*<sup>1</sup>

Stories told by the *rawda-khwan* detail the ten days that Hossein and his followers spent in the desert surrounded by Yazid's army. They climax with the battle on *Ashura*, the tenth day of *Moharam*. The appropriation of this narrative—and how it should be conducted—was often a source of contention among religious groups inside Iran.<sup>2</sup> The *rawda-khwans* were the best storytellers—not the most esteemed religious leaders—and their dramatic renderings of the Karbala events were judged against one another. These stories incorporated many mystical and allegorical elements into the narrative. For instance, one common account is that the decapitated head of Hossein, when brought to Yazid, continued to recite the *Qoran* (Fischer 1980). Indeed, these stories are filled with superhuman efforts and twisting narrative accounts of near successes, last moment conversions, battlefield weddings and tragic double crosses designed to create the most emotional experience possible from those listening to the narrative. Ritual weeping occurs during the most tragic points of the narrative. Often, audiences actively participated in these narrative accounts. For example, sweets were often passed around during the wedding scene (Chelkowski 1979).

The *Ta'ziyeh* (passion plays) also recounted the martyrdom of Hossein at Karbala. They were local productions often made possible by the patronage of wealthy contributors (Chelkowski 1979). The plays were not conducted in mosques, but usually at a *Hosseiniyeh* (the place where stories of Hossein are told). For the most part, these plays were outlawed by Reza Shah during his reign (1924-41), and are no longer performed except as modern “folk-art” performances. Still, the narrative tradition of both the *rawda-kwan* and the *ta'ziyeh* remain evident in the modern narratives that describe Hossein’s martyrdom (see previous chapter). In the early movements chronicled in this text, both the *rawda-khwan* narratives and *ta'ziyeh* were still widely practiced throughout Iran.

During the late twentieth century many of the Islamic elite began to object to the “folk” elements that were being incorporated into the account of Hossein’s death (see Mutahhari [1960] 1996; Akhtar [1996]). In some respects, the differences between what many considered the clotured, elitist tradition of the Islamic scholars and the popular traditions of believers became a point of contention between lay religious leaders and the religious authorities in the 1960s. For example, Ali Shariati—the most dynamic social movement leader in Iran during the 1960s-1970s—was critical of the religious elite and taught at the *Hosseiniyeh Ershad*, a center named after the traditional *Hosseiniyehs*. The name may have been deliberate in that it was a religious center, but not controlled by the religious elite<sup>3</sup> (see chapter 11). Lay religious figures, such as Shariati, often believed that the clerical elite neglected their obligation to provide the poor, usually the most religious Iranians, with a concrete means to better their lives. Indeed, these reformers often charged the religious elite with using a false religion as a means of keeping the poor ignorant (see Shariati 1979; 1981).

Included in the stories recited by the *rawda-khwan* are the heartbreaking death of Hossein’s infant child (Ali Asghar) who is pierced by an arrow while being held in Hossein’s

arms; the battlefield marriage of Qasim—son of Hasan (the second Imam)—to the daughter of the Hossein; the quest for water by Abbas, which he distributes among the women and children before losing his life; the crying of Hossein's three-year old daughter who upon being shown her father's decapitated head immediately falls into a deep sleep from which she never awakes; the post battle sermons of Zaynad—sister of Hossein—who is responsible for protecting the fourth and fifth Imams; Yazid's whipping of the decapitated head of Hossein, which continues to recite Qoranic verse and; the discovery and burial of the bodies of Hossein and his followers (see Fischer 1980)

The *ta'ziyeh* was formally banned by Reza Shah (1924-41), but were held in secret in rural communities throughout Iran. Furthermore, many of the most prominent Iranian clergy—who always viewed folk aspects of the *ta'ziyeh* with distaste—also tried to prevent the *ta'ziyeh* from being practiced. Still, despite the fact that the Reza Shah outlawed the *ta'ziyeh* and other aspects of the Moharam ceremonies, it was impossible to completely excise these traditions from Iranian society. As such, while no longer directly supported by the state (as during the Safavid and Qajar period) the *Moharam* ceremonies continued to be conducted during the reign of the Pahlavi Shahs (1925-1978).

### *Moharam Symbols in Iranian Life*

Cultural aspects of the *Moharam* ceremonies are played out throughout the daily lives of many Iranians. For example, ritual weeping accompanies any narrative that involves a sermon, or other account (e.g. the *ta'ziyeh*) dedicated to the story of Hossein. In this respect, weeping represents the profound remorse an individual feels regarding the events that took place on *Ashura*. Many Iranians know this narrative account so well, that weeping is a conditioned part of their mourning process. Even those Iranians who are not particularly

religious would be familiar with narrative account of Hossein's martyrdom. Indeed, as a literary and artistic analogy it is pervasive in much Iranian art.

One consequence of this tradition is that weeping in public, particularly during emotionally charged political and social event, acquires a different symbolic meaning than a simple show of extreme remorse. Indeed, during charged political moments, such as Ayatollah Khomeini's (1963) *Ashura* speech following a crackdown by Mohammad Reza Shah, the first mention of the martyrdom of Hossein is going to be accompanied by weeping from the audience. It would be a remarkable event if weeping did not occur. Another example occurred in 1989 when Ali Khamenei publicly read (and wept while reading) the last will and testament of the Imam Khomeini. Likewise, those seated around him—some of Khomeini's closest associates—also wept openly. While the meaning of the tears is self-evident, the weeping was also accompanied by a greater symbolic content that designated the passing of an exceptional religious leader who embodied the same fortitude as those martyred with Hossein. Those in attendance at this event then made this comparison explicit.<sup>4</sup> Although Khomeini himself stated that he did not want extreme shows of remorse marking his death, many in the massive crowd that gathered for his funeral procession re-enacted the ritual laments that occur during the *Moharam* processions.

Khomeini often used the martyrdom of Hossein, and *Ashura* sermons, as an occasion to juxtapose the martyrdom of Hossein with the injustice Iranians faced. In this regard, the martyrdom of Hossein offered a ready made narrative, a classic battle between good and evil, that religious movement leaders used to anchor the descriptions of their struggle against the Pahlavi Shah and the West. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini (1978g) made the speech (*italics added*) below just before the *Moharam* ceremonies in 1978.

With the approach of Muharram, we are about to begin the month of epic heroism and self-sacrifice—the month in which blood triumphed over the

sword, the month in which truth condemned falsehood for all eternity and branded the mark of disgrace upon the forehead of all oppressors and satanic governments; *the month that has taught successive generations throughout history the path of victory over the bayonet; the month that proves the superpowers may be defeated by the word of truth; the month in which the leader of the Muslims taught us how to struggle against all the tyrants of history*, showed us how the clenched fists of those who seek freedom, desire independence, and proclaim truth may triumph over tanks, machine guns, and the armies of Satan, how the word of truth may obliterate falsehood. (242)

### ***Formal Taqiyyeh***

The formal practice of *taqiyyeh* is the dissimulation of religious belief in order to be safe. The practice originates from a directive by Mohammad that religious faith could be hidden if it would result in persecution (Tabataba'i 1988; Enayat 1982). The Shi'is were often a persecuted minority group so they further refined this practice. Allamah Tabataba'i (1988)—perhaps the foremost reformist Shi'i cleric of the twentieth century—describes when *taqiyyeh* can be employed as follows:

In our view, the practice of *taqiyyah* is permitted if there is definite danger facing one's own life or the life of one's family, or the possibility of the loss of the honor and virtue of one's wife or of the other female members of the family, or the danger of loss to one's material belongings to such an extent as to cause complete destitution and prevent a man from being able to continue to support himself and his family. In any case, prudence and the avoidance of definite or probable danger which cannot be averted is a general law of logic

accepted by all people and applied by men in all the different phases of their lives. (204)

Ironically, religious groups that broke from orthodox Shi'ism also practiced *taqiyeh*. The Shaiki, Bab-Baha'i and Azali Baha'i movements in Iran during the nineteenth century all practiced *taqiyeh*. These sects were doctrinally similar to the Shi'i in many respects, but were considered heretical by traditional Shi'i because of their beliefs regarding the occultation of the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam. For example, in the case of the Baha'i their leader—the Bab—revealed that he was the Hidden Imam to a small number of followers and then asked they practice *taqiyeh* in order to protect themselves and protect his identity (Manuchehri 1999:93).

The Azali Baha'i adapted *taqiyeh* to include infiltrating powerful circles of Iranian society to gather information that could be provided to followers. These infiltrators also secretly attempted to move the doctrinal beliefs of others towards the acceptance of Baha'i beliefs and practices. In this respect, *taqiyeh* became a strategic practice used to facilitate movement goals. Persecutions of the Shaikis, Bab-Baha'i and Azali Baha'i occurred throughout the nineteenth century in Iran. Further persecutions against the Baha'i were initiated throughout the 1950s and were also common after the 1979 revolution.

The tradition of *taqiyeh* affects social movement dynamics in a number of ways. First, *taqiyeh* offers a practical strategy—particularly if it includes the belief that one can lie in order to infiltrate an opposition organization—to movement leaders and followers. Conversely, it was common for religious lay leaders to be accused of practicing *taqiyeh*—of not being true believers—when they fused religious doctrines with political philosophy. For instance, Ali Shariati—a primary ideologue of the Iranian Revolution who was critical of the orthodox religious elite—was often accused of secretly being a Baha'i despite the fact that he anchored his ideology to Shi'i religious doctrine. During the Constitutional revolution many

reformers were accused of being Baha'i who were practicing *taqiyeh*. Of course, as it relates to the Azali Baha'i, they were actively hiding their beliefs during the Constitutional revolution, and did funnel their religious dissent into active political dissent (Bayat 1993; Lambton 1956). Religious dissenters were active in many of the secret societies (*anjomans*) that were created during the Tobacco movement and Constitutional revolution and practiced *taqiyeh* when confronted with their membership to these groups. Furthermore, the practice of *taqiyeh* helps account for the multiple allegiances to a plethora of “secret societies” (*anjomans*) that many individuals joined during some of the early movements surveyed in this work (Bayat 1993, Keddie 1966, 1972; Lambton 1956). Many of the clerical elite, including Ayatollah Khomeini, later adopted the position that *taqiyeh* was no longer an acceptable practice during the course of the struggle against the Shah. This corresponded with Khomeini's activist political agenda and his avowal that death in the cause of righteousness was honorable.

### ***Popular Taqiyeh***

The popular meaning of *taqiyeh*—which has gained wide currency throughout the modern Middle East—is when an individual seeks to avoid conflict with others by being less than forthcoming about their personal beliefs.<sup>5</sup> This can help protect someone from powerful authorities, but it also a strategy used in order to further a discussion designed to introduce controversial ideals in a piecemeal fashion. It is also a common sense strategy that when discussing difficult concepts it might be useful to start with points of agreement rather than beginning with a position that will be regarded as unacceptable. In this regard, *taqiyeh* might be regarded as a universal practice in that most people seek to protect themselves when broaching a difficult topic with powerful people. In effect, this is the daily horse-trading, half-truths and partial evasions that have helped people facilitate relationships in all cultural

settings. But in the Middle East—particularly in states with authoritarian tendencies—*taqiye* can mean generally pushing the envelope of debate to that point where debate can take place, but not to the point where someone’s personal safety is endangered. In this regard, *taqiye* is a practical guide that allows people to be firm in their beliefs, but also allows them to protect their true feelings if it would endanger them personally (Mir-Hosseini 1999).<sup>6</sup>

### *Taqiye and Social Movements*

The popular tradition of *taqiye* is a cultural artifact that can inform us why movement leaders engage in practices that might, on the surface, seem contradictory. Indeed, during any period of social flux—in any culture—there is what might appear in the West as “double-dealing,” “playing both sides of the fence,” “changing to a winning horse” etc... In fact, many Western scholars tended to disparage the Shi’i practice of *taqiye* in terms similar to those above (Enayat 1982).<sup>7</sup> But this view fails to appreciate the particular historical circumstances of Shi’i Islam, or investigate fully the range of beliefs that are associated with the concept of *taqiye*. In short, the cultural aspects of *taqiye* are clearly a nuanced system more complicated than simply “backing the winning horse,” and have evolved from the original intention of providing for individual safety. Knowledge of *taqiye* can help elucidate behaviors among movement leaders in Iran. It also explains why a common counter-framing technique employed by movement leaders was to accuse the opposition forces of being insincere and of hiding their true beliefs. Moreover, the practice helps explain the apparent willingness of different doctrinal groups to support Ayatollah Khomeini even when they were opposed to his specific programs. Again, shifting alliances are normal during any social movement—in any culture—but the tradition of *taqiye* may act to reinforce this common movement tactic. In short, the cultural practice of *taqiye* may make movement leaders in

Iran more comfortable negotiating in a terrain where shifting alliances are common, particularly since there is a doctrinal precedent that sanctions this type of behavior.

***Bast: Seeking Sanctuary***

*Bast* is the act of seeking sanctuary. It is also a form of symbolic protest regarding individual treatment by the state or another powerful figure. Sanctuary (*bast*) was usually sought in a mosque or Islamic shrine that had symbolic importance. Associated with *bast* are a number of social movement strategies that Westerners are familiar with. For instance, during the later nineteenth and early twentieth century Iranian *bast* became a movement strategy wherein adherents occupied symbolic spaces as a means of publicizing movement positions. This would include conducting a “sit-in” where groups of individuals occupied a space (e.g. a mosque, the Parliament, a telegraph station) as a sign of protest and as a means of publicizing their demands (see examples in Chapter 9). These types of strikes remain common in modern India, and the Indian concept of *dharna* (most often translated as a “sit-in” in *Urdu*) and Iranian *bast* may both have their origin in the transfer of cultural practices between the regions that occurred during the Safavid Empire.<sup>8</sup>

In the early twentieth century *bast* was a common movement strategy in Iran. For example, the Constitutional revolution was precipitated by three religious figures who, upon being expelled from Tehran, were supported by *bazaari* guilds (approximately 12,00-14,000 individuals) who sought *bast* in the British embassy. Likewise, during the Nationalist movement (1951-53) Mohammad Mosaddeq—and his supporters—sought *bast* on the Palace grounds to protest the increasingly authoritarian policies of the Shah.

It seems likely that this type of *bast* was an innovation of a traditional practice wherein individuals would ask a political authority for consideration in resolving a dispute. Often, individuals seeking this consideration remained a guest—under the protection of the

authority figure—until the issue was resolved satisfactorily. In these cases *bast* was not connected with a specific social movement, but often a demonstration that an individual deserved attention from the authorities regarding a specific demand. In this respect, the practice was a highly personal act before it became a movement strategy. For instance, as a young boy, only six years old, Khomeini made a formal appeal, on behalf of his family, to the Qajar Shah requesting punishment for the individuals responsible for his father's murder (Moin 1999). This was a routinized symbolic act that was not *bast*, but the request did include a formal statement that Khomeini's family would remain in the Shah's house, as guests, until he deposed of the case in the appropriate manner.

Individuals in conflicts with the state often sought *bast* as a means of asking a religious figure that they intervene, with the weight of their traditional religious authority, in the conflict. In this respect, at roughly the turn of the century, many regarded the religious authorities as an appropriate avenue of appeal against the state, and regarded *bast* as a traditional form of dispute resolution.

The increasingly innovative use of *bast* at the turn of the century was regarded by the Qajar monarchy as an abuse of the traditional system. This is particularly true of the 1906 *bast* that took place in the British embassy (see chapter 9). Still, individuals seeking *bast*, because they asked the authorities to consider their petition in good faith, usually assumed that their *bast* would not be interrupted until they received some assurance that their complaint would be addressed. As political issues became more contentious state authorities were less inclined to recognize the tradition of *bast* and started to intervene, forcefully, when individuals engaged in this practice. One famous case where this occurred was when the Qajar authorities forcefully ended Jamal Din al-Afghani's *bast* in 1891, and shortly after was unceremoniously escorted to the Iraqi border. A follower of al-Afghani later assassinated the Qajar Shah, and cited the treatment of Afghani as one of the reasons for his action (Browne

[1910] 1966; Keddie 1972). Although *bast* is not as widely practiced in modern Iran, aspects of *bast* remain resonant in modern Iranian society. In particular, the occupation of symbolic space (through sit-ins, forceful occupation)—such as the occupation of the American embassy during the 1979 revolution—may constitute a new form of *bast*.

### ***Iranian Cultural Practices and Cultural Exchange***

The *Moharam* processions, *bast* and *taqiyeh* are culturally grounded Iranian practices that were often adopted as movement strategies. These are traditional means of dissent that existed before the modern period surveyed in this work, but these practices were often adopted, and amended, during twentieth century protest periods.

Movement groups in the West have used similar movement strategies—particularly the use of sit-ins. In particular, the concept of *dharna* as formulated by Mahatma Gandhi during the Indian nationalist movement was later amended, and used to great effect, by Martin Luther King and supporters of the American Civil Rights movement. Practices common during the Indian movement—particularly the adoption of movement strategies that symbolically demonstrate inequality—are now commonplace in most social movement activity throughout the world. These practices have also proved to be remarkably malleable with regard to their adoption by different cultural groups in different social contexts. It is difficult to know whether the Iranian concept of *bast* had its origins in the Near East or the Far East, but it is clearly a practice that is part of the common cultural milieu of the region. The tradition of *bast* in Iran predates its use in the American civil rights movement.

I end with an example of cultural exchange because it is often assumed that ideas move in only one direction: West to East. It is also important to recognize that an exchange of cultural practices can be a two-way street and is not necessarily destructive. Indeed, many current reform leaders in Iran are advocates for a program that facilitates cultural exchanges

because they regard this process as beneficial to all societies (Khatami 1997; Soroush 2000). But, during the early movements surveyed in this text, the cultural exchanges between East and West ultimately came to be regarded as a negative experience among individual Iranians. In particular, the expansion of the British and Russian empires into regions previously controlled by the Safavid empire helped precipitate anti-Western discourses that became dominant during the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> The Iranian has nine *Ta'ziyeh* plays, published in 1951, available online at <http://www.iranian.com/Arts/Taziye/>. Chelkowski (1979; 1989) and Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999) also have excellent accounts of this tradition.

<sup>2</sup> See the series of sermons by Ayatollah Motahhari (Mutahhari 1996) concerning Ashura and “popular myth.” In these sermons, delivered in 1960, Motahhari was attempting to excise the “popular” and “mythic” aspects of Hossein’s martyrdom out of the narrative. He claims that orthodox account represents the “true” account that should be followed by Shi’i Moslems.

<sup>3</sup> Some traditional religious figures, such as Ayatollah Motahhari, initially participated in the *Hosseiniyeh-e Ershad* before the lay religious factions asserted control over the institution.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.irna.com/occasion/ertehal/english/will/> for an account, and audio download, of Khomeini’s last will and testament.

<sup>5</sup> In informal discussion with Moslem scholars (usually Sunni) they often initially describe *taqiye* as “being sneaky.” But then further elaborate that the practice can be much more subtle, and have many different purposes, and generally reason along the lines of Enayat (1982), a well-known Iranian political scientist.

<sup>6</sup> Mir-Hosseini (1999) uses, repeatedly, this particular conception of *taqiye* in explanations concerning how she facilitated dialogue with the religious elite in Qom concerning women’s rights in Islam. In effect, she states that both she, and the people being interviewed, practiced a “modern” form of *taqiye* in order to facilitate conversation, remain true to individual ideals, but also stay out of trouble with the authorities.

<sup>7</sup> The most famous example is Lord Curzon’s (1892) largely racist accounting of the Persian’s ability to lie. Of course, it does seem likely that Persians, when confronted with Curzon—who was surveying Iranian resources that the British could exploit—would have had compelling reasons to lie to him.

<sup>8</sup> I am not aware of a formal study that links these two practices.