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‘Āshûrâ’

Some remarks on ritual practices in different Shiite communities (Lebanon and Syria)

The Lebanese Shî‘a observe ‘Ashûrâ’ rituals in Beirut and its southern suburbs, in South Lebanon and in the Bekaa valley. In Syria, Shiite groups of various origins observe these rituals around the shrine dedicated to Sayyida Zaynab, Imam Husayn’s sister, in a little town to the south of Damascus, which now bears the saint’s name. Before analyzing how the rituals are performed today, among the different Shiite groups, in these places, we have to give a brief historical overview of the practices in the region, that can be divided into three steps: the importation of Iraqi and Iranian practices, the reform of the rituals, and their politicization.

The first step is the importation of Iraqi, and then Iranian rituals, more than a century ago. Oral history reports that during the Ottoman rule, the Shî‘a could not observe their specific rituals in the open air in Bilâd al-Shâm, because it was forbidden. So the believers used to hold the lamentation sessions (*majâlis al-ta‘ziya*) at home, in secret. There were children posted on the look-out who warned the participants when Ottoman guards entered the neighborhood, and the believers would pretend to be reading the Quran. This is a *topos* that we have heard and that is transmitted in several academic works about the history of ‘Āshûrâ’ rituals in Jabal ‘Āmil¹. Nevertheless, we can find written data about the subject. John M. D. Wortabet, who observed the ‘Āmilî practices around 1860, noted: “The Metawileh (namely the Shî‘a of Jabal ‘Āmil) spend the first ten days of the month of Moharram in mourning and lamentations, as the anniversary of the death of El Hosain. During those days they read a long and pathetic history of the occasion, and do not work in them. They call them “The Ten Days”.”²

Muhsin al-Amîn, one of the most prominent ‘Āmilî *mujtahid* of the XXth century, gave more details in his autobiography, explaining that during the first days of Muharram, the believers

¹ Jabal ‘Āmil is the ancient name of South Lebanon.

² John M. D. Wortabet, *Researches into the Religions of Syria*, James Nisbet, Londres, 1860, p. 272.

used to read a book entitled *al-Majâlis*. He added that, on the tenth day, they read the *maqtal* written by Abû Mikhnaf³, and then they recited the prayer of the *ziyâra* at Husayn's shrine. Afterwards, he said they brought a special meal, called *harîsa*, to the mosque, where they distributed it to the poor. Then, in 1880, when his master Mûsâ Sharâra came back from Iraq, where he had completed his religious studies, he brought some changes to the 'Âshurâ' rituals, reorganizing them in the Iraqi way. He used another *majâlis* book, and the *maqtal* written by Ibn Tâwûs as was customary in Iraq, and he introduced new weekly sessions and funeral rituals⁴. For Muhsin al-Amîn, all these changes were positive. But there were other changes that occurred as well.

About 1895, Ottoman authorities softened their policy towards the Shî'a and their rituals: it was part of the pan-Islamic policy to be more tolerant towards the Shiite minority. Yet, they had given more freedom to the Iranian community of Istanbul, which was now able to observe the 'Âshûrâ' rituals in public⁵. They let the Iranians who had settled in Damascus and in Jabal 'Âmil at the end of the XIXth century observe their ritual practices: They performed a primary form of the theatrical representation of the Karbalâ tragedy (*shabîh* in Arabic, *ta'zieh* in Persian), and public processions, (*mawâkib husayniyya*). During the processions, they practiced the mortification ritual of *tatbîr* which consists of making an incision in their skull before beating their head with their hands or with the flat part of a sword in order to make the blood flow all the while walking. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Iranian rituals developed and spread; the cleric of Nabatiyyeh 'Abd al-Husayn Sâdiq encouraged the process⁶. So all these practices were held in market places, in Jabal 'Âmil, most of all in Nabatiyyeh, and around the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, in a village near Damascus which in those days was called Râwiya or "Qabr al-Sitt".

The second step of the historical development of the 'Âshûrâ' rituals is the reform that Muhsin al-Amîn, the 'Âmilî *mujtahid* who was living in the old Shiite area of Damascus,

³ A *maqtal* is an account of the martyrdom of Husayn. See Sebastian Günther, « *Maqâtil* Literature in Medieval Islam », *Journal of Arabic Literature*, XXV (1994), p. 192-212.

⁴ Muhsin al-Amîn, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiite du Jabal 'Âmil*, translation and notes (in French) S. Mervin et H. al-Amîn, IFEAD, Damas, 1998, p. 72-75. The original text in Arabic was published in *A'yân al-shî'a*, and has been recently reprinted, see *Sîrat al-sayyid Muhsin al-Amîn*, tahqîq wa sharh Haitham al-Amîn wa Sâbrînâ Mîrfân, Riad el-Rayyes Books, Beirut, 2000.

⁵ Thierry Zarcone, « La situation du chi'isme à Istanbul au XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle », in *Les Iraniens d'Istanbul*, éd. Thierry Zarcone et F. Zarinebaf-Shahr, IFÉA/IFRI, Istanbul-Téhéran, 1993, p. 103-105 ; « Un regard sur les lieux de culte chi'ites à Istanbul (fin d'Empire ottoman-époque contemporaine) », *Lettre d'Information de l'Observatoire Urbain d'Istanbul*, 2 (juin 1992), p. 10-11.

⁶ For more details, see Sabrina Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite. Ulémas et lettrés du Jabal 'Âmil (actuel Liban-Sud) de la fin de l'Empire ottoman à l'indépendance du Liban*, Karthala-CERMOC-IFEAD, Paris, 2000, p. 246-247.

implemented in the 1920's. On the one hand, he reorganized and rationalized the lamentation sessions, seen as a "school" (*madrasa*) for the believers, and to this end, wrote several books including a *maqatal* and a *majâlis* book, *al-Majâlis al-saniyya*. On the other hand, Muhsin al-Amîn prohibited two kinds of practices: the representation of the tragedy, and the flagellation and other mortification practices which he considered as innovations (*bid'a*). This attempt at reform triggered violent debates within religious circles, in Lebanon and in Najaf: Many *mujtahid* were against it. They published treatises replying to Muhsin al-Amîn and other reformists ; some prominent *mujtahid* gave *fatwâ* about the subject. Muhsin al-Amîn insisted in his will that some practices be declared *muharram* (forbidden) and, in 1928, he published a booklet in which he exposed his positions again, *Risâlat al-tanzîh* which provoked other reactions, press articles, quarrels among the clerics and even fistfights among their supporters⁷. Al-Amîn's aim was to rationalize and moralize the religious practices, and to give a more positive image of the Shiites. His detractors wanted to defend these specific rituals where the believers expressed their devotion to the imam and their Shiite identity.

In Lebanon, the reform had little impact on the majority of the believers because although Muhsin al-Amîn had a few supporters among the scholars and the clerics, others opposed the reform and authorized all the rituals of 'Âshûrâ'. In Damascus, on the other hand, he was able to impose the reform because he had no rival in a position to challenge his religious authority. So the representation of the Karbalâ' tragedy and the mortification rituals stopped around the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, and the Syrian Shî'a of Damascus performed the reformed rituals that Muhsin al-Amîn recommended in the old Shiite area of the city.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-274.

The third step is the spread of the rituals and their politicization. Until the 1970's, in South Lebanon, these rituals were used to perpetuate the domination of the local political leaders who were allied to the religious clerics. After the loss of Palestine, in 1948, some members of the Ba'ath party tried to rethink the rituals, giving them a political meaning: Yazîd was Israel, and Husayn, Palestine. But the clerics ignored the Ba'ath militants and the believers did not follow them. At that time, the refugee Shi'a from South Lebanon started to settle in the suburbs of Beirut and, at this point, the rituals started to be held publicly, in the streets ⁸.

In addition, the influence of the traditional political leaders began to decrease. Mûsâ Sadr emerged on the political scene and he succeeded where the lay parties had failed. He was the first religious cleric to become involved closely with the so-called Shiite masses, and to fight for their political and social rights. In a famous speech he gave in Baalbek in 1974, he said: «Do not allow ceremonies or lamentation to serve as a substitute for action. We must transform the ceremonies in a spring from which will gush forth the revolutionary fury and the constructive protest... Now let me ask you: If Husayn were living with us and saw that the rights of the people and justice were being trampled upon by the foot of pride, what would he do?». Inspired by Ali Shariati, Mûsâ Sadr made use of the Muharram rituals to express a revolutionary spirit and a political and social protest.⁹

After the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon, the rituals became a means of defying the occupying army and of exalting Islamic resistance. Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allâh, who was the spiritual leader of Hizbullah, declared that the true followers of Husayn were the resistance fighters, and not the 'Âshurâ' flagellants. On the other hand, the rituals, specially the public processions, gave the two Shiite movements, Hizbullah and Amal, an opportunity to stage their rivalry and hostility ¹⁰.

Some important changes occurred also in Damascus. In the 1950's the old shrine of Sayyida Zaynab was rebuilt in Iranian style, thanks to private donations. In the 1970's, Iraqi Shi'a started to settle in the small town of Sayyida Zaynab. There were several waves of new comers there, in the 1980's and then after the Shiite uprising of 1991 in Iraq. Today, the Iraqis form an important community in Sayyida Zaynab, where some other Shiite groups live as

⁸ Majed Halawi, *A Lebanon Defied : Musa al-Sadr and the Shi'a Community*, Westview Press, 1992, p. 172-173 ; Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, « Les interprétations d'un rite : célébrations de la 'Achoura au Liban », *Maghreb-Machek*, 15 (janv-mars 1987), p. 5-12. See also Waddah Chrara, *Transformation d'une manifestation religieuse dans un village du Liban-sud (Ashura)*, Publications du Centre de Recherches de l'Université Libanaise, Beyrouth, 1968.

⁹ See Salim Nasr, « Mobilisation communautaire et symbolique religieuse : l'imam Sadr et les Chi'ites du Liban (1970-1975) », in *Radicalismes islamiques*, éd. Olivier Carré et Paul Dumont, l'Harmattan, Paris, 1985, p. 119-158.

well: Afghanis, Pakistanis, Gulf Arabs, Iranians, etc. They founded several *hawza* (religious schools) and *husayniyya* (places of worship where the sessions are held). The Shiite groups from different countries living there created networks, which are interwoven with other networks which are based on neighborhood solidarities, on affiliation to a political party or on religious obedience to the same *marja*‘.

In addition, the number of visitors to Sayyida Zaynab increased, partly due to the pilgrimages organized by the Iranian Islamic Republic all around the Syrian Shiite places of worship. A Syrian consortium even built a tourist complex to accommodate all the pilgrims. Hence, the small city became an economic and tourist center in Syria as well as an expanding Shiite center with places of worship, institutions of learning, bookshops, representation offices for several *marja*‘, and a substantial amount of political and religious agitation ¹¹.

As far as the rituals of ‘Âshûrâ’ are concerned, we can observe two phenomena, today, in Sayyida Zaynab ¹². The first one is the resurgence of certain ritual practices that had disappeared since Muhsin al-Amîn’s reform. We notice for instance the use of musical instruments during public processions (trumpets, drums), the presence of flares (*mash‘al*) and of carnival floats (notably for the celebration of Qasim’s wedding). These elements are clearly of Iraqi origin. In addition to chest beating (*latm*), the believers perform some mortification practices, with the use of chains for flagellation and *tabîr*, on the 10th day of Muharram, the day of ‘Âshûrâ’. Also on that day, there is a performance of a scene of the Karbala tragedy, which takes place in a soccer field in Sayyida Zaynab. It stages the capture of Husayn’s family by the Omayyad army and the burning of Husayn’s camp. There is also the procession, from the Omayyad mosque in Damascus - where they say Husayn’s head is kept - to Sayyida Zaynab, during which some people walk barefoot for three hours.

The second noteworthy phenomenon is that each year, Syrian authorities have become more and more lenient with the Shiite community. For example, every evening during the celebrations, some processions are held in the main street of Sayyida Zaynab; this gives more visibility than before to these rituals. They attract a great number of non-Shiite on-lookers, who come from Damascus to watch the “show” and form a crowd in the streets where car traffic is stopped during the processions. Syrian authorities have also allowed the *tabîr* to take place on this street, on the 10th day, whereas before it was forbidden. However, the *tabîr*

¹⁰ Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, *ibid.*, pp. 19-28.

¹¹ See Sabrina Mervin, « Sayyida Zaynab : banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite ? », *CEMOTI*, 22, "Arabes et Iraniens", 1996, pp. 149-162.

¹² The following information is based on fieldwork that I have done over several years, from 1993 to 2002.

procession still takes place at dawn, with no outsiders present – while in Lebanon, it happens in broad daylight and with a large audience. But the trend in Syria is that the rituals are becoming more visible, and are attracting more non-Shiite on-lookers. They have become real street shows, with lights, colorful banners and flags, singing, horses in the streets, distribution of refreshment and pastries. In addition, thanks to technological means such as audio and video tapes, and CD-roms, the rituals are invading the whole space: not only the private space, in houses, but the public space as well, because loudspeakers in the shops emit the blaring rituals throughout the streets. Also, distances are abolished: people can watch some sessions which took place in other parts of the Shiite world, and they can listen to their favorite reciters (like Ahmad al-Wâ'ilî, 'Abd al-Hamîd al-Muhâjir, or Bâsim al-Karbalâ'î). There is an Iraqi influence as well as from other countries. Pilgrims come from all over the Shiite world – they form groups and some of them settle inside the shrine and stay there night and day for the whole duration of the celebrations. Other pilgrims come from Shiite villages in Syria, located mainly around Homs; they form a special group, and join the foreigners inside the shrine, under their own banner.

And then, there are the Shî'a of the old Shiite neighborhood in Damascus - now called hayy al-Amîn - who go to Sayyida Zaynab individually, and do not present themselves as an identified group there. They have their own lamentation sessions, in *the husayniyya* of the area or in the schools founded by Muhsin al-Amîn. There, they still practice the reform rituals recommended by the *mujtahid* (who died in 1952): without any public procession or performance, but only sessions where you can see a few tears, and soft chest beating (*latm*), but nothing more. They are more intent in transmitting their moral values through more intellectual exercises such as conferences and lectures rather than through public display of emotion. They do not aim to show their religious particularity nor to emerge as a confessional community of its own, but they blend into the group of the Syrian Muslims, and stay very discreet about their religious rituals.

In the old city of Damascus, not far from the Omayyad mosque, there is another place, the shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya, which the Shî'a particularly worship. At the beginning of the 1970's, a committee of clerics and religious personalities was formed to renew and extend the shrine; they bought shops and houses in the area, tore them down, and in 1984, they began the construction of a new shrine, which was completed in 1991¹³. Today, this magnificent Iranian

¹³ 'Âmir al-Hulw, *al-sayyida Ruqayya, qissatuhâ, maqâmuhâ*, Manshurât Markaz ahl al-bayt, Vienna, Austria, 1994, pp. 75-76.

style shrine has special ties with the Iranian embassy whose cultural center organizes lamentation sessions there during the Muharram celebrations. These sessions are in Persian, and are attended by Iranians, many of whom are women who come especially from Tehran by bus, for an organized pilgrimage around Syria. For them, the Muharram celebrations are the highlight of the tour.

Thus, as an example of the disparities in the 'Āshûrâ' rituals among groups of various origins, we can observe many differences between the lamentation sessions of the Syrian women and those of the Iraqi women. In the old Shiite area of Damascus, the Syrians listen quietly to the reciter, and sometimes cry in silence. There are more tears and lamentations among the Iraqis who attend sessions in Sayyida Zaynab, either in the private house of a notable or in a *husayniyya*. These women who suffered from repression in Iraq and live in exile are able here to express their sorrow. Moreover, at the end of the session, some of them stand up, take off their veil, and dance in a circle, moving their head back and forth and beating their forehead in a rhythmic fashion. It seems that this ritual comes from Bedouin dances of the South of Iraq. As for the Lebanese women, during the lamentation sessions, they behave in a way that could be described as a cross between the reserve of the Syrians and the expansiveness of the Iraqis.

In Lebanon the celebrations take place where there is a Shiite population: In the villages and towns of the South, notably Nabatiyyeh and Tyre, in the Bekaa valley, in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and even now in Beirut proper. Local committees, religious schools, as well as the two political formations, Amal and Hizbullah, organize lamentation sessions and public processions every day. During the last 'Āshûrâ', in March 2002, a fight broke out in Nabatiyyeh between the two formations, which caused 70 wounded, because they could not decide who was going to walk at the front of the procession¹⁴. This public demonstration is still a means of expressing local rivalries.

On the 10th day, the tragedy of Karbala is performed in Nabatiyyeh, on a large stage that is set up on the ancient threshing floor (*baydar*), in front of the *husayniyya*. From the initial preparations of the actors and the arrival of the audience looking for places to sit or stand, until the end of the performance, the whole morning elapses. Every year, it is nearly the same play, with many actors, horses and camels. It is based on a text written in 1936 with the help

¹⁴ *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 26/3/2002, "Au moins 70 blessés dans des affrontements Amal-Hezbollah à Nabatiyé"; *al-Nahâr*, 28/3/2002, "Hawâdith al-Nabatiyya aqsat al-haraka wa al-hizb fa-ista'âdat al-madîna taqâlid 'Āshûrâ'".

of a group of young people, by ‘Abd al-Husayn Sâdiq (d. 1942), the Shaikh of Nabatiyyeh who was against Muhsin al-Amîn’s reform¹⁵. They re-invented and re-elaborated a play, relying on accounts by Shiite historians. The play is much more influenced by the Iraqi version than by the Iranian well-known *ta‘ziyeh*: there are no songs; no parts for women; no supernatural manifestations; it is not performed in a *tekiyeh*; and it tells the whole tragedy of Husayn at once, in Arabic¹⁶. A local committee is in charge of the organization. The play attracts many people from outside Nabatiyyeh, even from Beirut and further. In the near by village of Jibshît, a local committee recently put together its own play, which is staged during two hours and is starting to be successful.

The tragedy is not the only show that attracts such a large audience and causes traffic jams around Nabatiyyeh. On the same 10th day, which commemorates Husayn’s martyrdom, just after the play, there is another large procession where some people practice the mortification ritual, the *tatbîr*. As in Sayyida Zaynab, there are more and more of these bloody and spectacular practices. Yet some Shiite clerics forbid the *tatbîr*, because they consider it self-damage (*darar*) and it is *harâm* in Islam. Hizbullah doesn’t allow its members to practice the *tatbîr*, because Khomeini, and later Khamenei, forbade it. The party organizes a blood drive instead during which it appeals to its followers to give their blood through its television and radio stations. Some prominent clerics in Lebanon, such as Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Dîn (d. 2000), Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allah and other modernists have regularly declared that they are against the *tatbîr*. But other clerics, generally more traditionalists, allow the believers to practice it. The debate is still open, in the *fatwâ* literature and in the press. In March 2002, a journalist asked several Lebanese clerics their opinion about the ‘Âshûrâ’ rituals, and most of all the *tatbîr*: half of them forbade it and half allowed it¹⁷.

The same debate divides clerical circles in Sayyida Zaynab, and they recognize that it is a “sensitive subject”. Some even practice the *tatbîr* themselves, among the believers, whereas others are definitely against this kind of rituals. Muhammad Shîrâzî, an Iraqi *marja‘* who was

¹⁵ Sabrina Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite*, p. 247-248. For more details about the history of the performances in Lebanon, see Frédéric Maatouk, *La représentation de la mort de l'imam Hussein à Nabatié (Liban Sud)*, Publications du Centre de recherches de l'institut des sciences sociales, Université libanaise, Beyrouth, 1974 ; Fridîrik Ma‘tûq, “‘Âshûrâ’ (lubnâniyya) wa nass 1936”, *Abwâb*, 6 (1995) Dâr al-Sâqî, London, p. 148-108; Hassan Kahyl, “Le théâtre du ‘Ashura à Nabatiyye”, *Colloque "Ashura"*, *Cahiers de l'Ecole Supérieure des Lettres*, 5 (1974), Beirut; and the excellent unpublished work of Sleiman Najah, *La célébration de la ‘Ashura à Nabatiyye, Liban*, thèse de 3^e cycle, Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1974, 2 vol.

¹⁶ Sleiman Najah, p. 259-260.

¹⁷ Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allâh, Muhammad Hasan al-Amîn, Hânî Fahs, ‘Abd al-Amîr Qabalân, and Na‘îm Qâsim forbade it; Abd al-Husayn Sâdiq, Murtadâ ‘Ayyâd, ‘Abd al-Husayn ‘Abd Allâh, Ja‘far Murtadâ,

living in Qom, has many followers in Sayyida Zaynab, who practice the *tatbîr*¹⁸. Now that Muhammad is dead, his brother Sâdiq gave a *fatwâ* allowing it, which was distributed in the streets before the day of ‘Âshûrâ’, in March 2002. This brought about a dispute: Some clerics, who are against the *tatbîr*, stated that this *fatwâ* was not valid because Sâdiq Shîrâzî could not declare himself a *marja*’, simply because his brother was a *marja*’.

In the last two years, some young Iraqi intellectuals, who teach in Hawzat al-Murtadâ, a religious school supervised by Fadl Allâh in Sayyida Zaynab, put in place a blood drive for ‘Âshûrâ’. Some clerics support this initiative. It is organized in collaboration with the Syrian government and some Palestinians who are in charge of sending the blood to Palestine. In this way, they associate the remembrance of Husayn’s death with an action of solidarity with the people who, like the imam, “march on the line of martyrdom”¹⁹. Other blood drives of this kind are organized in Bahrain and in Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, Sayyida Zaynab is a place where Shiite communities are able to practice these rituals of mortification freely. Iranians cannot practice these rituals in their country, because they are forbidden; in Iraq, in the past 15 years, all the Muharram rituals have been gradually forbidden. So here, many believers take the opportunity to express their religiosity as well as their frustration through these public demonstrations of symbolic violence. The Syrian state allows these Shiite foreigners to demonstrate their religious particularities. Let’s remember that these foreigners often are in the opposition in their own countries, and have suffered from repression and exile (like the Iraqis, but also the Afghanis or certain people from the Gulf). So Sayyida Zaynab has become a Shiite melting pot where it is possible for outsiders to watch the rituals. The same is true in Lebanon. In addition, the Lebanese Shiite community uses these rituals in order to occupy more space within the Lebanese political arena.

Each community has developed its own way of performing the ‘Âshûrâ’ rituals. The way the participants move, the way they form a group around one or several leaders during the processions, the way they beat their chest, all these are different. Also, the way in which men display their virility through out the rituals and the way in which women are expected to respond to this display, differs from one community to the next. During the sessions, each

Muhammad ‘Usayrân, and Muhammad Kawtharânî allowed it. Salwâ Fâdil, *al-Nahâr*, 21/3/2002, "al-Tuqûs al-‘unfiyya ‘alâ masrah ‘Âshûrâ’".

¹⁸ See the position of Muhammad Shîrâzî about these rituals in Markaz al-imâm al-Shîrâzî li-l-buhûth wa al-dirâsât, *Thaqâfat ‘Âshûrâ’ fî fikr al-imâm al-Shîrâzî, al-ta’âtî wa al-adwâr*, Beirut, 2002. His brother Hasan, who founded the first *hawza*, al-Zaynabiyya, in Sayyida Zaynab and was killed by the Iraqis in Beirut in 1980 stood up for the same opinion. See Hasan al-Shîrâzî, *al-Sha’â’ir al-husayniyya*, Mu’assasat al-imâma, Beirut, 2000.

¹⁹ Leaflet distributed by al-Markaz al-husaynî li-tabarru’ al-damm, Sayyida Zaynab, 24/03/02.

community insists on certain characters among the heroes of the Karbala battle, stresses on certain themes, and uses its own corpus of texts in its dialect or language. All this reflects cultural differences and disparities between various societies as well as the construction of an identity through ritual practices.

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