

The Iranian origin of Ashura

A short Essay

By

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This essay is dedicated to the Shia reformers that have sacrificed their lives for the truth, from Shariat Sanglaji to *Allamah* Borqei.

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

1. Introduction.

I'm writing this short essay to start a discussion on the history and origins of Ashura, which is a mourning ritual commemorating the martyrdom of *imam* Hussain ibn Ali (d. 680), the grandson of prophet Muhammed (d. 632) which takes place on the 10th of Muharram each year.

The goal of this essay is to be as easily accessible to young people and students of knowledge. I have therefore decided to keep this essay short and to skip overly detailed explanations and repetitions of narrations that is common in more detailed books on Islam. If one wishes to study each matter in detail, there are plenty of resources online.

I ask Allah to accept this effort from me and that he guides me and the reader to the straight path.

2. The martyrdom of imam Hussain.

Hussain ibn Ali upon receiving letters from the people of Kufa in Iraq asking him to become their rulers decided to leave Medina, the city of the prophet together with his close family and friends. But upon reaching a place in Iraq called *Karbala* meaning the land of *karb* and *bala*^{1 2} he was stopped by an Umayyad army.

He and his pure family was besieged, slaughtered and captured. This massacre is today known as the battle of Karbala.

¹ *Kamil al ziarat*, chapter 2, hadith 2.

² Some Shias believe that Karbala is a blessed land and therefore prostrate on it when praying on a piece of clay called *turbah* in Arabic and *mohr* in Farsi. The belief of Karbala being a blessed land is incorrect because as the name entails it means the land of *karb* and *bala*. The word *Karb* means according to the *Hans Wehr* dictionary: worry, sorrow, grief, concern, anxiety, fear, distress, trouble, pain, torment, agony and torture. According to *Hans Wehr* the word *bala* means: trial, tribulation, misfortune and plague. Does this sound like a place filled with blessings? Is this a land Muslims should look forward to visiting?

On the 10th of Muharram Shia Muslim commemorate this massacre by beating themselves with chains, walking on fire, mourning, beating their chest but recently Shias in the western world have also started to donate blood to commemorate the battle of Karbala. Perhaps as act to counter all the bad PR Ashura commemoration has given them?

3.1 The question of Ashura?

Now to the question, what's the origin of this commemoration? Because mourning on Karbala isn't something that prophet Muhammed used to do, in fact its authentically narrated by both Shias³ and Sunnis that the prophet used to fast on Ashura, not mourn! So where did this commemoration come from?

3.2 The origins of Ashura.

According to the medieval historian ibn Athir (d. 1232)⁴ and modern historians the first documented celebration of Ashura happened in the year 963/352 after *hijra* by the Persian Buyid ruler Mu'izz al-Dawla ibn Buwayh (r. 945-967).

This means that it took 341 years after the death of Muhammed for the first documented celebration of Ashura to take place.

Now someone might argue:

- Shi'as weren't politically powerful enough to commemorate Ashura before the year 963.
- The *Ahlul bait* commemorated Ashura in secret.

I will promptly refute these arguments before returning to the main question of what's the origins of the Ashura commemorations.

3.2.2 Question 1. Shi'as weren't politically powerful enough to commemorate Ashura before the year 963.

This is false. Because before the year 963 multiple Shia dynasties had reached power, including descendants of Ali ibn Abu Talib. Below I will present a complete list of Shia dynasties that came to power before the rule

³ Read page 15-16.

⁴ Ibn al-Athir, 1851-76, p. 407.

the year 963⁵, which proves that Shias had political power before the year 963.

Name	Reign	Location	Alids?
Idrisids	789-985	Morocco	Yes
Justanids	791-1004	Daylam	No
Alavids	864-929	Daylam	Yes
Banu Ukhaidhir	865-1066	Yemen	Yes
Rassids	897-1970	Yemen	Yes
Fatimid Caliphate	909-1171	Egypt, North Africa, Levant	Yes
Aishanids	912-961	Kurdistan	No
Buyids	934-1062	Iran, Iraq	no

3.2.3 Question 2. *Ahlul bait* commemorated Ashura in secret.

As the table above shows there not only existed Shia dynasties before the year 963, but also Alid⁶ dynasties, kingdom and empires. The most powerful of whom was the Fatimid Caliphate which existed at the time of the Buyids and even for a short period of time controlled the Sunni capital Baghdad and the holy sites of Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina.

Now someone might argue that the Fatimid weren't true Alids which is something that not only goes against the consensus of modern historians but also classical Sunni historians (Khalil Andani, PhD [Islamic Studies], 2021).

Below is a quote from the Sunni historian ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) on the geology and political power of the Fatimids (Ibid):

“[Another example of] ludicrous information which is accepted by many historians concerns the ‘Ubaydid (-Fatimids), the Shi’a caliphs in Qayrawan and Cairo. (These historians) deny their Alid origin and attack (the genuineness of) their descent from the imam Ismail, the son of Ja’far al-Sadiq. They base themselves in this respect on stories that were made up in favour of the weak Abbasid Caliphs by people who wanted to ingratiate themselves with them through accusations against their active

⁵ Any dynasty that has been classified as Zaydi, Ismaili or Twelver by modern historians have been classified as Shia. Much of the dates and information’s about the dynasties has been taken from The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second edition.

⁶ Alids are people that are descendants of Ali ibn abu Talib, through his sons Hassan or Hussain.

opponents and who (therefore) liked to say all kinds of bad things about their enemies. We shall mention some of such stories in our treatment of the history of (the Fatimids). (These historians) do not care to consider the factual proofs and circumstantial evidence that require (us to recognize) that the contrary is true and that their claim is a lie and must be rejected.

The (Fatimid) propaganda spread successfully throughout Ifriqiyah and the Maghreb, and then, in turn, reached the Yemen, Alexandria and (the rest of) Egypt, Syria and Hijaz. The (Fatimids) shared the realm of Islam equally with the Abbasids. They Almost succeeded in penetrating the home country of the Abbasids and in taking their place as rulers... The Abbasids were continually bothered by the Fatimid power and preponderance, and the Umayyad rulers beyond the sea (in Spain) expressed their annoyance with them and threatened war against them. How could all this have befallen a fraudulent claimant to the caliphate?

Had there been doubt about their pedigree, their followers would not have undergone the dangers involving supporting them. A sectarian does not manipulate his own affairs, nor sow confusion within his own sect, nor act as a liar where his own beliefs are concerned.

The judges in Baghdad eventually prepared an official statement denying the Alid origin of the Fatimids... The event took place one memorable day in the year 402 (1011) in the time of al-Qadir. The testimony (of these witnesses) was based upon hearsay, on what people in Baghdad generally believed. Most of them were partisans of the 'Abbasids who attacked the Alid origin of the Fatimids. The historians report information as they heard it. They handed it down to us just as they had remembered it.

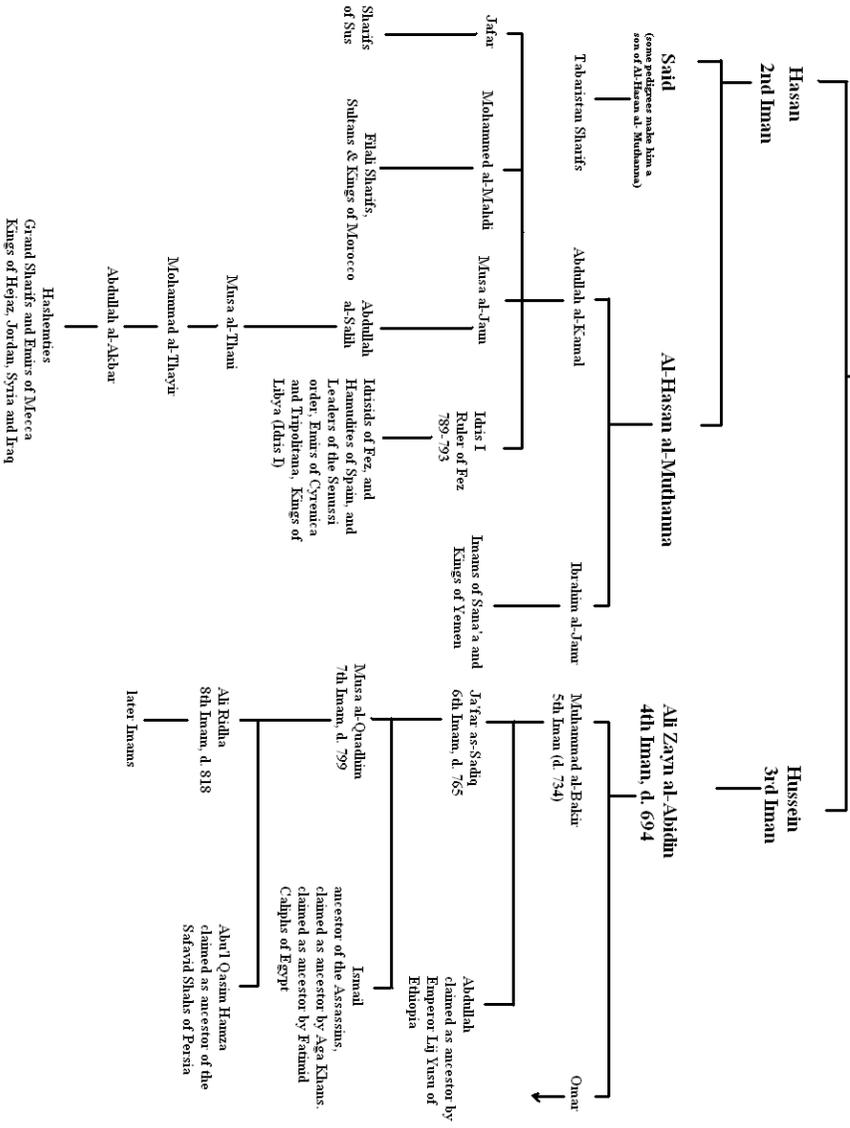
In the quote above Ibn Khaldun not only affirms the Alid origins of the Fatimids but also confesses their political power. Therefore no one can argue after reading this that 1. The Fatimids weren't descendants of the Prophet and 2. Shi'as weren't politically powerful enough to commemorate Ashura before the year 963.

If someone still refuses to accept the genealogy of the Fatimids and the Alid descentance, there is the Idrisi's in Morocco (Abd al-Salam, n.d.) and Alawid dynasty in northern Iran (Shahbaz, n.d) which are two dynasties that are also accepted by historians as real descendants of Ali ibn Abu Talib. If Ashura was something proscribed by Islam, how come they didn't practice and encourage it?

On the next page is simplified geology⁷ of the Alid dynasties showing their connection to the *ahlul bait* and the “12 imams” (Daftary, 2008).

⁷ Self, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Fatima = Ali, 4th Caliph 656-661



Now that I have answered the two questions which proves that the Shias were powerful enough to commemorate Ashura and that the Alids that came to power didn't do it. It's time to discuss why the Persian Buyids were the first to commemorate Ashura and where did they get the idea of self-mutilation?

4. Self-mutilation and passion plays in late Ancient Iran.

Every year on the day of Nowruz, which is the Persian new year, ancient Zoroastrians used to gather with their priests to commemorate the “martyrdom” of a mythical Persian prince named Siavash (Daryae & Malekzadeh, 2014, 57).

4.2 The story of Siavash.

Siyavash was a mythical prince belonging to the mythical Kayanid dynasty. He was famous for his beautiful looks and high morality.

One day Siavash gets caught in the middle of the feud between his father Kavus the king of Iran and his father in law Afrasiyab, the king of Turan.

After a dramatic series of events Siavash gets unjustly killed by his father in law Afrasiyab.

5.1 Iranians and mourning ceremonies.

Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Jafar Narshaki (d. 959) documents in his *Tarikh of Bukhara* (1984, 24) that how the Zoroastrians of his time used to mourn the death of Siavash, he says:

“The people of Bukhara perform/have amazing hymns/songs pertaining to the killing of Siavash and minstrels call these hymns/songs, kin-e Siavash (Avenging Siavash)”

According to Narshaki, him and people of his time believed that Siyavash was a real person that lived a millennia before their time and that he was buried in the city of Bukhara (Ibid) which is in modern day Uzbekistan. He describes the bukharans commemoration of the martyrdom of Siyavash like this:

The magi of Bukhara honour this place and find it dear to their hearts and every year, each person sacrifices a rooster there. The people of Bukhara also mourn and grieve the death of Siavash on the day of Nowruz, and sing sad hymns in his

commemoration.[These songs] are famous in all regions and are called Gristan-e Moghan or ‘the weeping of Magi’ by the min-strels”(ibid, 32-33)

According to Daryae & Malekzadeh (2014, 58) there is possibility that people mourned the death of Siyavash by wailing and pulling one’s hair. Because in Ferdowsis *Shahnameh* (1990, 361) its narrated how when the news of his martyrdom reached his kin the whole palace trembled with screams and cries. Both his kins and servants pulled their hair, cut off their locks and scratched their cheeks out of sadness.

Daryae & Malekzadeh has the following to say about figure 1⁸ which is a depiction of a lamentation ceremony:

One of the best known artistic representations of a lamentation ceremony is a mural that displays a youth on his deathbed and several people gathered around him lacerating their face and body, probably as a funerary rite [Fig.1]. A. M. Belenitskii argued that this illustration might be a depiction of Siavash’s mourning scene.

Another interesting artistic depiction (figure 2)⁹ of Persian mourning ceremony is from a Sogdian Iranian tomb located in China dated to the 6th century (Daryae & Malekzadeh, 2014, 59).

Daryae & Malekzadeh (Ibid, 59-60) has the following to say about the depiction:

At the center of the image is a Zoroastrian priest, who can be identified by his padam or mask, and is tending to the sacred fire and performing a ritual. There is also a dog present at the feet of the priest is probably depicting the *Sag-did* ceremony. In the Zoroastrian tradition, the “four-eyed dog” is believed to have had the ability to drive off demons and to decrease the infection of the corpse. In this tomb portrait, the dog (*Sag*) is viewing the funeral, as it should do at any orthodox Zoroastrian funeral in the pre-modern times. This scene depicts the service for death in Zoroastrianism which is called *rawanpase* “soul-service” which is a solemn affair in orthodox Zoroastrianism. The rest of the scene includes a noble lady holding the deceased person’s *kusti* (sacred girdle). Behind her is a group of mourners. This would be an orthodox Zoroastrian funeral, except that four of the mourners are lacerating their faces.

For more examples and artistic depictions please check Daryae & Malekzadeh article.

⁸ Page 11.

⁹ Page 12.

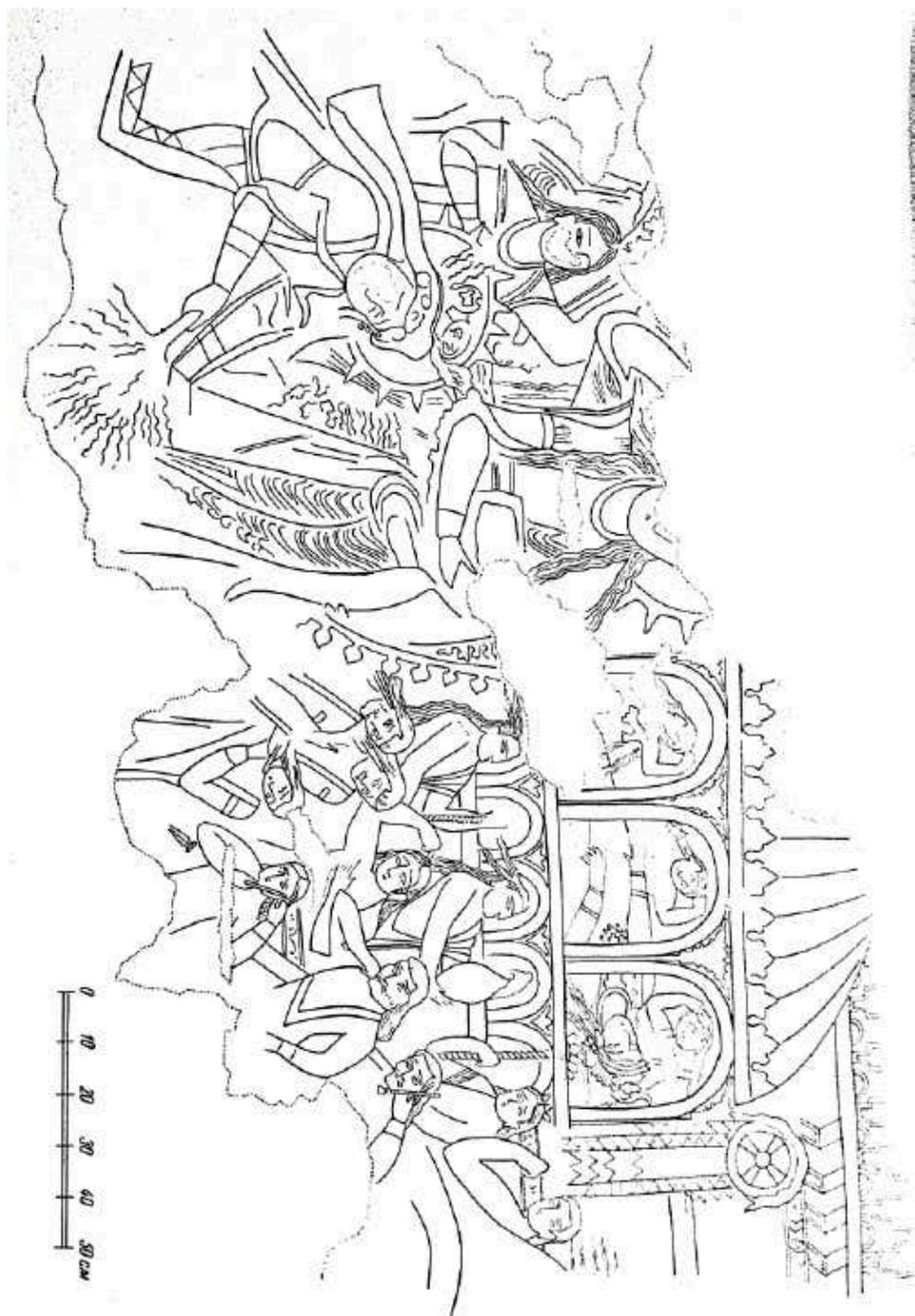


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Mourning scene, Panjikent, Object II, wall V, middle section of composition. After: Zhivopis' drevne-go Piandzhikenta (M., 1954), Tab. XIX. Fig. 3. Detail of panel on the Miho Mu-seum's Sogdian burial couch depicting the Zoroastrian rawanpase, "soul-service". Source: <<http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/images/death/sog-dianchinvatdetail.jpg>>.

Figure 2: Detail of panel on the Miho Mu-seum's Sogdian burial couch depicting the Zoroastrian rawanpase, "soul-service". Source: <<http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/images/death/sog-dianchinvatdetail.jpg>>

5.2 Ibn Kathir’s description of the first Ashura commemoration.

“On the tenth of Muharram of this year [963 CE], Mu’izz al-Dawla ibn Buwayh, may God disgrace him, ordered that the markets be closed, that the women should wear coarse woolen hair cloth, and that they should go into the markets with their faces unveiled and their hair disheveled, beating their faces and wailing over Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib.”¹⁰

What becomes obvious when reading this depiction of the first Ashura commemoration is the clear similarities with the ancient Persian commemoration for the death of Siyavash. Not only in the way they both beat their faces but also how women play an important role.

According to dr. Eric Hanne (2020) who is one of the few authorities on Buyid history, this mourning ceremony is something that was part of the Deylami culture, which is the cultural background the Buyids came from which proves that this was something they had in their culture before Islam and that they just “Islamized” by chaining the story of Siavash to the martyrdom of Hussain.

6. Ashura according to Islam.

Now that I have proven that Ashura commemoration is something that is foreign to Islam and that it has crept into the religion through to Iranian converts to shiism. I now want to show what Islam says about mourning and what a Muslim is supposed to do during Ashura.

6.2 Islam and mourning.

Islam is a religion of happiness and joy, and sadness is seen as something from the devil, therefore prophet Muhmmad has told us to only mourn the death of a person for three days and after that we should move on with our lives¹¹.

6.3 What to do on Ashura.

Now that I has presented what not to do during Ashura, I need to show the reader what to do!

¹⁰ The translated passage is adapted from Michel M. Mazzaoui, “*Shi’ism and Ashura in South Lebanon*,” in *Ta’ziyeh*, 231.

¹¹ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, chapter 23 (al-Janaaiz).

Its authentically narrated that the prophet saw the Jews fasting on the day of Ashura to commemorate their release from captivity in Egypt. And since Muslims have a bigger claim to the prophet Moses; Muhammed declared that whoever wanted to fast on the day of Ashura, he could do so¹². And as a reward for fasting during Ashura God will forgive on of their sins from the past year¹³.

6.3.2 Zeydi Shias on what to do on Ashura.

Imam al-Mutawakkil ala Allah, Ahmed bin Suleiman (d. 1171) said in his *Kitāb Usūl al-Ahkām*:

It is narrated on the authority of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny, that he used to fast on ‘Ashura. It is narrated on the authority of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny, that he said: (There are no days that has as much reward as the month of Ramadan and ‘Ashura.) There are two reports that mention the recommendation of fasting on ‘Ashura, which is the tenth of al-Muharram. Some of the Imamis discourage fasting because al-Hussein bin Ali (as) was killed on ‘Ashura. That is not reliable (‘itimād) because fasting does not prevent grief. Also, breakfast is closer to the pleasure of fasting. He was killed after the time of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny, and it is not permissible to change something after a Shari’ah law has been established. It is narrated on the authority of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny, that he fasted on ‘Ashura and encouraged others to fast. It was said to him: “O Messenger of Allah, it is a day that is esteemed by the Jews and Christians.” The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny, replied: ((Then, next time, we fast on the ninth day.)) Elsewhere in the book, there are other narrations that state that Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny, commanded those who ate on ‘Ashura to make it up (Ashura: A Zaidi Perspective, 2010).

6.3.3 Twelver Shias on what to do on Ashura.

Ayatollah al-Khoie (d. 1992) is one of the biggest and most popular Shia scholars in modern time, and certainly someone that doesn’t need any introduction has this to say about fasting on Ashura, the first fatwa I’m going to present is found in *al-Mustanad fi Sharh il-`Urwat il-Wuthqa*, kitab al-sawm vol 22, page 316. And in it, he says:

“The narrations that forbid this (Fasting) do not have proper Sanad, they are all weak, in fact we don’t have any respectable narrations that we can rely on to prove that

¹² *Sahih al-Bukhari*, hadith 2004.

¹³ *Sunan Ibn Majah*, hadith 1738.

those that differ with them are Taqqiyah. As for the narrations that speak about fasting this day and that it is favourable to fast there are plenty of them, such as the SAHIH of al-Qaddah: "Fasting the day of 'Ashoora removes the sins of a year." and the Muwaththaq of Masa'adah bin Sadaqah: "Fast 'Ashoora the ninth and the tenth for it removes the sins of an entire year." and others like them. This is acceptable taking into consideration the unimaginably great hunger and thirst and pain that Ahlul-Bayt had to go through on that hard day. So the strongest opinion would be that it is favoured to fast this day."

The second one is in *al-Mustanad fi Sharh il-`Urwat il-Wuthqa*, volume 12. Khoei states:

"So it is correct what we have claimed, that the prohibitive narrations are all da'if(weak) in sanad. So, the authoritative is free of opposition, and the karahat (dislike) of the fast of Ashura is not established, let alone its prohibition which was the view held in al-Hada'iq(of Yusuf al-Bahrani). Rather, it is permissible, recommended especially (if done) mournfully according to what you have recognized by what there is no exceeding upon it. "

But for some reason these statements have been hidden from the Shia masses, especially in the English translation of Khoei's works.

In *Islamic Laws by Ayatollah Abul Qasim al-Khu'i* (n.d) which is a book not actually written by Seyyid al-Khoei himself but a summarization of his religious rulings, for the lay people to blindly follow. On the page 233 it says this about fasting on Ashura:

1756. It is abominable to fast on Ashura (10th of Moharrum). It is also abominable to fast on the day about which it is not sure as to whether it is the day of Arafaa or Eidul qurban.

Why are the Shia scholars contradicting themselves? Why are they presenting one view to the masses and lay people and another opinion for the scholars of students of knowledge? Why are they hiding the truth from the Shia masses? Why are they hiding the truth?

According to Dr Musa al-Musawi, whom I will talk more about in chapter 8.3; the Shia scholars are the main reason why there isn't any unity between Sunni and Twelver Shias, their dishonesty as I showed you above is the main reason why the *ummah* is divided.

6.4 Allamah Borqei on muharam and mawlid.

The famous Shia scholar and reformer Allamah Borqei (d. 1993) writes in his translation of *Minhaj as-Sunnah*¹⁴ by ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328):

Islam has not commanded us to celebrate anyone's birthday or mourn anyone's death. During the five year old reign of Imam Ali (*aleyhi salam*) he never once celebrated our mourned the death of Prophet Muhammed.

Prophet Muhammad wasn't just his teacher but also the most beloved person in his life, peace and blessing be upon him and his pure family. How can they [the Shia clergy] allow an innovation like this when the *shariah* clearly forbids innovations?

7. The evidence for the 12er interpretation of Ashura.

It wouldn't be fear to the Twelvers if I attacked their interpretation of Ashura without even mentioning their evidence for this ceremony.

In the book *The Shia-Sunni Debate: Answering the 50 Most Common Questions* (2012, 65-66) the authors presents the 'evidence' for hitting oneself¹⁵ during *Ashura*, and they are the following:

7.2 The verse “Then came forward his wife in grief, she hit her face and said (what! I) an old barren woman?” in Surah Dhariat.

They argue that 51:29 proves that hitting oneself is halal. This is a clear lie for whoever reads the verse in its context.

The verses 24-30 is about when the angels visited him and his wife informing them about that they are going to have a son. Which results in her claspng her forehead in astonishment, this is similar to when middle easterners hit their hands out of surprise.

You have to be crazy to draw parallels between the surprise of an old lady getting pregnant and in the moment claspng her forehead to beating oneself with chains or hitting their chest in a yearly parade!

¹⁴ *Rahnamode sohnat*, p. 433.

¹⁵ Shias call hitting oneself in mourning for *maatum*.

7.3 Owais al-Qarni breaking his own teeth upon hearing that the prophet had been hurt.

The authors claim that Owais al-Qarnani broke his own teeth out of sorry when he hurt that the prophet had been hurt in the battle of Uhud. This story is a fabrication according to the majority of scholars (Sunni and Shia articles destroying the myth of Uwais al-Qarni Breaking His Own Teeth, 2015).

7.4 The prophet establishing a period of time of mourning and matam for his uncle Hamza.

The authors claim that the prophet ordered the people of medina to mourn Hamzas death and to do *matam*. This is a lie!

In the *life of the prophet by Muhammad* (2010, 370-71) by Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) it mentions that in the aftermath of Uhud the prophet went passed the neighbourhood of Banu Abdul Ashhal and upon hearing them mourn he got emotional and said “But, there is no one to mourn Hamza” whereupon Sa’d ibn Mu’az and Sa’eed ibn Nadir sent their womenfolk to the home of the messenger to mourn the death of his uncle, Hamza.

When the prophet heard these women, he said “May God have mercy on you. Go to your homes. You have expressed sympathy, indeed”

The prophet never ordered the people of Medina to hit themselves and mourn the death of his uncle and he never turned the martyrdom of Hamza into a yearly commemoration.

7.5 Aisha hitting herself while mourning.

The author argues that because of Aisha¹⁶ hit herself when receiving the news that the prophet had passed away.

The answer to that is simple. Aisha did it once, she didn’t turn it into a yearly commemoration and neither did the other companions of the prophet. She did this out of shock and grief upon hearing the news of the death of the prophet who also happened to be her husband.

¹⁶ *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal*. Vol 43: narration 26348.

7.6 Umar hitting himself over the death of his commander Nu'man.

The final evidence the authors use is that Umar supposedly hit his head and screamed “O what a pity that Nu'man died”. There are two problems with this story, their only reference to this a late medieval Indian scholar named Muttaqi al-Hindi (d. 1567), they do not mention where he got this story other than he narrates it as if he was present. Also if the story is true; Umar was clearly in upset upon hearing this news and he did this out of grief not sadness. There is a clear difference upon hearing something for the first time and crying and gathering every year to commemorate the death of Imam Hussain.

8. Commentaries on the Ashura ceremonies.

Before concluding this short essay, I would like to present the reader with a couple of short takes on the Ashura commemorations from different perspectives, which I believe can help open the eyes of my Shia brothers and sisters on the uselessness of these commemorations.

8.2 Rumi: The Shias of Aleppo.

The following story is from *Mowlana* Jalal al-din ar-Rumi (d. 1273) famous book *Masnavi-e Manavi*¹⁷. In it he mentions the story of a poet meeting Shias outside the city of Aleppo that are commemorating the death of Hussain. He picks up a discussion with them and then which I will present to the reader:

On the Day of ‘Áshúrá all the people of Aleppo gather at the Antioch Gate till nightfall, Men and women, a great multitude, and keep up a constant lamentation for the (Holy) Family. During the ‘Áshúrá the Shí‘ites wail and lament with tears and sobs on account of Karbalá. They recount the oppressions and tribulations which the (Holy) Family suffered at the hands of Yazíd and Shimr. They utter shrieks mingled with cries of woe and grief: the whole plain and desert is filled (with their cries).

A stranger, (who was) a poet, arrived from the road on the Day of ‘Áshúrá and heard that lamentation. He left the city and resolved (to go) in that direction: he set out to investigate (the cause of) those shrill cries. He went along, asking many questions in his search—“What is this sorrow? Whose death has occasioned this mourning? It must be a great personage who has died: such a concourse is no small affair. Inform me of his name and titles, for I am a stranger and ye belong to the town. What is his

¹⁷ Book 6, line 777 - 805. Translation by Nicholson (d. 1945).

name and profession and character? (Tell me) in order that I may compose an elegy on his gracious qualities. I will make an elegy—for I am a poet—that I may carry away from here some provision and morsels of food.”

“Eh,” said one (of them), “are you mad? You are not a Shí‘ite, you are an enemy of the (Holy) Family. Don't you know that the Day of ‘Áshúrá is (a day of) mourning for a single soul that is more excellent than a (whole) generation? How should this anguish (tragedy) be lightly esteemed by the true believer? Love for the ear-ring is in proportion to love for the ear. In the true believer's view the mourning for that pure spirit is more celebrated than a hundred Floods of Noah.”

“Yes,” said he; “but where (in relation to our time) is the epoch of Yazíd? When did this grievous tragedy occur? How late has (the news of) it arrived here! The eyes of the blind have seen that loss, the ears of the deaf have heard that story. Have ye been asleep till now, that (only) now ye have rent your garments in mourning? Then, O sleepers, mourn for yourselves, for this heavy slumber is an evil death. A royal spirit escaped from a prison: why should we rend our garments and how should we gnaw our hands? Since they were monarchs of the (true) religion, ’twas the hour of joy (for them) when they broke their bonds. They sped towards the pavilion of empire, they cast off their fetters and chains. ’Tis the day of (their) kingship and pride and sovereignty, if thou hast (even) an atom of knowledge of them. And if thou hast not (this) knowledge, go, weep for thyself, for thou art disbelieving in the removal (from this world to the next) and in the assembly at the Last Judgement. Mourn for thy corrupt heart and religion, for it (thy heart) sees naught but this old earth. Or if it is seeing (the spiritual world), why is it not brave and supporting (others) and self-sacrificing and fully contented? In thy countenance where is the happiness (which is the effect) of the wine of (true) religion? If thou hast beheld the Ocean (of Bounty), where is the bounteous hand? He that has beheld the River does not grudge water (to the thirsty), especially he that has beheld that Sea and (those) Clouds.”

What Rumi is trying to say with this story is that we should be worried about ourselves, not someone that is promised paradise; we should cry for our own corrupt hearts.

8.3 Dr Musa al-Musawi.

Dr Musa al-Musawi (d. 1997) was a shia scholar and the grandson of the biggest Shia scholar of modern time Sayyid Abu'l Hassan Isfahani (d. 1946).

Dr Musas father was assassinated before his birth which resulted in him growing up at home of his grandfather, the sole *marja* of his time.

Dr Musa al-Musawi received a traditional religious education at the feet of his grandfather and at the Najaf seminary, which he reached the level of

itjihad. He later spent years studying abroad and getting involved in politics before migrating to America where he set up The high Islamic Council of the Americas in 1981.

In 1989 he wrote a book with the name *al-Shia Ya al.Tashih* which translates to English during his life and released after his death under the name *Shi'ah A critical Revision* (2001, 123-124). In it he tries like many passed Shia scholars to reform the beliefs of the *ithni ashari* Shias. In the chapter of Ashura, he cites an interesting discussion he had with a fellow scholar which I also would like to cite:

Here I want to mention something amusing, yet full of wisdom and bright ideas. I heard it from one of the Shi'ite scholars and religious leaders about thirty years ago. This elderly and respected man was standing beside me, the day was the tenth of Muharram and the time was noon and the place was the Rawdah of Imam AI-Hussain in Karbala. Then a demonstration of those who strike their heads with swords and cause blood to gush out of their heads as a sign of grief and mourning for the death of AI-Hussain entered in great numbers to the grave site of AI-Hussain.

Their blood flowing down their foreheads and the sides of their bodies in a sickening way caused one's body to shiver. Then another large group of people who were hitting their backs with chains until they bled came in after the other group. That is when the old man, an independent scholar, asked me:

What is the matter with these people who have inflicted this disaster and pain on themselves?

You have asked this question as if you are not listening to what they are saying, which is, 'O Hussain, ' expressing their grief for him.

Then he asked again:

Isn't AI-Hussain now 'firmly established in the favor of a Mighty King.'

I said yes. Then he asked me again:

Is not AI-Hussain now at this moment in a garden whereof the breadth is as the breadth of the heavens and the earth, which is the reward for those who ward off evil'?

I said yes. Then he asked:

Aren't there in Paradise fair ones with wide, lovely eyes, like unto hidden pearls'?

I said yes. Then he took a deep breath and said in a forceful way with pain and sadness:

Woe to them, stupid, ignorant, for what they do to themselves, for an imam who is now in the gardens of delights, there wait on them immortal youths with bowls and ewers and a cup from a pure spring. '

8.4 Cursing the attributes of Yazid.

I once had an interesting discussion on Ashura with a Sufi Muslim of the Qadriyyah *tariqa* that also come from an Iranian Shia background. He said to me that “we as Muslims shouldn’t curse Yazid for what he did; rather we should curse the traits that made the people kill Hussain!”

We as Muslims need to learn from the massacre at Karbala the danger of unquestioned loyalty, whether it be to historical personalities or people in political power. Because the people in the both camps thought that God was on their side.

We as Muslims need to learn about the danger of greed and how it can make us not only destroy our *akhira* but also destroy the lives on people in this life.

We as Muslims shouldn’t curse Yazid and the killers of Hussain, rather we should curse and seek refuge from the attributes that made people kill Imam Hussain.

9. The danger of *taqlid*.

Something I feel like doesn’t get talked about when it comes to the massacre at Karbala is how the killers of Hussain were doing *taqlid* of their leaders, something that is a vital part of shiism.

Instead of thinking for themselves they just assumed that their leaders knew what they were doing and therefore went along with their orders which lead to the killing and of the descendants of the Prophet.

Shias talk about Karbala every year, yet they are the biggest followers of *taqlid* not only in the religious sphere but also in the political.

When it comes to politics, we see how they are blind followers of Iran and legitimize whatever tyrannical acts they do, whether it be slaughtering civilians in Syria or oppressing their own population. They cried when the Saudi government executed a Shia scholar, yet they are quite when Iran imprisons, kills and executes Shia scholars.

They cried when the American government forbade American hosting services to host websites connected with the Iranian government, yet the Iranian government have banned Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Also, they are forbidden Shia reformist scholars like Mostafa Tabatabaie to have a website and even telegram channel.

The reason why Shias don't protest these injustices is *taqlid*, the same taqlid that the killers of Hussain followed.

And when it comes to the religious sphere, how can you do *taqlid* of someone whose office hides their real scholarly opinion? How do you know they are teaching you the correct Islamic history and theology when they don't dare to say the truth about fasting on Ashura which is a simple matter of jurisprudence?

What will you say to *Allah* on the day of judgment when he asks you about the people you blindly followed? God says in the holy *Quran*:

The Day their faces will be turned about in the Fire, they will say, "How we wish we had obeyed Allah and obeyed the Messenger." And they will say, "Our Lord, indeed we obeyed our masters and our dignitaries, and they led us astray from the [right] way. Our Lord, give them double the punishment and curse them with a great curse." (33:66-68)¹⁸

10. Did the battle of Karbala save Islam?

Some people argue that the battle of Karbala saved Islam, this is false because Allah will protect this religion from its enemies. As He says in the holy Quran:

Indeed, it is We who sent down the message [i.e., the Qur'ān], and indeed, We will be its guardian. (15:9)¹⁹

Also, the battle of Karbala failed with its objective since it didn't cause any political change just as the revolt of Abdullah ibn Zubair (d. 692) didn't cause the downfall of the Umayyads. One could argue that if Hussain ibn Ali succeeded in taking the caliphate, he would have saved the caliphate as an institution, but unfortunately, he didn't.

¹⁸ *Sahih International translation.*

¹⁹ *Sahih International translation.*

Therefore, one can not argue that Hussain saved Islam because the Umayyids went on to rule for hundreds of years and God has specifically promised to protect Islam and its message.

11. Conclusion.

The conclusion one should reach after reading this short essay is that Ashura as its commemorated by the Shias today is nothing but an innovation that goes against the essence of Islam.

It has its roots in Iranian pre-Islamic culture and has crept into the religion thanks to new converts to Islam.

It's a commemoration that lacks logic, because why should we cry and hit ourselves for someone that is promised paradise? Rather we should cry for ourselves that are living in this world and has no guarantee of the next!

And finally, I ask the reader to reflect upon these two Quranic verses:

And when it is said to them, "Come to what Allah has revealed and to the Messenger," they say, "Sufficient for us is that upon which we found our fathers." Even though their fathers knew nothing, nor were they guided? O you who have believed, upon you is [responsibility for] yourselves. Those who have gone astray will not harm you when you have been guided. To Allah is your return all together; then He will inform you of what you used to do. (5:104-105)²⁰

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Muharram – 2021/1443

²⁰ *Sahih International translation.*

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