THE KARBALA PARADIGM IN IRANIAN SHITTE MEMORY: QUESTIONS ON TRADITION, NARRATIVE, RITUAL, AND PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The Battle of Karbala has been constructed, in primary and secondary historical sources, as the watershed event in the narratives of Shi'ite Islam. This project has sought to inquire about and raise questions regarding the role of this battle and its narrative in the Shi'ite collective memory of Iran, which has today the largest Shi'ite population of any Islamic country.

In this project, I have attempted mainly to ask questions about two paradigms in relation to the Karbala Legend: first, the question of continuities in folklore and mythology, and second, the question of the role, if any, of the Karbala Legend in historical and collective memory.

The definition of myth and mythic time has been central to this project. I have construed the term myth to apply to a narrative which occurs in mythic time - a time outside of or parallel to ordinary time and everyday life. This project has also addressed questions related to verbal art, performance, and performativity.

The concept of performance might be one useful approach to the study of verbal art, with the implied assumption that all verbal art is delivered as performance, despite the fact that scholars often encounter verbal art forms as texts. This project has also dealt with the historical development of the Karbala narrative. Questions of oral tradition and
primary historical writings are addressed.

Throughout its history, ta'ziya, mourning for the martyrs of Karbala, has held different connotations of performance, which are addressed here. Other performance forms, such as rowza, are also discussed. I began this project with questions about the place and role of performance in society, and more specifically, about the socio-politically subversive roles that performance might play. I chose the Karbala Legend because it seemed to be an obvious choice of a narrative which could be approached as a social text.
To my mother, Shahla Sohail,
and to my grandparents,
Abolghassem Sohail and Ozra Moazzeni (Farah)
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On the ninth and tenth of the Islamic month of Muharram, in 680 of the Common Era, a battle occurred on the plains of Karbala, in present-day Iraq. The forces of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, marched into Mesopotamia from the Hijaz, or the Arabian peninsula to meet the army of the Umayyad caliph Yazid, coming from Damascus in present-day Syria. The argument between the two sides was regarding the succession to the Prophet Muhammad in the form Caliphate, the institution of the leadership of the umma, or the Islamic community. The followers of Husayn, it is thought, believed that the Prophet intended that the succession pass through the family of the Prophet, while the Umayyads, in power in Damascus after the 660s, believed that the succession was intended to be based on nomination.

The question of succession to the leadership of the community had been a problem, it seems, from the time of the death of the Prophet in 632 C.E. onward and various inquiries into the socio-political issues of the Islamic world in the seventh century have been made by scholars. This battle, it seems, was but one of
the events of the early Islamic period which gave rise to (proto-)Shi‘ite ("partisanship") sentiments and created divisions both of allegiance and of tradition in the general Islamic framework.

While heterodoxy and localized belief systems could be thought to have existed since this time, it is in the sixteenth century that Shi‘ism is consolidated as an official state religion of Safavid Iran. In today’s Iran, approximately ninety percent of the population adheres to one of the various forms of Shi‘ism, and most often the so-called Twelver branch. While no other country in the Islamic world has such a large majority of Shi‘ites as does today’s Iran, elements of Shi‘ism can be found almost everywhere, including those areas which I term as Greater Iran: the culturally Iranian areas of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and South Asia.

The Battle of Karbala has been constructed, in primary and secondary historical sources, as the watershed event in the narratives of Shi‘ism, and specifically in its repertoire of martyr narratives. Husayn, often called Shah al-Shuhada, or king of the martyrs, often seems to be constructed as the ideal hero-martyr of Shi‘ite traditions. This project, which has been in progress since March 2002, has sought to inquire about and raise questions regarding the role of this battle in Iranian Shi‘ite collective memory. It seems that the narratives
surrounding this battle have been maintained through systems such as collective participation in performance, which in certain eras have been sponsored by the state apparatus.

The chapters that follow are descriptions of the questions raised in the last fourteen months and some of the scholarship available on those questions. Chapter one discusses collective memory and the continuity of tradition. Chapter two further discusses questions of continuity of tradition, especially in regard to myth and mythic families. Chapter three intends to deal with the historical development of the Karbala narrative and its communication. Chapter four looks to performance forms and the idea of performativity, a concept from the field of linguistics.
CHAPTER 2

MEMORY, SYMBOLISM, CONTEXTUALIZATION, AND TRADITION

In this project, I have attempted mainly to ask questions about two paradigms in relation to the Karbala Legend: first, the question of continuities in folklore and mythology, and second, the question of the role, if any, of the Karbala Legend in historical and collective memory. Here, I look to the question of memory. Sociologists and social psychologists have studied the workings of collective and historical memory.

First, collective and historical memory should be defined, and perhaps distinguished from one another. Both Maurice Halbwachs and Paul Connerton begin their works on collective memory by distinguishing it from individual and historical memory, although both assert that the latter two forms of memory do inform the former. In order for an experience called collective memory to occur, there first needs to be knowledge of the past (Connerton 2), which may be thought of as beginning on the individual level. This knowledge of the past may be formed from textual historical writing, oral narrative, and in more recent times, technology. This knowledge will inform the memory, which in turn will inform the experience of the present, and thus images of the past commonly tend to
legitimate a present social order (Connerton 3). Rituals, such as commemorative ceremonies, may be the bridge that not only sustains the memory, but takes it from the level of individual memory to that of a collective memory.

Halbwachs also describes a distinction between collective and historical memory. He claims that history is unitary – thus while there is one history, and therefore one historical memory, there are various collective memories, and that the experience of the same historical event may be a completely different memory (85). Hence, to use Halbwachs' analogy, the memory of the Franco-Prussian Wars of the nineteenth century may be completely different in the collective memory of the French and German nation-states. There is some validity to this argument, perhaps mostly in the idea that a single event may be experienced and remembered in multiple ways. However, it seems to be an essential flaw to believe that one can know a single historical event without the influence of experience, context, et cetera of the thinker, writer, reader, or listener. Thus, this distinction, based on a positivist view of history, becomes moot.

Connerton has also discussed a differentiation between social memory and historical reconstruction. He writes that historical reconstruction is the work of historians which is completely independent from social memory. While he does
go on to qualify that there may be at times links between the two, for Connerton, it also seems to be a flawed assumption to think that this link is tenuous at best. He gives the example of historical writing on the Crusades.

He compares historical writing contemporary to the Crusades to modern scholarship. He concludes that modern “Muslim” historians have adopted their sense about the intensity of the Crusades [as does the “Western” scholarship, which is of course a flawed dichotomy, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this project] from medieval Christian historians rather than medieval Muslim historians who do not describe the Crusades as a definitive moment in history (Connerton 13-16). I would argue rather that social memory plays a more important role in historical writing and thinking than Connerton or Halbwachs are willing to admit. In fact, it colors many of our thoughts and choices in daily life, which is why this project focuses on collective memory as one of its paradigms. History and historical scholarship are certainly not exempt from this coloring.

I will suggest here a distinction which has been more useful for at least this project. I will call historical memory a text such as Narshakhi’s tenth-century *Tarikh-i Bukhara*, a local history, which may inform us, who are removed from that society and time, as to what kinds of collective memory people may have had. I will construe collective memory as a more general concept, and apply it
here to specifically our contemporary time. Therefore, I will describe historical and social memories as subsets of collective memory. It should be noted that the line between historical and social memory is quite blurred.

Connerton goes on to assert that part of social collective memory is ‘habit-memory,’ which he distinguishes from personal and cognitive memory by defining it as the ability to form meaningful narrative sequences and not to simply recall isolated events (26)\(^1\). It seems that it is this ability that may both lead to and be sustained by ritual and performance.

Connerton asserts that collective social memory is sustained through authoritative structures and unconscious elements (1)\(^2\). Thus, one might think of the ‘authoritative structure’ as the propaganda of legitimization. In the case of the Karbala Legend, commemorations existed before the sixteenth century, but it is with the rise of the Safavids, their propaganda, and the consolidation of Shi'ite Islam as the state religion that ritual performances such as rowza-khwani (homiletic sermon) and dasta (public mourning procession) are thought to become more prominent. The prominence of such ceremonies appears to be both an

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\(^1\) Dr. Mills asks the pertinent question whether this idea of habit-memory could be construed as conscious (analytic and/or analogic) or part of the subconscious, such as Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus.” While Connerton seems to be aware of Bourdieu in general, his points on habit-memory draw more so on Freud.

\(^2\) Given this idea, Connerton might say that habit-memory is working more at the subconscious level than at an analytic level.
increase in number and in sponsorship by the authoritative structure of the court. The consolidation of the disparate elements which make up the modern ta‘ziya and various other commemorative ceremonies of Karbala appears to begin under the Safavids. Therefore, society’s memory seems to be largely controlled by and to largely condition the hierarchy of power in place at a given moment.

Connerton has also used the seemingly synonymous terms ‘master-narrative’ and ‘background narrative’ which I will apply to the Karbala Legend as the epitome of Shi‘ite legends related to martyrdom. So, for example, while the Rowzat al-Shuhada, the sixteenth-century Persian maqta‘ of Wa‘iz-Kashifi, may narrate various martyrdom stories, it is the martyrdom of Husayn and his kinsmen on the plains of Karbala which is the backdrop and comparison for all other stories.

In his work on collective memory, Connerton has devoted an entire section to the use of commemorative ceremonies in the creation of collective memory. This section of his work is especially interesting for questions which I have raised in this project. I would suggest a loose feedback model in which the memory influences the (creation of the) ceremony and its form, which in turn influences, sustains, and affects the memory. Connerton here asserts that a process of ‘mythicization’ transforms historical events into unchanging and unchangeable substances, in which the contents are represented as if they were not subject to
change of any kind (Connerton 42). I would argue that an historical survey might show that these elements are certainly subject to change over a long period of time, but that first, they do not appear to change in a short span of time such as the life of a human being, and second, I would add that the author’s point about the representation of these elements, as unchanging for example, is a key concept. Connerton goes on to argue that this mythicization (and I would add, ritualization) makes the master or background narrative more than a story told, and it becomes a “cult enacted” (43).

Connerton describes ritual as performative and formalized language\(^3\). While he views both ritual and myth as collective symbolic texts, myth does not do that which ritual essentially does, which is to specify the relationship between performer and performance. He also asserts that ritual action might be interpreted as exemplifying certain cultural values (53-58). I would add to this argument that it is the maintenance of the collective memory of a specific event, the invention of a tradition, and its related ritual action that might point to the cultural values that Connerton mentions. In turn, while as I mention above, the idea that there is a representation of elements as unchanging is a key, to see changes in the elements

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\(^3\) Because refers to him here, I believe that Connerton is using the word “performative” in Austin’s sense of the creation of reality through language. In chapter four, I will further discuss performance and performativity.
of myth, ritual, and their related collective memories over a long period of time will point to cultural values which are specific to certain eras and socio-political situations.

The perception of time related to myth and ritual may be a part of the representation of their elements as unchanging. Modern writers have noted that with the Karbala legend, for example, it is a situation that is outside of ‘real time,’ in which human beings perceive both change and its inevitability. Schubel, for example, writes that the events of the Karbala Legend are not only historical but also metaphistorical. They seem to stand outside of real time and even parallel to it (71).

The performative and formalized language of ritual tends to use plurality and collectiveness which leads to collective action and a corporate personality (Connerton 58). This corporate personality appears to be an important concept in the distinction of memory as a personal and as a collective paradigm. It also appears to be paramount for a myth to first, make its way into the collective memory, and second, to be sustained there, in whichever form. Connerton goes on to assert that this sustenance occurs by modes of performance, specifically, language and bodily attributes such as postures, gestures, and movements (59). In the case of the ta'ziya, for example, one might think of the musicality of the ‘righteous’ to not only distinguish them from the ‘evil,’ but also to harmonize
them with the ‘us’ and ‘our lot.’ This musicality may distinguish the space and time in which the ta’ziya occurs, placing it beyond the daily unmusical and unpoetic speech.

In the realm of language, Connerton writes that ritual tends to use ‘canonical parallelism.’ Further, he suggests that a restricted lexical field, syntax, and style suggests that this might be common feature of oral poetry and ritual (60). While I am unsure as to his assertion regarding this link between ritual and oral poetry, it may be this restricted language use, which in time may appear archaic compared to the quotidian use of language, that helps to create an illusion or representation of unchanging elements in myth and ritual.

Commemorative ceremonies in particular tend to have explicit references to prototypical persons and events, whether historical, mythological, or both (Connerton 61). As a subset of commemorative ceremonies, he discusses re-enactment rites, which he describes as tending to be calendrical, verbal, and gesturally repetitive. As an example, he points to Muharram self-flagellation rites and the frenzied grief that accompanies them (61-2). Therefore, one might point to restricted and necessarily repetitive language use in addition to the repetitive

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\text{ Drawing on Jakobsen, Connerton describes canonical parallelism as “where certain similarities between successive verbal sequences are compulsory or enjoy a high preference” (Jakobsen 1966, 399).}\]
nature of bodily movements to create a seemingly unchanging myth or ritual which, due to this characteristic, is able to find its way into social memory and to stay there.

Finally, Halbwachs has written on the relationship of the group to the individual in the maintenance and creation of the social memory. Groups, he asserts, provide their individual members with frameworks in which their memories are localized, thereby providing a mental space which refers back to the material space which the group occupies. In Halbwachs, a foundational part of his argument is that no collective memory can exist without a “socially specific spatial framework.” Connerton, building on this idea which in Halbwachs ignores the connection of conveyance and sustenance by ritual performance to collective social memory, furthers the notion by arguing for the importance of these actions, their specified language, and their particular gestural forms (in Connerton 37).

Religious Symbolism

Pascal Boyer describes four domains of representation in religion: the existence and powers of supernatural entities, a set of moral rules, notions of group identity, and particular types of experience or emotional states (in Whitehouse, 2001 57). One could argue that the paradigm of the innocent hero-martyr studied in this project pertains especially to the latter three categories. The hero-martyr is often morally righteous (which is a part of his innocence), and
could be used to reinforce the moral rules as represented in a certain religious framework. The hero-martyr and his story may also reinforce notions of group identity.

For example, the Karbala Battle is often described as a watershed in the Shi'a-Sunni dichotomy, both by modern writers (Sandra Mackey, 1996) as well as groups in history such as the Safavids, interested in the use of Shi'i propagandists to attain their own ends. In fact, the idea of the “party of ‘Ali” and the dispute over the leadership of the umma had been in course since the time of Abu Bakr’s Caliphate (632-634). The notion of the innocent hero-martyr as embodied by Husayn and his kinsmen, faced with the “bad” or “evil” Yazid and the treacherous people of Kufa, as well as the death of Husayn securing paradise for the faithful as described in magtals or ta‘ziyas, seems to help to reinforce a Shi'i group identity beyond a general Islamic identity.

Finally, the Karbala legend could be described by Boyer’s third notion of representation in religion: that of particular types of experience or emotional states. From the commemorations of Buyid times, which are often described as violent, bloody, and emotional, to contemporary ta‘ziya (ritual theatre), rowza (homiletic sermon), sina-zani (ritualized beating of one’s chest) and zanjir-zani (self-flagellation), this legend and its central innocent martyr-hero, are connected to emotional experiences involving lamentation and the self-infliction of pain.
Using Boyer's framework as presented here, one might be able to compare innocent martyr-heroes of other traditions (i.e., Seyavash, Attis, Balder, Tammuz, et cetera).

Another interesting and possibly useful notion presented by Boyer is that of how cultural transmission occurs on a psychological level. He argues that often it is not the concept itself that is passed on but the cues that led people to build the concept (in Whitehouse, 2001 76). This notion could be useful in asking questions both about the workings of historical memory and the possibilities for continuities in tradition. For example, it might be possible to argue that in the Eastern Iranian and Central Asian areas, the “cues” relating to the lamentation over the death of the innocent hero-martyr Seyavash were still in existence during and after the process of Islamicization, and during the consolidation of heterodox Islamic beliefs. For example, in tenth-century Bukhara, Narshakhi writes that people are sacrificing roosters during the celebration of Noruz, a practice associated with lamentation for Seyavash, and that their calendar system is based on the time in which Seyavash passed through the gates of Bukhara (Yarshater in Chelkowski 90).

Christina Toren comments on the short comings of social anthropology. She argues against that which she terms an a priori distinction between sign and symbol, a common anthropological distinction. She goes on to write that scholars
should abandon the notion that to analyze ritual is to analyze its meaning as a relationship between metaphors. At most, such an analysis might be one step towards understanding the power of ritual (in Boyer 1993).

While it would be naïve to argue that there is never any symbolism in ritual, the notion that the ritual act is *only* symbolic, standing for something besides itself, is a process of cognitive construction in people over time. To illustrate her point, she discusses a Fijian ritual of drinking kava, which according to the adults in the group, has a symbolic value, standing for something beyond itself, while according to the children, it is nothing more than the drinking of kava (in Boyer 1993: 147).

**Contextualization of Discourse and Narrative**

Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban have described a method of cultural analysis, which, while convenient to the researcher, may be problematic to a comprehensive understanding of meaning and structure. They describe this approach as viewing elements of culture as simply a text or an ensemble of texts (essentially, extracted from its context) that can be read or analyzed in order to draw a boundary around it and to inquire into its structure and meaning, without thought to larger on-going social processes. While it might be convenient to do
this, to turn a piece of culture, such as a performance, into a text and to extract it from its usual framework is to rob it of the spatiotemporal frames in which its forms and meanings are constructed and affected (Silverstein and Urban 1).

In this project, I admit that this decontextualization might have occurred, since I have looked to these myths and rituals outside of their usual framework, and mainly from the perspective of secondary sources. However, my goal here has been to raise questions about the connections between and amongst these myths and rituals, and I do not pretend to have comprehensively understood them within their context. Nevertheless, Silverstein and Urban’s warning to the researcher is important to bear in mind, and may be applied to some of the secondary sources in raising questions regarding their approach.

Silverstein and Urban’s edited volume deals with (de)contextualization and entextualization of the text-artifact in various instances of culture. Thus, beyond the researcher who might decontextualize a situation for purposes of convenience or a thematic approach, techniques of decontextualization and recontextualization are often used by cultural participants in order to create a durable, transmittable “thing” called culture, or at least, its image. Thus, the text-artifact might be seen as a metadiscursive action (2). From this idea, one might view narrative as a by-product of this metadiscursive action, while also acting as a support mechanism for it.
In the same volume, Richard Bauman has written on Mexican folk drama and contextualization. Bauman argues that decontextualization and recontextualization of discourse are essential mechanisms of social and cultural continuity. A useful key, he postulates, is the concept of performance, because this form tends to be the most markedly entextualized, memorable, and repeatable of all communicative discourse (in Silverstein and Urban 1996 301). This is a fascinating concept in the question of continuities - both the reason for and the workings of these continuities, if in fact they do exist.

Continuity of Tradition

Ideologies and their communications are complex paradigms. In the Karbala Legend, some scholars have found a certain continuity of tradition from pre-Islamic legends. The connection between the martyrdom of Husayn and that of Jesus as drawn by Bausani (see chapter 4) is interesting and merits further research. Additionally, at a very basic level, one wonders, why and how have heterodox traditions developed and managed to gain strength and importance.

Ehsan Yarshater comments on the possible connections between two pre-Islamic legends which may have influenced the Karbala Legend. One is the Ayadegar-i Zararan (“Memorial of Zarar”), a middle Persian work, perhaps surviving from a Parthian gosan (minstrel) oral tradition. Zarar, valiant defender of the Zoroastrian church and its holy king, Vishtasp, is slain at the hand of
Bidafarsh, brother of Arjasp (king of the Chionites and enemy of Vishtasp). Zarer and his kinsmen already know the outcome of the situation, as the sage Jamasp has told them beforehand. Yarshater points out that ‘Abbas, Husayn’s brother, makes an elegiac speech in some versions of the Karbala Legend narrative, which makes it clear that he knows the outcome of the situation. Zarer’s death is followed by a lamentation by his son Bastur/Nastur who volunteers to fight to avenge his father’s death. The poetic qualities of the lament lead Yarshater to believe that it may have been sung in Zoroastrian circles as a devotional and cathartic activity (Yarshater in Chelkowski 1979, 88-90).

Yarshater also draws parallels between the Seyavash legend and that of Karbala. He cites Narshakhi’s tenth-century History of Bukhara in which the author records songs, laments, and rituals of sacrifice relating to Seyavash which indicate evidence of a funerary cult in Sogdiana. Al-Biruni attests to the marking of the Khwarazmian calendar by the supposed entrance of Seyavash into the city (Yarshater in Chelkowski 1979, 90-91). Archaeological diggings near Panjikent (seventy km east of Samarqand) present evidence of such a funerary cult. A prince displayed on wall paintings is thought to be Seyavash (in Azarpay). While this is possible, the paintings do not definitively show this (see chapter 3).
Additionally, in Firdausi, Seyavash has a prophetic dream of the events to come, and describes them to his wife Farigis/Farangis in the form of a farewell lament (Yarshater in Chelkowski 1979, 92). This is reminiscent of both the prophetic laments seen in certain narrations of the Karbala Legend as well as Yarshater’s description of Ayadegar-i Zararan. Furthermore, Bausani, citing Virolleaud from the early twentieth century, describes a ta‘ziya in which the brother of Shahrbanu, Husayn’s legendary wife and the daughter of the last Sasanian monarch, says to his troops who are engaged in the defense of Husayn’s kinsmen, “Seyavash’s blood is boiling.” While in general Virolleaud observed very few ta‘ziya references to Seyavash, in this case, a parallel was certainly being made (Bausani 1959/2000, 354).

Beyond the Seyavash-Husayn connection, Yarshater draws a parallel between Seyavash and Tammuz, the youthful Mesopotamian god who died and was reborn annually with dying and reviving vegetation (Yarshater in Chelkowski 1979, 93). This parallel might be strengthened by the presence of a certain herb in the Shahnama. Afrasyab orders Seyavash’s blood to be shed over a barren rock, from which there immediately grows an herb called khun-i Seyavashun (Yarshater 92, citing 1934 Burukhim edition, page 664, lines 2514-15). The possible connections of these myths will be explored further in chapter 3.
In the fifteenth century, al-Suyuti, probably a Sunnite, in Tarikh al-khulafa (History of the Caliphs) wrote of the horizon becoming red for six months after the battle at Karbala, and this red, which was seen everyday since the event, had not been seen before. Bausani draws a parallel to the myth of Adonis in which the detail regarding the red of the horizon is the same as in al-Suyuti’s description: it is colored by the blood of the martyred hero (Bausani 1959/2000, 355). While this is a fascinating parallel, in checking al-Suyuti’s Arabic text with Ameneh Gazerani, who has studied and translated this part of al-Suyuti’s description, no explicit reference to the red of the horizon being colored by the blood of any Karbala martyr is made (Ameneh Gazerani, personal communication, November 30, 2002). However, it may be that Bausani’s reading of the text led him to believe that al-Suyuti was drawing on this reference, perhaps based on his knowledge of a version of the Adonis myth.

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5 As Parvaneh Pourshariati points out, it is not clear if the editions of al-Suyuti used by Bausani and Ameneh Gazerani are the same, and the difference in the text may be accounted for by the use of a different edition.
CHAPTER 3

THE MYTHOLOGICAL TOPOS OF THE YOUNG INNOCENT

In the Karbala legend, and specifically narratives surrounding Husayn, one might find some parallels in the Mediterranean and pre-Islamic Iranian myths of the young innocent who is unjustly killed. The stories of Iraj, Forud, and above all, Seyavash, which appear in Firdausi's *Shahnama* as well as in popular literature and folklore, might provide some interesting parallels regarding questions about continuities of tradition, as might the myths of Adonis, Tamuz, and Attis in the Mediterranean traditions. Because the *Shahnama* has been treated by scholars as a pillar of the literature of Greater Iran and a reservoir of its mythology, I consider here the topos of the young innocent in the *Shahnama* as well as its possible partial sources in Mediterranean mythology.

Funk and Wagnalls dictionary of folklore describes legend as a narrative which was at some point the description of the life of a saint or martyr, but which has become a narrative, supposedly based on facts, and which may integrate non-

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6 The definition of the term folklore and the various aspects it might entail is a problematic this project has not attempted to address. Here, I construe folklore as oral narrative or written narrative with roots of an oral nature.
factual elements. The line between myth and legend, the dictionary says, is often vague, but main distinguishing element is that the principal actors of myth are usually divine. This description seems to be grounded in Greek mythology and European and Christian paradigms.

Hélène Tuzet, whose work is also based on Greek mythology, offers a definition perhaps more useful for this project. She writes that myth is in the first place a story [narrative] which occurs in mythic time and which the central character is an hero who is either somehow divine, or, surpasses ordinary human beings in some or all of his traits. For Tuzet, mythic time is a time in which divinities and humans mixed (13). This concept certainly seems to arise from the repertoire of Greek mythology.

For purposes of this project, I construe mythic time as a time which is outside of or parallel to the time of quotidian life. A yearly return to a time, such as the ninth and tenth of Muharram, in which one steps out of daily life, might be one way to construct mythic time. While the characters of the martyr narratives of Shi‘ism, including those related to Karbala, are not official divinities, it could certainly be said that they have some traits which could categorize them as semi-divine figures, usually constructed as ideal or perfect, which gives them super-human qualities.
One way to approach the problematic of the young innocent, a topos seen in Mediterranean, Iranian, and Indian mythologies, is to ask questions about continuities of tradition. For example, Hélène Tuzet has written on the myth and cult of Adonis in Greek traditions and has compared her findings with the context of other Mediterranean myths, such as those of Hyacinth, Daphne, Attis, and Tammuz. She has created a paradigm in which these myths are grouped together as the “mythic family of Adonis” (38-39).

The myth of Adonis, claims Tuzet, fits in the most descriptively “restricted” category of myths as described by Mircea Eliade – that of the assassinated divinity. These gods seem to appear later than the cosmogonic gods in mythic time. Additionally, there seems to be a link between the violent death of gods such as Adonis and a creative, life-giving or life-renewing force. For example, Adonis is born from a tree, and the blood shed upon his death gives birth to the anemone flower. As in this myth, this life-giving force seems usually to have vegetal connotations, so, for example, the god will often live on, symbolically, in the form of a plant (13-14).

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7 Dr. Mills has asked whether Adonis is considered a god or simply an immortalized human (May 2003). Given the sources and my very limited knowledge of Greek myth, I would say that the line between divinity and immortalized human in the ancient Greek and Mediterranean worlds is quite blurred, and it would depend on both the version of the myth and the belief of the specific cult.
In terms of the connection of myth and ritual, Tuzet points out that a constant problematic is the debate as to whether myth results from ritual or ritual from myth (27), although one might say that this was more a concern of scholars in the nineteenth century than today (Margaret Mills, personal communication, May 2003). When thinking about non-literary *Shahnama* traditions, and specifically rituals that may have been attached to young innocents (such as the Seyavashun rituals mentioned below), this can also be a concern. To live these myths, through ritual, writes Tuzet, is to step out of profane time and enter into a time which is qualitatively different – being both primordial and indefinitely recuperable.

Furthermore, Tuzet asks the important question about the “modern texts” of these myths\(^8\): is a transformed and adapted myth the same myth or another one? When can one say that a myth is dead or that it has been transferred to a different tradition? (13-14). The lines of these distinctions are most certainly blurred. In the context of the *Shahnama* and its related traditions, one could ask such questions related both to Firdausi’s interpretations of earlier myths as well as

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\(^8\) Tuzet’s choice to read a cultural item as a text could be critiqued using arguments made to by Silverstein and Urban about entextualization (see chapter 2); nonetheless, I found her problematization of the transformation and adaptation of myth to be a relevant one.
later interpolations and the resultant nature of the text as a palimpsest. Additionally, in terms of the questions raised in this project, one might ask if and how pre-Islamic Mediterranean and Iranian traditions transferred to a new socio-cultural framework in the Islamic period.

According to Tuzet, Theocrates describes a funerary cult for Adonis, which included women’s lamentations, hair-pulling, and chest-beating (as a joining of Aphrodite’s grief) (27). Narshakhi’s Tarikh-i Bukhara gives information of a possibly similar funerary cult for Seyavash and perhaps Forud, in Soghdian areas (see below). In the Greek and Eastern Mediterranean region, Tuzet points to the religious syncreticism and “confusion” of the first centuries of the Common Era as a reason for the assimilation of elements from the Adonis story into other cults, such as Osiris, Attis, and Isis.

She finds that in the Common Era, Adonis often becomes androgynous (31-32). This is an interesting point in relation to myths such as Seyavash, Yusuf, or the prince in Sandbadnama, where issues of gender and “contamination” of a

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9 Dick Davis has suggested that changes to the Shahnama after Firdausi’s lifetime have resulted in a text which is like a palimpsest, a manuscript which is incompletely erased and written over, so that one may see two or more manuscripts at the same time (personal communication, January 2003).
young man by femininity, which are sometimes described positively (Yusuf and Zulaykha) and sometimes negatively (Sandbadnama), are raised (Najmabadi, 2000, 158).

As mentioned above, Tuzet has created a paradigm which she terms the “mythic family of Adonis.” Myths, she argues, can be grouped into families and one can find mythological “cousins” of more or less proximity (38). In this family, she has identified two branches. The first is that of a young, innocent, and beautiful human being, loved by a deity, who is killed or lost, and in most cases, it is the deity that is the involuntary cause of death. Upon death, the young innocent is transferred to a vegetal orientation (plant or tree), conferring upon him immortality. The story of Jesus might also be included in Tuzet’s paradigm, although she herself does not do so. The theme of wrongfully killed innocent young man, often construed as a divinity, is certainly applicable here (see chapter three for discussion of Bausani’s comparison of Jesus and Husayn).

The other branch of this family is the young innocent hero who faces a monster figure, whether s/he kills it or is killed by it. This either confers immortality upon him/her or returns the hero to a regular life and s/he subsequently oftentimes becomes the object of a cult, which alternates between
joy and pain (39). Connotations of immortality and renewal of life should be a key in understanding ritual, commemorative ceremonies, and the primordial and indefinitely recuperable time as described by Tuzet related to these notions.

One of the Greek myths that has some possibly interesting parallels to the *Shahnama* traditions is that of Attis. The blood of Attis upon his death fertilizes the growth of an almond tree, and Seyavash’s blood fertilizes the growth of a green plant or a red tulip, also depending on the version. Additionally, a point which Attis and Seyavash have in common, and which is missing from certain versions of Adonis, is the rejection of a mother/lover\(^\text{10}\). In various versions of the Attis story, Sybil is either his mother, his lover, or both. In some accounts, he rejects her advances and it is her vengeance that kills him (39). It seems that the parallel to Sudabeh’s role in the story of Seyavash is unmistakable, and it is certainly plausible to argue for a connection at the level of a continuity of mythological tradition.

In some versions of the Attis myth, such as that of Arnobius as recounted by Sorensen, Attis dies from loss of blood when he cuts off his genitalia in a mad frenzy under a pine tree. From his blood grows a violet. From the blood of his

\(^{10}\) In the commonest version of the Adonis story, he rejects Aphrodite to go on the hunt, which kills him (Dick Davis, personal communication, March 2003), however in others, he goes on the hunt during Aphrodite’s absence.
bride-to-be, grows a single almond. Following this death, Agdestis, who is sometimes his father, his mother, or his lover as his sex and role change throughout the story, requests that Attis be revived, and the gods grant that Attis’ body should never decay. Agdestis then establishes a funerary cult for Attis with annual rites (Sorensen 25).

In this aspect, one can make the link to the Adonisite family as proposed by Tuzet. In his analysis, Sorensen makes several points which may be relevant to the Adonisite family, the Seyavash myth, and in turn, one of the questions of this project, namely the possible overlay of the topos of the unjustly killed young innocent from pre-Islamic times onto Iranian Shi’ite traditions in the Islamic period.

He points to several themes which “recur in inverted form” (25). In the beginning of the myth, divine or human life derives from a non-life form (such as a rock). In the end, vegetal life originates from death. At the beginning, seduction or rape is prevented, and at the end, marriage is prevented. Seyavash’s death certainly leads to vegetal life, his seduction is prevented by being sent away from Iran, and his marriage is ended abruptly.

Seyavash does have offspring, and thus one might be able to make the argument that this makes him different from the Adonisite family. However, when the situation, at least in the Shahnama, is regarded more closely, one sees
that Kay Khusrau, his son by Farigis, despite even reigning for a time, is described as having no father and no son, and he ends by choosing an ascetic path and the renunciation of material life. His other son by Jarira, Forud, is tricked and killed by the Iranian army. Thus, while Seyavash is able to reproduce before his death, his lineage is ended abruptly in the generation subsequent to him.

There are also contradictions in the Attis story which seem to be based on the characters’ sex or gender. In Arnobius’ version, Attis is the son of Nana, daughter of the river god Sangarius and a pomegranate which grew from Agdestis’ blood when he lost his male attributes and became purely female. In his female form, wine is used to keep information from Agdestis, while wine makes Attis reveal everything. Agdestis’ emasculation is described as the temperance of a wild and libidinous being, while Attis’ emasculation is due to a wild frenzy.

Nana, when pregnant, is shut up to starve to death, but survives on vegetal food (apples). Attis, by order of his grandfather Sangarius, is exposed, but survives on animal food (goat milk). Nana’s death is prevented and birth is the result. Procreation is prevented for Attis and death is the result. Sorensen concludes that opposing themes such as life and death, male and female, savagery and civilization, and vegetal and animal procreation, are the building blocks of the myth as described by Arnobius (25-26). These themes, in different contextualizations, might be seen in the other Adonisite myths and in the
Shahname traditions. The question which this project has raised, but has not been able to answer, is whether these themes have been carried into the Islamic framework in the martyr narratives of Shi’ism.

As I have mentioned earlier, in this project, I have construed the term myth to apply to a narrative which occurs in mythic time – a time outside of or parallel to ordinary time and everyday life. In this vein, I would think of the repertoire of martyr narrative in Shi’ism to be a subset or a certain type of myth. While here I have looked to the Karbala narrative, most of the narratives in the repertoire seem to have a millennial approach, which would set them beyond the general category of myth.

The usual link, already being made in Antiquity, is made between Adonis and Tamuz, a myth probably of Babylonian origin, later propagated in Phoenicia, mostly amongst Jews and Syrians, according to Tuzet (29-30, citing Atallah, citing Origenius). Tamuz, as the young beloved of the goddess Ishtar, died each year and his lover went looking for him in the “other world”. During her absence, interestingly, Atallah writes that both people and animals were believed to become sterile (Tuzet 30). Again, connotations of fertility, sterility, death, and renewal are themes that are seen repeatedly in these myths.
In the *Shahnama* of Firdausi and its related traditions, one finds several examples of the young innocent who is unjustly killed. Three striking examples are Iraj, Seyavash, and Forud. In Firdausi’s account, these stories may be juxtaposed, compared, and contrasted both for their elements and for their meanings in the larger context of the epic. For example, elements within the stories may be compared to the mythic family of Adonis as described by Tuzet; furthermore, the location of the stories in Firdausi’s version and their differences from one another are important for the structure of the epic which appears to be based on a steady decline of order in the world.\(^{11}\)

Within Firdausi’s account, it is certainly with the story of the sons of Feraydun that the reader first sees a disunity over the Iranian realm, which plagues the rest of the epic. Feraydun’s division of the realm, and the subsequent rage of Salm and Tur against their favored brother, begins the troubles between Iran and Turan and in some moments, Rum.

There may be some evidence for a ritual, *kin-i Iraj* (revenge for Iraj), at some point in the pre-Islamic period; however, the evidence I have seen so far, which consists of references in passing without citation (Bahram Beyzaie in

\(^{11}\) The relation of these stories to the structure of the *Shahnama* epic was treated in a paper I wrote in March 2003, on which this chapter is partly based. As this issue is beyond the scope of the project at hand, I do not discuss it here.
seems to be too scarce to draw any conclusions about such a ritual. While it might
be plausible to think that there is a multiplicity of traditions related to Iraj’s story
outside of Firdausi’s account, further research is needed to verify more precisely
what these may have been.

If such a ritual existed at any point, Tuzet’s question regarding the origin
of myth and ritual, and that which she terms the “chicken and egg” problematic
(Tuzet 14) could become useful to understanding how the Iraj story arrived to the
repertoire of the Shahnama, both in Firdausi’s version and in the larger collection
of narratives.

To use Tuzet’s paradigm, Iraj, within the context of the Shahnama, might
be thought of as a “cosmogonic” figure as opposed to the figure who is killed in
the way that Seyavash is killed. Iraj’s life and death play an important part in the
construction of the world as it is known in the Shahnama. While, for example, he
does not play a role such as that of Jamshid (carrier of civilization), Iraj is
instrumental in the construction of the geography that will affect every reign and
every hero after his death. Thus, one may construe him as belonging to a mythic
time which is prior to the death of the young innocent as it is constructed in the
stories of Seyavash and Forud. In this vein, the Iraj story may be seen as similar to
the stories of Jesus and Husayn in their cosmogonic role. Iraj’s death constructs
humanized geography by creating the paradigm of “us and them” between Iran and Turan, which were previously one land. The death of Jesus creates Christians and subsequently, unbelievers or infidels. The death of Husayn is constructed as the watershed situation on which Shi’ites distinguish themselves from unbelievers\textsuperscript{12}.

In the story of Seyavash, one might find the greatest parallels to the Adonis mythic family as explained by Tuzet\textsuperscript{13}. However, there are elements within the story, especially in Firdausi’s account, which make the story distinct from the Adonisite cousins. For example, a later interpolation to the text adds that Afrasyab orders that Seyavash’s blood be shed over a rock where no vegetation will grow (Moscow edition, vol. III, p. 146, line 2244). Firdausi’s account does not seem to describe vegetation growing from the rock over which Seyavash’s blood is shed, but the appearance of the interpolation and the reference to a barren rock seems to indicate that at least myths, if not rituals, related to vegetation and Seyavash’s blood, may be identified.

\textsuperscript{12} For example, in his 1979 article, cited in chapter four, Mayel Baktash speculates that in 963 C.E., there seems to have been the first procession in commemoration of the Karbala battle, while in 973, there is thought to have been a counter-procession, commemorating the Battle of the Camel, the defeat of ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, who later becomes the first imam of the Shi’ite traditions.

\textsuperscript{13} I construe of the Adonis myth as simply a reference point for Tuzet’s paradigm of “mythic family”. It would be naïve to consider Adonis or any of the “cousins” of this or any other mythic family an original myth from which the others evolved.
In his 1979 article on pre-Islamic mourning rites, Yarshater cites Narshakhi’s tenth-century *Tarikh-i Bukhara* which relates that each year at Noruz, the Zoroastrians of Bukhara each kill a rooster and shed its blood over the supposed gravesite of Seyavash while weeping profusely (In Chelkowski 90).

Yarshater also cites al-Biruni’s *Athar al-Baqiyah* where he relates that the people of Khwarazm begin their calendar with the year that Seyavash passed through their city. Al-Biruni also writes that the Soghdians weep and lament, hitting their faces, and they offer food and drink to the dead at the end of the month of Akhshum or Khshum (91). According to al-Biruni’s own text, this is the last month of the Soghdian calendar, and it might be plausible to think that it was the end of the winter season and thus directly before the Bukharan Noruz ritual.

In recent times, the Noruz pilgrimage to Mazar-i-Sharif has also often been associated with tulips of a blood-red color, and this may provide a link to the vegetal connotations of Seyavash’s death as the area of Mazar is geographically proximate to Bukhara, Turan, and perhaps the mythical Seyavashgerd. The goal of the pilgrimage may have been replaced in the Islamic period by the shrine of ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, but there may possibly have been such a pilgrimage related to the Seyavash in the general area. The connection between Mazar-i-Sharif and
tulips may be found in our contemporary time in the popular song *Mulla Muhammad Jan* which juxtaposes the words *Mazar* (shrine) and *Lalazar* (field of tulips) (Margaret Mills, personal communication, May 20, 2002).

In short, many of the rituals related to the Seyavash myth seem to occur in the spring or the early spring season, and thus a time for the cyclical renewal of life. Therefore, it may be plausible to view the vegetal connotations of Seyavash, and cyclical rituals related to him reminiscent of Tamuz’s annual death, as placing him in the Adonis mythic family, at least as a distant cousin.

As with the Attis myth, in Firdausi’s account, Seyavash has a mother figure and seductress, Sudabeh, whom he rejects, and who is, at least partially, to blame for his exile and subsequent death. The connections between characters such as Absal in the Salaman and Absal story, Zulaykha/Potipher’s wife, Sudabeh, and Sybil will require attention that is beyond the scope of this project. There do, however, seem to be strong connections, which may in turn have greater implications in terms of constructions of gender and sexuality in the medieval and ancient worlds.

However, Seyavash appears to lack a divine lover such as Adonis’ Aphrodite and Tamuz’ Ishtar. The question of divine figures as related to the *Shahnama* becomes interesting because of its Islamic veneer, which implies a strongly monotheistic approach to cosmogony. In the very early part of the
mythical-legendary section, the reader perceives many supernatural figures. By the time of Seyavash’s story, only a few are left: such as the Akvan Div and the Simorgh.

In the question of the movement of traditions, one may pose the question as to the role of Rustam in Firdausi’s version of the Seyavash. Rustam receives permission from Kavus to raise Seyavash away from the court. Therefore, Rustam is Seyavash’s adoptive father. Rustam is also partly to blame for Seyavash’s death. However, Rustam is not Seyavash’s lover whom he rejects. This role is played by Sudabeh. In comparison with the Attis story, it might be said that the role of parent/lover, played by Sybil, is being split by Rustam and Sudabeh in Firdausi’s version of the Seyavash story.

Furthermore, one may pose questions about this in regard to Rustam’s religious and spiritual qualities, despite the Islamic veneer of the poem and the lack of divine figures. For example, he might be viewed as the upholder of pre-Zoroastrian faith. In addition, he is associated with the spiritual and perhaps quasi-divine figure of the Simorgh. Thus, while Rustam is not a divinity such as
Aphrodite or Ishtar, he has, in Firdausi’s version, some supernatural associations, from which parallels to the divine parent/lover of the Adonisite stories may possibly be drawn.\(^{14}\)

In Firdausi’s version, Seyavash is not a divine figure. Again, this is probably related to the Abrahamic/Islamic beliefs that are incorporated into the epic. In the myths of Adonis and the other cousins, it might be argued that they begin by being human, but achieve divine status through their death. The sense of *kin-i Seyavash* (revenge) and the sense of mourning that the reader perceives in Kay Khusrau’s reign almost give the impression of Seyavash becoming a quasi-divinity upon his death. However, on the face of the description, Firdausi and later interpolations (sections added in later manuscripts) do not treat Seyavash as a divinity.

It is plausible to think that at some point in the pre-Islamic period, Seyavash was seen as a divinity. For example, in her 1981 work, Guitty Azarpay discusses a temple painting near the Soghdian city of Panjikent, near Bukhara, which has also been described by Alexander Mongayt, Bahram Beyzaie, and Sadiq Humayuni. The painting depicts the funeral bier of a “youthful crowned personage” and his death being mourned by both gods and mortals. Azarpay

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\(^{14}\) Rustam’s main supernatural associations are described as demonic, but this may be a Zoroastrian gloss (Dick Davis, personal communication, March 2003).
believes this painting to be linked to a funerary cult linked to the royal house of Panjikent. The young character in the painting has previously been thought to be Seyavash, but she points out that it could also be a cult related to Forud, although she does not explain from where she draws her evidence for such a claim. Similar depictions are to be found on painted ossuaries from Khawrazm. Without further explanation, Azarpay writes that the Chinese sources describe Seyavash as the Soghdian version of Adonis (129-131).

Forud is the son of Seyavash by Jarira, the daughter of Piran, Afrasyab’s counselor. He is killed in battle with the Iranian forces under the command of Tus, who are going to Turan to avenge Seyavash’s death. Forud puts his trust in the Iranian army, following the advice of his mother, but Tus tricks him into fighting with the army, and ends by killing him.

Like Seyavash, Forud is an innocent who is tricked by the “other side”. Seyavash is tricked by Afrasyab and Forud, in essence a Turanian, is tricked by Tus’ forces. In Seyavash’s case, he trusted the Turanians and Afrasyab, which led to his death. In Forud’s case, he trusts the Iranians and Tus (and by extension Kay Khusrau), which leads to his untimely and unjust death. In terms of the structure of the epic, one sees a continuing decline of the world order. At this point, not only are many of the Iranian camp showing their evil ways, but instead of avenging the death of Seyavash, the purpose of the expedition, they kill his own
son. Therefore, they are rapidly making the situation worse. Again, unlike Iraj, Forud himself is far from perfect. He is headstrong and with little experience in battle; he does not listen to his counselor's advice. Unlike Seyavash, he appears to be quite naïve.

As Azarpay has suggested, there may have been some sort of funerary cult devoted to Forud at some point in the eastern Iranian areas, but at least in Firdausi's rendition, Forud's story does not have many parallels with the Adonis mythic family. The parallels to Seyavash are more clear. It would be interesting to find other renditions of the Forud story, which may shed light on the role of the story beyond the Firdausi's *Shahnama*.

In conclusion, in Firdausi's version, the story of Seyavash as the young innocent who is unjustly killed, is probably closest to the Adonisite mythic family as described by Hélène Tuzet. The stories of Iraj and Forud can probably be categorized into different families of myths. Iraj, for example, might be considered a cosmogonic myth, since his death is so crucial to the construction of the world described by the *Shahnama*. While echoes of his father Seyavash may
be seen in the Forud story, it is an ironical reversal of the Seyavash story. In their enactment of a *kin-i Seyavash* ritual, the Iranians kill the son to avenge the father’s blood, which is an ironical act in a system based on patrimony.

Drawing on sources such as Tha’alebi, Firdausi, and Tabari, Ehsan Yarshater has written on the possible connections between the legend of Seyavash and funerary rites associated with his story and that of Husayn. One element that Yarshater points to as a similarity between the stories of Husayn and Seyavash is that of the martyr’s prophecy of his own fate. In Firdausi’s account, Seyavash makes a soliloquy to his wife Farigis (Farangis) in which he describes the calamity that awaits both of them.

One of the mainstays of the speeches of the Karbala martyrs, as seen for example in the *ta’ziya*, is that of their recognition and acceptance of the fate that awaits them. The foreboding fate of an innocent to be killed at the hands of an evil and foreign monarch might be thought to have something similar to the Seyavash story, as well as a mixture of farewell, lament, and prophecy, elements which appear in some *ta’ziya*. (Yarshater in Chelkowski, 92-93).

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15 Structuralist thought might term this concept a “completion” (Margaret Mills, personal communication, May 2003). At least in Firdausi’s version, Forud’s death stops the chances for any descendents he might have had, and furthermore, the asceticism of Kay Khusrau, coupled with Forud’s death, stops any chance for further progeny of Seyavash.
A part of this project has been to ask questions related to the possibility of the continuity of traditions. The Adonis mythic family, a paradigm described by Tuzet, may provide useful comparisons for pre-Islamic Iranian and Mediterranean myths, which in turn might be compared to myths prevalent in the Islamic period, and as here, specifically in the Greater Iranian Shi’ite context. On the other hand, while there may be some parallels between these myths, to view them as a cluster with a definite point of origin and a center of concern which in each myth is the same, would be overly simplistic and would probably be detrimental as an approach.
CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION

The term "verbal art," according to Ruth Finnegan, was introduced by Bascom in the 1950s as a "convenient and appropriate term for folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, and other literary forms." Under this label, American folklorists and anthropologists have done a great deal of work. More recently, the term has also come to include songs and poems, as well as "verbal processes" like naming, rhetoric, and tongue twisters (Finnegan 10).

As Richard Bauman has argued, the line between verbal art and performance can sometimes be blurred. In sociolinguistic terms, he suggests the concept of performance as an approach to the study of verbal art, with the implied assumption that all verbal art is delivered as performance, despite the fact that scholars often encounter verbal art forms as texts (Bauman 1977; Margaret Mills, personal communication, April 2003).

In this project, I have asked questions about narrative and performance forms as they relate to the place of martyrs in Iranian Shi‘ite Islam in general, and to the Karbala Legend in particular. I first looked to the work of folklorists, anthropologists, and sociolinguists on the categories, albeit academic and convenient, of verbal art and performance, and their relation to communication. In
the following chapter, I have looked to literature dealing with the following Shi'ite forms, as they appear mainly in Iran (this project has not pretended study of this legend and its verbal art forms in the Indian Subcontinent or elsewhere).

The first form I have looked to is the ta'ziya, sometimes translated as “Passion Play,” a theatrical form relating the events of the Karbala Battle (or Tragedy) on 9-10 Muharram, 680 C.E. between the Umayyads, in control of the Islamic Caliphate or leadership, and the opposition forces of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Husayn, at Karbala, in present-day Iraq. I then looked at rowza-khwani, or “Garden Recitation.” A person learned in the form will recite the lives of Shi'ite martyrs, whether from Karbala or from other narratives for a group, often segregated by sex, who will respond with lament, crying, et cetera. While rowza occurs throughout the year, it is quite popular during the Shi'ite month of mourning, the Islamic month of Muharram.

I next looked to literature dealing with two forms, which are not specifically related to the Karbala Legend, but which are also popular during the month of Muharram, and which are often not approved of by Sunnite forms of Islam, or even orthdox Shi'ism\textsuperscript{16}. These are the sufra, a gathering involving

\textsuperscript{16} The question of the meanings and implications of the concepts of orthdoxy and heterodoxy are quite important but have been somewhat beyond the limited scope of this project. As I also mention in the following chapter, I do not see these terms as simply academic and convenient;
nadhr (a vow), ritualistic preparation, consumption, and distribution of food, and perhaps a rowza or du’a (prayer). I also looked at literature discussing ziarat (pilgrimage), usually to Shi‘ite shrines whether they be local (such as an imamzada – the shrine of a descendent of a Shi‘ite imam), the shrine of Husayn and others at Karbala, or the Mashhad shrine of ‘Ali Ridha, the eighth Shi‘ite imam (leader of community, see further discussion below). Finally, I include (due to sources, limited) discussion about the performative aspects of the dasta (processions), local groups (all male) which might pass through villages, urban streets, and bazaars in commemoration of the Karbala Battle/Tragedy.

Theoretical Perspectives

The question of the Karbala Legend, as one narrative of a group of people, has become interesting because the place that narrative in general occupies for humans in general. Roland Barthes has written that

...Narrative starts with the history of mankind; there is not anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups have their stories...Narrative remains largely unconcerned with good or bad literature.

(Finnegan 39, citing Barthes 1975: 37).

however, it is important to keep in mind that the construction of these categories implies certain power relations.
While this school of thought, according to Finnegans, developed out of structuralist theories, now under deconstruction, the idea that all human groups “have their stories” and combined with narrative’s disregard for literary “quality” (a politically-loaded construct), led me to an interest in the Karbala Legend as a narrative.

In her discussion of the scholarly history of oral tradition and verbal art, Finnegans discusses the nineteenth and early twentieth-century desire of folklorists and anthropologists to seek the “origins” of forms, focusing attention away from current forms or meaning to seek “pure” and “traditional” stages, with the contamination of “outside influences” (Finnegan 27). I mention this trend here to note that while I have an interest in the historical development of this legend and its meaning, it would be absurd to seek its “original” and “uncontaminated” forms. In fact, if one argues for a certain continuity and on-going conversation of and among traditions, which this project seeks to shed light on, these questions become trivial.

Beginning in the early 1970s, Dell Hymes and other American folklorists began to approach narrative and specifically its oral performance, in an action-centered and expressive view of language and performance. They began to use detailed ethnographic observation as the data for the possibility of current meanings and undertones. Sociolinguistics began to play a role in this approach.
with discourse analysis. Some of these folklorists attempted to bridge the “great divides” of oral/low and written/high literatures, and to focus their attention on various verbal forms, thus everyday conversation as much as performance of epic narrative (Finnegan 42-44). Margaret Mills, for example, attempted this approach as she tried to tape record conversation between the recounting of stories in her Herat fieldwork of the 1970s.

In his 1977 *Verbal Art as Performance*, Bauman takes this sociolinguistics-influenced approach a step further by defining performance as a “mode of speaking” (3). Citing the earlier work of Jakobsen, Havránek, and Durbin, he critiques their text-centered approach to verbal art as flawed and calls instead for a performance-centered approach. He describes this approach as focusing first on the nature of the performance, and looking to formal manipulation of linguistic features second.

In terms of sociolinguistics, Bauman’s point is that performance can represent a transformation of the basic referential in language. As he puts it, in the communicative exchange between performer and audience, there is something that says “interpret what I say in a special way,” and do not take the words to mean what they literally mean (Bauman 1977, 7-9). It seems that it is precisely in this aspect that performance can have subversive socio-political uses and can
create a bond between audience and performer beyond the control of political authority. The possibility for subversion of the socio-political status quo has been one of the sub-categories of questions raised in this project.

Bauman goes on to argue that in this view of performance as a mode of verbal communication, there is an assumption of cognitive competence on the part of the audience, and an assumption of accountability on the part of the performer. For the former, he writes, it rests on the performer’s knowledge and ability to speak in “socially appropriate ways,” and for the latter, on an expectation of evaluation by the audience (Bauman 1977, 11). I would further argue that the cognitive competence of the audience rests on their inter(con)textual understanding.

In the ta’ziya, for example, where audience members are completely familiar with the narrative framework, their understanding of a new element, for example, a contemporary British military costume in the early twentieth century, would rest on previous knowledge of color schemes and other costuming and decoration effects. Bauman’s remark about evaluation by the audience could raise many interesting questions in regard to the ta’ziya, in which the audience is both audience (responding, crying, lamenting) and performer (the players may call on the audience to play the role of a chorus such as the people of the Iraqi city of Kufa). Without the audience, the performance is not a performance and the level
of their lamenting might be in some ways viewed as the expression of both their evaluation and participation. Bauman gives the example of Japanese professional storytellers, as described by Hrdlicková, for whose audience, it is often more important how the story is told rather than what it tells (Bauman 1977, 13, citing Hrdlicková). The same might be said of the ta’ziya audience. Furthermore, one might argue that because without the audience, there can be no ta’ziya, the audience is thereby given a potential power for a role in the development of the narrative as it sees fit.

Bauman also discusses that which he terms “the keying of performance.” Drawing on Bateson, he argues that a performative frame is “metacommunicative” in that it includes a range of explicit and implicit messages which carry information on how to interpret other messages being communicated therein (Bauman 1977, 15, citing Bateson). A few pages later, Bauman goes on to discuss special codes as a characteristic of this metanarrative frame in verbal art. One such example comes to mind, again from the ta’ziya, in that the “good” characters tend to sing their lines while the “bad” ones tend to recite their lines.

Other characteristics, according to Bauman, might include figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, appeal to tradition, and disclaimer of performance (Bauman 1977, 16-24).
Finally, Bauman argues that the “emergent quality of performance” (as defined by the place of performance within the context of the larger cultural system, not as a judgment value by outside researchers) is to be found in the interplay between the resources used for communication in performance, the competence of the participants (performer or audience), and the general goals of the participants (Bauman 1977, 38). Here, he draws on Lord’s research on Serbo-Croatian oral epic poetry and later conceptualization in terms of the larger cultural context. He writes that the singer of tales competes for his audience’s attention with other factors that may engage them, and that the length of time available to him is variable. Thus, he must be fluent and flexible (Bauman 1977, 38-39).

Elsewhere, Bauman has argued further about literary interest in narrative events and their relationship to narrative. This, he writes, drawing on Bakhtin, is centered around two principal issues. The first is the formal relationship between these elements, and the second is the ontological and epistemological status of narrative events (Bauman 1986: 4-5).

Traditionally, he writes, scholars have tended to view narratives as icons of the events they narrate – thus to put it in linguistic terms, the narrative as the sign and the event as the external referent. Interestingly, he proposes an alternative view beginning to develop, which turns this formulation inside out and may be useful in questions relating to the Karbala Legend as narrative. Events, he
writes, may be abstractions constructed out of narrative, rather than the other way around. While narrative may be a cognitive instrument for making the great amount of experience comprehensible (drawing on Mink 1978: 131), Bauman adds that it may serve to obscure, explore, or question an event (Bauman 1986: 5).

It is in this vein that one might be able to begin to ask questions about the complex place of narrative in collective social memory and its multiple uses therein. To be sure, in order to maintain collective social memory, it is necessary to contain and frame a large amount of experience. Narrative frameworks may and do serve this very practical purpose. However, they may also serve the ideological purpose of obscuring, exploring, or questioning, as Bauman writes – thus, molding the way in which the group, and by extension, the individual, views an event or group of events.

This “inside-out” conceptualization of narrative is quite interesting if again, one thinks to the continuity of traditions argument. In the previous chapter, I have explored comparative narratives of martyrdom, such as the Adonisite mythic family and Shahnama traditions, and how they might be related to creation of such a rich repertoire of martyr narrative, verbal art, and performance. It is fascinating to consider that it might be exactly these narrations which might frame and create the way in which Iranian Shi'ites have tended to think of the Karbala Battle and how they might relate it to their everyday contemporary experience.
In his 1975 article “Breakthrough into Performance,” Dell Hymes has discussed the notion of performance as communication in folklore studies. He identifies performance as a specific mode of cultural behavior, in which an individual [or a group of individuals] assumes a responsibility to an audience. He goes on to call it a key to “the difference in the meaning of life as between communities.” (Hymes in Ben-Amos and Goldstein 18)

If one assumes this view, looking at the performance of narrative relating to the Karbala Legend and related martyrlogies might be one key to understanding the difference between our own (Euro-American late capitalist) society and way of life and one in which these narratives are part and parcel of the fabric of life.

In another article in the same volume, Barre Toelken has written about communication and worldview\(^\text{18}\), another important aspect of gaining some understanding about the performance of the Karbala Legend. Basing his argument in the idea that one’s environment, and especially or most basically, language,

\(^{17}\) Margaret Mills suggests that this statement seems to be “obscure, vague, and grandiose” (personal communication, April 2003). While Hymes’ use of this statement may be intended for a vague interpretation, I have chosen to use it as a “springboard” from which to think about a two-way relationship between performance and cultural context; i.e., the importance of using performance to understand context and using context to understand performance.

\(^{18}\) As Dr. Mills suggests, this is also a potentially vague term (personal communication, April 2003). In Toelken’s writing, I understand the term to mean the understanding of the order of things and of socio-political frameworks in the world in which one lives.
shapes worldview, he draws a comparison between Anglo-American and Native American worldview and their respective rituals, languages, et cetera. For example, he explains Anglo-American society as generally linear while he views Native American society as generally circular. Out of this, he finds that in the former planning becomes an important activity while in the latter, it is replaced with negotiation, a concept occupying a place of similar importance (Toelken in Ben-Amos and Goldstein 277-286).

Also in the same volume, Roger Abrahams has written about the relationship between casual and non-casual [presumably, performance-oriented] communication. Demonstrations of such a relationship could be made by a comparison of messages contained within each type of communication, and then compared to the “stated ideals”\(^{19}\) of the community. Another method he suggests is to analyze characteristics of casual discourse and compare it to the more stylized elements as seen in performance. A third method, which he pursues in his discussion of folklore and communication on St. Vincent is to find relationships between the structure of the interaction of the participants in casual and performance discourse (Abrahams in Ben-Amos and Goldstein 288).

\(^{19}\) This conception might be considered problematic because as Dr. Mills, drawing on Bourdieu, points out, the *unstated* may be even more influential (personal communication, April 2003).
Drawing on the work of Hymes and others, Nancy Bonvillian has argued for speech analysis using ethnographic data. She writes that this method stresses the cultural specificity of rules of communication, while looking to setting, participants, topics, and goals (1993, 85). She emphasizes that this approach can be used in both formal (performance) speech, as well as informal (casual conversation) study. She reminds the reader that rules governing informal speech, which may be just as structured and rooted in cultural discourse as formal speech, are rarely objectified on a conscious level by participants (Bonvillian 1993, 86).

Therefore, viewing performance and verbal art as a form of communication embedded in a larger linguistic system which affects and is in turn affected by social, cultural, political, and economic structures may be a useful way to approach the Karbala Legend. This approach may provide greater insight into the various constructions of its narrative and those of related martyrrologies in the Shi`ite paradigm, its uses, and its manipulations by participants.

Development of the Karbala Narrative

Alessandro Bausani, in Religion in Iran, has approached some of the problematical issues of attempting to understand the origins of the Karbala Legend and its narrative. An attempt to trace the narrative and indeed the whole of Shi`ism as an “Aryan” and/or Persian reaction to Arab and Semitic Sunnism, seems quite simplistic, and not free of implications of the imperialism of the
nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. While there may be some
continuities and there may be echoes of other traditions present, it is probably
going too far to make such a claim. Additionally, the political and racial
implications of such a comment can have consequences which one must be aware
of. Bausani's general argument is that the attempt to trace the entire history of
Shi'ism to simply Aryan roots is naïve (300), and while I agree with it, it should
be noted that one of his sub-arguments is problematical in that it does not take
certain historical aspects into account.

Bausani writes that Twelver Shi'ism was consolidated in sixteenth-century
Iran under the Safavids. Therefore, Shi'ism, he claims, cannot be inherently
Persian, because the people of Iran had "peacefully" been Sunni for seven to eight
centuries before this political change (Bausani 1959/2000, 301). Here, I disagree
with Bausani because heterodox and non-"Sunni" elements are to be seen even in
early Islamic times. The first known commemoration of the Karbala Legend is
thought to have taken place in 963 C.E. and there might have been pilgrimages to
the tomb of Husayn starting in the very late seventh century. We see the rise of
the Isma'ilis already under the Seljuqs (1035-1194 C.E.). Persian popular prose

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20 One could choose to critique various paradigms within this construct: what might Bausani
mean, for example, by "inherently" Persian? Also, he does not define the "people of Iran," a
category which is quite fluid, especially in the pre-modern period (Margaret Mills, personal
communication, April 2003).
forms are filled with heterodox elements such as Sufism, Central Asian *ghulov* elements, and Anatolian elements like the *ghazis*, and at least some of these works were in oral or written circulation before the Safavid era.

Many of these elements, as presented in these forms, display a preference for ‘Ali, Husayn, Fatima, and other members of the Prophet Muhammad’s family. While the discussion of the relation of this literature to actual events and beliefs is beyond the scope of this project, it is plausible to believe that Twelver or Imami Shi’ism was in some process of consolidation before its officialization under the Safavids. It is difficult to construe it as an element appearing without precedent.

The link has been made by Shi’ite piety, cited by Bausani, between Jesus and Husayn as a “redeemer hero” and a “man-god” who voluntarily sacrificed himself for the good of his community and for greater humanity. In both cases, the hero is killed, not by an enemy, but by the people who are in theory “the people of God.” (Bausani 1959/2000, 352-353). Bausani accepts the idea of some continuity of traditions; from pre-Islamic Persian elements, he mentions Gayomarth, Jamshid, and Seyavash. He goes on, however, to say that these funerary rites here lack first, the redemptive quality of the Karbala Legend (and specifically, Husayn) and the crucifixion of Jesus (Bausani 1959/2000, 354-355), and second, these heroes are usually killed by an enemy (a satanic monster or Afrasyab), not by their own people.
Two ways in which the legend was communicated between the seventh and thirteenth centuries was through iconography and literature. In the realm of iconography, which may have been either mentioned or actually created in a visual form, is the severed hand (referring to Husayn’s brother ‘Abbas, who after losing both hands, holds his sword between his teeth and continues to fight), lack of water and thirst (an allusion to a people suffering in a desert climate), a long pike or *tuq* (Shimr, the main opponent is said to have placed Husayn’s severed hand on it and raised it to the sky as seven drops of blood fall down), and Husayn’s horse to name just a few. The severed hand, water, and thirst, appear in contemporary iconography.

The severed hand is a symbol which could merit further inquiry as to its meaning. The “Hand of Fatima” has appeared in Sunnite iconography (usually as protection from the “evil eye”), and a hand has been the Shi‘ite symbol of *panjtan* (referring to the Prophet’s household). Parallel symbolic development between a hand that is severed and one that is seen as protective could reveal interesting connections (Margaret Mills, personal communication, December 2002). The *tuq* has a complicated history which is beyond the scope here but has been used by many opposing factions at various historical times (i.e., Mamluk *tuqs*, etc.).
Various literary forms discuss or allude to Husayn’s martyrdom and the Karbala Legend. Al-Tabari, in his tenth century historical chronicle gives a complex narration of it. The family of the Prophet are mentioned, for example, in the Abu Muslim Nama, which may date from the Timurid or early Safavid period (15th or 16th century), as guardians and blessed beings. Oral traditions of this narrative may date back further, thus the development of the Karbala narrative may have begun in popular literature even prior to the fifteenth century, especially if the historical tradition is viewed as a parallel literary development. Bausani mentions a seemingly interesting text which Browne has attributed to the eighth-century Abu Mikhna‘f Lut b. Yahya – Maqṭal al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali (translated as “Husayn’s Defeat and Vengeance” in a 19th-century German translation).

Philosophical texts of Mut‘azilite thinking also influenced the development of the narrative. In the early medieval period, the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate tended to align itself with the thinking of the Asharite school, which believed in predestination. On the other hand, the Mut‘azilites tended to view intellect as a standard of judgment: man was seen as possessing freedom in his actions and thus responsible for good and bad behavior, and deserving of punishment and reward (Baktash in Chelkowski 1979, 99).

The Mu‘tazilite interpretation of tashabuh (imitation), which drew on hadith literature quoting the Prophet Muhammad as saying “whoever resembles a
group is in the category of that group,” expressed a necessity for making a resemblance to that which is good. The eleventh-century Mut‘azilite theologian Zamakhshari wrote that anyone who weeps for Husayn is destined to join him in paradise. In the twelfth century, Khwarazmi, a disciple of Zamakhshari, continued this theological groundwork for *maqta-l-khwani* (recitation of martyrdom stories), which later became *rowza-khwani* and the *Ta‘ziya*, which might be seen as a combination of *dasta*, street processions, and *maqta-l-khwani*. Khawrazmi’s *Maqta al-Husayn* discusses the virtues of the Prophet and his family, and a *hadith* is quoted in which Muhammad says to ‘Ali that the two of them, Husayn, Hassan, will first enter paradise, to be followed by their partisans (*Shi‘a*). In the sixteenth century, Wa‘iz-Kashifi (see below) wrote the first *maqta* in Persian and Fuzuli the first in Turkish (Baktash in Chelkowski 1979, 101-102).

Certainly, there is a strong written tradition which deals with the legend. The interesting question, seemingly unanswerable, however, is if a parallel oral tradition existed in which the narrative was communicated and maintained. *Rowza-khwani* (oral tradition) is believed to have begun in the sixteenth century, but al-Tabari and Abu Mikhna‘f (written tradition, beginning in the eighth century) and Buyid-sponsored commemorations (ritual, tenth century) began well before the Mongol period/invasion of the thirteenth century. Therefore, a question forms as to the relationship of the oral to the written tradition in that which concerns the
narrative: did an oral tradition develop only after the Mongols, from the written traditions and the rituals? If the rituals existed in pre-Mongol times, would it not be plausible to expect a parallel oral narrative tradition?

Hamid Enayat has discussed the political implications of the Karbala Legend and its related narrative. Of the twelve imams recognized by Imami (Twlever) Shi‘ism - and narratives on all of their lives exist and are used rhetorically - Husayn was the only one who died as a consequence of combining his claim to legitimacy as Caliph with an armed uprising. The others either used regular procedures to obtain power, made formal peace with the Caliph, or secluded themselves in a life of scholarship, jurisconsultancy, and piety (or went into occultation in the case of the twelfth imam). For Shi‘ite movements challenging an established order, the strong element of martyrdom [and redemption] in the narrative can be used to draw support (Enayat in Nasr, Dabashi, and Nasr 1989, 52). While an interesting concept, it also raises a question: how have Shi‘ite “movements,” as a part of the political establishment (especially Safavid and Qajar) have made rhetorical use of the narrative to draw support? In this sense, the narrative almost takes on a feeling of a double-edged sword – both the powerful and the oppressed have used it in their rhetoric. The possibility of a counter-discourse of justice in a strongly hierarchical society emanating from “underdog” heroes becomes interesting when one asks the
question how and if a successful ex-underdog, having used the discourse of the oppressed, is thought to be able to maintain his achieved power without being subject to corruption.\textsuperscript{21} Ideas about power relations and this discourse will be touched upon in the subsequent chapter.

\textsuperscript{21} Margaret Mills, personal communication, April 2003.
CHAPTER 5

THE LEGEND IN PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

In addition to textual and iconographic materials, the ta'ziya (“ritual theatre” or “passion play” from the Arabic root ‘aza, grief), and rowza-khwani (homiletic recitation), have been two performance modes used to communicate and maintain the Karbala Legend and its narrative. In addition, in these two modes, supplementary narratives of martyrrology and the general Shi'ite cosmic view are presented. The sufra, a food feast sometimes involving vows and rowza, and the ziarat, pilgrimage to local shrines, and mausoleums of Shi'ite imams and saints related to them, also reinforce this integration of martyr narratives in general and the Karbala Legend in particular into people’s spiritual lives.

Ta’ziya

Throughout its history, ta’ziya, mourning for the martyrs of Karbala, has held different connotations of performance. Scholars tend to believe that mourning processions in the Buyid era (tenth century) were the first to appear in the Islamic period, in and around Baghdad. Presumably, the Buyid ruler, Mu’izz al-Dawla, convinced (or forced) the ‘Abbasid caliph to allow processions of mourning during the Islamic month of Muharram. Muharram 963 C.E. is thought
to have been the first procession in mourning for the Karbala martyrs and a statement against the Sunnite establishment of power in Baghdad. Bloody riots between Sunnis and partisans of the ahl al-bayt, or family of the Prophet Muhammad, which one might term “proto-Shi‘ite,” ensued in the following years. In 973, for example, it was reported that there was a counter-commemoration of the Battle of the Camel and the defeat of ‘Ali, which continued in Baghdad even after the Buyid period (Baktash in Chelkowski 1979, 96-97).

Some scholars have argued that the Iranian ta‘ziya in its contemporary form, that of a processional or stationary ritual theatre, is the ‘natural product’ of two historical developments. The first component is thought to be rowza-khwani, itself developed from the merging literary elegiac recitation and the Mu‘tazilite theological concept of tashabух or imitation (see below) The second component is described as the mourning processions beginning under the Buyids (Baktash in Chelkowski 104-5; Calmard in Chelkowski 122-23). It should be noted that various aspects of the Karbala Legend, but especially the ta‘ziya, came to have their manifestations in at least the Levant, South Asia, and Caribbean. The manifestations seen there are quite interesting and useful for a global understanding of the Karbala Legend, but such enquiries would require specific socio-political contextualization beyond the scope of this project.

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While there is historical evidence for the development of the Karbala narrative and rituals such as elegy and mourning processions in the later medieval era, the next period in which the concept of *taʿziya* as performance gains importance is the Safavid era (16th-18th centuries). Arab and European travelers regularly report ritual mourning for Husayn and other martyrs during this period. Subsequently, it was during the Qajar period, and specifically in the late nineteenth century that *taʿziya* reached its height as a “dramatic form” (Beeman 1982, 97). I would argue rather that it seems to be under the Safavids and Qajars that the *taʿziya* is most manipulated by the structures of political authority for their own purposes of propaganda and nation-state building. The larger political situations in which these two dynasties operated, such as the European Enlightenment and imperialism, as well as changes in technology, such as the coming of the industrial era, are important to remember when asking questions as to their politics and more specifically, their use of myth and religion to meet political ends.

The Safavids sought to consolidate general and seemingly disparate heterodoxy, in existence since early Islamic times, into a monolithic state form of Shiʿism. It seems that this was at least in part a geopolitical effort to counter the Sunnite Ottomans and Mughals on their borders. Thus, the encouragement of rituals such as *dasta*, *taʿziya* and *rowza* (see discussion below) may have helped
to create a sense of a monolithic spirituality as well as some kind of proto-nationalist sentiment. In the study of secondary sources, it is difficult to understand the exact role, if any, of the state sponsorship of these rituals in the formation of this supposed proto-nationalist sentiment, because many of these writings seem to have some correlation to the nationalist project of the mid to late twentieth century.

In the Qajar period, according to Beeman, ta'ziya began to embody Iranian elements of music, poetry, and mythical as well as religious history (1982, 97). Most scholars have tended to see the Qajar manipulation of the Ta'ziya, as evidenced most vividly by the Tekiya Daulat – the state ta'ziya theater, as quite benign, but it seems plausible that there may have been political reasons for sponsorship – such as an attempt at state control of popular religion or a way to keep the disapproval of the ta'ziya by certain clerics in check.

Today, while its status is ever-changing and is usually disapproved of by certain claimants to orthodoxy, the ta'ziya continues to be performed and to move people spiritually and emotionally. Beeman goes on to write that all Shi'ite mourning ceremonies invite the spectators to project their own troubles onto the event of Husayn's martyrdom (1982, 100). First, while the Karbala Legend is
certainly the mainstay of Shi'ite martyrdom legends whose main personage is Husayn, it may be more accurate to propose that Shi'ite mourning ceremonies invite spectators to use martyrdom in general to alleviate their own troubles.

Second, while this assessment may be partly correct on the part of the fieldworker, it is not clear whether participants themselves would assess the situation as such. For example, in the context of friends and relatives lost in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, a lamenter might admit that they weep both for the martyrs of Karbala and the martyrs of the war. While there certainly seems to be personal and contemporary identification with the events of Karbala, I should think it a fallacy to dismiss the meaning of the narrative for participants and believers as simply a format onto which their personal problems can be projected.22

Here, the critiques raised by Silverstein and Urban (see chapter 2) in regard to tendency of the researcher to extract and decontextualize a given paradigm resonate. I would argue that the ta‘ziya, or any performance mode,

22 In order for the ta‘ziya to work as a format, it is necessary for the narrative to be transcendent to all participants, both performers and audience members (Margaret Mills, personal communication, May 2003).
should be regarded in light of the larger socio-political situation as well as cosmology and worldview, the process which Silverstein and Urban call entextualization.

Idealization of character types – the heroic male, the perfect wife or mother, and the evil opponent, is an interesting component of the ta'ziya found in at least the Iranian versions. It might be argued that these essentialized characters are part of a greater ideological system in which good and evil are clearly delineated (Beeman 1982, 110). The clear delineation of good and evil could merit further research as it might be argued that this delineation resonates from Zoroastrian cosmology, and if one is to accept certain continuities of tradition, this might be a plausible hypothesis. However, it would be important to be cautious in jumping to such a conclusion because in the mythic “spaces,” such as myth, legend, ritual, and performance, of various traditions, one might commonly find personages who are perfectly good or perfectly evil (120)\(^23\).

\(^{23}\) “Splitting” is normal in popular culture – even in forms such as the folktale, one finds this idea. For example, the deceased mother versus the evil stepmother is a very prevalent theme in which this splitting occurs (Margaret Mills, personal communication, May 2003). The interesting question in the case of performance becomes how the audience occupies this “split” space – in the ta'ziya, as scholars have suggested, the audience occupies both sides of the spilt – as mourners and murderers.
Elsewhere, Beeman has written that the *taʿziya*, in which linguistic expression is esoteric and requires interpretation, is designed to reassert the moral and ideological religious order for the audience (Beeman in Chelkowski 1979, 30). The importance of language in ritual, pointed to by Paul Connerton (see chapter one), who describes ritual as “performative and formalized” language (53-58) becomes pertinent here. According to Beeman’s comment on the nature of the linguistic expression of the *taʿziya*, it may require interpretation due to its formalized nature, which may at times appear even archaic.

Beeman goes on to assert that this moral and ideological religious order is confirmed in the *taʿziya* by cathartic reactions of the spectators, caused by the esoteric nature of its linguistic expression. The audience is in an interesting position. Beyond evaluation of the performers, they are placed in the position of being the murderers of Husayn [since it was the “people of God” who killed him, as Bausani has pointed out, see chapter 4] and being his mourners after his death. At the end of the performance, they must end by being converted or renewed by the expression of their grief (Beeman in Chelkowski 1979, 30).²⁴

²⁴ Bausani points out that a strong similarity between the myths of Jesus and Husayn is the idea that they were unjustly killed by the “people of God” and not an enemy. Margaret Mills has remarked that the idea of spectator as both murderer and mourner also appears in dramas about the death of Jesus (personal communication, January 2003).
This idea is quite similar to a quotation of al-Tabari given by Bausani in which he relates that after the death of Husayn, many repented and lamented over his tomb. Only four years after the Battle at Karbala, Sulaiman b. Surad and thirty of his companions (according to al-Tabari) walked around the tomb of Husayn while asking to be forgiven for having helped the Umayyad forces to kill him and asking to be martyred for him in the future (Bausani 352). Here, there seems to be a textual parallel of the later role of the audience in ta'ziya. Drawing on this idea, one wonders what types of performances of public mourning may have existed at the time of al-Tabari, on which he may have drawn in addition to his sources. Additionally, given that in al-Tabari’s time, the early medieval period, the ta’ziya as we recognize it did not exist, but that dasta may have existed as under the Buyids, one might hypothesize about the role of an audience in those dasta and its evolution to today’s ta’ziya.

Given Bauman’s theories on the relationship of the performer to the audience, the ta’ziya becomes an interesting case study. The performer maintains a responsibility to create a feeling of identification in the audience with the martyrs within and related to the Karbala narrative. In turn, the audience, with cries, laments, and other reactions, evaluates and perhaps embodies the ability of the performer to create this atmosphere of identification.
Here, it might be useful to combine theories related to performance and performativity. In such a paradigm, one might perceive of "performance" as action, representation, and the enactment of Connerton's formalized language, thus a descriptive mode of language, and on the other hand, "performativity" as the creation of a certain reality through the use of language. In the ta'ziya, and especially in the multiple roles played by the audience, one might see a combination of the two ideas—a performance which is also performative in that it affects the reality of those people and who they perceive themselves to be.

It is interesting to note here some parallels to theories of carnaval. The carnaval is thought to be a space in which hierarchies are suspended and even reversed (Turner 1986). Certain actions and speech acts delineate this space. However, one might choose to ask questions as to how this separate space and time, somewhat mythic time which is parallel to normal time, will affect participants both while they are in this separate space, and also once they return to that normal time. In regard to ta'ziya participation, the same kind of question arises as to the possibility of an altered reality and its durability in human experience through the use of specific forms of language\(^\text{25}\).

\(^{25}\) Dr. Mills has raised the question as to whether the ta'ziya transforms the participant temporarily, as the carnaval is presumed to do, or permanently (May 2003)? I would suggest that it does both. Once one steps out of the space and time of myth and mourning, one is no longer a
Rowza

The rowza, or homiletic sermon, began with a literary elegiac form, the maqta-l-nama. The form of the maqta-l-nama began its development in the pre-Mongol period with heterodox historical chronicles and Mu’tazilite philosophers. During the second to sixth centuries A.H., Islamic scholastic theologians (mutakillimin) parted into two main branches: the Mu’tazilites and the Asharites. Mu’tazilite philosophy developed the idea of free will in human beings and the idea of reward and punishment for good and evil behavior. Asharite philosophy was based on predeterminism, and as it has been argued by some scholars, served the political interests of the Caliphate. Official thinkers of the Caliphate were probably opposed to Mu’tazilism, which called for man’s right and ability to oppose an oppressor (Baktash in Chelkowski 98).

Beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the meaning of tashabbeh (imitation or role-playing) was stressed by Mu’tazilite philosophers and the concept was used to justify Muharram rituals, which had begun, as mentioned above, probably in the tenth century C.E. under the Buyids. Previously, in the eleventh century, the Mu’tazilite philosopher Zamakhshari mourner and murderer. However, the phrase “every place is Karbala and every day is Ashura” (citation?) seems to indicate that one is also permanently affected by that parallel time of Muharram.
writes that anyone who weeps for Husayn in destined to join him in paradise\textsuperscript{26}. By doing so, he lays the theoretical framework for the concept of *tashabbuh* and highlights the importance of both weeping and the causing of weeping through imitation. The first *maqtals*, it has been argued, were based on Zamakhshari’s ideas (Baktash in Chelkowski 101-102).

Zamakhshari was followed by Khwarazmi in the twelfth century who stresses a *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad is thought to have said that the first to enter heaven will be first himself, ‘Ali, Hassan, and Husayn, followed by their descendants and wives, and finally, partisans of his family (Baktash in Chelkowski 102). The combination of Khwarazmi and Zamakhshari’s ideas may have lead to the idea that to imitate martyrs - specifically those related to the House of the Prophet - and to cause weeping for them is a way to ensure one’s place in the hereafter.

In the late fifteenth-century text *Rowza al-Shuhada* (“The Garden of Martyrs”) the author, Husayn Wa‘iz-Kashifi, recounts the lives and fates of the Shi‘ite martyrs, and most markedly, those of Karbala plains. Wa‘iz-Kashifi’s text is considered to be the first *maqtal-nama* in Persian (Baktash in Chelkowski 102). *Rowza-khwani* (“garden recitation”) is a performance mode in which a clergyman

\textsuperscript{26} Dr. Mills makes the interesting comment that Zamakhshari’s comment is quite performative in that it creates a reality that may have not previously been current in Islamic beliefs (May 2003).
or other rowza khan, learned in the text, would recite a sermon based on these elegies for an audience. It appears that the name rowza-khwani may have originated in the title of Wa'iz-Kashifi's text.

The possibility of its rise at the end of the fifteenth century might indicate that it was another tool for the Safavids in their consolidation of Shi'ism. The audience, as in the ta'ziya, is again given the chance to evaluate the orator by their responses of grief. However, while the ta'ziya belongs solely to Muharram mourning, the rowza might occur anytime throughout the year, and is especially popular during Ramadhan and Muharram. Usually, rowza refers to the sermon during Muharram, and the term jalisa (meeting) is used for sermons occurring during the rest of the year (Kamalkhani 1997). It should be noted that today, the subject of rowza khwani has been expanded beyond Wa'iz-Kashifi's text and changed in creative ways, although it still focuses on stories of the martyrs. In fact, the orator might choose any topic at all, but will usually end with tragedies relating to Shi'ite martyrs.

Beeman recounts a family which tells him that attending rowza and weeping for the Karbala martyrs helps them to deal with their own problems; in comparison with the suffering endured at Karbala, their problems seem minute. He goes on to say that the verbal skill in the rowza lies in the orator's ability to make the events of Karbala seem immediate and relevant to the audience. For
example, he cites a Mashhad orator who in 1978 recited a rowza in which he calls Husayn on the telephone to warn him to leave the plain of Karbala (1982, 100-101). This recalls Hymes' notion of performance as communication and a specific mode of cultural behavior in which an individual or a group assumes a responsibility to an audience (see chapter 4). The orator in this case seems to use a notion available to him—modern technology—in order to communicate the urgency of the martyr's fate to his audience.

Rowza-khwani might be performed for mixed or segregated audiences. In the case of the male or mixed audience, the rowza-khwan (orator) is usually male. For a female audience, trained female orators, usually able to read Arabic and respected for their religious learning, will orate. In theory, rowza is meant to communicate religious ideas, history, and morality to the audience. In practice, the certain rowza ceremonies, and especially the all-female variant, has been criticized by men and some women, usually devout but more formally educated, for its inclusion of nadhr (vows) and the perceived tendency to focus on the ritual's social aspect. The first objection is related to the skewing of the human-divine relationship by vows ("making the relationship commercial"). The second criticism has to do with sufra, a ritual food feast given in the positive outcome of

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27 The center of the experience as the rowza, nadhr, or sufra will depend on the particular participant (Margaret Mills, personal communication, May 2003).
one's vow, in which besides the *rowza-khwani*, one might also encounter the
showing off of finery, gossiping, bawdy storytelling, singing, and dancing
(Betteridge in Falk and Gross 1989, 103-104).

Zahra Kamalkhani has describes and discusses women’s *rowza*
ceremonies. According to her, the *rowza* is carried out in the home space (or in a
religiously endowed building) and constitutes both a social and religious network
for women. In this description, the mosque becomes a place of secondary
importance for women, and does not constitute the only location of collective
religious authority. Female *rowza-khwans* and other ritual leaders hold significant
positions of religious authority in this scheme, which is in contrast to their
position in the mosque. Flags of green and black may be hung on the outside of
the building in which the *rowza-khwani* is taking place as a reminder to the
community of the activity within. The use of green is representative of Islam and
black seems to be used to indicate mourning. The author here describes black as a
specific什iite mode of mourning based on the ties between the martyrdom of
Husayn and ‘Ali, as described in Karbala-related narratives (Kamalkhani 1997,
12-16).

Elsewhere, Kamalkhani describes the symbolic application of the Karbala
Legend and related Shi‘ite martyrologies in both the Islamic Revolution (1978-9)
and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) (Kamalkhani 1993, 71-85). Here, the socio-
political and ideological implications of such a narrative become clear. Governments and those vying for power are able to use the iconography, symbols, and contextual references as a tool of rhetorics; they are able to make viable claims based on identification of a contemporary situation to these narratives (especially when they are in an inferior position in which they can display themselves as victims struggling against an oppressor).

As Margaret Mills has pointed out, one can ask to what extent the consolidation of power in Iranian areas has depended [and does depend] on the ability to claim with some success to represent a struggle against or victory over the “oppressor.” One might also be able to think about discourses and counter-discourses of the underdog, at both a popular level as well as the level of authority. If justice might be thought to emanate from an underdog hero or martyr, it might be useful to see how and if authority is able to self-legitimize in a discourse of the oppressed.²⁸

Other Ritual Aspects

Anne Betteridge describes ziarat (shrine pilgrimage) by women in Shiraz. In the Shi'ite context, visits seem to be made usually to the burial places of imams or their descendents. There does appear to be at least a loose correlation between

²⁸ Margaret Mills, personal communication, April 2003. Please also see chapter three.
martyrdom narratives of the Shi'iite repertoire and the pilgrimage ritual to these sites. For example, Betteridge describes a Saturday evening visit to Qadam-gah, one of the popular shrines in Shiraz, which is attended mostly by women. They might circumambulate the glass case which is thought to contain the footprint of 'Abbas, Husayn's brother. The role of 'Abbas in the Karbala narrative is visited in both the ta'ziya, art historical materials, and the rowza. Off to the side, some women might be praying, playing with children, or exchanging news. Some prefer to sit alone and weep. When a few men enter to pay their respects, they become the object of intense and unfriendly scrutiny by the women, and the men abruptly leave (Betteridge in Bowen and Early 1993, 241).

She later concludes that local pilgrimage, which offers an alternative to the mosque and a chance to leave the home without much scrutiny or cost, has much to offer women. It provides them an opportunity to both visit with one another (on a social level) and to experience contact with a saint and to attempt to exercise some control over their own lives (on a personal [and spiritual] level) (Betteridge in Bowen and Early 1993, 244). Fieldwork in the shrines might reveal the exact use of martyrdom narratives in the pilgrimage context. For example, one might think of religious education circles making use of the narratives to further legitimize the making of the shrine pilgrimage.
Kamalkhani also describes local pilgrimages, in Shiraz as well. On Tuesday evenings, women and their families from sub-disticts and nearby villages might fill the Astana shrine to fulfill vows, and to cook and distribute communal meals. She describes various types of spiritual expression: clinging to the bars of the tomb while weeping, remaining silent or reciting words of prayer in whispers, reciting Qu’ran, or listening to a (sad) song.

The bars of the tomb might also be kissed. Kamalkhani agrees with Betteridge that the ziarat fulfills both social and personal or spiritual needs (Kamalkhani 1997, 102-105). For both Kamalkhani and Betteridge, the Karbala Legend and related Shi’ite martyrologies have a dimension in which women are able to find spiritual expression, social networks, and catharses not offered to them in the institution of the mosque and officialized Islam\textsuperscript{29}.

The Karbala Legend and related narratives are also to be found in other forms of ritual, mostly within Muharram, but also throughout the year. Zanjir-zani (self-flagellation) and sina-zani (chest-beating), which might take place in dastas, or street processions and gatherings, are performed exclusively by men, but often

\textsuperscript{29} Of course, the idea of a divide between heterodox and orthodox, while I do not see it as simply academic and convenient, may be questioned in terms of power relations, i.e., who decides what official and orthodox Islam is as opposed to popular or heterodox beliefs. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the male-dominated mosque is a place in which women’s spiritual activities are relegated to the background.
viewed by a mixed audience, are two performances of which there seem to be few serious discussions. I have not integrated them into this project; however, they also seem to be multi-layered acts filled with references to text and context, identification with suffering and redemption, and the performance of the sinner and the repentant.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The seed for this project was planted in a graduate seminar on folklore methodology in February 2002. I began this project with questions about the place and role of performance in society, and more specifically, about the socio-politically subversive roles that performance might play. Additionally, I had questions about the possibility of continuities in tradition, an idea and an approach to various topoi that was introduced to me early in my Master of Arts studies at the Ohio State University. I chose the Karbala Legend because it seemed to be an obvious choice of a narrative which could be approached as a social text.

The answers and further questions provided by the research for this project led me to not a coherent thread of scholarship, but rather an array of approaches which was at times useful and at times quite frustrating. Most of the scholarship dealing with the performance forms has been descriptive rather than analytical in nature, and given the nature and short timespan of this project itself, I was not able to observe these forms for myself. I therefore attempted to match theory, about performance or memory, for example, with the descriptions made available by the scholarship.
Another difficulty in the research was to understand answers related to one of my original questions: that related to subversion. It was difficult to find scholarly literature dealing with this question because most of the literature approached the Karbala legend from the perspective of state-apparatus sponsorship. I found it necessary to do a lot of reading “between the lines” in an attempt to find if this subversion was in fact occurring. Again, given the nature of the project, I was able to raise questions related to subversion and the use of political themes, but not to find any definitive answers.

I found myself becoming increasingly wary of the secondary source material, and especially that which was produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It seemed that the nationalist project of the Pahlavi monarchy, along with the interests of neo-imperialism could be felt in the scholarly literature. For example, both the involvement of various European and American scholars in the Shiraz Festival of Arts in 1967 and 1976, where the Ta'ziya of Hurr was played, and the creation of the Institute for Traditional Performance and Ritual in Tehran in the 1970s created questions in my research. The effect of these political realities on the scholarship dealing with the Karbala Legend and specifically, on questions of continuity, could be questioned extensively.

It appeared that most of the scholarship attempted to make a direct link between pre-Islamic Iranian legends, such as that of Seyavash, and the Karbala
Legend, with little or no evidence to support these claims. This project has led me to the conclusion that this legend and its place in society are questions which are more complex than a simple replacement of one legend for another. The literature on the Karbala Legend produced after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, especially that produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran, seems to focus more so on the Islamic and Shi'ite nature of the Legend, sometimes ignoring the question of continuities of tradition, or treating it as simply incidental.

Nevertheless, this project has helped me to actively engage questions of collective memory, continuity of traditions, narrative development, and performance and performativity. The project had, for its core, the label of folklore, but drew on various disciplines and modes of argumentation in an attempt to raise questions in ways and in specific combinations that scholars have not previously done.
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