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# **Appendix**

This appendix includes two research articles by Zeynab Ali.

- The Tragedy of Karbala
- Imamat as the Fulfillment of Divine Justice

This research was presented at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, New York, in 2011 and 2012. Zeynab Ali has received a M.A in Islamic Studies from Columbia University.

For more of her related work you may follow the link below:

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# The Tragedy of Karbala A Defining Moment in the Construction of Shi'a Identity

by Zeynab Ali

#### Introduction

The martyrdom of Imam Al–Hussein at Karbala in 680 A.D was a defining moment for the creation of a distinct Shi'a identity. This tragedy had a greater impact on Shi'ism than any other event in Islamic history and has been described as a 'root metaphor' around which Shi'a religious beliefs and practices are grounded. Although the controversial issue of the succession of Imam Ali led to the initiation of Shi'a partisanship, it was the Karbala tragedy that gave impetus to create a distinct Shi'i identity that could be distinguished from other mainstream outlooks in Islam. The way in which this clear distinction manifested itself after the events of Karbala can be assessed from the way sectarian identities became firmly demarcated in the Muslim community of Kufa, for example, after this incident.

The centrality and importance of Karbala, in the ideological and geographical context, was also affirmed by the traditions of the later Imams (the descendants of the Prophet) and it's significance can be further

assessed by the evolution of distinctly Shi'a rituals informed by it. The rituals that came to be associated with the Karbala tragedy played a defining role in the creation of a distinct Shi'a identity and a political sensibility by becoming a central 'vehicle of expression' for this identity. 2

# **Segregation of Sacred Space in the Aftermath of the Tragedy of Karbala:**

An overview of the earlier diversity of sacred space and its later segregation provides an instructive insight into the way the tragedy of Karbala had played a crucial impact on what came to characterized as a distinct Shi'a identity. Before the events of Karbala, there seemed to be porous demarcations of sectarian boundaries and identities in Islam. Various tribes had loose sectarian inclinations but most Muslims followed their clan's tribal affiliations. However, such sectarian tribal affiliations did not lead to the classification of religious spaces as being Shi'a or Sunni.3 Taking the example of 7th century Kufa, the central seat of the Caliphate at the time, it can be assessed that although sectarian affiliations existed, people from a range of sectarian inclinations easily prayed at the same venue in their own distinct ways in.4

Given that this situation changed by the 8th century within two decades of the battle of Karbala, it is clearly probable that the tragedy of Karbala created new 'religious geographies' in its aftermath which delineated a clear distinction between 'friendly/sacred' and 'hostile/accursed' spaces. Although a transformation towards the consolidation of a sectarian identity had started taking place in the mid-7th century when certain ritual practices began to somewhat 'eclipse' tribal affiliations5 it was in the post-Karbala milieu when 'some mosques were renovated to celebrate the death of al-Hussein' that some religious spaces became safe havens for the Shi'a while other became openly hostile.6 In this way it was in the aftermath of this tragedy that by segregation of spaces a distinct Shi'a identity seems to have emerged.

# Muharram- Ashura Rituals as Vehicles of Expression of the Shi'a Identity

The segregation of sacred spaces is indicative of the fact that a paradigmatic change occurred in the Islamic community and in the fluid Shi'a character, with the development of a distinct set of rituals that were developed and formalized after Imam Hussein's martyrdom. These rituals, which started immediately after the Battle of Karbala, became a novel and powerful public affirmation of the Shi'a identity while serving as a unique medium for expressing and strengthening a variety of political and social identities, associations and relationships. 7 So much so that the 'potency of the practice' came to overshadow matters of theology.8

To this day it is the martyrdom of Imam Hussein that is celebrated most fervently in the entire Shi'a calendar. The myths of Karbala, woven together with historical facts introduced a devotional aspect into Shi'ism and created the ethos of the popular Shi'a personality (Jafri 2002). They also played a crucial role in creating and consolidating the Shi'a identity and set it apart from other sectarian inclinations. Such rituals are also the particular elements which manifestly distinguish Shi'ism from Sunnism, because

otherwise the differences between the two sects on actual theological or ideological constructs are rather insignificant (Jafri 2002: Enayat 2005). 10

The 'institution of mourning' for the martyred Imam as embodied in the Ashura rituals came to symbolize the ethos of Shi'ism and became a conduit for articulating the 'revolutionary' message of Shi'ism against perverse socio-political conditions that negated the Islamic ideal. 11 The mourning rituals held during Muharram and the ensuing months also provided crucial opportunities for the development of social networks among Shi'as while fostering a sense of unity for the community identity (Cole 1986: Enayat 2005).

Imam Hussein's sacrifice also gave Shi'a Islam an 'ethos of sanctification through martyrdom' which did not exist earlier (Aghaie). Although the Shi'as were persecuted all through their early history and according to the Shi'a traditions all the Imams faced persecution and were martyred, it was the martyrdom of Hussein that has given this distinct characteristic to Shi'a Islam. These rituals provided an intrinsic socio-religious channel to articulate the devotion of the Prophet's family. For the Shi'a the primacy of the Ahle-Bayt was utmost and this was a singular event which symbolized the highest form of injustice meted out to the family of the Prophet. 12 In a way, consequently, Shi'ism unwittingly appropriated the claims to affection of the Ahle-Bayt by giving utmost importance to their reverence through such rituals and formulating an identity around them.

## Pilgrimage and The Religious Geography of Karbala:

Among the various rituals that emerged in the aftermath of Imam Hussein's martyrdom, the pilgrimage to Karbala and the resting places of other Imams was a tradition that came to signify a specific Shi'a devotional outlook. Many traditions from the Shi'a Imams point to the importance placed on a pilgrimage to Karbala for strengthening the communal identity and consequently extensive pilgrimage manuals were developed which were significant in articulating the Shi'a identity. The fact that these acts of pilgrimage became integral to the Shi'i identity after the 7th century, points to the significance of the Karbala tragedy and the effect it had on the larger Islamic community in its consequent aftermath.

According to a tradition by Imam Jafar as–Sadiq, a person who failed to visit al–Hussein at Karbala had 'departed from a claim of God' because 'the claim of Hussein is a mandatory duty from God and is an obligation upon every Muslim'. In many ways pilgrimage to Karbala was almost elevated to the rank of the pilgrimage of Hajj by the Shi'ite traditions. 13 In another tradition from Imam Hasan al–Askari, a pilgrimage to Karbala after forty days after the anniversary of Hussein's death is described as 'a sign of a true believer' and as one of the distinct characteristics of a Shi's which distinguishes them from the general Muslim population. 14 Therefore the centrality of such pilgrimage came to be seen as being integral to the construction of the Shi'a identity.

### **Crystallization of Political Sensibilities**

Before the Battle of Karbala took place various tribes held loose sectarian inclinations. But a tribe, which for example supported Imam Ali politically, did not necessarily come to be designated as 'Shia' and such sectarian tribal affiliations did not lead to the classification of religious identity as being exclusively either Shia or Sunni (Haider 2011: 238). Subtle sectarian identities, it must be emphasized therefore, existed primarily as a consequence of political loyalties rather than any manifest theological differences. The fact that some Muslims sided with Ali, can therefore be explained only in the terms of socio-political reasons, not on the basis of theological teachings (Momen 1985: Enayat 2005). Such socio-political influences did later however lead to seemingly superficial differences and theological bifurcation on the interpretation and implementation of the tenets of the faith (Jafri 2002).

The Battle of Karbala manifestly enhanced the solidarity amongst the Shi'a and renewed their political agency because it provided a clear vindication of Shi'ism claims against the 'injustices' of Sunni political elite against the Prophets family and underlined the 'moral corruption' and 'political repression' of these elites. 15 The symbolism of Karbala as the revolt of the oppressed against oppressors, staged against tyranny, injustice, and repression had an everlasting impact on the Shi'a psyche. In the immediate aftermath of the Karbala tragedy this renewed sense of agency constituted the prelude to a series of successful Shi'ite revolts which finally overthrew the Ummayad dynasty.

Imam Hussein's refusal to compromise with 'godlessness' and 'tyranny', with an outlook that did not 'see death but as happiness, and living with tyrants but as sorrow', saved the Muslims from having to adhere to a 'pseudo-religion'. 16 After Karbala, Imam Hussein has emerged as the 'most revered and meritorious martyr' the world has produced and in this sense 'he lost the battle but won the campaign' 17 and his martyrdom has possibly brought a paradigmatic shift in the political consciousness of the Shi'a community and left a lasting impact on the construction of the Shi'i identity. Given these aspects it seems clear that the tragedy of Karbala is a central narrative in the Shi'a history that manifests, informs and consolidates the Shi'a identity.

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# **Imamate as the Fulfillment of Divine Justice**

#### by Zeynab Ali

#### Introduction

The concepts of Divine Justice (AdI) and the doctrine of the Imamate are fundamental aspects of Sh®ism. In this context when one analyzes the relationship between the two theological beliefs its seems impossible to articulate an argument for the primacy of one over the other. Imamate complements and actualizes the goal of Divine Justice, and in this sense it is the fulfillment of God's Justice. However without an Imam to implement it, the promised justice would remain unfulfilled. In Shi'ism ideology, the world without an Imam is not a real possibility because God is eternally just and justice is inherent in his essence. 18 The concepts of Divine Justice ('AdI) and Imamate are therefore both crucial to Shi'ism.

#### The Visceral Connection Between Adl and Imamate

The precept of Divine Justice is intricately connected with the concept of Imamate. In Shi'a theological precepts the world is a reality based on 'equity and justice' where 'justice (adl) means putting everything in its place' and inversely injustice would destroy the equilibrium. 19 Everything in this universe is a necessary existant and there is a causal connection between rationality and justice. Given this, human beings have a purpose in this world as rationl beings (mukallaf) to respond to God by worshipping him.

In this sense the Imamate is a consequence of the Divine Justice, where the Imams become a channel of divine guidance and manifestations of God's grace (lutf) for mankind. This divine grace (lutf), by making it incumbent upon God to have an infallible guide among mankind, provides the necessity of a supreme religious leadership in the form of Imamate. Thus the concept of the infallibility of the Imam (isma) is conjoined with the principle of the grace of God (lutf).20

Shi'ism, following Imamic traditions, also upholds that justice begins with the assertion of one's agency or exercise of will. However in Shiism there is no ultimate pre-destination or absolute human discretion, there being a sense of relativism in the argument about pre-determinism and 'the truth seems to lie between the two extremes'. In a paradoxical way then God has ordained free will for man. Whenever man wills an action, Divine power brings into effect its attainment, so that man determines his destiny by his own decisions.21 The actions which proceed from humans, all take place by their own power and choice, and are therefore their responsibility. In other words 'he is not forced to act as he does, but he can act and he can refrain from acting'.22 If humans have no power over their own actions, then God would be 'the most unjust of unjust beings' because he would be willing these actions and setting human beings up for failure. 23

However, the Quran states that there is no possibility of injustice by God because God is just and justice is a divine attribute. This is accepted through the concept of Tanzih, which proclaims that Allah is free of all defects and failures. When man makes the decision to devote himself to God, he is aided by God and without the guidance of the Imams cannot realize this purpose. Since man will be judged for the decision he makes himself, God helps him by providing the Imams for guidance at all times. Because of lutf man is able to tell the difference between good and evil. The principle of the intelligibility of good and evil, the concepts of Amr (to command good) and Nahi (forbid evil) are central to Divine Justice and are the foundation of Shia beliefs. Imamate is an incumbent kindness which complements this aspect of Divine Justice because it ultimately brings the creature near to obedience and keeps him far from disobedience'.24

## The Characteristics of Imamate

According to Shi'ism, God has delegated to the Imams the 'spiritual rulership' over the whole world, which must always have a leader and guide. Imam's are those who have supreme leadership over affairs of religion and mundane life' and are sent to 'give proofs', 'protect' and 'guide' men at all times.25 The concept of Imamate is derived from the niyaba of the Prophet, where the Imam is the Prophet's representative who interprets the Divine message that was revealed through the Prophet. The Imam is the repository of God's knowledge and is the interpreter of His revelation as the wasi (legatee) of the Prophet. The Imam thus has a universal authority (riyasa) in 'the things of religion and of the world'.26 The Imam is also a wali (friend of God) and his wilaya, the reality of the imamate was defined as the esoteric aspect of prophecy, with the Imam being an 'initiator into mystical truth'.27 Among the foremost characteristics that the Imam posesses is therefore the intimate knowledge of the prophetic message,

along with exceptional knowledge and ability.

The idea of the Imamate therefore rests on the idea of a permanent need for a divinely guided Imam who could act as the authoritative teacher of mankind in all religious matters. In this sense the Imams are also a proof of God on earth (hujja) and without them the earth will perish and descend into chaos. 28 Imamate is a succession (khilâfa) from God and the Prophet, and it cannot be acquired except by the word of them both. So therefore for the Shi'i the Imams have to be designated through divine appointment (nass).

In Shi'ism the notion of authority stemming from the Divine Justice and it's consequent guidance of mankind was consolidated into a principle of absolute and infallible authority. Infallibility and immunity to sin (isma) is one of the salient aspects of Imamate and is a matter which 'no one perceives but God himself'.29 Immunity to sin is 'a hidden kindness' which God shows to the Imams, as is revealed in the Quran and understood by the Shi'ites that 'God has removed all impurity and made them absolutely pure'.30

Imamate is therefore a central point of reference around which Shi'ism defines itself. Imamate is also what distinguishes Shi'ism from other sects in Islam. The Shi'i outlook of the concept of imamate diverged from its Sunni counterpart because it was at marked variance with the Sunni notions of political leadership. For the Shi'a the Imam is the supreme leader of the community and there is no separation of temporal and religious authority. For the Shi'a the Imams are also leaders without attachment to the world and do not seek worldly gains. 31

#### The Significance of the Imamate

As can be seen from the above argument Divine Justice would never have been able to be actualized or its objective be fulfilled because man being responsible for his own actions would need to interpret God's directives to lead a meaningful life. The Imams, as markers of God's graciousness, aid mankind in seeking and deciphering such interpretations. Like Prophethood, the Imamate has been endowed with cosmic significance as a mechanism of mediation between God and man. Importantly humanity can be without a prophet but never without an Imam. From the Shi'a perspective human beings are always in need of a leader and an organized society needs a guide to avoid disorder and chaos. Since Islam is a religion predominantly concerned with social life it needs an ever present leader who can navigate through the pitfalls of society.32 Hence the necessity of the Imamate.

Reason cannot fully explain revelation without the Imam's intercession because there is a difference between the tafsir (exegesis) and taawil (the hidden meaning) of the revelation. The Imams possess an insight into the esoteric meaning with their ability of taawil and the way in which the Ahl–Bayt interpret the Quran is 'nothing other than the way of the Quran'.33 In this context the Shi'a seek to understand religion not only through reason but also through the guidance and interpretations made accessible through revelation, Prophecy and Imamate.34

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