

Introduction: The History and Philosophy of Aza' al-Husayn

The Message

Over one thousand three hundred and fifty years ago, on the 10th of Muharram, just before 'asr, a man stood on a sand-dune at Karbala'. He was bleeding from several wounds on his body. He had lost everything. Since early morning he had carried several dead bodies into his camp. He had even buried his infant child.

He looked at the bodies of his loved ones. Tears flowed out of his eyes. He looked at the sky and seemed to draw some strength from an unseen source. Then, like a muezzin from a minaret, he raised a call: "Is there anyone who will come to assist us? Is there anyone who will respond to our call for aid?"

He turned direction and repeated the call. He did this four times.

Whom was he calling out to? Surely he was not expecting anyone to come to his aid. Those who wanted to help him had already crossed the lines and laid down their lives for the cause. He knew there was no one left. He knew that there was no other Hurr. And yet, meticulously and laboriously, he made sure that his call reverberated in all directions.

Of course that call was a call to Muslims of every generation in every land. It was a call to us where ever we may be. It was a call for help. Help against Yezedism which in every age rears its ugly head to oppress justice, truth and morality. Our Imam was calling out to every Muslim of every age and time to combat Yezedism, both within himself and as an external force.

This was his battle cry for jihad-ul-akbar. He had already demonstrated that his objective had always been to create a spiritual awakening through amr bil ma'ruf and nahyi anil munkar. Now he was calling out for the continuation of this jihad at the individual, social and political levels.

Evolution of Aza

Muslims, and more particularly the Shiahs, have answered this call with the unique institution of Aza' al-Husayn. With every tear that we shed for him we pledge to resist the oppression of injustice, immorality, inequity and falsehood. Every time we raise our hand and bring it down on our chest in matam, we are saying: "Labbaik, Labbaik Ya Mawla!" to our Imam Husayn Ibn Ali, the grandson of the Holy Prophet (SAWA).

For long the word Aza' al-Husayn has been exclusively used in connection with the remembrance ceremonies for the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. Aza' al-Husayn includes mourning congregations, lamentations, matam and all such actions which express the emotions of grief, anger and, above all, repulsion against what Yazid stood for. These emotions, however, remain futile and hypocritical unless accompanied by a will to reform both at the individual level and the community level.

The term majlis has both a grammatical meaning and a meaning which relates to Aza' al-Husayn. In its technical sense, a majlis is a meeting, a session or a gathering. In reference to Aza' al-Husayn, it means a gathering to mourn Imam Husayn. In this sense it was first used by our sixth Imam, Ja'far Sadiq (A.S.) It is reported that his companion al-Fudhayl Ibn Yasaar came to pay his respects to the Holy Imam.

After the exchange of usual courtesies, Imam asked al-Fudhayl: "Do you people ever organise majaalis to recall the martyrdom of Imam Husayn?" Al-Fudhayl, with tears pouring down his eyes, replied: "Yabna Rasulillah, indeed we do." The Imam said: "May Allah bless you. I highly approve of such majaalis."

On another occasion, the poet Ja'far ibn Iffaan recited to our Imam al-Sadiq a poem on the tragedy of Karbala'. The Imam began to weep uncontrollably. He then addressed the poet in the following terms: "O Iffaan, do not think that it is only those whom you can see here are listening to your poetry. In fact Allah's closest angels are present here at this majlis and they are all listening to your recitation and they too lament and weep. May Allah bless you for what you have recited. He will, inshallah, reward you with paradise for your efforts on our behalf."

Aza' al-Husayn was a phenomenon which gripped Muslim conscience immediately after the tragedy of Karbala'.

The first majlis al-Husayn was recited in the market-place of Kufa by a lady from whose head her veil had been ripped off, whose hopes and aspirations had been destroyed on the blood-drenched sands of Karbala' but whose indomitable spirit stepped forward to free the Islamic values from the yoke of tyranny and oppression. She was the first one to answer the call of Imam Husayn. Standing on her unsaddled camel, she looked at the multitude rejoicing the victory of Yazid. As soon as people saw her, they were quiet.

They knew that a historic moment for Kufa had arrived. Looking straight at them, the daughter of Ali said: "Woe upon you O people of Kufa. Do you realise which piece of Muhammad's heart you have severed! Which pledge you have broken! Whose blood you have shed! Whose honour you have desecrated! It is not just Imam Husayn whose headless body lies unburied on the sands of Karbala'. It is the heart of the Holy Prophet. It is the very soul of Islam!"

The first majlis touched and moved the people of Kufa so deeply as to give rise to both the Tawwabun movement and al-Mukhtar's quest for vengeance.

Ten days after Ashura, a messenger from Yazid arrived in Madina. His name was Abd al-Malik ibn Abi al Harith al-Sulamee. He came to tell the Governor, Amr bin Said al-Aas that Husayn ibn Ali had been killed in Karbala'.

The Governor, more conscious of the mood of the people, said that he himself could not make the news public but Abd al-Malik, if he so wished, could make the public announcement. Abd al-Malik announced the news after the morning prayers.

There was such intense weeping and wailing from the homes of Banu Hashim that the very walls of masjidun-nabawi began to tremble. Zainab, Umme Luqman, the daughter of Aqeel ibn Abi Talib came out screaming: "What will you say when the Prophet asks you: "What have you, the last ummah, done with my offspring and my family after I left them? Some of them are prisoners and some of them lie killed, stained with blood. What sort of ajr al-risaalah is this that you disobey me by oppressing my children?"

Fatimah Bint Huzaam, also known as Ummul Baneen, carried her young grandson Ubaidullah ibn Abbas and prepared to go out. When asked where she was going, she said that she was taking the orphan of Abbas to offer condolences to the mother of Husayn.

Marwan ibn Hakam reports that every afternoon men and women would gather at Jannat-ul-Baqee and there would be remembrance of the tragedy of Karbala' and the weeping and wailing could be heard miles away.

When the prisoners were finally freed by Yazid, they asked for an opportunity to have rites of remembrance in Damascus. A house was made available to them and Aza' al-Husayn went on for over a week. Just as Hadhrat Musa Kalimullah had been raised in the palace of the enemy of Allah, Firaun, Bibi Zainab laid the foundation of Aza' al-Husayn in the very capital of his murderer!

On their return to Madina, Bibi Zainab took over the leadership of Aza' al-Husayn in the city of the Holy Prophet. This aroused such strong emotions in the people and such revulsion against the oppressor that Amr ibn Said ibn al-Aas wrote to Yazid to have Bibi Zainab exiled from Madina. This was done in the beginning of 62 A.H. Bibi Zainab died shortly afterwards.

Both the 4th and 5th Imams greatly encouraged Aza' al-Husayn. In their times Aza' al-Husayn had to be performed in utmost secrecy as the regime was opposed to any remembrance of Karbala'. The poets who composed elegies and the devout Shiahs who attended the gatherings at which these elegies were recited did so at the risk of their lives. Nonetheless, the poets continued to pour out their emotions in their poetry.

Some of these poetry are extant today and one can see the intensity of faith and sadness enshrined in the words of the poets.

Gradually, the institution of ziyarah came into being. People would visit the graves of the martyrs and there perform Aza' al-Husayn. Our Imams wrote for them ziyarahs to be recited. One of these ziyarahs is recited today by us and is known as Ziyarat al-Warith.

When we examine Ziyarat al-Warith, we can see not only a testimony of the greatness of Imam Husayn and the moving sentiments describing his sacrifice for the cause of Allah, but also a solemn pledge and a commitment by the reciter: "And I make Allah, His angels, His prophets, and His messengers, witnesses to the fact that I believe in Imam Husayn and in my return to Allah. I also believe in the laws of Allah and in the consequences of human actions. I have subordinated the desires of my heart to his (Imam Husayn's) heart and I sincerely submit to him and (promise to follow his commands)"

Clearly, this undertaking was never meant by our Imams to be an empty ritual. Recitation of Ziyarat al-Warith is a commitment to Imam Husayn's cause made in the presence of Allah and the angels and the prophets and the messengers and in full awareness of the final accountability of human action. One must always reflect upon the seriousness and solemnity of this pledge.

Until the time of ghaibat al-kubra, we find that our Imams always encouraged Aza' al-Husayn. They saw in Aza' al-Husayn not only a demonstration of grief for Imam Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala' but also a renewal of one's commitment to Allah and His laws as expounded in the Holy Qur'an and the ahadeeth.

We have records of the sayings of the representatives (Naibs) during ghaibat al-Sughra explaining and encouraging Aza' al-Husayn. From 329 AH onwards the fuqaha and the 'ulemas took it upon themselves to perpetuate the message of Karbala'.

Shaykh Ibn Babawayh-al-Qummi better known as Shaykh as-Saduq who died in 381 AH was the first scholar to have introduced prose as medium of conveying the message of Imam Husayn. He would sit on a pulpit and speak extempore while many of his students sat by the side of the pulpit and recorded the speech. His speeches have been preserved and to this day are known as the Amali (dictations) of Shaykh Saduq.

Public demonstration of grief first occurred in 351 A.H. On the 10th of Muharram, there was a spontaneous procession in the street of Baghdad and thousands of men, women and children came out

chanting “Ya Husayn! Ya Husayn!” beating their breast and reciting elegies. In the same year, a similar procession took place in Egypt. The regime tried its best to stem the tide of Aza’ al-Husayn but failed. Very soon Aza’ al-Husayn became an institution with deep roots in the hearts of Muslims. Majlis evolved into an institution for amr bil ma’ruf and nahya anal munkar as well as reminder of the tragic events.

As Islam spread, different cultures adopted different modes of Aza’ al-Husayn. Taimur Lang introduced the institution of tabut and alam in India. As Islam spread southwards on the sub-Continent, the form underwent changes to take into account local cultural influences so as to portray the message of Karbala’ in the medium best understood by the local people, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

By the beginning of the 19th Century, there was not a corner of the world, from Spain to Indo-China, which did not have some form of demonstration on the 10th of Muharram.

The form varied from country to country. In Iran, the most popular form has been passion plays as a medium transmit the message of Karbala’ in addition to the majaalis from the minabir.

In India, the Ashura processions became part of the Indian Muslim culture. Even the Hindus participated in these processions. The Maharajah of Gwalior was always seen walking behind the 'alam of Hadhrat Abbas barefooted and without any insignia of his exalted office. Marthiyas and majaalis were such strong influences on the Muslim population that they helped strengthen not only their Islamic beliefs but also their political resolve.

History reports that even Gandhi on his famous salt march to protest against the oppression of the British Raj took 72 people with him in emulation of Imam Husayn protest against Yazid's oppression.

Importance of Aza’

The following excerpt from the last will and testament of the Late Ayatullah Ruhullah Khumayni (A.R.) is most touching and relevant: “The memory of this great epic event (Ashura) must be kept alive. Remember, the cries of damnation and all the curses that are rightfully raised against the cruelty of the Bani Umayyayah caliphs towards the Holy Imams, are reflected in the heroic protests against cruel despots by the nations through the centuries.

It is the perpetuation of such protests that shatter oppression and cruelty. It is necessary that the crimes of the tyrants in each age and era be indicated in the cries of lamentation and in the recitals of elegies held for the Holy Imams”

Where ever the Shiah have gone they have taken with them the cultural forms of Aza’ al-Husayn as practised in their country of origin. Today, Aza’ al-Husayn in one form or another, can be seen throughout the world.

Aza’ al-Husayn is an important institution and we have to ensure that it is kept alive so as to cultivate

and nurture Islamic conscience in each one of us and that our children and their descendants remain committed to the cause of Imam Husayn.

Aza' at Personal Level

We must never lose sight of the fact that while the form of Aza' al-Husayn may reflect the local indigenous culture, the essence of Aza' al-Husayn must always be remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and our re-dedication to his cause.

There is always the danger that if the form appears to be incongruent to the local norms and consequently incomprehensible to the young generation or to the indigenous population upon whom we wish to impress the message of Karbala', the substance might gradually lose its significance. The fabric of the substance invariably depends upon the acceptability of the form.

Throughout history the form of Aza' al-Husayn has always undergone changes to accommodate local norms. It is for us, therefore, to seriously re-evaluate the form in order to ensure that we can pass on to our children the substance of Aza' al-Husayn in its pristine state and also make Aza' al-Husayn an irresistible instrument of tableegh! We are duty bound to Allah and His Prophet to ensure that our children grow up to accept Aza' al-Husayn **not** as a ritualistic activity **nor** as means for atonement, but as a serious commitment to the basic values of Islam."

Dr. Liyakat Takim in his speech in Toronto on the occasion of the last Husayn Day made this very profound statement: "The message of Imam Husayn can only be properly comprehended when we bear in mind the Qur'anic principle of tawheed which demands our undivided commitment to Allah only."

I accept that not all of us can suddenly make or honour such a commitment. But supposing on the day of 'Ashura, after performing our a'amaals or when the Ziyarah is recited after the aza, each one of us promises, in the name of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, to give up one such activity as is contrary to the doctrines of Islam what a strong community we would be and what an excellent legacy we would leave for our children!! This in my opinion would be Aza' al-Husayn par excellence!

Aza as Instrument of Tableegh

It is our duty to deliver Imam Husayn's message to the indigenous population of the country we live in. We can succeed in this only if we ourselves appear to be true followers of Imam in all our interaction with the community at large. We must reflect the maximum integrity, Islamic values and our sincere commitment to Imam's cause. We can not possibly be making the commitment enshrined in Ziyarat al-Warith without the least intention of honouring that commitment.

Processions are of course the institution effectively used in the countries of the East and in Africa. We have to convince ourselves that this institution can be equally effective in the West. If not, we must

explore other means of taking Imam's message to the people. We have to examine such activities as:

1. Blood donation through Hussaini Blood Banks;
2. Distribution of food to the needy;
3. Maximum usage of media to explain the event and the fact the Holy Imam died to save the basic values cherished by all the communities;
4. Publication and distribution of leaflets;
5. Distribution of cold drinks in schools and colleges;
6. Visiting the patients in hospitals with floral gifts. You may find that when you take a small gift to a patient in hospital you will have carried the message of Imam Husayn to the entire family of that patient.

All these suggestions are based on the institution of the public "sabeels" which we still have in the East and in Africa. While mourning is important, perhaps we should limit that within the confines of our Imambargahs, and demonstrate the true spirit of Imam Husayn's generosity when he ordered Hadhrat Abbas to provide water to Hurr and his army. Perhaps we too may see a large number moving towards Islam and Imam Husayn.

Zakiri And Presentation of History

I seek, with utmost respect, to offer word of caution to all my zakir colleagues.

Exaggeration can only discredit us and the cause of Imam Husayn. The historical accounts must be adhered to although at times, in our anxiety to arouse emotion, we resort to exaggeration. We should have the recorded history as our guide and reason and logic as our limitations as do most of our 'ulema and fuqaha.

Abu Mikhnaf was the earliest historian who took testimonies from eye witnesses and compiled his maqal. There is in existence today an book in Arabic called Maqal Abi Mikhnaf. It is doubtful whether this is the original text. However we do have the excerpts quoted by Tabari and other historians. We zakireen have relied on various sources principally Allamah Majlisi's Biharul Anwar and others. Several very good books in English exist on this subject. Maulana Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi is the compiler of a book containing several very interesting articles relating to the history of the tragedy of Karbala'. Then there is Shaykh Mufid (A.R.)'s al Irshad.

Extrapolations of certain inferences from known facts are not, in my opinion or in the opinion of the 'ulema, objectionable. For example description of natural human emotions, though not chronicled in vivid detail may be extrapolated if the description is within the bounds of reason and does not detract from the character of the personalities involved.

Some of the maqaatil can be faulted in respect of certain statements For example Tabari records that the age of Imam Zain-ul-'Abideen (A.S.) was questioned at Kufa and he was examined to determine whether he had attained buloogh. (See the History of al Tabari, Vol. XIX page 166). Shaykh Mufid gives the fourth Imam's age at the time as 23 years. It is well known the Imam was married and had a son.

Many such contradictions exist in the maqaatil but this does not mean that we have to reject any account in total. Detailed events, and often the names of those involved, are very difficult to record accurately even by an honest and meticulous chronicler recording contemporaneously as the events are taking place. Abu Mikhnaf began to compile his history, mostly through eye witness account at least twenty five years after the tragedy. It is necessary for us to be eclectic for so long as we remain within the confines of reason. To be eclectic we must know what historical material is available and where to find it.

It is not within the scope of this article to deal with all the historical sources I would refer the reader to S. H. M, Jafri's the Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam, Chapter 7. I would also refer any reader interested in the subject to the following additional works:

1. The volume of Tabari referred to above.
2. Al-Irshad by Shaykh Mufid.
3. The article by Imam Husayn by Veccia Vaglieri in the Encyclopaedia of Islam which is based mostly Balaadhuri's account.

Objectives

We have to remember that the 'ashra al-Muharram is a very emotional period and this emotion has to be exploited by the ahle minabir to convey the message of Karbala', to awaken a hatred against all that Yazid stood for and to rekindle a commitment to Islam as preached by the Ahlul Bayt and for which Imam Husayn laid down his life.

We can not perpetuate the illusion that Aza' al-Husayn means no more than a few tears, matam and processions. These are the means and not the end. They are important only if they lead each of us becoming a better Shiah than we were in the preceding year.

If we lose sight of the objectives we may find ourselves answerable for forgetting and holding to ridicule the cause for which our Imam sacrificed so much!

Imam Husayn himself advised a muslim who was claiming to be a shiah to fear Allah and not to make a false claim lest on the Day of Judgement he is raised with the liars. "Our shiah," the Imam added, "is the one whose heart is pure of malice, deception and corruption. His words and deeds are only for the pleasure of Allah."

We must during this forthcoming 'ashra al-Muharram pose this question to ourselves in all seriousness. Do we intend to make a commitment to Imam Husayn's objectives or do we wish to continue complacently in our current state, paying what can best be described a lip service to his martyrdom with demonstrative mourning only??

While I pray that we begin, as we must, to understand the philosophy of Aza' al-Husayn and make a serious commitment to the objectives of the King of Martyrs, I sincerely hope that there never comes a day when majalis are replaced by clinical lectures devoid of all emotion! Reason when supported by emotion has a more enduring effect, and it is for this very end that as a recompense of the rationality of the message of the Holy Prophet he is told by Allah to ask for no recompense save the love of Ahlul Bayt. Love, while being an emotional force, becomes hypocrisy if one fails to identify and follow the wishes of the loved one.

May all our Muharrams be true demonstration of our love for, and a confluence of emotion, reason and commitment to, Imam Husayn.

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