

The Husayni Mourning in Iran Between the Safavid and Qajar Eras

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summary

The issue of Husayni rituals has always been among the most prominent and significant matters that all Iranian governments and authorities have endeavored to develop and encourage to be held in the best manner. This stems from the nature of the doctrinal belief (the Twelver Imami Shiite sect) upon which the political entity was founded since the Safavid era—a belief that has persisted through the eras of those states and continues to this day.

Keywords (Iran, Safavids, Qajars, Hussein rituals, conflict)

The first axis :Hussein rituals during the Safavid era

With the declaration of the Safavid state during the reign of Shah Ismail I (1501-1524 AD), the adoption of the Twelver Imami Shiite sect as the official doctrine throughout Iran was announced, abolishing all decrees, legislations, and laws that did not align with this principle and belief. The muezzins were ordered to add the phrase "I bear witness that Ali is the Wali of Allah." Due to the religious nature of this state and the accompanying instructions and intellectual-doctrinal propositions, one of which was the emphasis on Husayni rituals and the exaggeration in practicing them, these rituals were considered a fundamental pillar for the continuity of the Safavid state's tent. Therefore, the Safavid rulers found themselves compelled to establish a ritualistic school, so to speak, to arrange, organize, and develop the Husayni ritual, especially during the days of Muharram, to illustrate the tragedies of the Ahl al-Bayt in general and the events of Ashura in particular.

History tells us that among the practical steps taken by the Safavid rulers was the lavish spending on poets and writers to compose poems and write stories and narratives illustrating the painful event of Karbala. Instead of the

phenomenon of poets being tied to the palace and composing poetry for the king or caliph, this phenomenon (composing poetry) became exclusively dedicated to praising the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them) throughout the long history of the Safavid era and beyond. A clear example of this phenomenon is the poem by Mohtasham Kashani, written during this period, who dedicated 18 poems and verses to Husayni themes, leaving a significant impact on the works of poets of the Safavid era and those who followed. It is said that he composed a poem in praise of Shah Tahmasp I (1524-1576 AD) and sent it to him, to which the Shah responded with a letter requesting that he abandon praising him and devote his poetic efforts to the elegies of the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them). The letter stated, "I am only pleased with what is for the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them)." Consequently, Mohtasham composed these elegies and sent them to him, for which he was rewarded with a generous gift. These poems have been widely accepted and popular from that day until now, being among the foremost recited by preachers and the top of the elegies chanted by mourners in the Husayni commemorations.

During the reign of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629 AD), the Shah was accustomed to mourning Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) even during his military campaigns. For example, during one of his wars with the Ottoman Empire, which coincided with the days of Muharram, he held mourning ceremonies on the night of Ashura. There was an exaggeration in performing the rituals and mourning, expressing the grief and sympathy for the family of the Prophet to such an extent that the sounds of wailing, crying, and chest-beating reached the enemy camp, causing them to panic and surrender, believing that Shah Abbas had ordered a sudden night attack. The era of Shah Abbas also witnessed changes in the methods of mourning and holding ceremonies. For instance, theatrical plays (ta'ziyeh) emerged to depict the painful event of Karbala, where women would ride camels with children, crying and in a state of anguish, and

the phenomenon of holding ceremonies with scattered bodies, symbolizing the scattered bodies of the Prophet's family in the Battle of Karbala. This incited emotions and anger among the mourners, stirring their passionate feelings, which were exploited to some extent by some Safavid rulers to build a state, which some call a "rational state," somewhat distant from the unjustified excesses practiced by Sufi orders, thereby mobilizing the masses towards their enemies, the Ottomans and Uzbeks, among others.

The second axis : During the Qajar Era (1797 – 1925 AD)

During the Qajar era (1797 – 1925 AD), unique rituals and ceremonies emerged that were specific to this period, although they were inherited from previous eras. Many historical sources document a special and unique state of several of these rituals and ceremonies. From the first day of Muharram, groups began decorating streets and alleys with black flags and banners, all indicating mourning for the tragedy of the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them).

For example, the phenomenon of striking the chests and bodies with iron and spiked chains dates back to this era or before, but the Qajars developed it and added new materials to this ritual. Foreign visitors and travelers during their stay in Iran in Muharram reported that "some people were striking their chests with their fists with great force, some placed iron chains on their bare chests, injuring themselves severely, and others walked barefoot, covered in blood with blackened faces, chanting for Husayn (peace be upon him) in the streets..." This was to express their opinion and show their loyalty to the Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them).

Some of those with strong bodies would carry large flags and banners through the streets, moving them from side to side by tying them to their stomachs and chests. Many of these gatherings were held in the courtyards of

mosques, involving men, women, and children, all practicing their specific rituals.

In another description, a foreign tourist described the Ashura mourning: "Shortly after noon on Ashura day, the echo of mourners' voices could be heard throughout villages and cities. Groups formed circles, marching in the streets... The sadness of these mourners was in appreciation of the brave hero whose body lies in the plains of Karbala (Imam Husayn and his family, peace be upon them)... At the beginning of the procession, a group of boys, naked to the waist, circled the mourners wearing green sashes... Some narrating the suffering and tragedy of Karbala walked among the crowd... The children were jumping and beating their chests... Following them were men carrying long poles with colored banners... Behind these, a wailer led another group of men who had torn their collars and injured their chests and foreheads, striking their bodies repeatedly..."

What distinguished the mourning days during the Qajar era from the Safavid era is that the mourning days during the Qajar period extended beyond the month of Muharram, unlike the Safavids, whose mourning period ended with the conclusion of Muharram and Safar. Moreover, the religious decrees issued by the religious institution regarding the necessity of holding religious gatherings became stronger, stemming from the saying of Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq (peace be upon him): "Revive our affairs, may Allah have mercy on those who revive our affairs." Additionally, the political class, including the Shah and his entourage, encouraged and even participated in these ceremonies and rituals. Historical accounts mention that the Grand Vizier to Naser al-Din Shah, Mirza Aghasi, was among those who held mourning gatherings and prayers at their homes for several days. It is also reported that Naser al-Din Shah ordered his Grand Vizier to build a large Husayniyah in the shape of a circle that could accommodate hundreds of mourners, adorned with

candles, banners, and various lamps to gather mourners for a unified ceremony. Naser al-Din Shah frequented these government-supervised central mourning events, which typically began with the recitation of the Quran, followed by the reciter ascending the pulpit to recount the tragedy of Imam Husayn and his family (peace be upon them) (the Husayni massacre).

In addition to the official ceremony held by the Shah every year, there were other special rituals and traditions adhered to by the people, including the phenomenon of vows offered to these processions by the public. Among the important aspects cared for by the procession organizers was providing food for the poor. Some historians noted: "It is said that during those days, those who could not feed themselves participated in the rituals and afterwards went to the food tents, receiving a handful of rice or a piece of meat in soup. Even distributing black mourning clothes to the poor who could not afford mourning attire was a common vow in Tehran during the Qajar era..."

Thus, many individuals who struggled to find their daily sustenance found in the Ashura events and the feasts held in the name of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) a means to alleviate their hunger.

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