ANTHROPOS

110.2015: 63–72

Redefining the "Ashura" Ritual in Iraq

The Islamist Movement and the Student Processions (*mawakib al-talaba*) during 1966–1968

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Abstract. – This article examines the redefinition of the Muharram processions in Iraq during the 1960s. The article addresses the societal and political significance of "Ashura" in Iraq and examines in detail the Muharram processions organized by the country's nascent Islamist movement. The Islamic Da'wa Party (Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya), established at the end of the 1950s, sensed the importance of "Ashura" for promoting its political message, attracting new followers, and mobilizing the Shi'ite community. By then, however, the educated middle classes, who accounted for the majority of al-Da'wa's activists, were absent from the "Ashura" rituals. The party, therefore, organized separate processions for university students, differing from popular forms of commemoration in both outward appearance and political content. *[Iraq, Ashura, Islamism, Da'wa Party, Hizb ad-Da'wa]*

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Introduction

The ritual forms of mourning expressed by members of Shi'ite communities on the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram have long been a source of fascination for external observers, e.g., journalists, scholars in the field, Western travelers, and non-Shi'ite Muslims. Over the last 50 years, a large number of scholars have analyzed the historical background to, as well as the political, sociological, and religious functions of, the "Ashura" rituals. The bulk of research has focused on the *ta'ziyeh*, the Iranian passion play. Further emphasis has been placed on the politicization of "Ashura" in Iran and Lebanon during the 1960s and the 1970s. Less attention has been directed to the commemoration of "Ashura" in Iraq. This is all the more remarkable since it is in the territory of present-day Iraq that the Shi'a, as a distinct political and religious group developed centuries ago and where the central religious tenets of Shi'ism were formulated. Although present-day Iraq is the location of four of the shrines of the Twelve Imams and is home to the most important educational institution of Shi'ite learning in Najaf, the number of studies dealing with "Ashura" in Iraq remains limited.

Background: The Battle of Karbala and the Development of the "Ashura" Rituals

The events which occurred near Karbala during the first ten days of Muharram in 680/61 h constitute the background to the "Ashura" ceremonies. A detailed account of the course of events, meticulously reported in Shi'ite sources, is beyond the scope of this article. To briefly summarize: the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, Husain Ibn 'Ali, together with 72 supporters and members of his family, died in battle against the numerically superior Umayyad army. Western historians stress the weakness of Husain's position in the struggle for power against the Umayyad. Shi'ites, however, emphasized that Husain was deliberately seeking martyrdom in order to become a symbol for the downtrodden and

disadvantaged people. Regardless of the differing accounts of the battle of Karbala, it was central in transforming the identity and self-conception of the Shi'ites from a political to a primarily religious group: it has ultimately become crucial to their communal identity. The most famous account of the battle of Karbala is provided by the historian al-Kufi (d. 926) in his *Kitab al-futuh* "Kitab al-futuh" (al-Kufi 1421 h: 100–147).

The tradition of commemorating the martyrdom of Husain can be traced back to the formative years of Shi'ism. It has been asserted that immediately after the battle of Karbala, Husain's followers in Kufa publicly began to express repentance for abandoning the imam in the face of danger, thereby laying the foundation for the Muharram ceremonies (al-Kufi 1421 h: 173–294). From the early years of the 'Abbasid period memorial services were held in public, whereas Shi'ite dynasties like the Buyid (945–1055), who controlled the 'Abbasid caliphate, provided funding and patronage. Since breast-beating and face slapping were traditional ways of mourning, it is likely that they were included in the commemorative practices from the very beginning.

It is, however, difficult to determine the origin of the more vigorous tradition of flagellation with chains and of swords (*tatbir*) in which the flagellants cut their foreheads with swords or daggers. European travelers and Shi'ite sources have indicated that these practices originated from the Caucasus and date back to the beginning of the 17th century. Nakash suggests that they might have been inspired by similar Christian practices (1993: 178–180). The Shi'ite passion play has a comparatively short tradition. The Safavid dynasty, established at the beginning of the 16th century fostered the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a full-fledged play (*shabih*), enacted on the streets or in other public places. Yet it was not until the end of the 19th century that the *shabih* developed – in Iran under the Qajar dynasty – into a theatrical form of drama, the *ta'ziya* play, and reached its zenith.

To this day, there is no homogenous and binding form of remembrance. The particular form and content of the commemoration of "Ashura" differs with regard to national, regional, and local characteristics. Its form reflects political and societal conditions and is determined by the educational and class affiliations of the participants. To briefly summarise, three different forms of commemoration have developed over the 13 centuries since the battle of Karbala: (1) Mourning recitations (*ta'ziyah*, *dhikra*); (2) representation of the battle as a play (*ta'ziyeh*, *tamthil al-Husain*, *shabih*); (3) mourning processions (*mawakib Husainiyya*).

History of the Muharram Rituals in Iraq: Form and Function

In 20th-century Iraq, all three types of commemorating the martyrdom of Husain were apparent. The eminent position of Najaf and Karbala as centers of Shi'ite learning and destinations for pilgrimage encouraged the spread of "Ashura" practices from all parts of the Shi'ite world. As already indicated, some of these practices were not very old, dating back only to the middle of the 19th century. Until recently, the rituals and beliefs of Iraq's Shi'ite tribal society differed considerably from "orthodox" Shi'ism as reproduced and represented by the *ulama* of Najaf and Karbala. This was apparent in the lack of a religious infrastructure in southern Iraq, the nonobservance of religious duties, the existence of merely sporadic contacts with religious authorities, and the prevalence of heterodox beliefs and practices, among them the veneration of local saints. The contact with Najaf-trained clerics was, in many cases, confined to the month of Muharram, when *ulama* from the shrine cities or preachers were touring the small towns and villages.

The Arab Shi'ite tribal society played a significant role in shaping the form and content of the Muharram ritual in Iraq, in rural areas as well as in the Shrine cities. In Iraq, the *ta'ziya* was far less significant than in Iran, with its comprehensive genre of literature, professional actors, and representative buildings (*takiyya*). In the rural and tribal environment of southern Iraq the bulk of participants in the "Ashura" processions and plays came from the local population. Although metaphoric objects, such as the cradle of 'Ali al-Asgar or a puppet representing the body of Imam Husain, were frequently integrated into the performance, they were less refined than in Iran. In the march areas, for example, they were often made of weed (Westphal-Hellbusch 1962: 264–268; Fernea 1970: 70–72).

The importance assigned to 'Abbas, the half brother and standard-bearer of Husain, who was reportedly killed in Karbala when trying to get water from the Euphrates, is another indication of the tribal character of the "Ashura" ceremonies in Iraq. Though early Shi'ite accounts did not emphasize the role of 'Abbas, he is, according to the Iraqi sociologist 'Ali al-Wardi, credited with embodying the ideals of chivalry and manhood and is, therefore, regarded with the greatest reverence. Swearing an oath in his name is believed to be more credible than one made in the name of God or the prophet since 'Abbas is considered to be a strict and impatient judge, easy to enrage. Though 'Abbas does not belong to the imams, his tomb in Karbala is an im-

portant destination for pilgrims. His martyrdom is especially remembered on the 7th day of Muharram and his tomb, which is located close to the shrine of Husain, is included in the mourning processions (al-Wardi 1965: 241–244).

Another central element, which is influenced by Iraq's tribal society, is the poetry recited in the "Ashura" rituals. Nakash makes the point that two major genres of Iraqi colloquial poetry played a major role in the development of the "Ashura" literature: the *abudhiyya* and the *hosa* with their central themes of ideal manhood, courage, pride, and honor. The *hosa* is a vocal song, with a precentor praising the noble deeds and virtues of a hero, his tribe, or a heroic incident. He is accompanied by the audience or a group who joins in the last rhyme of a paragraph with the same note. Sometimes a popular stamping dance is performed and guns are fired into the air (Nakash 1994: 117–119). In addition to the first ten days of Muharram there is another religious event associated with the martyrdom of Husain, one which marks in particular the religious calendar of Iraq's Shi'ite community. According to Shi'ite belief, Husain's son, the fourth Imam 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin, was permitted by Caliph Yazid Ibn Mu'awiya to take the head of his father – which had been chopped off – from Damascus back to Karbala and bury it next to the body. According to other traditions, Imam Husain's head is buried either in Medina, Kufa, Najaf, Damascus, or Cairo (al-Barahim 2010: 171). The Arba'in pilgrimage or *maradd arra's* (Returning of the Head), observed 40 days after the 10th day of Muharram, recalls this incident. On this particular occasion, hundreds of thousands of Shi'ite pilgrims from all over southern Iraq set out to Karbala, many of them walking on foot, some even for several days.

In social terms, the commemoration of Husain on the first 10 days of Muharram and on the *yawm al-arba'in*, the 20th Safar reasserts the solidarity of the Shi'ite community as a whole by invoking the collective memory of the battle of Karbala and by reflecting on current political and societal conditions. The Arba'in processions, as sociologist Faleh Abdul Jabar has noted, are particularly instrumental in bolstering the solidarity of the Shi'ite communities of southern Iraq, since the different villages and towns around Karbala traditionally provide food and shelter for the passing pilgrims and contribute their own contingents to the march. According to popular belief, participation improves the prosperity of the pilgrim in this world and his salvation in the hereafter, since he evokes the imam's powers to mediate with God. Those who represent their guild, neighborhood, or village in the pilgrimage or who finance, shelter, or feed one of the groups obtain forgiveness for their sins and the opportunity to enhance their social prestige and status. Since a gathering of hundreds of thousands of people always provide an opportunity for doing business, some participants use the pilgrimage to combine their concern for the hereafter with more profane interests (Jabar 2003: 197 f.).

"Ashura" and State Authorities in Iraq: On the Political Potential of a Religious Event

Political authorities in Iraq have always paid close attention to the "Ashura" ceremonies, in part because this occasion brings thousands of people together in a highly emotional atmosphere. Dawud Pasha, the last Mamluk ruler, who reigned from 1816 until 1831, banned the "Ashura" ceremonies. While mourning ceremonies in Baghdad were reportedly conducted secretly in households, it can be assumed that they were tolerated by the authorities in cities like Najaf and Karbala where state control was less established. When the Ottomans took over direct control over Iraq, the new governor 'Ali Rida Pasha formally authorized the public commemoration of "Ashura" (al-Wardi 1971: 109–111). As Gökhan Çentinsaya, who studied the Ottoman policy towards Iraq's Shi'a community has noted, 'Ali Rida's successors pursued a similar policy. Some Ottoman officials, however, regarded the Shi'ites as having the potential to be disloyal to the state and thus considered measures to counter the spread of Shi'ism among the Iraqi tribes during the last decades of the 19th century (Çetinsaya 2007).

The modern Iraqi nation-state adhered generally to the Ottoman policy. In 1921, the 10th of Muharram was declared a national holiday and King Faisal attended the mourning ceremonies during the same year in Kazimain. Still, successive Iraqi governments and the British authorities followed closely the "Ashura" ceremonies due to concerns about the emotional atmosphere and the potential for political mobilization and confessional strife. On various occasions, *ulama* and reciters, who were suspected of having incited the mourners to action against the government, were deported to Iran. Despite such measures, the number of incidents on the occasion of "Ashura" during the 1920s and 1930s nevertheless was markedly high.

It was not so much sectarian differences or anticolonial feelings but disaffection with the government and regional rivalries which resulted in physical violence. According to British reports, four people were killed in 1927 when eight hundred un-

armed Shi'ite soldiers, accompanied by military police, tried to take part in the mourning at the Great Mosque of Kazimain. The presence of the army simply was seen as an act of provocation. The Arba'in commemoration in Karbala in the same year, which was attended by 200.000 people, was reportedly marked by "inflammatory speeches." Verbal hostility to the government was also reported in Diwaniyya (*Colonial Office* 1928: 19 f.). Another serious incident occurred in Karbala in 1929 on the occasion of Arba'in commemoration, which was attended by approximately 300.000 people. The gathering of pilgrims from all the Shi'ite areas of Iraq had previously served as an opportunity to settle dispute between cities, villages, and tribes that had a competitive or even hostile attitude towards each other. This time it was the traditional rivalry between Najaf and Kazimain, which led to physical violence between groups from both cities and resulted in one or two deaths. The Iraqi sociologist 'Ali al-Wardi observed that the people of Kazimain, contradicting their usual custom, marched this time in a unified procession through Karbala, behaving like "a tribe who had just defeated another tribe in battle" (1965: 190 f.).

With the emergence of modern party politics various forces seized the opportunity provided by the Muharram festivities to advance their political aims. Among them was the Iraqi Communist Party, who reinterpreted the battle of Karbala in modern terms as an eternal symbol of struggle against injustice, tyranny, and oppression, characterizing Husain as a revolutionary whose example should be emulated at all times and in all places. The Communists, however, were divided as to whether the "Ashura" ceremonies should be dismissed as "feudalist concepts" and "archaic traditions" serving the "enemies of the people" or whether they could be used "for the cause of peace" or even turned into "a weapon of the revolutionary movement" (Batatu 1978: 695–697). Regardless of the ongoing discussion of the party's position vis-à-vis Islam in general and "Ashura" in particular, several Communists reportedly used the *maradd ar-ra's* to praise both Imam Husain and the Soviet Union and to distribute "Marxist leaflets" (Fernea 1969: 218). There are conflicting reports on the relevance of the "Ashura" rituals during the last days of the monarchy and the Qasim era. Though many scholars pointed to the declining relevance of religion in Iraqi society and concluded that the public Muharram observances "lost much of their effectiveness as a political instrument" (Nakash 1994: 162), other observers reported a constantly large number of participants, which amounted to nearly a million in 1957 (Fernea 2005: 137).

The Rise of Iraq's Islamist Movement

Islamism as an organized political force entered the political landscape of Iraq during the 1940s. The Islamic Da'wa Party, which was established at the end of the 1950s in the surroundings of the *hawza* of Najaf, is the oldest Shi'ite Islamist party of Iraq. The party's founding group consisted of young intellectuals belonging to the educated middle classes and young *ulama* who felt the need to restore the decreasing influence of the *hawza* in Shi'ite society and to counter the rise of the Communist Party. From the outset, al-Da'wa was a clandestine underground movement, one which relied on grassroot activities and pedagogical-educational means and aimed to promote an Islamic consciousness within Iraqi society. The party's political outlook, its strategy, and tactics were substantially shaped by its self-conception as an intellectual and strongly devoted avant-garde with the self-assigned task of educating the masses, bringing about revolutionary change, and establishing an Islamic state in the distant future. Given its aim to organize the educated classes, it was necessary for the Da'wa Party to gain a foothold in Iraq's universities which hitherto had been a domain of the Communist Party and various nationalist organizations. As the short-lived Ba'th regime of 1963 and successive rulers had cracked down on all actual and suspected Communists, the Da'wa Party was able to expand its activities at the universities and to attract large numbers of followers, especially in the faculties of medicine, education, and engineering. The Islamists newly acquired strength in the universities is evident from the elections to the students' representative councils, which were organized by the military rulers in a gesture of goodwill in 1967. According to Islamist publications, the Da'wa Party's candidates, who ran on the ticket of an inconspicuous, independent list, scored a major victory (al-Ittihad … 1982: 28–30).

In accordance with al-Da'wa's strategic line, which demanded the concealment of all party activities, the student activists campaigned as individuals or acted under the protection of cultural or other associations. They distributed leaflets on the campus, organized religious festivities and discussion meetings, established libraries and prayer rooms, encouraged fellow students to attend collective prayer, to follow the Islamic moral code, and to observe Islamic dress codes (al-Ittihad … 1982: 23–30; 1985: 60–73). The establishment of sports clubs served as an instrument for the spread of the Da'wa Party at Iraq's universities. According to internal party documents, sports clubs were regarded as a means for bringing about political change,

since they admonished the youth to "serve their religion and their country" (Hizb … 1401 h – 1409 h: 144 f.). The activities of these clubs were not confined to soccer training and tournaments, but also included political discussions and collective trips to the shrines of the imams as well as to other sights in the country. Furthermore, these groups provided guidance, social support, and a first contact with political activities for young men from small towns and villages. At the same time, they conveyed the sense of belonging to a political and religious vanguard. While al-Da'wa's followers on the campuses increased, its student organization became more and more important for the progress of the party as a whole. According to al-Kharsan, the universities proved to be a springboard for the expansion of al-Da'wa to all parts of Iraq, because many returned to their villages and cities during summer holidays where they then recruited new activists and established new party-cells. The party committee responsible for the universities, therefore, became a central pillar of the Da'wa (al-Kharsan 1999: 128). It was the leadership of the Da'wa Party's student organization which advanced the idea of organizing student processions to commemorate "Ashura" during the middle of the 1960s and they also took over responsibility for conducting them during the years following.

A Dispute on the Flagellation of Muharram

The leadership of the Da'wa Party sensed the importance of the Muharram rituals as an opportunity to demand an Islamic state, acquire new followers, and to mobilize the Shiite community – all under the guise of a primarily religious event. The Da'wa Party felt that it was their task to secure the participation of the educated middle classes, which kept their distance from the "Ashura" processions with their crowds of countrymen, their sobbing and crying, pushing and shoving, and chest-beating. The party claimed to be responding to the need to modernize "Ashura," as articulated by students and the "educated youth," who wanted to take part in the processions but rejected what they regarded as popular (*sha'bi*) and traditional (*taqlidi*) forms of remembrance and "lifeless customs" (*tuqus jamida*). The party, therefore, made the case for an activist (*haraki*) and purpose-orientated (*hadif*) commemoration of "Ashura" and took a stance against what it considered to be backward practices which conveyed a misleading image of Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular (Hizb 1403 h (a): 98; al-Adib 1988).

The conflict between conservative and reformists over "Ashura" was mainly focused on the bloody practice of cutting the forehead with a dagger or sword. The flagellation with swords (*tatbir*) on the tenth of Muharram was introduced to Iraq in the middle of the nineteenth century by immigrants from the Caucasus and adjacent areas. The number of sword flagellants in Iraq had always been comparatively small and did not exceed a few hundred. According to eyewitness reports, the practice of *tatbir* in the 1920s was mainly confined to Persians and Turkmens (Lyell 1923: 67–70). Among those who felt repelled by these practices were not only Western travelers and British colonial officials but also many observing Shi'ites. In the 1920s, Muhsin al-Amin (1867/68–1952), a reform-minded Shi'ite jurist from Jabal 'Amil, sought to purify the "Ashura" ceremonies of all practices which, in his opinion, were harming the reputation of Islam. In his treatise "al-Tanzih li-a'mal al-shabih" – published in 1928 –, al-Amin expressed displeasure with all forms of flagellation, as well as the use of musical instruments, loud lamentation, the appearance of unveiled women representing relatives of Husain, and the representation of women by men for being un-Islamic innovations (*bid'a*), condemnable acts (*munkarat*), contradicting human reason and the Shari'a (al-Amin 1928: 7–9). al-Amin's views triggered a heated dispute, one which primarily was carried out in the shrine cities of Iraq and became known as the "Shi'ite fitna." Though al-Amin could count on the backing of influential clerics, such as the supreme *marja'* Abu-al-Hasan al-Isfahani (d. 1946), he never enjoyed wider public support. Those who threw their weight behind him were accused of being heretics and apostates or labeled, polemically, as "ummayads" (Ende 1978).

The revolutionary regime of 'Abd al-Karim Qasim prohibited flagellation in 1958 but failed to enforce the ban. Eyewitness accounts show that the custom of *tatbir* spread beyond the narrow circles of immigrants and that the number of flagellants had grown significantly since the 1920s. al Haidari, who witnessed "Ashura" in 1968, counted 22 processions of sword flagellants in Kazimain alone, each of them with an estimated number of 100–200 participants (1975: 46 f.).

Although almost 40 years had passed since Muhsin al-Amin's publication triggered off the "Shi'ite fitna," the discussion was taken further by Iraq's Islamist movement in the 1960s, particularly by the Da'wa Party and the Shiraziyya Movement. The Shiraziyya was a rival Islamist faction, named after its leader Hasan al-Shirazi (1935–1980), who rejected the political party model and advocated

traditional lines of organization and mobilization. al-Shirazi not only did encourage all kinds of flagellation but also tried to establish the practice of walking over glowing coals, a custom which one of his followers had observed in 1965 in India on the occasion of "Ashura" (al-Katib). In a polemical book, published in the 1960s, al-Shirazi accused the Da'wa of ruining the "Ashura" processions, of being an instrument of colonialism, of possessing a "wahhabi" character, and undermining the authority of the *ulama* (al-Shirazi 1427 h). The Shiraziyin regarded the Da'wa's condemnation of the flagellations as a clear proof of the party's elitist stance and its deviation from true Islam. In 1966, this conflict escalated into physical violence. When Sadiq Tu'ma, a member of the Da'wa, denounced the bloody practice of *tatbir* in a speech, followers of al-Shirazi charged the office of the Islamic Benevolent Association (Jam'iyya al-Khairiya al-Islamiyya) in Karbala associated with the party and destroyed it (al-Katib).

Politicization of "Ashura" under the 'Arif-Regime

The Da'wa's student processions occurred during a period which was beneficial to the rise of Iraq's Islamist movement. The massacres against the Communists during the short-lived Ba'th regime in 1963 eliminated the most powerful political rival of the Islamists and created a vacuum which the Da'wa Party hastened to fill. Though the rule of the 'Arif brothers (1963–1968) appears to be an era of relative stability, there was a persistent struggle for power between rival factions of officers, barely distinguishable from each other in terms of their ideology. As political power only could be taken and maintained by means of military force and all political actions on a legal basis were becoming irrelevant, religion was gaining ground. On a broader regional level the defeat of the Arab armies in the Six-Day War in 1967 damaged the regimes of the Arab world and their underlying ideology of Arab nationalism.

Many Shi'ite Islamists and researchers in the field blame 'Arif brothers for pursuing a one-sided policy on behalf of the Sunnis. However, this charge appears to be inaccurate. Both of them attempted to co-opt the religious authorities of Najaf and demonstrated their respect for Shi'ite Islam through visits to the shrines, which were widely covered by the Iraqi press. The same can also be said of the state's approach to "Ashura." On the tenth of Muharram, the consumption of alcohol was banned, radio and television broadcast Quran recitation and *maqatil* literature instead of popular music, and, at least in predominantly Shi'ite cities, shops, state institutions, and bars were closed (al-Haidari 1975: 55 f.). The "Ashura" processions, following 'Abd as-Salam 'Arif's ascent to power, indicate, however, that many Shi'ites shared a common disaffection for the new ruler and blamed him for pursuing a confessionalist policy. While in 1964 the number of individual "Ashura" processions more than doubled from 150 in the previous year to 362, it is estimated that the number of participants amounted to between 400,000 and one million. British Secret Service reports, published by Hamid al-Bayati point to the "scarcely veiled abuse heaped on Arif personally", who was depicted as "grandson of Yazid … the greatest infidel of them all" and as the "discriminator, the importer of whores (from Egypt), the destroyer of Islam through incomprehension" (Bayati 1997: 127). In the following year, the Arba'in pilgrimage on the 20th June 1965 was overshadowed by a serious incident. After the pilgrims had chanted "anti 'Arif slogans", a firefight broke out between police and marchers, which lasted for several minutes and left three members of the crowd and two policemen dead (Bayati 1997: 94 f.).

The Da'wa Party's Student Processions – Organization and Proceedings

It was in this politically tense situation in 1966 that the Da'wa first decided to take part in the "Ashura" ceremonies with its own procession. Due to the untiring efforts of the party leaders – Nuri Tu'ma, Husain Jalukhan, and 'Abd al-Sahib Dukhaiyyil – the student processions proved successful. The person in charge of planning was 'Abd al-Sahib Dukhaiyyil, who had been among the founders of the Da'wa Party in 1957. Since the beginning of the 1960s, Dukhaiyyil had been part of al-Da'wa's leadership, where he was responsible for the publication of the party's clandestine journal *Sawt al-Da'wa*, for the bulk of the party's regional committees, and its organization in the universities. According to his biographers, Dukhaiyyil descended from an old-established Najaf family renowned for its deep sense of piety and for traditionally sponsoring "Ashura" processions and hosting mourning ceremonies (*majalis al-ta'ziya*) in their house ('Abd al-Karim 2001: 18 f.). According to this it can be supposed that Dukhaiyyil was familiar with this task, which required the provision of transportation, food, and housing for thousands of pilgrims, the maintenance of discipline, and the implementation of the party's

political line. According to party literature, Nuri Tu'ma and Kazim Jalukhan joined the Da'wa at a very young age and quickly ascended to influential positions within the party's student organization and then its general leadership (Hizb 1403 h (a): 73–82; 1403 h (b): 18–20). As both were born in Karbala, where they had been involved in political activities, it is fair to assume that their contacts were essential for organizing the student processions.

The first student procession was organized in 1966 and attracted 4,000 participants, most of them from Baghdad University. In 1967, the turnout was higher and in April 1968 the number of participants amounted to more than 10,000, among them students from Mosul, Sulaimaniya, and Basra. Party publications claim that there was a considerable turnout of Sunnis, among them Palestinian students and a Kurdish delegation ('Abd al-Karim 2001: 170; al-Adib 1988). In 1969, the Ba'th regime, which had returned to power in the previous year, banned the commemoration and closed the shrine on the 9th of Muharram. Given that the number of marchers and spectators who were flocking to Karbala every year was estimated at one million, the attendance of the *mawakib al-talaba* was modest in terms of numbers. Its specific importance, however, lies in the establishment of a new form of "Ashura" processions whose outward appearance and political content distinguished them from popular forms of commemoration.

A booklet, published in 1968 by Nuri Tu'ma, gives a detailed account of the student's processions on the 9th and 10th Muharram 1388 (corresponding to the 8th and 9th April 1968). The publication provides an illustrated record on the course of events by documenting the speeches delivered, the slogans shouted and displayed on banners, and the poetry recited by the participants. In line with the Da'wa Party's strategy, the political affiliation of the organizers and the participants is not mentioned at all. According to the booklet, the meeting point for participants from Baghdad University was the square in front of the faculties of politics and economics. From there they were transported by buses and private cars to Kazimain, the first stage of the journey. Here, they gathered in the Husainiyya al-Mashat, where political speeches were given and where other students joined the group. From Kazimain the students set out for Karbala which took four hours, because the population in the small towns and villages they passed through traditionally welcomed pilgrims on their way to Karbala with cheers and provided food and drink.

According to common practice, those groups of pilgrims who could not afford to stay in the expensive and overcrowded hotels of Karbala took up residence on the outskirts of the city, some of them in tents. The students who participated in the procession of the Da'wa Party took up quarters in the Husainiyya Karrada Sharqiyya on the outskirts of Karbala, which also became the starting point for their march through the city. At dawn, a mourning procession of 4,000 students set out and marched in silence through the crowded streets of Karbala to the tomb of Husain, where they performed the *maghrib* and *isha* prayer. Pictures show that the participants were holding candles in their hands, giving the procession a solemn and well-organized outlook. The banners displayed on the march had a uniform character and were made of black cotton and inscribed with white capitals. Once the students from Mosul who apparently were delayed had arrived to bolster their numbers, the students continued their march to the shrine of 'Abbas where they congregated in the inner court. Here, mourning poetry was recited and political-religious speeches were held before the participants gathered at 10 PM in the Husainiyya Jami' al-Maslub for dinner. The tenth of Muharram again was spent listening to recitation and political speeches, with collective prayers and other festivities (Tu'ma 1968: 25 ff.).

The well organized and disciplined manner in which these marches were conducted, as well as their unequivocally political nature, apparently amazed the participants of other "Ashura" processions and bystanders alike. The students marched in groups of about one hundred. Surviving pictures show that they wore black suits and white skirts, some of them with ties, thereby conforming to the usual style of clothes worn by the educated middle classes. Their habits and their clothes distinguished the students from the participants of other processions. This is illustrated in an episodic account, which states that many students doubted whether Abd al-Sahib Dukhaiyyil, who was hurrying from one group to another, was indeed the main organizer. Their doubt was based on the fact that Dukhaiyyil wore a *kufiyya*, probably to disguise his identity (al-Hadidi 2009: 171).

Like the "Ashura" processions organized by different villages, city neighborhoods or guilds, who illustrated their geographic and professional affiliation at the front of each contingent, the banner at the front of the student march simply read "*mawakib al-jami'*" (procession of the universities). Other banners in between marked the groups from the different cities. The first contingent at the head consisted of professors, representatives of the supreme 'Marja' Muhsin al-Hakim (1889–1970), and dignitaries from Karbala. Among them were representatives of

Karbala's Chamber of Commerce, who provided funding for the students and hosted the professors.

The Political Message

In 1968, the commemoration of "Ashura" in Iraq was marked by a general trend towards an increasing politicization. Dominating issues were the resounding defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967, an annual tax of 10%, introduced by the 'Arif regime allegedly to support victims of the war, as well as the flooding of the Euphrates, and the inadequate efforts of the government to limit the hardships suffered by the affected areas. Poetry recited during the first ten days of Muharram in 1968 addressed corruption and poverty and recalled the memory of the Iraqi revolution in 1920 (al-Haidari 1975: 42; Heine 1979: 30).

From the booklet published by Nuri Tu'ma (1968) it is, however, obvious that the Da'wa Party's student processions largely ignored social issues and the concerns of the rural population. By contrast, the situation in Palestine was more significant for the political agenda and was made the subject of banners, slogans, and speeches. The banners displayed invoked the "inspiration from the commemoration of al-Taff" and the "true heroism of the martyrs of Karbala" and vowed to fight for the liberation of "every inch of Islamic Palestine," defined as a "duty for all Muslims." Other banners called for the establishment of an Islamic society and an Islamic state:

> This is how Husain revolted: In his right hand the sword, to break the tyrants sleep, in his left hand the Koran, which enlightens the path to a true Islamic society. The blood of Husain: A living proof, which calls for the establishment of a society in the light of the Koranic principles (Tu'ma 1968: 55).

Other slogans were dedicated to the memory of 'Abbas or were addressed especially to women, who were invited to stand "at the side of men to defend faith" just as "Zainab was standing beneath Husain during the battle of Kerbala" (Tu'ma 1968: 55–58).

The speeches delivered on the 9th and 10th of Muharram were even more plain in their criticism of the political system and in their call for an Islamic state. In contrast to Lebanon, however, where Musa al-Sadr on similar occasions threatened to overthrow the government by force, the Da'wa Party kept a low profile and did not mention the Iraqi political leadership by name. The message of the student processions had a more general thrust, dealing with the status quo of the *umma* in general, criticizing the domination of the Islamic *umma* by Western colonialism and its alleged puppets. Dawud al-'Attar, a professor of law and one of the Da'wa Party's first members, appealed for the "purification" of Iraq from "Colonialism, Disbelief, Zionism," the "reclamation of all our robbed lands," and the "restoration of the sovereignty of Islam." In his fiery speech, al-'Attar made it clear that

> … the restoration of Islam will be a decisive challenge for worldwide colonialism, infidel philosophy (*al-tafalsuf al-ilhadi*) and the supremacy of ignorance (*jahiliyya*). Oh my brothers! The security and prosperity of this region are dependent on your loyalty because you are the standard bearers of knowledge and of Islam, which is the banner of satisfaction for Mankind. You are heirs to the message of Islam and callers (*du'at*) for the greatest system and the truest constitution (Tu'ma 1968: 33).

Dawud al-'Attar addressed the students as the "avant-garde of the educated classes." The idea that the students belonged to a "combative vanguard" (*tali'a mujahida*) as well as to an educated elite, assigned with the task of restoring the true message of Islam (*nukhba risaliyya*), was present in all speeches, because it was a central element of the Da'wa Party's self-image (Tu'ma 1968: 33, 80 f.). Instead of addressing isolated issues and calling for their reformation, the organizers and participants of the student processions made clear that the only way to overcome the problems of society and to achieve a life of independence, freedom, and dignity was to adopt Islam as both a belief and a political program. This meant adopting the Sharia as a guiding principle for all aspects of life (Tu'ma 1968: 88 f.). In order to achieve that aim, all Muslims should change into those who set out with Husain to restore the original message of Islam:

> Let us adopt Islam in all aspects of our life. Let us change humankind in the light of Islam's message. There is no satisfaction, no victory and no dignity but in Islam. … Let us turn the struggle of Husain and his upright companions into a shining example of the way to Islam. We are not going to leave the earth of Kerbala before the words of Husain, whose echo can still be heard, have transformed us into a fighting community. A community which is marching on the way to honor and salvation and which is upholding the banner of Islam as a blessing for humankind (Tu'ma 1968: 83 f.).

The use of the Muharram ceremonies as a means of agitation for political purposes and, ultimately, even for an Islamic state, alarmed political authorities and conservative religious circles alike.The majority of Najaf's senior clerics shared a pronounced distrust of politics in general and considered the es-

tablishment of an Islamic state to be a prerogative of the "Hidden Imam." It was, therefore, crucial for the Da'wa Party to convey the impression that their political ambitions in general and the student procession in this particular case were approved by the supreme 'Marja' Muhsin al-Hakim. al-Hakim actually had contributed significantly to the consolidation of the Da'wa when he shielded the activists from their conservative religious critics and allowed them to act under the guise of his *marja'iyya*. His benevolence, however, should not be confused with unconditional support for the Da'wa's claim to leadership or for an Islamic state. According to the Iraqi historian 'Adil Ra'uf, Al-Hakim's efforts had a limited, reformist nature and were focused on fending off the "communist flood," restoring the impact of Islam and particularly the position of the *hawza* in Iraqi society (Ra'uf 2001: 32 f.).

According to his biographer al-Sarraj, al-Hakim approved a reformation of the customary popular "Ashura" rituals but hesitated to criticize them expressively in order not to antagonize influential conservative circles at the *hawza*. Only on rare occasions, however, did al-Hakim abandon his cautious policy, for example, when he characterized the *tatbir* and the walking over glowing coals as the "practice of ignorant people" and tried to prohibit them in Iraq (al-Sarraj 1993: 147 f.). It is obvious that al-Hakim endorsed the modernization and politicization of the "Ashura" ceremonies and welcomed the mobilization of a certain social strata which had hitherto been absent. He demonstrated support for the student processions by sending a delegation consisting of close confidants. Among them was his son Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who was at the same time a founding members of the Da'wa Party. Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim gave a speech to the students in the shrine of 'Abbas on the evening of the 9th Muharram. Here he presented the compliments of his father and thanked the students for their commitment and dedication to Islam (Tu'ma 1968: 62–64).

The Da'wa Party particularly emphasized the fact that al-Hakim approved the student processions by displaying a huge picture of the 'Marja' in the front row. In this way, they attempted to bestow religious legitimacy on their efforts and to disguise their political affiliation. In the morning of the tenth of Muharram, they even sent a delegation to al-Hakim who was residing at that time in his house in Karbala. According to the booklet published afterwards, they were welcomed by al-Hakim like "a father who is greeting his beloved sons" and "a leader who is saluting his loyal soldiers" (Tu'ma 1968: 67).

Unfortunately, there are no reliable reports or historical sources on the reactions to the student processions. The Da'wa Party claims that they were a great success. They stated that participants in the traditional "Ashura" processions and spectators in Karbala welcomed the students, and at every place they stopped their "vibrant march, they successfully transformed the surroundings into a revolutionary spark and an area for jihad" (Hizb 1403 h (a): 103). Political opponents and the press, who seemed to have noticed the student processions, were probably not alerted by the number of participants but rather by the clear political intent and the high degree of organization, indicative of the presence of a secretive political force behind the scenes. In neighboring Kuwait, the daily *al-Siyasa* was apparently alerted by what it called the "most dangerous phenomenon in Iraq." The Kuwaiti weekly *al-Qabas* asked with concern: "what after the student processions?" (al-Ittihad 1985: 68). Sources close to the Da'wa, point to Communist attempts to co-opt the student processions for their own political ends; attempts which were, however, successfully prohibited by the organizers ('Abd al-Karim 2001: 171).

Conclusion

The "Ashura" ceremonies, which mark the anniversary of the martyrdom of Husain in Karbala in 671, are crucial for shaping and preserving a sense of community and identity among the Shi'ite community. Iraq's authorities observed the "Ashura" ceremonies with suspicion, since they possessed considerable potential for voicing disaffection and instigating rebellion. The Islamic Da'wa Party, which entered the political arena at the end of the 1950s, regarded the Muharram rituals as an excellent opportunity to mobilize support and to convey its political message. The traditional commemoration of "Ashura," however, formed an obstacle for many followers of the Islamist movement who belonged to the educated middle classes. The Da'wa Party, therefore, organized its own processions, which not only politicized the mourning ceremonies but also changed their outward appearance. By renouncing popular practices, such as flagellation or the use of instruments, the student processions corresponded with the demands raised by reform-minded clerics from the 1920s. Although short-lived, the Da'wa Party's student processions mark the first appearance of an organized Islamist party in the commemoration of "Ashura" and, therefore, warrant scientific attention.

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