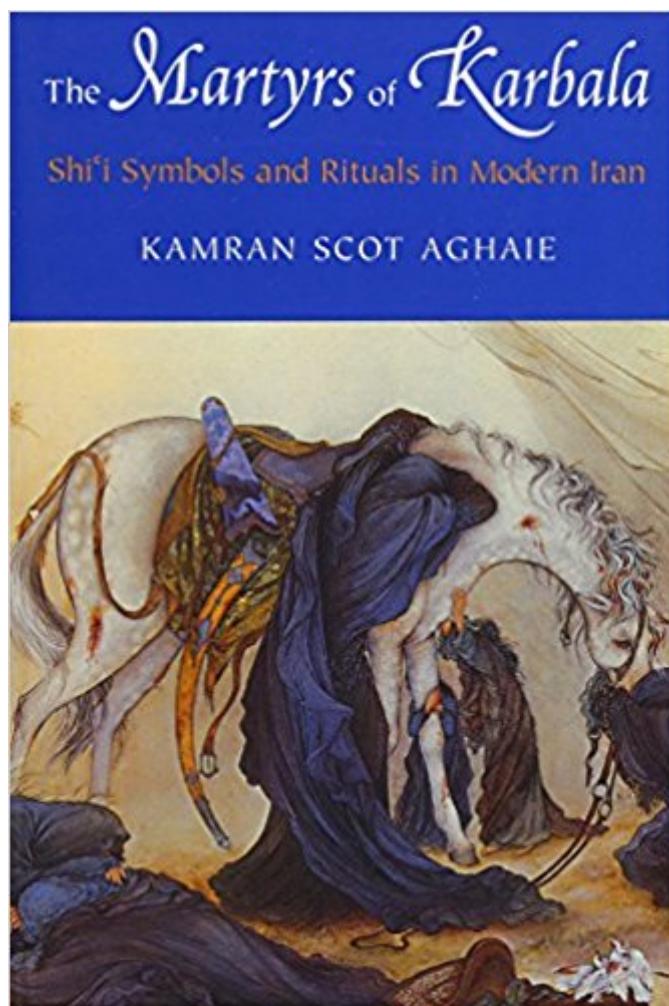


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# The Martyrs Of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols And Rituals In Modern Iran



## Synopsis

This innovative study examines patterns of change in Shi'â'i symbols and rituals over the past two centuries to reveal how modernization has influenced the societal, political, and religious culture of Iran. Shi'â'i, who support the Prophet Mohammad's progeny as his successors in opposition to the Sunni caliphate tradition, make up 10 to 15 percent of the world's Muslim population, roughly half of whom live in Iran. Throughout the early history of the Islamic Middle East, the Sunnis have been associated with the state and the ruling elite, while Shi'â'i have most often represented the political opposition and have had broad appeal among the masses. Moharram symbols and rituals commemorate the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, in which the Prophet Mohammad's grandson Hoseyn and most of his family and supporters were massacred by the troops of the Umayyad caliph Yazid. Moharram symbols and rituals are among the most pervasive and popular aspects of Iranian culture and society. This book traces patterns of continuity and change of Moharran symbols and rituals in three aspects of Iranian life: the importance of these rituals in promoting social bonds, status, identities, and ideals; ways in which the three major successive regimes (Qujars, Pahlavis, and the Islamic Republic), have either used these rituals to promote their legitimacy, or have suppressed them because they viewed them as a potential political threat; and the uses of Moharram symbolism by opposition groups interested in overthrowing the regime. While the patterns of government patronage have been radically discontinuous over the past two centuries, the roles of these rituals in popular society and culture have been relatively continuous or have evolved independently of the state. The political uses of modern-day rituals and the enduring symbolism of the Karbala narratives continue today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 680 CE, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hoseyn and 70 associates were slaughtered by troops of the rival Umayyad caliphate. This massacre, known as the Battle of Karbala, was a decisive event in the schism between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, and as such is remembered by Shi'ites in story, song, drama and ritual procession. In this book, Islamic historian Aghaie traces the political uses of Karbala symbolism in 19th- and 20th-century Iran, arguing that it has been a "very flexible" narrative for Iranian rulers. Some, like the Qajar regime (1796–1925), enthusiastically sponsored the story in drama and song, and found that their use of Karbala symbolism helped legitimate their rule. Others, like the more secular and Westernized Pahlavi regime (1925–1979), ignored or suppressed the story's retelling—at their peril. Although the prose is dry and formal, Aghaie is sensitive to the way that Karbala symbolism serves as a valuable lens for examining change in modern Iranian society. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Overall, for fusing together cultural, social, and political history of the Moharram rituals and symbols, Aghaie's book is highly recommended to all those interested in modern Shi'i and Iranian history." — American Historical Review "For those concerned with the political currency of religious ritual and symbolism among the Shi'ites of Iran, take heed of Kamran Scot Aghaie's *Martyrs of Karbala*..An essential study for our leaders and general readers alike." — Virginia Quarterly Review

The Tragedy of Karbala is a historical event which took place in 680 A.D. in Karbala, Iraq, where a grandson of the Prophet of Islam named Husayn (spelled variously as Husain, Hussein, etc.) was brutally killed by the orders of Yazeed, the Umayyad Caliph of the time, after having fought desperately with a handful of his companions. Since that time, the Tragedy is remembered as a solemn event by sad lamentations (popularly known as AZADARI), as an effort to protect the basic human rights by a lone crusader against a tyrannical despot, and as the struggle for true and pristine Islam against a debauch oppressor who had taken the garb of a Caliph. The Shi'ites have taken that as a part of their religious duty and practice that lamentation mixed with some demonstrations. Iran being the majority Shi'ite Muslims have taken that as a part of their religious duty and practice that lamentation mixed with some demonstrations. Iran being the majority Shi'ite

country, stands out for that practice. However, the Iranian general public has developed a custom of *Tāfāqā* → „caziyya to commemorate the tragedy which consists of street dramas which look like a celebration more than a solemn observation of a tragedy. Scholars who have written about the Tragedy have obviously been attracted to those dramas rather than to the true passion and the underlying philosophy of the great sacrifice presented by Husayn. A number of books have appeared describing the Tragedy. Kamran Scott Aghai's *The Martyrs of Karbala* is one such book. This book, as we mentioned, is also full of glossy pictures and describes the Iranian tradition of *Tāfāqā* → „caziyya. However, the main spread of the Karbala observance has happened in the wider world through the South Asian culture of India/Pakistan, so is true about the U.K. and the U.S.A. Aghai's book stands out because he has spent considerable time and space in discussing how the Karbala Tragedy was used by the revolutionary forces in Iran to help the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Chapter 6 of the book discusses the controversy that ensued in the 20th century about how the Tragedy should be documented and how it has to be described in public, both as a religious text as well as a socio-political text. Chapter 7 has discussed the gender issues related to Karbala, as to how two significant female characters are presented in the socio-religious cultural milieu of Iran, namely: Fatima the daughter of the Prophet of Islam (who had passed away before the event of Karbala but was instrumental as being the mother of Husayn, and Zaynab, Fatima's daughter and Husayn's sister who was responsible for describing the events of Karbala afterwards to the wider world. Chapter 8 specifically discusses the way Khomeini and his ruling apparatus used the Karbala paradigm for setting up an Islamic government in Iran, very much like the Karbala passion had been used in the 1960s and 1970s by revolutionary groups to oust the Shah. The author notes very correctly that even though the revolutionary leaders had claimed that they were bringing in a new universal Islamic revolution in Iran, the Iranian nationalism was strengthened by the 1979 Revolution rather than supplanted by any new Islamic movement.

This book is the premiere comprehensive analysis of how the battlefield death of the Shi'ite's third Imam Hoseyn/Hussain at Karbala, Iraq, led to the development of Shi'ite religious rituals that were used by the Shi'ite imams in influencing their successful dethronement of Iran's Mohammed Reza Shah in late 1978. This book is really about the historical development of Shi'ite symbols and rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Hoseyn, rather than an expansive history of the 1970s-era of student demonstrations against the shah of Iran. The battle resulting in Hoseyn's martyrdom occurred on 10 October 680 C.E. (Ahsura Moharram 352 A.H.). The author presented two reasons

as to why Hoseyn started his ride towards his martyrdom. The author clearly opined that Hoseyn rode towards Damascus to at least upbraid the new Muslim caliph Yazid for being cruel and despotic to his Muslim minions. [Yazid's father, Muawiyah had moved the Muslim government from Mecca to Damascus in 661-662.] This makes Hoseyn's adventure look really unselfish, and even highly moralistic. However, what is obliquely mentioned in the book (on pages 7 and 93), but not as clearly portrayed, is the contention that Hoseyn really rode forth in an armed coup attempt to unseat Yazid. Briefly, when the Muslim prophet Mohammad died, his successors were: (#1) caliph Bakr (Sunni), (#2) caliph Umar/Omar (Sunni), (#3) caliph Uthman/Othman (Sunni), and (#4) caliph Ali (while all Sunni respect Ali has the fourth caliph, as the Shiites regard Ali as the first proper successor to his uncle Mohammad, Ali is the first Shiite imam). As Ali attempted to consolidate his rule, he was opposed by the military-governor of Damascus: General Muawiyah/Moaviyeh (who had been appointed governor of Syria by #2 Sunni caliph Umar in 640). Following the Battle of Siffin, Ali defaulted rule to Moaviyeh, but with the alleged understanding/treaty/deal/agreement that upon Moaviyeh's death, the Islamic caliphcy would return to Ali's clan. Ali's oldest son Hassan/Hasan (the second Shiite imam) was championed by Ali's clan in becoming his successor. However, after realizing that the three previous caliphs had been assassinated while serving as caliph, Hassan apparently wasn't as divinely inspired as his predecessors had been, and decided that he really didn't want to be caliph. Thus, Hassan figuratively resigned and passed the Shiite-caliph baton to his younger brother: Hoseyn/Hussain/Husayn. Recognizing the weakness in Ali, power-hungry Muawiyah of Damascus agreed to become the ruling caliph. Muawiyah, most likely, had the hidden design of eventually turning the caliphcy over to his son Yazid, instead of returning it to the Ali lineage to Ali's grandson Hoseyn. Anyway, upon Muawiyah's death, his son Yazid seized the title of the caliphcy over all Muslims -- and ignored the 'agreement' to return power to Hoseyn. For power is what we are really talking about here; power to control the tax-treasury of the Muslim community. Muslims are required to pay 10% of their annual wealth by an annual tax to the Muslim treasury. Literally watching the coinage of the Muslim treasury slip through their fingers to Yazid, Hoseyn's clan took umbrage with Yazid's seizure of power and urged Hoseyn to travel to Damascus and remind Yazid of his father's 'deal' that Hoseyn was to be recognized as the next rightful caliph. However, as Yazid had no desire of turning the tax-treasury over to Hoseyn, Yazid sent a large army under the command of general Omar ibn Saad to repulse Hoseyn's upcoming 'invasion' of Damascus. When Hoseyn tried to parley with Omar at Karbala, he and most of his small retinue of 80 soldiers were surrounded and killed. While Hoseyn's youngest son Ali Asghar was killed, his older son Zayn al-Abedin (who was ill and incapacitated during the battle), Hoseyn's wife, and a

number of other newly minted widows and orphaned children were captured and taken to Yazid. As radio personality Paul Harvey would say: "Now you know the rest of the story" -- and a very important part of it. Part of Hoseyn's motive in talking to Yazid to resign as caliph was most likely due to his being repulsed by Yazid's highhandedness, but the clear motive was to restore and secure power for Hoseyn-Ali's lineage in controlling the caliphcy to control the Muslim treasury. This is my one little snit here that I believe the author "short changed" the coup explanation for Hoseyn's journey. Otherwise, Prof. Aghaie superlatively analyzed how the Karbala battle was ritualized into annual public performances (rowzeh khanis) and parades (dasteh) that were later used as rallying demonstrations for the Shiite imams to reassert their political power that the Pahlavi shahs had tried to curtail through their liberal Westoxification of Iran. Also, see the author's related book: "The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam."

The Shi'i branch of Islam makes up only about 15 percent of the religion. But counting for nearly the entire population of Iran and 60 percent of Iraq's, the Shi'i have a crucial influence on Middle East and world affairs from their numbers in these strategically important countries. A professor of Islamic and Iranian history at the U. of Texas-Austin, Aghaie gives a view of Shi'i culture in Iran that is eye-opening and germane for Western readers. Basically, one sees that for the Shi'i there is no clear, or even worthwhile, distinction between religion and other aspects of society, including most significantly government. Whereas such a distinction is a part of the foundation of the U. S. and other democracies, Shi'i culture was founded with the defeat of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson Hoseyn and the massacre of his family by the caliph Yazid in the 680AD battle of Karbala. Shi'i religious ceremonies, motives for behavior, social purposes, and community goals grew out of this defeat. A special intensity and commitment, as well as sacrifice, was called for so Islam as expressed by Mohammad and his descendants would not be lost. This branch of Islam faith is distinguished from that reflected in the institutional rule of the caliphs came about throughout most of the Middle East. Aghaie's subject is the relationship between Iranian leaders from the Qajars of the 19th and early 20th century through the Shah of Iran to today's Islamic Republic and the symbols and rituals of Shiism. The Shah of Iran was overturned in a revolution because in an effort to modernize Iran, he sought to minimize the symbols and rituals. The work brings an insight into the Shi'i culture that is timely and germane considering current events in Iran and Iraq and U. S. ambitions to institute democracy in this area.

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