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To cite this article: Mohammad Mohsen Zarifpooya, Fatemeh Sadrnabavi & Majid Fouladiyan (2021): Transformations in the Mourning Rituals of Muharram among Afghans Residing in Iran (Mashhad), Journal of Religious & Theological Information, DOI: [10.1080/10477845.2021.1921922](https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2021.1921922)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2021.1921922>



Published online: 28 May 2021.



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Transformations in the Mourning Rituals of Muharram among Afghans Residing in Iran (Mashhad)

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ABSTRACT

Among the significant contributions that religious rituals make are the production and reproduction of the identity and culture for the residents of a society. Some of the factors emphasizing the importance of examining the formation and modification of mourning rites of Afghan refugees include the marginalization of the Afghan refugee community in Mashhad, the need for creating a social network for identity restoration, and the impact of the mourning ritual on the production and sustainability of this social category. This study investigates the transformations in the mourning Muharram rituals among the Afghans residing in Mashhad and evaluating the relation of these transformations with the host societies. In this study, 12 Afghan immigrants living in Golshar (an area in Mashhad, were selected to participate in interviews. Given the cultural sensitivities of the geographical setting, it is vital to note that these participants were all male. The results of the study demonstrate considerable qualitative and quantitative transformation in the mourning ceremonies.

KEYWORDS

Shia religious; Afghan refugee; mourning rituals; Muharram

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Afghan immigration to Iran and Pakistan has been a significant phenomenon within the past three decades (96% of Afghan migrants have moved to these two countries) (Abbasi Shawazi & Sadeghi, 2015). Many Afghans migrated to Iran for economic or religious reasons (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007). Others have fled their native land to escape near constant warfare (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Many of these immigrants to Iran have opted to settle in Mashhad, the home of the Shia Imam shrine. Reports also show that the population of male refugees is larger than that for females (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2012). These Shia immigrants are predominantly of Hazara ethnicity (Yousefi et al., 2013; Yahya and Kia,

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2009). In their homelands, they have long been in mourning for Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who was beheaded at the battle of Karbala in 680 (CE). Muharram is the period of mourning for Imam Husayn. Both Shia and Sunnis observe Muharram, but not in the same manner. Shia are in mourning for ten day. Believers dress in black, chant, and whip their chests. Sunnis, on the other hand, observe a single day fasting.

Shi'ite mourning rituals are basically a popular and mass ritual that have been shaped by the culture and beliefs of religious people throughout history (Mazaheri, 2011). The Afghani Shiites are no exception and their particular style of mourning has evolved over time. The Hazaras, a Persian-speaking ethnic group from Hazarajat, central Afghanistan, have traditionally held mourning in the first decade of the month of with chest beating as the visible sign of mourning (Cultural Institute of Shiite Studies, 2005). While this mourning custom is still prevalent, other mourning rituals have undergone changes.

Afghan immigrants have not always been accepted by their host communities, who blame the immigrants for a variety of Iranian social problems, including unemployment and juvenile delinquency. Religious rituals illustrate the extent to which immigrants may be socially integrated into the host community. As one of the most important factors linking individuals' mental states and lifestyles with their worldview and moral order, rituals have a profound relationship with religious identity and knowledge in addition to representing the religious, cultural, social and political life of believers. In the meantime, rituals also represent this identity and knowledge. In addition to carrying religious culture and sacred symbols, rituals realize an opportunity to establish religious knowledge and strengthen religious faith under the influence of the social and cultural conditions. In the same way, rituals attempt to create various forms of religious and cultural functions, which in turn contributes to the promotion, accreditation, and "representation of cultural transformations of the society" (Bates and Plug, 1996). In the same way, the use of different tools for mourning have changed throughout the history. According to Mazaheri (2019), the rituals available in each religious group can be generally divided into two categories: "primary rituals" and "secondary rituals." Primary rituals originate from the rites of the founders of a particular religion and are often legislated in the basic texts of that religion. In religious groups, other rites are usually formed, as well. These rites pertain to the citizens and, thereby, they are called "secondary." The secondary rituals have been invented by the believers themselves. These secondary rituals, unlike the primary ones, are extremely pluralistic, fluid, and evolving. Thus, secondary rituals cannot be confined to any fixed form since procreation, evolution, and dynamism are the integral features of these rituals. A set of different factors, from

politics and economics to popular culture and folklore, and even climate and ecology are involved in the emergence of secondary rituals (Mazaheri, 2019). The current paper investigates the changes in the mourning rituals of Afghan immigrants as a means of integrating and stabilizing this community in the host community.

Theoretical Approach

According to Durkheim's definition of religion, there are two fundamental elements, i.e. beliefs and rituals that constitute religion. Durkheim emphasized that limiting religion to a mere set of beliefs was wrong: he considered rituals important to religious life and considered them the main avenue of religious experience and acquisition of religious faith. Cult and rituals refer to a set of repetitive regular acts that are a device through which faith is externally translated, and also a set of tools through which faith and religious feeling are created and repeated periodically. In his discussion of rituals, he lays emphasis on communal rituals does not often refer to individual rituals (Durkheim, 2004). Durkheim believed that religious rituals prepared people for social life by imposing discipline on the self and subsequently exerting some form of individual abstinence. Religious rituals bring people together, reaffirm their shared bonds and, as a result, reinforce social cohesion. In addition, religious practices preserve and revitalize a group's social heritage and transmit its enduring values to future generations (Cozer, 1991). Sociologists of religion seek to examine the relations among religion and society, the understanding of ideas, organizations, institutions, and rituals, while accounting for the influence of religion on the social system and on individual and social actions. These experts address the social role and function of religious beliefs and practices (Jamshidiha and Ghobadi, 2007). Rituals are undoubtedly one of the most complex and varied form of human behavior and have very different aspects and dimensions (Hamilton, 2013).

Research Method

This study examines the major changes of the Muharram mourning rituals among Afghan immigrants in Iran using a qualitative ethnographic research methodology. Ethnography refers to the analysis of human subjects in a natural social environment using the methods and instruments that reveal social notions and human activities. In this method, the researcher is directly present in the research field and environment (Esterberg, 2002). The required data were collected using participatory observation and in-depth interviews, which are specially designed for

qualitative studies (Berg, 2006; Silverman, 2005). Given the qualitative nature of this study, the purposive-theoretical sampling method was employed to select the interviewees and determine the number of interviewees. The sample size in qualitative and ethnographic studies is determined based on the theoretical saturation level of research questions. Theoretical saturation occurs when the researcher concludes that the similarities between the identified notions grow in one stage and no new notions are emerging (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 immigrants that were associated with immigrant congregations. The sample units were selected from the senior managers, clergymen, and panegyrists of the immigrant congregations whose age allowed them to have a relatively accurate understanding of the events occurring during the past forty years. In this regard, this congregations of Musa ibn Jafar and Yahya ibn Zayd Shahid provided the current research field. These two congregations were selected because they were established in Golsharh, a residential section of Mashhad City housing Afghan immigrants (Yousefi et al., 2013).

The Musa ibn Jafar Mosques serves one of the largest congregations of immigrants, while Yahya ibn Zayd Shahid congregation is a home-based congregation. An analysis of these two congregations provide a description of the general condition of Afghan immigrants in Iran.

Considering the fact that almost 25% of Afghanistan's population are Shias (Abdoli, 2012), it is natural that some sort of peaceful coexistence has been developed between the Shias and the Sunnis of Afghanistan. But, it should be noted, that the above insight does not account for the fact that many Shias and Sunnis consider each other terrorists. Most Afghanis already migrants into Mashhad have been Shias and, Shiism is the official expression of Islam in Iran. Hence, many Sunnis have not felt welcome in Iran.

	Approximate Age	Position
1	45	Officiant at Salman Mosque (Golshahr neighborhood)
2	50	Orator of Yahya Ibn Zayd religious panel (Golshahr Neighborhood)
3	40	Afghan journalist and eulogist
4	40	Eulogist at the Musa Ibn Jafar Mosque religious panel (Golshahr neighborhood)
5	50	Head of Musa Ibn Jafar Mosque religious panel (Golshahr neighborhood)
6	22	Head of Youth affairs at Musa Ibn Jafar Mosque (Golshahr neighborhood)
7	50	Former head of the Council of Immigrant Boards
8	40	Eulogist of the religious panel of Zaid Shahid Mosque (Golshahr neighborhood)
9	45	Afghan eulogist
10	45	Officiant at Hazrat Rasool Mosque (Panjtan neighborhood)
11	55	Head of the Yahya bin Zayd's religious panel
12	20	Head of the Afghan Lamenters Association

Research Results

Change in Congregational Style

Inviting Other Congregations to the Seventh Night Ceremony

The Shia Afghan population dedicate the Seventh Night of the ceremony to the brother of the third Shiite Imam (Hussein ibn Ali), Hadrat Abbas ibn Ali, who is known as Hadrat Abul Fadl. This ceremony, which has been observed for generations, is always held during the night following sixth day of Muharram. This ceremony, known as “Alam Keshi,” is highly valued by Afghan immigrants and is held every year in the immigrant residential areas of Mashhad. The most important artifact in this ceremony is the sign, which includes 3-meter straight wooden rod; the sign itself (in the shape of a hand and made of brass); and fabrics of different colors, sizes, and materials that are wrapped around a long rod. These fabrics are tied together by the people in the neighborhood who expect that their wishes will be fulfilled by fulfilling this task. The sign is prepared in the house of an elder, typically known as the “Seyyed and chief” of the community. The ritual ends with a eulogy about Prophet Muhammad and his children, after which food is distributed and sacrifices are made. On this day, the old fabrics on the sign are changed and the sign is prepared for Muharram ceremonies. In the evening of the sixth day, the mourners take the sign to the house of the bereaved. Additional eulogies are delivered, and the mourners beat their chests and engage in self-flagellation, and poems are recited (many of which have survived the passage of time).



*Who owns this ownerless sign?
This sign belongs to the moon of Bani Hashim.*

Reading Ziyarat Ashura in the Beginning of the Ceremony

Ziyāra ‘Āshūrā, (Arabic: زیارة عاشوراء) is a ziyara-text (a written text for pilgrimage) recited by Shi’a to salute Imam al-Husayn and to commemorate the epic-tragic Battle of Ashura’ and the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn and his companions. This ziyara is deemed very important by Shi’a and has been narrated from Imam al-Baqir.

Singing Manqabats

Manqabats are epic poems recited by panegyrists in praise and mourning for Imam Ali and other infallible Imams, friends and enthusiasts (Ahmadi, 2017). *Manqabats* were often in the form of poems, stories, and prose. These forms were introduced to Persian poetry in the eighth century, but they were developed fully and blossomed in the ninth century. Unlike elegies, especially the commemoration of the martyrs of Karbala that was mainly performed in Muharram during Ashura day and called for planned gatherings and ceremonies, *manqabats* did not require a certain time, place or gathering. Rather, *manqabats* were sung in public squares, mosques, cemeteries, bazaars, alleys, schools, and corners of gardens where people generally gathered together and panegyrists delivered their art. One of the authorities of the immigrants’ congregation council of Mashhad says: “During Muharram and the first ten days of this month, a *manqabat* singer used to sing *manqabats* prior to the mourning ritual for half an hour within the first 13 days of Muharram in Afghanistan. Thereafter, they formed lines to beat their chests.” A panegyrist in one of the congregations states: “Here, the ceremony generally starts by reading Ziyarat Ashura. However, it starts by singing *manqabats* there while *manqabats* are rarely sung here in special ceremonies.”

Changes in Hosting the Mourners

Changes in the Form of Offerings (Nazri)

One of the rituals closely associated with to Muharram is the offering called “Nazri,” which bestows a certain symbolism and sacred value to the food, cloth, and other things people use in order to carry out this custom. One of the most significant and well-known Nazris among Muslims, Shiites in particular, is giving out food to mourners. In Muharram, the entire household, both men and women, distribute the food. The most important dish distributed and consumed by immigrant communities during Muharram is “qabli, made with rice, meat, raisins, almond, and pistachios.” However, due to the high cost of meat, many Afghans now serve Khoresh gheymey (meat and potato stew), which requires less meat than qabli. Chocolates and various candies are also served.

The panegyrist of Zaid Shahid masque:

"They often serve rice, mostly rice with meat (qabli), Gheymeh (a kind of stew) not that much, and there's no chicken at all"

An executive of Mashhad immigrant's committee:

"It was usually chelogusht (rice mixed with ground meat) or qabli, Afghanistan's special food which is usually served with meat."

Afghan preacher:

"I've stated before that due to the interactions that the Afghans had with Iranians, now the Afghanistan that exists in Mashhad is so different from the Afghanistan that exists in Dezful for instance. The same is true when it comes to food."



A Changes in Using the Blade Chain

In Afghanistan, one type of mourning exists in accordance with the present culture wherein the mourners physically harm and injure themselves to sympathize with Prophet Mohammad's grandson and the agony he went through on the day of Ashura. An example of this type of mourning is the use of a certain types of chains with blades attached to them. When

mourners hit their own backs with these chains, their backs will be injured. This custom was brought into Iran by Afghan immigrants and has been carried out in public up until recent years. Due to prohibitions against the practice by Ayatollah Khamenei and other leaders, the ritual is now practiced in secrecy.

The panegyrist of Zaid Shahid mosque:

“At the seventh night here in Afghanistan, people mostly do blades, do blade chains, they do it here too. They were done in public in previous years, but now are done secretly.”



At one time, Afghan mourners wore a specific type of shirt – one studied with thorns front and back. This shirt was originally intended to prevent partial nudity, as mourners were inclined to take off their shirts before flagellating themselves. In order to prevent women from viewing this partial nudity, mourners would segregate themselves by gender. The architectural constraints of many Iranian houses of worship have made this separation difficult, and hence, immigrant women mourn in proximity to men.

Conclusion

The present study examined the changes incorporated into Muharram mourning rituals among Afghans residing in Mashhad and its relationship

with the culture of the new community (Iran). Traditionally, Afghan mourning ceremonies were held in tribal sessions. However, as a result of Afghan integration into Iranian society, this is no longer possible, Afghan immigrants now participate with native Iranians in mourning rituals. Immigration remains an important issue in contemporary society. Durkheim believed that religious rites bring people together, thereby reaffirming their common bonds and strengthened social solidarity. The organization of religious ceremonies preserves and revives the social heritage of a group and transmits its lasting values to future generations. In this vein, Mazaheri (2019) asserted that minorities often create differentiation in religious rites in order to maintain their own cultural identity. Clothing is an important element in Afghan mourning rituals. Most *Tekyes* (Tekyeh refers to the place where mourning ceremonies of the religious leaders are held.) in Afghanistan separate men and women. Some area mourners are naked; in others they wear special clothes for mourning. *Manqabat* singing, a mourning tradition in Afghan, is practiced less frequently in Iran (the host country) than in Afghanistan. In place of *Manqabat* singing, the eulogy as become more prevalent in Afghan mourning ceremonies- almost to the extent that delivering them has become a vocation. In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that mourning rituals act as a means for maintaining the immigrants' social identity.

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