Ashura in Piraeus

The Performance and Politics of Lamentation

by Shi’ā Pakistani Migrants in Greece

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork conducted in 2014 among a Pakistani Shia community in Piraeus, this paper investigates how the commemoration of Ashura is displayed in the context of contemporary Greece. Before meeting the participants of this ritual, my aim was to focus on the discourses they would produce about their actions in order to interrogate if, to what extent, and in which ways, they perceive their lamentation for their 6th century martyrs as an enactment of their everyday struggles related to their minoritarian status as migrants in Greece. In this paper, I demonstrate how this initial research question has been challenged by my interlocutors and redirected through the fieldwork process. In order to do so, I reflect on the latter as a 'nexus of performances in which significant communicative events can happen' (Fabian 1999: 24) rather than as a strict collection of data or an ensemble of questions and answers.
Introduction

Drawing on eleven months of fieldwork in Athens and Piraeus (from February to December 2014), my doctoral thesis investigates if, to what extent, and in which ways, migrants and refugees in the Greek capital express grievances related to their minoritarian status through both aesthetic and cultural performances. The historical and political context of 2014 Greece is marked by the rise of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, the adoption of several of its main discourses by the former government, but also broader feelings of xenophobia. As a result of this, migrants and refugees -among many others- live under continuous life-threatening conditions. Moreover, the increasing militarization of the external European borders leads to serious human costs: innumerable people dye in their attempt to irregularly cross the Greek border.

Inscribed in these conditions, my fieldwork looked at a broad spectrum of performances able to address them, in manifold ways: from devised pieces to street-protests; from theatre plays to memorials; from hunger strikes to religious rituals. As my investigation advanced, a pivotal shift took place: while in the beginning of my doctoral process my central question was about mourning the ‘others’, in the sense that I was looking at artworks by established Greek practitioners paying tribute to minoritarian subjects whose losses are not officially considered as worthy of being grieved, my ethnographic research switched this focus towards the ‘mourning others’ themselves, focusing on migrants and refugees. In this paper, I demonstrate how my initial research question mentioned in the beginning of this text has been challenged and redirected during the fieldwork process in relation to one of my three main case-studies. This is the ritual of Ashura, as it has been performed in November 2014 by the Greek Pakistani Shi’ite community at a religious center in Piraeus, next to Athens, Greece.

Contextualizing Ashura
Deriving from the Arabic root *ashr* that means ten, *Ashura* signifies the tenth day of *Muharram*, the first month of the Islamic calendar, but also metonymically refers to the Muharram rituals in general. On the day of Ashura Shi’ite communities around the globe commemorate their martyr and 3rd Imam Hussein. Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad, was defeated and massacred, with almost all his male family members, in 680 CE by the forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid near the city of Karbala (South of contemporary Iraq). Determinant in the schism between Sunnis and Shi’as, the battle of Karbala constitutes the founding myth of the latter. The *Karbala paradigm* (Fischer 1981) symbolizes throughout Shi’a history the struggle of the weak against tyranny and oppression and has been repeatedly used for political purposes. It provides the central narrative around which the Shi’as construct their identity -religious and political- as a minority; mainly in a Sunni-dominated Muslim world but also in migratory contexts.

Since the 10th century, during the Ashura commemorations, Shi’ite communities reenact every year the martyrdom of Hussein through several acts of ritual lamentation (sorrowful narrations and chants, collective crying, chest and head-beating) while the 10th day is marked by public processions including, in some cases, self-flagellation. These rituals have often been used for the purpose of political quietism, by discharging performatively the feelings of oppressed minorities, and comforting the present malaise by the promise of a future redemption. Conversely, in other occasions, the same rituals have been used as keystones of revolt by enacting, through Hussein's martyrdom, the forces of resistance against contemporary oppressive powers.

This politically charged history of Ashura1 grounded my initial research question about the potential enactment of actual grievances related to migration in Greece through performances of lament. Would my interlocutors connect the battle of Karbala with their risky journey towards, or their everyday experiences in, a hostile capital, at the edge of Europe? Recent studies of Ashura in other Western contexts seem to have answered this question affirmatively. For instance, based on fieldwork conducted in Sydney, sociologist Paul Tabar (2010: 295) argues that

recall their feeling of victimization and their experience of racism and social exclusion.’

What I would like to highlight in this paper is that, in opposition to Paul Tabar’s interlocutors, the people I met in Greece were highly surprised by the connection I was trying to tease-out. In fact, the fieldwork-test of my library-based research question cast it as incomprehensible, if not invalid. But let me first get closer to my case-study, and then come back to the adventures that came out of this dislocation.

Once in the field

My research was conducted at the religious centre Azakhana Gulzare Zaynab from October to December 2014. In Urdu Azakhana literally means ‘Mourning House’ and in South Asia the Azakhanas are the places where the local Shi’a communities conduct their majlis; the gatherings in which they mourn their martyrs. Situated at a narrow street, in the post-industrial landscape close to the port of Piraeus, this Greek Azakhana has functioned since 2001, but the Ashura has only taken place outdoors since 2004. My fieldwork mainly consisted of attending the majlis during the first days of Muharram, but also during the commemorations of other Shi’a martyrs, and during the regular Saturday meetings. When the media look at the Ashura, the greatest attention is usually given to the highly spectacular finale; especially to the self-flagellating semi-nude, exoticized male bodies, fool of blood. Conversely, I would like to underline that, despite its importance, this moment is only one part of a much larger process that lasts several days and is inscribed within a yearly religious calendar. Thus, the summarizing description below focuses on my way of approaching the ritual life of the Azakhana through its continuity of several days, rather than through its apex alone.

The majlis usually start around 8pm with the collective recitation of Koranic verses. Then three zakheers, orators distinguished for both their knowledge of history and their ability to perform it in an efficient and moving way, succeed one after the other at the lectern, giving a speech. Generally, the first part of these speeches focuses on the ethical significance of the Karbala paradigm, as well as on the exemplary lives of Hussain and his family. It is delivered in a sober register and aims to function as a life-long lesson for the participants. In response the latter often shout out enthusiast approvals or other utterances. The second part focuses on the tragic events of the Karbala massacre and aims to move the audience emotionally. In this, the zakheers
become gradually very passionate, their voice often broken into sobs, while they sometimes fall into tears. While listening most of the participants cover their faces with their hands, while many of them start to cry. As time passes, the atmosphere gradually gets more intense. At the end of the third speech it sometimes reaches a sort of emotional outburst.

Once the 3rd zakheer finishes, he calls the participants to stand up and start a repetitive chant in unison, in honor of Hussein or other martyrs, depending on the day. At the same time, several men and boys take off their shirts and start doing matam, while the rest of the participants join them to varying degrees. The practice of matam consists of rhythmically beating one's chest with one’s hands, and can vary from simply beating the chest to rising first the right hand towards the sky while stretching the left behind the back, and then landing this hand on the chest while rising the other one. During the matam, the participants sing a nauha: a lament inspired by the Karbala massacre. Nauha's melody consists of a repetitive base that is transformed to a higher pitch when the matam becomes more intense, and comes back again to the basis when the matam slows down or stops for a while.

After around 30 minutes of matam, most of the participants prostrate themselves on the floor, and then stand-up for the final prayer, turning respectively towards the directions of Karbala, Mecca, and again Karbala. Those semi-nude leave to dress while, just after the prayer, a tablecloth is put on the floor for the communal dinner that will follow: a food named langar, dedicated to the memory of the martyrs. As the emotional build-up keeps rising towards the 10th day, with the Azakhana being busier every evening, several individuals delay the dinner-time, remaining speechless for a while or in tears, alone or in groups, while most people eat in complete silence. Gradually, the emotion is discharged.

Rethinking the question

In any case, despite the unconditional hospitality of my interlocutors, this emotional and sensorial charge of the atmosphere was certainly not always ideal for a fastidious doctoral researcher looking for 'data collection'. I tried though to grasp the opportunity when, after one of my first Azakhana dinners, I had a chat with a guy around my age. Having explained to me several issues regarding the meaning of Karbala or the Shi'a doctrine, my interlocutor also spoke to me about his everyday-life in Athens. In this context he mentioned that although he was personally fortunate as he had not been attacked by neo-Nazis so far, many of his compatriots have
recurrently been victims of racist violence. In this regard, we also discussed the assassination of the 27 year old Pakistani worker, Schechzad Lukman, in January 2013 by members of Golden Dawn, a case that my interlocutor had actively followed.

'Would you say that there is anything in common between the crimes of Golden Dawn and those of Yazid?' I tried to ask, quite naively.

'I do not get this one, how can religion be related to politics?' was the immediate response of my interlocutor. He also rushed to add a significant affirmation: 'Here is not a political organization; it is just a religious center.'

My other attempts to raise this issue in different ways led to similar attitudes towards my question, sometimes with a heartfelt tap on the shoulder, or with the eloquent urge: 'you just need to spend time with us, you need to learn step by step, as the Prophet has received the Koran from God step by step'. I gave up. What is more important, I shut up. Interestingly, it was my silence that encouraged people to speak more with me.

Forgetting for a while my 'research habits', I had to follow the flow of the situation. I also felt that my question was imposing a pre-fabricated and thus questionable reading of my interlocutors' identity, placing them -from a position of power- in the exclusive role of the 'precarious subject'. Thus, I intended to reverse this sort of Olympian observation and analysis -responding in fact more to what these people are than what these people do- and I became a sort of outsider/apprentice of the ritual. Appreciating my interest for their actions, as well as my timid attempts to try them, several participants came to me and discussed both religious and everyday-life issues.

To sum-up these complex accounts, the people I met did assert the famous Shi’a slogan 'Every day is Ashura; everyday land is Karbala'; which was my starting point for the connection between a 6th century battle with the struggles of 2015. That said, my interlocutors do connect 680 with 2015, but only as far as this concerns the actualities of the 'Muslim world'. Although they found my clumsy attempts to establish connections between Hussein’s oppressors and the Greek neo-Nazis absurd (somebody even said: ‘we Shi’a do not need Golden Dawn; we by ourselves trace scars on our backs’), they repeatedly drew parallels between Yazid and current oppressors in the Middle East, Afghanistan, or South Asia, such as the Islamic State or the Taliban. According to my interlocutors, these extremist Sunni organizations deform Islam, and Shi’a populations are some of their easiest victims.

Hence, rather than asking about the possibilities of a lament for a 6th century martyr to enact the eventual everyday martyrdom of my interlocutors in Greece, I have to wonder why this connection is refused or simply not made by the people I
met, albeit established in relation to the world they come from. Far from any pretension of providing premature responses -this is impossible at this stage of the research- I note a couple of potential reasons that are subject to further analysis. Firstly, in a post 9/11 world of increased Islamophobia, further accentuated by the current action of the Islamic State, it does make sense that my Shi’a interlocutors are ready to blame as ‘Yazids’ the Sunni extremists. This way, not only do they distinguish themselves from a caricatured image of Islam that terrorizes the West, but they make clear that they are themselves its easiest targets. Moreover, the fact that they blame Muslim oppressors, but also they oppose the religious freedom experienced in Christian Greece and the oppression felt in Pakistan where Sunnis are the majority, could also be understood within the framework of their minoritarian status as a reasonable attempt of being assimilated with, and thankful to, their hostile ‘hosts’.

Last, but not least, it is quite possible that many of my interlocutors simply did not want to think of their reality while lamenting for Hussein. As classical anthropological studies have shown², ritual time often functions as a suspension -if not a reversal- of the everyday life, rather than as its enactment. This made me realize that my initial approach towards the people I met dismissed the very possibility of them entering a different space and time and suspend, through the lament for their martyr, their current struggles in Greece. As several people told me while we were getting closer to the date of the battle: ‘Now all our minds are in Karbala.’

Coda

In this paper, I intended to contextualize one of my three key case-studies in its historical and political background, and to inscribe it within my doctoral inquiry as a whole. My aim was then to briefly present the fieldwork situation in order to demonstrate how, in ethnographic research, it is through this very process that our questions are dismantled and redirected. Unable at this stage to reach any conclusions, I would like to end with a methodological note, perhaps obvious in Performance Studies but still not always admitted in Social Sciences: No matter if, and how, we

² I think specifically on Turner’s definition of liminality ‘as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action (...) ‘a period of scrutiny for central values and axioms of the culture where it occurs (...) one where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are undone. In such situations, the very structure of society is temporarily suspended. (Turner 1969: 58)
finally interpret the discussions that we have in the field, it is indispensable to bear in
mind that these are not ‘data’ in the strict sense but the product of a fully performative
interaction between the researcher and the people she encounters. Or, as Johannes
Fabian once eloquently put it: “participant observation itself can never be a series of
questions and answers that are being accumulated, but rather a nexus of performances
in which the ethnographer acts [...] as an ‘ethnodramaturg’ or as a kind of producer or
provider of occasions where significant communicative events happen” (1999: 24-31).

References


