The Origins of the Sunnite-Shi‘ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta‘ziyeh Tradition

Kamran Scot Aghaie

Islam, like most other religions, has always been characterized by a number of internal divisions. The major division in Islam is between the Sunnites and the Shi‘ites. Today, Sunnites make up approximately 85 to 90 percent of Muslims in the world, while Shi‘ites constitute approximately 10 to 15 percent. Approximately half of the Shi‘ites live in Iran with smaller concentrations found in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, the Republic of Azerbaijan, Eastern Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and parts of South Asia. In most of these countries the Shi‘ites have little or no influence in the government. The only explicitly Shi‘ite government is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was established during the revolutionary upheaval in 1978/79. However, a small Alawi Shi‘ite minority also dominates the Syrian government, and Zaydi Shi‘ites are included in the Yemeni state as well. The largest group of Shi‘ites is the so-called Twelvers (Ithna Asharis, or Imamis), whose name derives from their belief that there were 12 imams, the last of whom has existed in a supernatural or metaphysical state of occultation from 874 C.E. to the present. Since we are primarily concerned here with the ta‘ziyeh tradition, which is associated mainly with the Twelver Shi‘ites of Iran, I will focus on this strain of Shi‘ism.¹

The roots of the Sunnite-Shi‘ite schism are found in the crisis of succession that occurred after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E. One of the key distinctions between the two factions is the Sunnite belief in the caliphate, as opposed to the Shi‘ite belief in the imamate. Shi‘ites have traditionally believed that there was a chain of pious descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, beginning with his son-in-law Ali (d. 661), who were meant to succeed him, one after the other, following his death. Shi‘ites consider these imams to be infallible religious guides for humanity, although not prophets. Shi‘ites believe that devotion to the imams brings them closer to God.²

Sunnites, on the other hand, have traditionally held that the caliphs were the legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad. The caliphs were selected according to political processes, rather than being explicitly selected by the Prophet himself. Shi‘ites consider the caliphs to be usurpers of the authority of the imams. This fundamental disagreement was compounded by later political divisions, which

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encouraged further divergence in political and legal systems, ritual practices, and theological doctrines. Despite their differing views, the relations between Sunnites and Shi'ites have varied dramatically throughout history, ranging from open conflict or hostility, to acceptance and rapprochement.

The disputes surrounding the succession to the Prophet Muhammad precipitated the fundamental schism between Sunnites and Shi'ites. When the Prophet died in 632, the community was relatively unprepared to deal with the consequences. During this time of crisis Umar raised Abu Bakr’s hand in a public gathering and declared him Muhammad’s successor. Those present accepted this and thus the institution of the caliphate came into being. In 634, shortly before Abu Bakr passed away, he appointed Umar as the second caliph, and Umar in turn appointed a committee of notables to select the third caliph. They selected Uthman, who was killed in 656 by a disgruntled mob unhappy with his policies. Upon his death Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-law, assumed the position of caliph. Many of Ali’s supporters asserted that the Prophet had left instructions that Ali should succeed him following his death. One typical example is said to have occurred at a place on the way from Mecca to Medina called Ghadir Khum, following Muhammad’s final pilgrimage to Mecca, a few months before his death. According to numerous accounts:

And then he [Muhammad] took Ali by the hand and said to the people: “Do you not acknowledge that I have a greater claim on each of the believers than they have on themselves?” and they replied: “Yes!” And he took Ali’s hand and said: “Of whomsoever I am Lord [Mawla], then Ali is also his Lord. O God! Be thou the supporter of whoever supports Ali and the enemy of whoever opposes him.” (in Jafri 1978:15)

Tensions were dramatically worsened by events that unfolded once Ali assumed the position of caliph in 656. The Prophet’s wife Aishah challenged Ali’s authority in the Battle of the Camel, so named because the fighting took place around a camel on which Aishah rode. No sooner had Ali put down this rebellion, then he was faced with another military challenge from the powerful military general Muawiya, governor of Syria, which resulted in a stalemate, and, eventually, an arbitrated settlement. This unsatisfactory outcome turned a small group of Ali’s supporters against him. These rebels, who were referred to as Khawarij, condemned Ali for failing to decisively crush Muawiya’s rebellion, and denounced him as caliph. Although Ali defeated the Khawarij, one of their adherents assassinated him in 661. Ironically, this set the stage for Muawiya to assume the office of caliph, thus ending the period of the “rightly guided” caliphs, and establishing the Umayyad Caliphate, one of three early Muslim empires, which lasted for a century.

The Umayyad period is critically important in understanding the schism that developed between the Sunnites and Shi’ites, because Ali’s descendants, especially his sons Hassan and Hussein, were increasingly perceived by opposition groups as the ideal rivals of the Umayyad Caliphs. Muawiya and his successors, therefore, were particularly hostile toward these supporters of Ali and his sons (called Alids). It was routine for the Umayyads to condemn or persecute the Alids. It was in this environment of tension, distrust, and conflict—along with the crisis resulting from the death of Muawiya and the accession to the throne of his unpopular son, Yazid—that the Battle of Karbala took place in 680.

The Battle of Karbala is the ultimate climax of this dizzying series of conflicts, battles, and debates. In many ways it is also the most important symbolic event for Shi’ites, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, because it is the ultimate exemplar of the Sunni-Shi’ite conflict. The battle serves as a religious
model for behavior among Shi’ites who are expected to struggle in the path of God, even if they face oppression and persecution from the Sunnite rulers. It is no surprise, therefore, that the vast majority of distinctly Shi’ite rituals are derived from the events that took place in the Battle of Karbala.

According to the surviving sources, the Prophet’s grandson Hussein, who lived in Western Arabia, received various letters from Muslims living in southern Iraq asking him to come to their assistance and rid them of the tyrannical rule of the caliph Yazid. Just as Yazid’s father Muawiya faced Hussein’s father Ali in battle two decades earlier, Hussein and Yazid were rival contenders for leadership of the Muslim community. Yazid was portrayed as morally corrupt, religiously impious, and politically oppressive. Hussein, on the other hand, was represented as pious, just, and capable.

Hussein reportedly responded to this call by sending representatives to Iraq to confirm the support of the local population for his rule (Howard 1990). Yazid, in turn sent spies and soldiers to capture or execute anyone who expressed support for Hussein. After hearing of this, Hussein traveled to Iraq with most of his immediate family members and a few close supporters. Yazid, in turn, sent his troops to intercept Hussein and his followers. In an empty desert named Karbala, located near the Euphrates river in Southern Iraq, Hussein and his followers, numbering, according to tradition, 72 men along with women and children, were surrounded by thousands of Yazid’s troops. During the standoff that ensued Yazid’s troops taunted and insulted Hussein and his followers, and refused them water and food, until Hussein openly pledged his allegiance to the caliph. Hussein pleaded for food and water for the children, but was absolutely firm in his rejection of Yazid. Over the course of the first 10 days of the month of Muharram, Hussein’s male supporters were killed one by one in combat, with Hussein being the last to be martyred on the 10th day, known as Ashura.

After brutally massacring the men, Yazid’s troops stormed the camp where the women and children were staying, taking captives and setting the tents on fire. Those who survived the battle were then taken in chains to Yazid’s court in Damascus. Their captivity is understood by Shi’ites to be a horrible ordeal of injustice and humiliation, especially considering that they were direct descendants and relatives of the Prophet Muhammad. Hussein’s sister, Zainab, publicly challenged and condemned Yazid. In this typical Shi’ite account, Zainab addresses Yazid, saying:

You are not a human being, you are not human, you are an oppressor who inherited bloodthirsty oppression from your father! [...] Even though my heart is wounded, and weariest, and my tears are flowing [because of the massacre of Karbala], surely very soon the day of God’s punishment will come and everyone will be subjected to God’s justice, and this is sufficient for us. [...] If fate has brought me here to face you, this was not something that I wished to happen. But now that it is so, I count you as small and I reproach you [...]. (Eshtehardi 1997:26–28; translation mine)

Even setting aside the eventual Sunnite-Shi’ite split, the Muslim community was deeply traumatized by the Battle of Karbala. The slaughter called to mind earlier traumatic events, such as the Battle of the Camel and the Battle of Siffin, in which pious and respected Muslims fought on both sides. Following the Battle of Karbala, opposition groups routinely used the tragedy of Karbala as a rallying cry. Some of these movements were explicitly Shi’ite while others were simply hostile toward the Umayyads and looked favorably upon the family of the Prophet. In fact, the Abbasids, who by 750 had overthrown the Umayyads and established a new caliphate, called the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), made very extensive use of the Battle of Karbala to gain popular support during their initial rebellion.
However, once they came to power, they ruled over their empire as a Sunnite dynasty for the next five centuries.

Shi’ism had come into being during the chaotic political environment of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, at which point Alid sentiments evolved into a wide variety of heterodox Shi’ite strains, from which Orthodox Twelver Shi’ism emerged. The rulers’ rejection of these Shi’ite tendencies eventually culminated in the emergence of what we now call Orthodox Sunnite Islam. In other words, Sunnism emerged largely as a response to Shi’ism and other heterodox movements of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. It was also during this time that the foundations were laid for the rich tradition of Shi’ite rituals. Following the Battle of Karbala, elegies were composed and recited for the martyrs. The following is a short excerpt from one of these:

Now listen to the story of the martyrdom and how they deprived Hussein of water; and when he was fighting on the plain of Kerbela how they behaved meanly and unjustly. They cut off the head of a descendant of the prophet in that fiery land! But the Imam lives, his foot in the stirrup and mounted upon his horse! He will not be killed! […] The angels in heaven bewailed their deaths and have wept so copiously that water was flowing from the leaves of the trees and plants. Then you must weep for a while; for after this tragedy of Ta’if, laughter is unlawful. (Sahib Ibn Abbud in Baktash 1979:97)

By the time the Buyids, a local Shi’i dynasty in Southern Iran, took control of the central Abbasid lands, pious elegies had evolved into ritual performances. In 963, Mu’izz al-Dawla, a Shi’ite ruler from southern Iran, relied on public displays of Shi’ite ideals to promote his religious legitimacy and to strengthen the sense of Shi’ite solidarity in and around Baghdad. The famous 14th-century Arab historian Ibn al-Kathir recounts:

On the tenth of Muharram of this year [A.H. 352], Mu’izz ad-Dawla Ibn Buwayh, may God disgrace him, ordered that the markets be closed, and that the women should wear coarse woolen hair cloth, and that they should go into the markets with their faces uncovered/unveiled and their hair disheveled, beating their faces and wailing over Hussein Ibn Abi Talib. The people of the Sunna could not prevent this spectacle because of the Shi’a’s large numbers and their increasing power (zuhud), and because the sultan was on their side. (in Eshtehardi 1997:26–28)

Shi’ite rituals continued to evolve somewhat sporadically over the centuries in isolated communities, and under the patronage of regional Shi’ite notables or rulers. Then, in the 16th century the Safavid dynasty established a massive Shi’ite state centered on the Iranian Plateau, and worked systematically to enhance their religious legitimacy by promoting explicitly Shi’ite rites. This was a watershed event for Orthodox Shi’ism. It was in this environment from 1501 to 1502 C.E. that the popular religious orator, Hussein Vaiz Kashefi, composed his seminal work, Rawzat al-shuhada (The Garden of Martyrs; see Baktash 1979:37). While there were countless earlier historical accounts and pious elegies, this book represents a new trend involving the synthesis of various historical accounts, elegiac poems, theological tracts, and hagiographies into a chain of short narratives that together formed a much larger narrative. This book also articulated a complex set of canonized doctrines, which stressed the courage, piety, and sacrifice of Hussein and his followers at Karbala.

This new genre of pious narratives was read aloud in religious gatherings and
evolved into mourning rituals called rawzeh khani, which roughly translates as “reading the rawzeh” (i.e., reading the book, Rawzat al-shuhada). The rawzeh khani was (and still is) a ritual in which a sermon was given based on Rawzat al-shuhada or some similar text, with a great deal of improvisation on the part of a specially trained speaker or orator. The objective of the speaker was to move the audience to tears through his recitation of the tragic details of the Battle of Karbala (Mazzaoui 1979:231). This type of mourning ritual has been viewed by Shi‘ites as a means of achieving salvation by developing the spiritual equivalent of empathy and sympathy for the martyrs. This belief is illustrated by the often-repeated quotation, “Anyone who cries for Hussein or causes someone to cry for Hussein shall go directly to paradise” (Calmard 1979:122).

By the Qajar period (1796–1925) the rawzeh khani had evolved into a much more elaborate ritual called shabih khani or ta‘ziyeh khani. The ta‘ziyeh, an elaborate theatrical performance of the Karbala story based on the same narratives used in the rawzeh khani, involved a large cast of professional and amateur actors, a director, a staging area, costumes, and props. The Qajars were great sponsors of these rituals, and social and religious status among the elites were based partly on their ability to sponsor such events on a large scale. These rituals, which were also patronized by a variety of social groups organized around guild, neighborhood, tribe, or ethnicity, also reinforced a variety of social identities (Calmard 1979:122).

This ritual reached its greatest popularity during the late Qajar period, after which it entered a relative decline until it became much less common in the large cities in the 1930s and 1940s. However, ta‘ziyehs continued to exist in Iran on a smaller scale throughout the 20th century, especially in traditional sectors of cities and in rural areas.

The ta‘ziyeh ritual is the culmination of centuries of sectarian development, beginning with the crisis of succession to the Prophet Muhammad in 632, which in turn led to a series of political and military conflicts. By far the most significant conflict was the Battle of Karbala, in which Hussein and his supporters were martyred. The collective memory of Karbala, combined with later historical, political, and ideological trends, produced the rituals associated with Shi‘ism, such as the ta‘ziyeh, which is arguably the most distinctive ritual of Orthodox Twelver Shi‘ism in Iran.

Notes
1. Shi‘ism has numerous divisions, such as the Isma‘ilis, Zaydis, Alawis, and Ithna Asharis. The roots of the divisions between different strains of Shi‘ism can be found in the historical development of Shi‘ism in the centuries after the Prophet Muhammad’s death. The distinctions between these different branches of Shi‘ism consist of different legal systems, ritual practices, and theological doctrines. More specifically, these different Shi‘ite groups have historically disagreed among themselves regarding the identity, nature, and sequence of the imams.
2. For a more detailed discussion see Momen (1985).
3. For a detailed discussion of the crisis of succession see Madelung (1997).
4. For an Orthodox Shi‘ite perspective on the succession struggle see Tabataba‘i (1977).
5. Sahib Ibn Abbad was a prominent poet from the Buyid era.
6. Rawzeh khans were usually men, although occasionally female orators gave the sermon in private rawzeh khans attended exclusively by women.

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Kamran Scot Aghaie received his PhD in history from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1999. Currently, he is the Associate Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His most recent publication is The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi’i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran (University of Washington Press, 2004). His research interests include modern Iranian history, Islamic studies, Shi’ism, gender studies, historiography, religious studies, nationalism, and economic history.