EXPERIENCING AL-ḤUSAYN'S SUFFERING: *QAMAHZANĪ* IN THE SHĪʿĪ MOURNING TRADITION

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Abstract

Qamahzanī (or *qamazanī*, *qama-zanī,* i.e., mortifying oneself with a sharp object) is one of the most controversial components of the Shīʿī mourning culture. This ceremony aims to share and experience al-Imām al-Ḥusayn's pain, and it has been performed by various Shīʿī communities for the last centuries. Historical data show that *qamahzanī* has been practiced in Iran since the Safavid period and spread to other countries with large Shīʿī populations, such as Syria and Iraq, during the Qajar period. Travel books that describe mourning in Iran during the Safavid period provide essential data about the first examples of *qamahzanī*, its transformation, and its place in popular religiosity. In addition, since the Safavid era, Shīʿī scholars have adopted different attitudes toward *qamahzanī*, and this ritual has been

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the subject of politics as well as piety. This article aims to understand the historical course of *qamahzanī* as well as its relationship with religion and politics and, indirectly, to question the power of high religious discourse to shape popular religiosity.

Keywords: Islamic sects, Shīʿah, Muḥarram, al-Imām al-Ḥusayn, Karbalāʾ, self-flagellation, *qamahzanī*

Introduction

The incident of Karbalāʾ, which resulted in the martyrdom of al-Imām al-Ḥusayn and many of his companions, deeply affected the Islamic ummah. Since 61/680, when the incident of Karbalāʾ took place, various ceremonies have been performed, primarily by Shīʿī Muslims, to mourn the martyrdom of al-Imām al-Ḥusayn. Mourning for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn in the Islamic month of Muḥarram has an irreplaceable role in the construction of Shīʿī identity.[1] In this context, the ceremonies performed in Muḥarram constitute the strongest fortress of Shīʿī spirituality.

Even though mourning for imāms, especially for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn, has been encouraged by both written and oral traditions, these mourning rituals harbor several problems. Religious rulings on many issues, such as the falsification caused by the telling of stories that lack historical authenticity in *rawḍahkhānī* assemblies, the role of women or the disguise of men as women in religious dramas known as the *taʿziyah*, the use of pop music in mourning ceremonies, and loud wailing in mourning assemblies, have long been debated. One controversial issue is the *qamahzanī* ceremony. This study primarily aims to identify the historical journey of *qamahzanī*, which can be considered an essential component of Muḥarram ceremonies today, and to understand its importance in the religiosity of the Iranian people. In this context, this paper examines the performance of the *qamahzanī* ceremony, its underlying philosophy, and claims about its origin. Subsequently, this study discusses the historical course of

[1] Behram Hasanov - Agil Shirinov, "Suffering for the Sake of Cosmic Order: Twelver Shīʿah Islam's Coping with Trauma", *Ilahiyat Studies* 8/1 (2017), 65-93.

qamahzanī and the attitude of Shīʿī scholars toward it.[2] Finally, using the case of *qamahzanī*, it aims to discuss the power of public religiosity vis-à-vis official/high religious discourse.

There are several studies on this topic in various languages. Since it is a contemporary issue in Iran, there are many Persian-language studies on the subject, but most seem to be based on either the defense or rejection of *qamahzanī*. Some English-language studies have also been written on the Islamic ruling on *qamahzanī* and its historical journey.[3] While there have been several studies in Turkish on the ceremonies performed during Muḥarram,[4] there has been no independent study of *qamahzanī* and other self-mutilation rituals. In general, it is noteworthy that such a popular topic has received relatively little academic attention compared to other rituals.

Studies have expressed different opinions about the period of the emergence of the *qamahzanī* ceremony. This study identifies the period of the emergence of *qamahzanī* and its first examples in light of historical data, especially the travelogues of the Safavid period, and draws attention to the transformation of this ceremony over time. In addition, through the case of *qamahzanī*, this study draws attention to

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2 This study is not concerned with determining the religious ruling on *qamahzanī* and similar acts but merely explains the opinions of some of the Shīʿī scholars on the subject.

3 Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of *ʿĀshūrā'*", *Die Welt Des Islams* 33/2 (1993), 161-181; Jean Calmard, "Shiʿi Rituals and Power II. The Consolidation of Safavid Shiʿism: Folklore and Popular Religion", *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 139-190; Werner Ende, "The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shiʿite ʿUlamā'", *Der Islam* 55/1 (1978), 19-36; Ingvild Flaskerud, "Ritual Creativity and Plurality: Denying Twelver Shia Blood-Letting Practices", *The Ambivalence of Denial: Danger and Appeal of Rituals*, ed. Ute Hüsken - Udo Simon (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 109-134; Oliver Scharbrodt, "Contesting Ritual Practices in Twelver Shiism: Modernism, Sectarianism and the Politics of Self-Flagellation (*Taṭbīr*)", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 50/5 (2023), 1067-1090.

4 Metin And, *Ritüelden Drama: Kerbelâ-Muharrem-Taʿziye* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2012); Fatih Topaloğlu, "Şia'da Kerbelâ Mateminin Ortaya Çıkışı ve Eski İran Kültürüyle İlişkisi", *Çeşitli Yönleriyle Kerbela (Tarih Bilimleri)*, ed. Alim Yıldız - Ali Aksu (Sivas: Asitan Yayıncılık, 2010), 1/501-509; Zeynep Sena Kaynamazoğlu, "Matemin Gölgesinde Sivil Bir Fenomen: İran'da Dinî Heyetler", *İlahiyat Tetkikleri Dergisi* 58 (December 2022), 67-76; Behruz Bekbabayi - Umut Başar, "Muharrem Ritüellerinde İslam Öncesi İnanç İzleri: İran Türkleri Örneği", *Millî Folklor* 16/125 (Spring 2020), 110-122; Zeynep Sena Kaya, *İran'da Âşûrâ Merasimleri ve Tarihsel Gelişimi* (Bursa: Uludağ University, Institute of Social Sciences, Master's Thesis, 2018).

the practical and transformative power of public religiosity in Shīʿah, over which scholars have undisputed religious and political authority, and aims to enrich the literature by seeking answers to new questions on the issue of *qamahzanī*.

1. Nomenclature, Performance, and Origin of the *Qamahzanī* Ceremony

Qamahzanī[5] is an act of self-harm in which a person strikes a cutting object, such as a dagger, knife, or razor blade, on the head, forehead, or any other part of the body, causing blood to flow from the body. This constitutes one of the mourning ceremonies of the Shīʿīs. In Iran, those who strike themselves with the dagger (*qamah*) are referred to as *qamahzan* (dagger striker), and this action is referred to as *qamahzanī*, *tighzanī*, or *shamshīrzanī*. The Arabic equivalent of the term is *taṭbīr,* while in Türkiye and Azerbaijan, it is known as *baş yarma* (head splitting) and *baş vurma* (head hitting). Today, Muḥarram ceremonies are performed in many countries with Shīʿī populations. While the intensity and form of the *qamahzanī* ceremony varies depending on the region, it is performed in Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Lebanon, Bahrain, and many other countries.[6] Although this ceremony is basically part of Muḥarram ceremonies, some records show that it has also been performed at ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of the first Shīʿī Imām ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and even at the funerals of some civilians.[7]

As will be discussed in the following sections of this article, historical records demonstrate that in addition to the head and forehead, the biceps, wrists, and chest were mutilated/flagellated during Muḥarram ceremonies during the Safavid period. Indeed, it seems that self-mutilation of other parts of the body was more common than the head and forehead. However, the expression *qamahzanī*

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5 This expression is a Persian phrase and the noun-verb form of the verb *qamahzadan* (to strike a dagger).

6 Muḥsin Ḥasām Maẓāhirī, "Qamah'zanī", *Farhang-i Sūg-i Shīʿī*, ed. Muḥsin Ḥasām Maẓāhirī (Tehran: Khaymah, 1395 HS), 388-389.

7 Calmard, "Shiʿi Rituals and Power", 142; Sir Anthony Sherley, *The Broadway Travellers: Sir Anthony Sherley and His Persian Adventure* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 128.

currently means "to strike the head with a sharp object".[8] It seems that in Iran and neighboring countries, over time, the self-mutilation of other parts of the body gave way to self-mutilation of the head, and today, the term *qamahzanī* refers only to cutting off the forehead. The fact that the focal point of scholarly discussions during the Qajar period was "to injure the head" suggests that the act of *qamahzanī* began to be limited gradually to the head, at least from this period onward. In this article, to determine the historical development of *qamahzanī*, all acts of self-mutilation of different parts of the body with a sharp instrument as part of Muḥarram ceremonies are considered within the scope of *qamahzanī*. Indeed, there are records of self-mutilation of both the head/face and other body parts since the early Safavid period. These practices performed as part of Muḥarram ceremonies are similar and should, therefore, be analyzed together.

Although the *qamahzanī* ceremony, which is currently limited to the self-mutilation of the head, vary in intensity and form between cities and even villages, it is possible to give a general description of its performance. The *qamahzanī* performers gather at dawn on the 10th day of Muḥarram (*ʿĀshūrāʾ*), when al-Imām al-Ḥusayn was martyred, in long white dresses similar to shrouds and with the front part of their heads shaved. The gathering place could be a mosque, *tekke* (monastery), *ḥusayniyyah*, *imāmzādah,* or square. Performers perform their prayers with the congregation and then recite *ziyārat-i ʿāshūrāʾ*. Then, they gather in circles and initiate the *qamahzanī* ceremony. Each group has an experienced person in charge of the ceremony who strikes the first dagger. Various *dhikr*s are also recited rhythmically while striking with the dagger. The *mayandār*, who stands in the center of the circle and leads the ceremony, and the surrounding *qamahzan*s shout "*Shāh Ḥusayn/Wāh Ḥusayn"* or

[8] Sharp objects or razor blades are attached to the ends of chains, and the back is self-mutilated in the Muḥarram ceremonies in the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, these ceremonies are not referred to as *qamahzanī* in contemporary usage. The meaning of *qamahzanī*, which is restricted to self-mutilation of the head, is reflected in the Turkish names of the ceremony as *baş yarma* (head splitting) and *baş vurma* (head hitting).

"Ḥaydar/Ṣafdar". At the end of the ceremony, the observers offer food and sweets to the performers.[9]

The purpose of the *qamahzanī* ceremony is to show commitment to do anything for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn and to perpetuate the memory of the Karbalāʾ incident. This act is fundamentally associated with sacrifice and courage. According to the widespread Shīʿī tradition, al-Imām al-Ḥusayn rose up and sacrificed himself for the sake of Islam even though he knew that he would be assassinated.[10] In particular, voluntary martyrdom[11] and sacrifice, or going to death deliberately and willingly, constitute one of the main themes of the mourning tradition. By sacrificing their own blood, the *qamahzanī* performers demonstrate that they are ready to do whatever it takes to uphold the cause of al-Ḥusayn and fight on his side. The bloodshed and wounds inflicted for his sake are a badge of pride, a demonstration of power, and a symbol of "manhood".[12] Young men demonstrate their strength and prove their masculinity through *qamahzanī*, which is an exclusively male ceremony. Refraining from such actions is associated with cowardice and weakness.[13] It is evident that the shedding of blood in the *qamahzanī* ceremony is not a result but a goal. The organization of blood donation campaigns organized by Shīʿī communities living in various countries in the month of Muḥarram is an indication of this.[14]

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9 Maẓāhirī, "Qamah'zanī", 390-391; Ibrāhīm al-Ḥaydarī, *Tirāzhīdiyā Karbalāʾ: Sūsiyūlūjīyā al-khiṭāb al-Shīʿī* (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2015), 114-116; Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shiʿis of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 149-150.

10 Mehmet Ali Büyükkara, "Çağdaş Şîa Düşüncesinde Kerbela'nın Problemli Mirası: İmam Hüseyin Kazanmak İçin mi Yoksa Canını Feda İçin mi Ayaklandı?", *Çeşitli Yönleriyle Kerbela (Tarih Bilimleri)*, ed. Alim Yıldız - Ali Aksu (Sivas: Asitan Yayıncılık, 2010), 1/383-407.

11 A Christian-like understanding that al-Imām al-Ḥusayn sacrificed himself to redeem people's sins is also present. This emphasis on voluntary martyrdom has caused the al-Imām al-Ḥusayn and the mourning after him to be addressed in relation to Christianity.

12 In 2016, during the mourning processions that I observed in the province of Iğdır (in Turkey), a *qamahzanī* performer in his 60s reported that when he hit his head with a dagger for the first time as a child, his father bought him ice cream and told him, "You are a real man now". In this example, it is noteworthy that *qamahzanī* is perceived as a criterion of masculinity and a kind of rite of passage.

13 Calmard, "Shiʿi Rituals and Power", 170; David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 102-104.

14 For differences of opinion on blood donation campaigns organized in Muḥarram, see Flaskerud, "Ritual Creativity and Plurality", 116-117.

Another feeling inherent in the *qamahzanī* ceremony is regret. Shortly after the Karbalāʾ incident, those who invited al-Ḥusayn left him alone and watched his martyrdom came together with regret for being unable to save al-Ḥusayn; thus, the movement of *Tawwābūn* was born. The members of *Tawwābūn* adopted the belief that the burden of the sin they had committed would only be lightened by avenging al-Ḥusayn's death or dying for this cause.[15] Today, the same regret manifests in the form of self-flagellation. The *qamahzan*s also regret the failure to save their Imām and, in some sense, punish themselves.

The performers of the ceremony revive al-Imām al-Ḥusayn's experience by shedding their blood, sharing his pain, and identifying themselves with al-Ḥusayn. In this sense, individuals also rebel against loneliness, betrayal, and troubles in their own lives through the Karbalāʾ incident. The ceremonies performed for family members in countries such as Iran and Azerbaijan, where the culture of mourning remains strong, are shaped by the example of Muḥarram ceremonies. This is a clear example of the bond established with the Ahl al-bayt.

It is challenging to reach a definite conclusion about the origin of *qamahzanī* and similar acts of self-mutilation. Researchers have identified four main points of origin for these acts: the Kızılbaş Turks, Christianity, the Indian region, and the Sufi groups.[16] It is reasonable to evaluate these elements, which interact with each other, together rather than selecting a single one as the origin. At this point, many studies favor the claims of the Kızılbaş or Christian cultures as the origin.

It is noteworthy that some of the funeral ceremonies of the Turks are in the form of a procession and include the presence of mourners, the hanging of flags over the tent of the mourning, and customs of self-mutilation and blood-shedding, such as cutting the nose and ears and wounding the face, which are quite similar to the Muḥarram mourning. In fact, it has been reported in historical records that the Göktürks,

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[15] Hasan Onat, *Emevîler Devri Şiî Hareketleri ve Günümüz Şiîliği* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 1993), 72.

[16] Muḥammadʿ Alī Afḍalī, *Qamah'zanī: Zakhmī bar Chahrah-yi Tashayyuʿ* (Qom: Būstān-i Kitāb, 1394 HS), 22-29; Muḥammad Mashhadī Nūshābādī, *Taṣawwuf-i Īrānī wa-ʿAzādārī-yi ʿĀshūrā: Naqsh-i Ṣūfiyyah, Ahl-i Futuwwat wa-Qalandariyyah dar Bunyān'gudhārī-yi Āyīnhā-yi Muḥarram* (Isfahan: Nashr-i Ārmā, 1396 HS), 291-302.

Huns, and Kazakhs cut their hair, cut off their ears, and scratched and wounded their faces with knives while mourning. Even in Kazakh culture, the household of the deceased is called "*cüzi caralı, üyi garalı*" (whose face is wounded, and the house is in darkness).[17]

In a 6th-century record, a description of the burial rites of the Tan Dynasty of the Göktürks bears a striking resemblance to *qamahzanī*: "... they put the dead in the tent. His sons, grandsons, and other male and female relatives sacrifice horses and sheep and lay them in front of the tent. They ride around the tent, where the dead is placed, seven times on horseback. In front of the door, they cut their faces with a knife and weep. The blood flowing from their faces and the tears flowing from their eyes mix together. They perform this ceremony seven times."[18] Such data support the opinion that some of the rituals in Muḥarram ceremonies may be rooted in Shamanism and have continued to exist in a new form with Islam.[19]

Another assertive claim to which researchers draw attention is that self-flagellation rituals emerged under the influence of Christian culture. Activities such as *zanjīrzanī* (chain striking) and *qamahzanī* are likened to the blood-shedding by Catholic Christians for Jesus Christ. In fact, it is noteworthy that in the Christian and Islamic worlds, rituals of self-harm emerged at the same time. With the influence of the Armenians, who were converted to Shīʿah by the Safavids and other Christian groups in the region, Sufi and Christian elements may have been fused into the Kızılbaş rituals and incorporated into the Imāmiyyah by the Kızılbaş groups.[20]

A special place is also allocated to India and the Sufi tradition with regard to the inclusion of blood and violence in Muḥarram ceremonies. According to this approach, the Shīʿī Muḥarram tradition and Sufi rituals and practices influenced each other. Particular attention is drawn to the role of Sufism and Qalandarī dervishes in the emergence

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17 Kaya, *İran'da Âşûrâ Merasimleri ve Tarihsel Gelişimi*, 14-18.

18 Abdülkadir İnan, *Tarihte ve Bugün Şamanizm: Materyaller ve Araştırmalar* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1986), 177-178.

19 Mehmet Ali Hacıgökmen, "Türklerde Yas Âdeti Temelleri ve Sonuçları", *Tarihçiliğe Adanmış Bir Ömür: Prof. Dr. Nejat Göyünç'e Armağan*, ed. Hasan Bahar et al. (Konya: Selçuk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, 2013), 413.

20 Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of *ʿĀshūrā'*", 177-178; Babak Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641 CE* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2012), 213-214.

and popularization of the *qamahzanī* ceremony. According to the Iranian scholar Nūshābādī, the *Ghulāt* (i.e., extremist groups) and the Qalandarīs were active in a large region extending from India to Herāt and from Baghdad to Damascus. They caused radical changes in Iranian culture over time, and *qamahzanī* was incorporated into Shīʿī mourning ceremonies through the Qalandarīs.[21]

2. The Emergence and Historical Adventure of the *Qamahzanī*

The history of mourning for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn (d. 61/680) is almost as old as the day he was martyred. For centuries, societies have wept and mourned after their losses in a unique way depending on their beliefs and local culture. Accordingly, within a short period, Ahl al-bayt and other people saddened by this tragic incident began to mourn and visit the grave of al-Ḥusayn. Muḥarram ceremonies, which in their present form consist of rituals such as *rawḍahkhānī* assemblies, grave visits, processions, and *shabīh/taʿziyah* performances, have emerged gradually. Over the centuries, many different elements have been added to their structure, taking on different appearances. One of the breaking points of Muḥarram ceremonies was the inclusion of acts of self-mutilation, such as *qamahzanī*, *zanjīrzanī,* or the burning of certain parts of the body.

Supporters of *qamahzanī* attribute the emergence of this action to an incident reported to have taken place in the immediate aftermath of Karbalāʾ. According to the narration, when Zaynab, al-Ḥusayn's sister, first saw her brother's head on the tip of a spear, she hit her forehead on the board of the palanquin (*maḥmal*) on which she was sitting under the influence of the scene she had just encountered, and as a result, her head bled. Based on this narration, which also appears in *Biḥār al-anwār*, it has been claimed that Zaynab was the first performer of the *qamahzanī*. The fact that ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, the fourth Imām of the Imāmiyyah, did not object to his aunt Zaynab's performance of the *qamahzanī* has been deemed an affirmation.[22]

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[21] Nūshābādī, *Taṣawwuf-i Īrānī wa-ʿAzādārī-yi ʿĀshūrā*, 294-302.

[22] Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Wafāʾ, 1983), 45/114-115; Maẓāhirī, "Qamah'zanī", 391; Afḍalī, *Qamah'zanī*, 88-89; Muḥammad

This famous narration has been criticized for its authenticity.[23] In addition, the absence of any record of the performance of the *qamahzanī* ceremony in the early period implies that this narration was merely the product of a typical reflexive attempt to justify the practice of *qamahzanī* by attributing it to early Islamic society. The books of Shīʿī theological scholars such as al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015), al-Shaikh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), and al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍá (d. 436/1044) lack rulings on rituals of bodily harm. Furthermore, no historical record has been found regarding the performance of such ceremonies in periods of Shīʿī rule, such as the period of the Buyid Dynasty, when Shīʿī mourning rituals gained visibility.[24] The available data identify the Safavid period as the birth of the *qamahzanī*.

The descriptions of the Shīʿah mourning ceremonies by travelers who visited Iran during the Safavid period constitute one of the essential sources for determining when and in what form the practice of self-mutilation was incorporated into the ceremonies.[25] Some of the travelers were unfamiliar with the Shīʿī tradition, literature, and religiosity, so their records may contain various mistakes. However, these works still serve as unique sources for understanding the period.

Although there is no record of the official commemoration of Muḥarram during the reign of Shāh Ismāʿīl (d. 930/1524), Shams al-Dīn

al-Ḥassūn, *Rasāʾil al-shaʿāʾir al-Ḥusayniyyah* (Tehran: Manshūrāt-i Dalīl-i Mā, 2019), 1/439-445.

[23] This report is narrated by a famous narrator named Muslim al-Jaṣṣās and called "the Muslim al-Jassās narration" in his honor. For various criticisms of the narration, see "Ṣiḥḥat-i Kūbīdan-i Sar Ba Maḥmal, Tawassuṭ-i Haḍrat-i Zaynab(s)?", *Pāygāh-i Iṭṭilāʿ-yi Rasānī-yi Daftar-i Haḍrat-i Āyatullāh al-ʿUẓmá Makārim Shīrāzī* (Accessed January 13, 2023); Afḍalī, *Qamahʾzanī*, 88-93.

[24] Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn, *Risālat al-tanzīh li-aʿmāl al-shabīh* (Ṣaydā: Maṭba ʿat al-ʿIrfān, 1347 AH), 25.

[25] With the political stabilization in Iran by the time of Shāh ʿAbbās, Westerners were given economic and diplomatic confidence. Thus, many more diplomats, merchants, and travelers arrived in the country during this period, and Muḥarram ceremonies performed in this period were described in Western sources in a much more detailed manner than ever before. This study will discuss only the reports of the travelers who witnessed the bloody acts. Detailed information about the mourning ceremonies of the Safavid period in general can be found in the works of scholars such as Muḥsin Ḥasām Maẓāhirī, Jean Calmard, and Babak Rahimi. See Maẓāhirī, *Trāzhedī-yi Jahān-i Islām*, 1/59-214; Calmard, "Shiʿi Rituals and Power"; Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*; Jabbār Raḥmānī, *Taghyīrāt-i Manāsik-i ʿAzādārī-yi Muḥarram: Insānʾshināsī-yi Manāsik-i ʿAzādārī-yi Muḥarram* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Tīsā, 1393 HS), 77-140.

Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 953/1546) reports that on the 10th of Muḥarram in Damascus (907/1501), months before Shāh Ismāʿīl's seized power in Tabriz, "a group of *ʿajam* and *Qalandarī* vagrants" gathered together and committed *rāfiḍī* acts such as mutilating their faces. Those who were disturbed by these behaviors made a complaint to the governor.[26] This and similar records[27] suggest that such acts of self-mutilation were known and practiced by some (arguably marginalized) religious and ethnic groups even before the Safavids rose to power.

The first conclusive record of the ceremonies of self-mutilation in Safavid Iran comes from Anthony Sherley (d. 1635), an English traveler who visited Iran in 1598 during the reign of Shāh ʿAbbās. According to Sherley's records, on the anniversary of the martyrdom of ʿAlī, *holy men* slash themselves over their arms and breasts with knives, sometimes even leading to death. In this record, Sherley seems to be referring to the Qalandarīs, who are depicted as "wearing only a felt gown of blue and rest of their bodies being naked".[28] This narration is worth noting because it indicates that *qamahzanī* and similar acts were also performed apart from the mourning ceremonies held in the month of Muḥarram during the Safavid period.[29]

After Sherley, travelers such as Georg Tectander von der Jabel (d. 1614), António de Gouvea (d. 1628), Fedot Kotov (d. 1624), Adam Olearius (d. 1671), Awliyāʾ Chalabī (d. 1095/1684 [?]), and John Struys (d. 1694) also recorded their testimonies of various bloody acts of self-mutilation with knives or chains.[30] According to the records of

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[26] Abū l-Faḍl Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat al-khillān fī ḥawādith al-zamān*, ed. Khalīl al-Manṣūr (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1998), 198; Calmard, "Shiʿi Rituals and Power", 142.

[27] Jean Calmard cites a similar narration. According to the narrative of the mid-16th century, the Shīʿī minority on the island of Hormuz held their *ʿĀshūrāʾ* ceremonies in the great mosque of Jalalabad, and every year, "for the love of Muḥammad", they cut themselves with knives. See Calmard, "Shiʿi Rituals and Power", 142.

[28] Sherley, *The Broadway Travellers*, 128.

[29] For another example, see Calmard, "Shiʿi Rituals and Power", 142.

[30] Jan Janszoon Struys, *The Perillous and Most Unhappy Voyages of John Struys, through Italy, Greece, Lifeland, Moscovia, Tartary, Media, Persia, East-India, Japan, and Other Places in Europe, Africa and Asia*, trans. John Morrison (London: Samuel Smith, 1683), 264-265; Adam Olearius, *The Voyages & Travels of the Ambassadors from the Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Muscovy, and the King of Persia*, trans. John Davies (London: Printed for Thomas Dring, and John Starkey, 1669), 175-176; Awliyāʾ Chalabī (as Evliyâ Çelebi), *Günümüz Türkçesiyle Evliyâ Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi 4. Kitap*, trans. Seyit Ali Kahraman - Yücel Dağlı (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010), 2/476-478; Rahimi, *Theater State and the*

Olearius, during the Muḥarram ceremonies in Ardabil in 1637, a large number of men gathered together and "slash'd and cut themselves above the Elbow, and clapping the Wounds with their hands, they made Blood spurt out all over the Arm, and about the Body". They then scampered around the city in that condition. There was so much bloodshed that anyone who witnessed this scene would think that many oxen had been killed there.[31]

The accounts of Awliyāʾ Chalabī in his travelogue are an early record of the involvement of violence in the ceremonies. On the 11th day of Muḥarram 1655, according to Awliyāʾ Chalabī, colorful decorated tents were pitched at the outside of the city of Dargazīn, *ʿāshūrāʾs*[32] and other delicious meals were cooked, and everyone listened to *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn*[33] in the Khan's tent. When the subject came to the battle of Karbalāʾ, *ʿAjam* soldiers shouted and wailed, everyone started to cry for al-Ḥusayn, and they were utterly ecstatic. When it came to the chapter in which al-Imām al-Ḥusayn was martyred, a man disguised as al-Imām al-Ḥusayn, with blood flowing from his neck and his head detached from his body, and others representing the people in Karbalāʾ took the stage, and all the lovers of the Ahl al-bayt began to cry out. They shout "*Āh Ḥusayn, Shāh Ḥusayn*" and pointed their chests and wrists at the Salmānī darwishes. The Salmānī darwishes struck the biceps and chests of these people with razors and cut their chests into slices and made them bleed for the love of al-Ḥusayn. Several hundred men shed their blood and pulled out their teeth for the blessed teeth of the Holy Prophet, whose teeth were broken in the Battle of Uḥud. That day, the countryside of Dargazīn was colored with human blood and the ground of Dargazīn turned into the color of tulips with human blood. After these grievances, all the companions, by shedding their blood, made a *tawḥīd-i sulṭānī* [a special kind of *dhikr*, i.e., practice of the rhythmic repetition of a phrase], and they were all enraptured and mesmerized by it.[34]

Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran, 228-229; Maẓāhirī, *Trāzhidī-yi Jahān-i Islām*, 1/67.

31 Olearius, *The Voyages & Travels of the Ambassadors*, 176.

32 A traditional dessert cooked on the 10th day of Muḥarram.

33 Classical Turkish poet Fuḍūlī's (d. 973/1556) prose work called *Ḥadīqat al-suʿadāʾ* on the incident of Karbalāʾ.

34 Chalabī, *Günümüz Türkçesiyle Evliyâ Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi 4. Kitap*, 2/476-478.

It is seen that in this ceremony, a theatrical presentation was made to impress the participants and that the barbers present there used razors to injure the performers' bodies (as opposed to the individuals mutilating their own bodies in general *qamahzanī* practice). Before the climax of the show, the Khan, who was a Kızılbaş, encouraged Awliyāʾ Chalabī to watch the show, indicating that the ceremony was in the form of a systematic show. Notably, the Khan's and other notables' tents were present at ceremonies, and decorative tools were used. The Salmānī darwishes, of which Awliyāʾ Chalabī says there were 700-800, and *ʿAjam* soldiers seem to be a part of this show.[35]

The Shīʿī mourning ceremonies were closely related to the sociopolitical structure of the Safavid period, just as they are today. Many shāhs and local rulers, especially Shāh ʿAbbās, personally participated in the ceremonies and kept the ceremonies under control. The Safavid Shāhs have been regarded as the heirs of ancient Iranian rulers and the representatives of al-Mahdī on earth.[36] In addition, the Shāhs drew power from the charismatic personalities of ʿAlī and al-Ḥusayn, and the historical events that were the subject of the ceremonies were reinterpreted in the social context of the time. In this context, during the Safavid period, Yazīd's army was associated with the Ottoman army and al-Ḥusayn with the Shāhs. The *qamahzanī* and similar actions during this period may have indicated that the *qamahzanī* performers, especially the military, were ready to do anything for the "Ḥusayn of that day," who was the present shāh or local ruler.

It is remarkable that in many records of the Safavid period, violent ceremonies were performed by large groups of people, sometimes in the presence of rulers, in open squares and streets in a highly organized manner. These recordings fail to provide sufficient data on small-scale individual acts of bodily harm that were not open to the audience. On the other hand, the beginning of discussions of the *qamahzanī* ceremony in the late Qajar period and the silence of the Safavid scholars on the issue indicate that either the ceremonies had not yet gained significant popularity among the public at this time or

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35 Chalabī, *Günümüz Türkçesiyle Evliyâ Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi 4. Kitap*, 2/477.

36 See Roger Savory, *Iran under Safavids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2; Cihat Aydoğmuşoğlu, "Safevi Tarih Yazıcılığı ve Safevi Çağı Kronikleri", *Türk Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4/1 (Spring 2019), 151.

that scholars remained deliberately silent in favor of reconciliation with political power.[37] Because such violent mourning ceremonies favored the Safavid state. Through ceremonies such as *qamahzanī*, the dissatisfaction and anger of the people, especially the young, were directed toward the past and the enemies of Ahl al-bayt "outside" rather than the current power. In this sense, the *qamahzanī* ceremony served as a "safety valve"[38] to control the youth's anger.

Regardless of their popularity among the masses, it is evident that such ceremonies have been performed in Iran since the Safavid period and have been adopted by the masses over time. The records of Tancoigne, who served as ambassador to Iran during the Qajar period, from Tehran in 1807 reveal that the Qajar period was not significantly different from the Safavid period in terms of bloody ceremonies. Tancoigne reports that some almost naked men struck their breasts, while others pierced their arms and legs with knives, fastened padlocks under their breasts, and made wide gashes in their heads, all the while shouting out "al-Ḥasan" and "al-Ḥusayn."[39] Under the Pahlavi regime, these acts continued to be performed and were banned several times.[40]

These practices, which developed within the framework of Iranian-centered public religiosity, also influenced and transformed Arab Shiʿism. However, based on oral tradition, bloody ceremonies found a

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[37] For an evaluation of the scholars practicing *taqiyyah* (dissimulation) in this regard, see ʿAlī Sharīʿatī, *Tashayyuʿ-i ʿAlawī wa-Tashayyuʿ-i Ṣafawī* (Tehran: Muʾassasah-yi Ḥusayniyyah-yi Irshād, 1350 HS), 208.

[38] John Perry has used this analogy for the rivalries and conflicts between the Ḥaydarī and Niʿmatī factions, which confronted each other during the Safavid period on various occasions, including mourning ceremonies, noting that the state supported this schism as a safety valve. I believe it would be correct to use a similar expression for *qamahzanī*. See John R. Perry, "Ḥaydari and Neʿmati", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Accessed January 23, 2023).

[39] J. M. Tancoigne, *A Narrative of a Journey into Persia and Residence at Teheran, Containing a Descriptive Itinerary from Constantinople to the Persian Capital* (London: Printed for William Wright, 1820), 197-198.

[40] During the rule of Reza Shah, *qamahzanī*, *zanjīrzanī*, and other ceremonies were banned. Although these bans were lifted after Reza Shah's removal from power, these ceremonies were banned again in various periods under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah. For example, in 1314/1934 and 1334/1955, the performance of *zanjīrzanī* and certain rituals were banned by the Pahlavi government. In 1955, when the news of the ban spread, reactions were raised, and the ban had to be withdrawn. See Muḥsin Ḥasām Maẓāhirī, "Zanjīrzanī", *Farhang-i Sūg-i Shīʿī*, ed. Muḥsin Ḥasām Maẓāhirī (Tehran: Khaymah, 1395 HS), 391.

place in neighboring countries such as Iraq and Syria[41] much later. Historical records indicate that such ceremonies were not performed in these regions until the 19th century.[42] It has been argued that such rituals were initially introduced to the holy sites in Iraq by the Kızılbaş groups and that in Iraq, the *qamahzanī* ceremony was practiced primarily by pilgrims from the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Tabriz. Thomas Lyell, who witnessed the ceremonies in Najaf, also stated that this ceremony was more specific to the Iranians, especially to the "Turcoman tribe" there.[43]

While some works have claimed that the bloody aspect of the Karbalāʾ ceremonies originated with Christian influence[44] or was popularized by the British,[45] the abovementioned records indicate that *qamahzanī* and similar acts were already known to some regions of Islamic societies and subsequently became part of Muḥarram culture. For instance, in 1638, Adam Olearius observed a Circassian burial ceremony in which people were reported to tear their foreheads, arms, and breasts with their nails and to continue mourning until their

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41 The arrival of Iraqi and then Iranian ceremonies in Syria is quite recent. During the Ottoman rule, mourning assemblies were not performed openly. At that time, mourning was held in homes and in a simple form. With the introduction of the Ottoman policy of pan-Islamism in 1895, when Iranians living in Damascus and *Jabal ʿĀmil* were given relief, Shīʿī ceremonies began to be performed openly, including marches, *shabīh* ceremonies, and *qamahzanī*. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Iranian rituals became even more widespread. See Sabrina Mervin, "'Âshûrâ': Some Remarks on Ritual Practices in Different Shiite Communities (Lebanon and Syria)", *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia*, ed. Alessandro Monsutti et al. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 137-138.

42 Ende, "The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shiʿite ʿUlamāʾ", 27-28.

43 Thomas Lyell, *The Ins and Outs of Mesopotamia* (London: A. M. Philpot Ltd., 1923), 67-70; Nakash, *The Shiʿis of Iraq*, 149; Muḥsin Ḥasām Maẓāhirī, *Rasānah-ʾi Shīʿah: Jāmiahʿshināsī-yi Āyīnhā-yi Sūgwārī wa -Hayʾathā-yi Madhhabī dar Īrān* (Tehran: Nashr-i Bayn al-Milal, 1374 HS), 70.

44 According to ʿAlī Sharīʿatī, many of the new ceremonies and symbols that emerged under the Safavids were borrowed from Christianity. During this period "European Christian patterns were given an Iranian Shīʿī content." *Zanjīrzanī*, lamentation, *qamahzanī*, and the like are also included in this context. See Sharīʿatī, *Tashayyuʿ-i ʿAlawī wa-Tashayyuʿ-i Ṣafawī*, 205-211.

45 In *Dast-i Pinhān*, a work published by the Administration of Foundations of Iran, it is asserted that *qamahzanī* was first taught to the Shīʿīs of India by British colonialists and then introduced into Iran and Iraq. The British embassy allegedly supported the spread of this practice until recently. See Wāhid-i Pazhūhash-i Daftar-i Farhangī-yi Fakhr al-l-Aʾimmah (ʿalayhimā al-salām) Qom al-Muqaddasah (ed.), *Dast-i Pinhān* (Qom: Sāzmān-i Awqāf wa-Umūr-i Khayriyyah-yi Āstan-i Qom, 1387 HS), 22-24.

wounds healed. Although this account postdates the introduction of the *qamahzanī* into Shīʿī mourning ceremonies, it is noteworthy that similar rites existed in the local cultures.[46] Various factors may have played a role in the popularization of the *qamahzanī*, including interaction with Christian societies. However, seeking the origins of this ceremony entirely outside would appear to be an attempt to deny the legacy of *qamahzanī*. The accounts of travelers indicate that (at least) since the 16th century, "suffering" for al-Ḥusayn was known and accepted by the Shīʿī community. Its form has changed over time and space, and in its present form, it has spread to the commons. The lack of consensus among Shīʿī scholars against these ceremonies must have facilitated the spread of these acts among the general public.

3. Differences of Opinion on the Religious Ruling of *Qamahzanī* in the Shīʿī Tradition

The practice of *qamahzanī* and similar bloody acts have caused serious disagreements among Shīʿī scholars. When the religious debates and judgments on *qamahzanī* are analyzed, it is clear that the issue has been addressed with regard to several main issues. The most critical issues are whether bodily harm is inflicted during these acts, the extent to which bodily harm is acceptable, and whether *qamahzanī* is a traditional ritual. One of the most frequently raised objections is that *qamahzanī* and similar rituals tarnish the image of the Shīʿah denomination both to the West and to non-Shīʿī Muslims.

The scholars of the Safavid period seem to have either approved of or remained silent about the changes in Muḥarram mourning rituals that took place in their period. During that period, opposition to these rituals was relatively scarce.[47] The fact that controversy emerged at the end of the Qajar period suggests that self-mutilation rituals became increasingly visible during this period and began to be practiced in different regions. While analyzing modern and contemporary *fatwá*s on *qamahzanī*, Scharbrodt found that most scholars were either sympathetic or indifferent to this act. However, the modernist discourse within the Shīʿī jurisprudence emphasizes the case of Karbalāʾ for the universal message of al-Imām al-Ḥusayn's uprising and

[46] Olearius, *The Voyages & Travels of the Ambassadors*, 311.
[47] Maẓāhirī, *Rasānah-ʾi Shīʿah*, 72-73.

seeks to rationalize Shīʿī rituals by opposing practices such as *qamahzanī*.[48]

The controversy among Shīʿī scholars over *qamahzanī* began in 1924 (1343 AH) when Āyat Allāh Sayyid Mahdī al-Qazwīnī (d. 1965) criticized some Muḥarram ceremonies. Al-Qazwīnī pointed out the inaccuracies and misconceptions in the mourning ceremonies and complained that other nations mocked the Shīʿah due to some of these ceremonies. According to him, the existence of mourning processions is contrary to the unity of the Islamic sects, and *qamahzanī* is a savage act lacking in evidence. Al-Qazwīnī's harsh criticisms were met with harsh reactions in Basra, and many refutations were written against him.[49]

Another widely known debate took place between Muḥsin al-Amīn al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1952), the author of the famous biography *Aʿyān al-Shīʿah*, and his opponents. Muḥsin al-Amīn al-ʿĀmilī, who was *marjiʿ al-taqlīd* (the supreme religious authority) in the region of Damascus and Jabal ʿĀmil, criticized some Muḥarram ceremonies in his work *al-Majālis al-saniyyah* and consequently encountered serious reactions. Al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Ṣādiq (d. 1942) penned a work entitled *Sīmāʾ al-ṣulaḥāʾ* against him in which he accused Muḥsin al-Amīn of opposing the foundations of religion. In response, al-Amīn wrote the treatise *Risālat al-tanzīh li-aʿmāl al-shabīh*, which firmly reflects his reformist orientation. While Muḥsin al-Amīn was not the first to criticize some aspects of the ceremonies, his work and views sparked great debate.[50]

In addition to rituals such as *qamahzanī* and *zanjīrzanī*, Muḥsin al-Amīn's criticisms targeted the recitation of false stories in the *minbar*s, the use of instruments such as the drum and zurna during mourning, the loud wailing of women, the shouting of ugly voices in the *minbar*s, and the riding of camels by women with their faces uncovered to portray the family members of al-Imām al-Ḥusayn. According to him, the real disfigurement in these practices was that they were performed in the name of worship and obedience.[51]

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[48] The study conducted by Scharbrodt analyses the views of the Shīʿite scholars on the subject in detail and emphasizes the political aspect of the *qamahzanī* ritual. See Scharbrodt, "Contesting Ritual Practices in Twelver Shiism", 1068.

[49] Afḍalī, *Qamah'zanī*, 88-89.

[50] Ende, "The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shiʿite ʿUlamāʾ", 21-36.

[51] Al-Amīn, *Risālat al-tanzīh li-aʿmāl al-shabīh*, 2-4.

The most striking of the arguments that al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Ṣādiq used in his work to justify the legitimacy of *qamahzanī* is that striking the head with a sharp instrument is a form of cupping/bloodletting (*ḥajāmah*) and is therefore *sunnah* in terms of the *sharīʿah*. According to him, it is essentially a permissible (*mubāḥ*) act, a recommendable (*mustaḥabb*) act according to the preponderant (*rājiḥ*) view, and a disliked (*makrūh*) act according to the less preponderant (*marjūḥ)* view. If it is a cupping that causes harm to the person, then it is forbidden (*ḥarām*). Because it is obligatory (*wājib*) to preserve one's health, it is sometimes necessary to carry out serious surgical operations and even the amputation of limbs to preserve one's worldly life and the health of one's body as a whole. At this point, ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Ṣādiq makes a comparison between *qamahzanī* and cupping and questions whether an earthly wound or a spiritual wound is more important. According to him, treating a wound that is important for one's eternal bliss is of greater value than treating a wound that would benefit only one's worldly life.[52]

Muḥsin al-Amīn strongly opposed this argument. According to al-Amīn, cupping is essentially forbidden (*ḥarām*) because it causes harm and pain to the human being, and it is permissible (*ḥalāl*) only in case of necessity. If striking the head is considered a form of cupping, the person who does it must be afraid that he will die if he does not strike his head because only then would the action be obligatory (*wājib*). This can only happen in the condition that a specialized doctor diagnoses a fatal disease and declares that the only cure for it is striking the head. If a person strikes his head, for example, because he is suffering from a severe fever and the doctor has advised him to strike his head and let the blood flow out to relieve his trembling, then this action would be recommendable (*mustaḥabb*). Finally, it would only be forbidden (*ḥarām*) to perform this action if it causes only pain and harm to a person, for example, if the person does not have a wound on his head or a fever in his body and this action is not considered necessary by a doctor. When forbidden, it neither brings one closer to God nor entails reward but rather punishment.[53]

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[52] Al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Ṣādiq, *Sīmāʾ al-ṣulaḥāʾ* (Ṣaydā: Maṭbaʿat al-ʿIrfān, 1345 AH/1927), 79.

[53] al-Amīn, *Risālat al-tanzīh li-aʿmāl al-shabīh*, 14-16.

In his work, Muḥsin al-Amīn discusses issues such as the limitations of performing arduous tasks that are difficult for the human *nafs* (the self) and torment the *nafs* and whether there is a silent consensus *(al-ijmāʿ al-sukūtī)* among past scholars on the subject; he also harshly criticizes the *qamahzanī* ceremony and the scholars who consented to it.[54] This triggered a strong reaction against al-Amīn. The pro-*qamahzanī* group called themselves "'Alids" and the supporters of al-Amīn "Umayyads". As a consequence of these disputes, which went so far as to lead to the cursing of al-Amīn during the Muḥarram ceremonies held in Najaf, such actions were carried out more vigorously during the ceremonies of 1929, and the "Umayyads" had to hide for fear of their lives or temporarily leave their places of residence.[55] Although Muḥsin al-Amīn's views were not accepted because there were scholars who opposed him in the Jabal ʿĀmil region, he was successful in preventing these acts in Syria because there was no rival religious authority.[56]

Sayyid Abū l-Ḥasan al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1946), who had unrivaled religious authority for many years due to his position as *marjiʿ al-taqlīd*, also objected to some practices performed during Muḥarram

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[54] Al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Ṣādiq mentions the existence of a silent consensus among the previous scholars in favor of permitting *qamahzanī*. However, Muḥsin al-Amīn opposes this. For discussion on the subject, see Ṣādiq, *Sīmāʾ al-ṣulaḥāʾ*, 82; al-Amīn, *Risālat al-tanzīh li-aʿmāl al-shabīh*, 22-25. Another topic of discussion is the limit of tormenting the self. Al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn argues that the Prophet Muḥammad and his Ahl al-bayt undertook arduous tasks that were challenging even though these tasks were not necessary. Therefore, those who take the Prophet and his Ahl al-bayt as an example today can also perform tasks that cause distress to themselves. Muḥsin al-Amīn, on the other hand, discusses the examples given by al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn one by one and attempts to draw the limits of acts of self-mutilation based on the principles of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). See Ṣādiq, *Sīmāʾ al-ṣulaḥāʾ*, 80-81; al-Amīn, *Risālat al-tanzīh li-aʿmāl al-shabīh*, 20-21. A similar argument was made by ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥillī (d. 1956), who compared the custom of self-beating with chains to the hardship imposed on the body by fasting during the month of Ramaḍān and the pilgrimage. See Nakash, *The Shiʿis of Iraq*, 156-157. The absence of evidence that the practice is *ḥarām* is also one of the arguments raised by *qamahzanī* advocates. According to al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn, since there is no evidence that this action is *ḥalāl* and there is no evidence that it is *ḥarām*, this action remains permissible (*mubāḥ*). See Ṣādiq, *Sīmāʾ al-ṣulaḥāʾ*, 81.

[55] For detailed information on the religious, sociopolitical, and economic aspects of the debates on rituals of self-mutilation in this period, see Ende, "The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shiʿite ʿUlamāʾ".

[56] Mervin, "'Âshûrâ'", 139.

ceremonies and therefore even experienced a security threat. Al-Iṣfahānī did not neglect the defense of al-Amīn and his followers, and he succeeded in achieving this to a certain extent thanks to the power he possessed.[57] Although many scholars, including al-Iṣfahānī, condemned such practices, they could not halt their spread.[58]

Āyat Allāh Abū l-Qāsim al-Khūʾī (d. 1992), who was regarded as the most prominent *marjiʿ al-taqlīd* for Shīʿīs living outside Iran between 1970 and 1992, was among those who approved of such practices as *qamahzanī* and *sīnahzanī* (chest beating). According to al-Khūʾī, provided that they are performed to illustrate the calamities that befell the Ahl al-bayt and do not cause significant harm, there is nothing wrong with slapping the body and striking the head with a sword to the extent that it may cause bleeding during the mourning ceremonies.[59] What is noteworthy in al-Khūʾī's *fatwá* is the stipulation "to not cause significant harm" for the action to be permissible. This statement, which appears in the *fatwá*s of many other scholars, leaves a loophole for different interpretations. When the expression "slapping the body to the extent of causing bleeding" is considered, it is understood that what is meant by "significant damage" is an act that would cause a life-threatening injury or a permanent illness. This loophole regarding harm from self-mutilation probably contributed to the popularization of *qamahzanī*.

Āyat Allāh ʿAlī Khamenei, on the other hand, considers *qamahzanī* to be unconditionally forbidden (*ḥarām*). According to him, *qamahzanī* is not a traditional way of expressing sorrow and grief, nor does it have a history dating back to the time of the Imāms and their successors. Furthermore, it leads to the weakening of the Shīʿah and the defamation of its name.[60]

It is noteworthy that Āyat Allāh Khamenei is not as harsh with regard to *qamahzanī* regarding *zanjīrzanī*. According to Khamenei, *zanjīrzanī* "does not pose any problem as long as it is done in a manner known by the society and can be regarded as one of the

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57 Ende, "The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shiʿite ʿUlamāʾ", 33-34.

58 Al-Amīn, *Risālat al-tanzīh li-aʿmāl al-shabīh*, 23.

59 Abū l-Qāsim al-Mūsawī al-Khūʾī, *Ṣirāṭ al-najāh fī ajwibat al-istiftāʾāt* (Qom: Intishārāt al-Ṣiddīqah al-Shahīdah, 1418 AH), 3/315.

60 ʿAlī Khamenei, "Istiftāʾāt - Marāsīm-i ʿAzādārī, Suʾāl 1461", *www.Khamenei.ir* (Accessed January 23, 2021).

customary ways of expressing sorrow."[61] Here, chain-striking is accepted as a traditional way of expressing sorrow. Nevertheless, this ritual originated at a similar time as *qamahzanī* and, like *qamahzanī*, lacks an early religious and historical basis.[62]

Today, the debate over *qamahzanī* and similar rituals has been supplemented by the view that "the judgment of the *walī-yi faqīh* (the ruling jurist) must be followed" (i.e., if he disapproves, it should not be practiced on that ground alone). Despite refraining from using sharp expressions, Āyat Allāh Khumaynī states that "he does not consent with those who strike the dagger"[63] and advises "not to strike the dagger in the present situation."[64] As noted above, Āyat Allāh Khamenei opposed the *qamahzanī* ceremony and declared it illegal in Iran.[65] In addition to Iran, this ban affected the followers and imitators of Khumaynī and Khamenei in countries such as Lebanon, Pakistan, and India; for instance, Hezbollah banned the practice of this action in Lebanon.[66] In a sense, this judgment issued by the *walī-yi faqīh* appears to be an attempt to test the authority and power over the Shīʿī world.[67]

The issue of *qamahzanī* in contemporary Iran has become a matter of distinction in terms of whether to accept the authority of the *walī-yi faqīh*. In this sense, it has been transformed beyond the religious sphere into the political sphere. In fact, *qamahzanī* has become a banner and constitutes a sort of symbol in the struggle for power among Shīʿī scholars, similar to the issue of *khalq al-Qurʾān* (the question of whether the Qurʾān was created or has existed for eternity)

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61 Khamenei, "Istiftāʾāt - Marāsīm-i ʿAzādārī, Suʾāl 1463".

62 The ritual of *zanjīrzanī*, in which a person beats himself with chains in rhythm, was first performed during the Safavid period and was recorded by the traveler Fedot Kotov in 1624. Nevertheless, other travelers who visited Iran during the Safavid period did not mention this ritual. See Muḥsin Ḥasām Maẓāhirī, *Tirāzhidī-yi Jahān-i Islām: ʿAzādārī-yi Shīʿiyān-i Īrān ba Riwāyat-i Safarnāmah'niwīsān, Mustasbriqān wa- Īrān'shināsān (az Ṣafawiyyah tā Jumhūri-yi Islāmī)* (Isfahan: Nashr-i Ārmā, 1397 HS), 1/67.

63 Afḍalī, *Qamah'zanī*, 74.

64 "Istiftāʾāt-i Imām Khumaynī", *Portāl-i Imām Khumaynī* (Accessed January 24, 2023).

65 See Maẓāhirī, "Qamah'zanī", 391; Scharbrodt, "Contesting Ritual Practices in Twelver Shiism", 1079-1082.

66 Mervin, "'Âshûrâ'", 145.

67 For the place of *qamahzanī* in Khamenei's political agenda, see Scharbrodt, "Contesting Ritual Practices in Twelver Shiism", 1075-1090.

during the *Miḥnah* period. It seems that Ṣādiq Ḥusayn Shīrāzī, the strongest proponent of the *qamahzanī* ritual in Iran, opposed the current form of the doctrine of *walāyat-i faqīh* and, in recent years, was in conflict with the current regime. Shīrāzīs and other opponents of the Islamic Republic have portrayed *qamahzanī* as "a sign of Shīʿī identity" and themselves as "guardians of true Shīʿah"[68] In 2016, Khamenei described the Shīrāzī family and their religious approach as "British Shīʿah".[69] The allegation that the *qamahzanī* was introduced into Muḥarram culture by the British[70] becomes even more important when considered together with the expression of "British Shīʿah".

4. The Position of the *Qamahzanī* Ceremony in Public Religiosity

It could be argued that the most important factor facilitating the inclusion of *qamahzanī* and similar rituals in the mourning tradition is the belief that any form of mourning for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn must be permissible. This belief led to the popular perception that all forms of mourning are legitimate and that expressing a contradictory opinion is perceived as a desire to ban people from mourning for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn. For this reason, Shīʿī scholars have always been cautious when discussing these actions to avoid antagonizing the public. In the same way that a Shīʿī Muslim needs a supreme authority to follow, a supreme authority needs people to follow him.[71] In this sense, the authority of jurisprudence and scholars in shaping public religiosity needs to be questioned. This section discusses some examples of interventions and reactions to Muḥarram mourning in the historical process.

As early as the Safavid period, there were hints that all kinds of ceremonies to commemorate al-Imām al-Ḥusayn were legitimate in the eyes of the people. A narrative about Muqaddas Ardabīlī (d. 993/1585), the author of the famous book *Ḥadīqat al-Shīʿah*, offers an explicit example. According to the narration, Ardabīlī was disturbed by the inappropriate practices carried out in the name of mourning for al-

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68 Scharbrodt, "Contesting Ritual Practices in Twelver Shiism", 1085-1088.

69 Mustafa Melih Ahıshalı, "Şirazilerin İran Muhalefetinde Yer Edinme Çabası", *Anadolu Ajansı* (Accessed January 18, 2023).

70 Wāḥid-i Pazhūhash-i Daftar-i Farhangī-yi Fakhr al-Aʾimmah (ʿalayhimā al-salām) Qom al-Muqaddasah, *Dast-i Pinhān*, 22-24.

71 Scharbrodt, "Contesting Ritual Practices in Twelver Shiism", 1071.

Imām al-Ḥusayn and forbade people from engaging in such activities, stating that they were not part of mourning and that the Ahl al-bayt did not engage in such practices. People refused to listen to him; instead, they increased these practices. Ardabīlī left Ardabil and traveled to a nearby village to avoid hearing the sounds of this mourning, and at night, he dreamed of al-Imām al-Ḥusayn, who asked him, "How can you prevent people from honoring my mourning?" Ardabīlī replied, "I did not prevent them from your mourning. I prevented them from the practices other than mourning." In response, the Imām stated that mourning for him was not subject to any restrictions or formalities and added that whatever the form and the way his calamity was expressed, this was what was meant by mourning. Upon this event, Ardabīlī abandoned his former attitude and began to mourn like the people he had condemned.[72] Regardless of whether this narrative, recorded by Mīrzā ʿAbd Allāh Efendī (d. 1131/1719), actually took place, it indicates that the idea that "all forms of mourning for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn are legitimate" was already present in the Safavid period.

A similar incident was recorded by John Struys, who witnessed a *qamahzanī* ceremony in the city of Shamakhi (in present-day Azerbaijan) in 1672. According to Struys, three days after the ceremonies, the khan or governor issued an interdiction that "none should hew and cut (as was their custom) with swords in the streets." A young man wrote a letter of complaint to the governor in which he criticized the governor: "How comes it that your Lordsh [sic], grows such a great Saint all on a sudden? Who has possessed your mind to alter those long continued Customs of the Persians? And do you not know what Dishonour it is to all the *Musulmans* and the whole Kingdom in general? Or are you indeed becom [sic] a Christian?" As a result, this young man was beaten to death with sticks as a punishment.[73] This record is significant not only because it shows the prestige of the *qamahzanī* in the eyes of the people but also because it points to an administrative restriction on mourning ceremonies.[74] The phrase "long continued customs of the Persians" suggests that, at least in that region, *qamahzanī* had become the subject of national affiliation and had already been called a custom.

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[72] Maẓāhirī, *Rasānah-'i Shīʿah*, 72-74.
[73] Struys, *The Perillous and Most Unhappy Voyages of John Struys*, 268.
[74] Maẓāhirī, *Tirāzhidī-yi Jahān-i Islām*, 1/184.

As revealed in the travelogues, in this period, it was believed that those who died as a result of bloody rituals performed to mourn the death of ʿAlī or al-Ḥusayn would achieve salvation, and those who voluntarily shed their blood for the sake of al-Imām al-Ḥusayn were honored.[75] Olearius reported that it was believed that those who mutilated their bodies expiated some of their sins and that a person who died during the *festival* (*ʿĀshūrāʾ* mourning rituals) attained salvation.[76] Even today, more than one person can be cut on the head with the same dagger. Although this evokes concerns about blood-borne diseases, the *qamahzanī* performers consider it sufficient to be cleansed and receive a simple dressing at the end of the ceremony. This is because they strongly believe that this practice in no way harms their health. In addition, it is believed that sins committed during the rest of the year can be cleansed by participating in Muḥarram ceremonies, even though this belief lacks any religious foundation.[77]

The most striking example of the power of public religiosity in the exemplification of the *qamahzanī* ceremony was narrated about Āyat Allāh Khumaynī's teacher, the supreme religious authority Āyat Allāh Burūjardī (d. 1961). When al-Ḥājj al-Sheikh ʿAbd al-Karīm Ḥāʾirī (d. 1937) traveled to Qom, he saw people practicing *qamahzanī* and opposed it. Subsequently, Burūjardī summoned the heads of the performer group (*dastah*)[78] and forbade the group from performing *qamahzanī*. Some of these people challenged him, saying, "We follow Burūjardī all year round, but for the first ten days of Muḥarram, we apply our own rulings" because it was not possible for them to "abandon al-Imām al-Ḥusayn."[79]

The examples presented above require a rethinking of the authority of scholars in the context of public religiosity in Shīʿism. Although it is a fact that the Shīʿī governments patronized the ceremonies, I argue that these ceremonies were not under the control of the state or the scholars but essentially remained in the hands of the common

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75 Struys, *The Perillous and Most Unhappy Voyages of John Struys*, 265.

76 Olearius, *The Voyages & Travels of the Ambassadors*, 176.

77 For an example of this belief, see Lyell, *The Ins and Outs of Mesopotamia*, 61-62.

78 The word *dastah* is used for small groups of people who come together to mourn and perform actions such as *sīnahzanī*, *zanjīrzanī* or marching through the streets while carrying symbolic objects.

79 Afḍalī, *Qamahʾzanī*, 45-46. ʿAlī Sharīʿatī narrates a similar dialog without giving names. See Sharīʿatī, *Tashayyuʿ-i ʿAlawī wa-Tashayyuʿ-i Ṣafawī*, 208.

people.[80] The reason for the bans and restrictions imposed on these ceremonies from time to time was their dynamism and popularity.[81] Furthermore, the divergent attitudes of the supreme religious authorities toward the act of *qamahzanī* created a space for the people to adopt this ritual, which in turn became one of the most critical factors in the spread of *qamahzanī*.[82] At this point, to better understand the authority of the state and scholars over the public religiosity of the Shīʿīs, it is necessary to examine the manifestations of religiosity in everyday life and to examine in detail the position of the supreme religious authorities in the religious and social lives of individuals.

Conclusion

Qamahzanī ceremony, the most prominent example of self-mutilation rituals in contemporary Islamic societies, was included in Shīʿī mourning ceremonies in the Safavid period. The close association of religious celebrations and mourning with the religious propaganda of the Safavids suggests the possibility that the *qamahzanī* ceremony had political significance and was performed by only a narrow circle of people. While it is difficult to determine how widespread the *qamahzanī* ritual was among the common people during the Safavid period, the historical records discussed in this article demonstrate that it quickly became part of public religiosity and that the people perceived criticism of the *qamahzanī* as an attempt to ban them from mourning for al-Imām al-Ḥusayn. Despite various obstacles and prohibitions, this belief must have been one of the main factors behind the spread of the *qamahzanī* ceremony.

In addition, it appears that the rituals of self-mutilation in the Muḥarram ceremonies of the Safavid period were not limited to mutilation of the head. Other parts of the body, such as the arms, biceps, and chest, were also mutilated. From the Qajar period on, the practice of *qamahzanī* gradually began to be limited to mutilation of the head. Again, from this period onwards, *qamahzanī* became

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[80] For a similar evaluation, see Scharbrodt, "Contesting Ritual Practices in Twelver Shiism", 1070-1071.

[81] On the dynamic nature of mourning ceremonies and efforts to control them, see Kaynamazoğlu, "Matemin Gölgesinde Sivil Bir Fenomen", 72-73.

[82] Flaskerud, "Ritual Creativity and Plurality", 110-111.

widespread in other regions and the subject of scholarly debate. The adoption of Iranian-style mourning rituals by Shīʿī Muslims living in other countries is considerable and worthy of further research.

Qamahzanī is also striking in demonstrating the political atmosphere in the background of a ceremony that is basically the subject of individual religiosity. Even though it is officially banned in contemporary Iran, this ceremony, which continues to be performed despite the *walī-yi faqīh*, has become the symbol of political polarization. In this context, the example of *qamahzanī* calls for a new discussion of the power of followers and the supreme religious authorities over one another and the influence of politics on this relationship.

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