

Muharram commemorations in the southern regions of Azerbaijan

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Local Shi'ism existed in the southern regions of the Azerbaijani republic, and particularly as concerns the subject of this article, in the areas with densely populated Talysh people^[1]. At first sight, this form of Shi'ism did not differ very much from *Isna Ashari* (the Twelve Imams) version of Shi'ism, which dominated neighboring Iran and other parts of the region. However, both historic as well as geo-economic factors influenced the formation of different religious traditions in the discussed region. The reasons of these differences could be the subject of a separate article, however, there is no doubt that Soviet policy, which deliberately isolated the region from traditional religious centers abroad, was the primary cause of the preservation of local traditions.

I am not claiming that the features, which I will discuss in the following pages, are common to all the villages and towns of the region. On the contrary, I demonstrate that differences in even very closely neighboring areas "flourished" as a result of oppressive policies in the region, such as restrictions on the circulation of religious texts and traditions. I also illustrate how these differences have begun to melt away in recent after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, despite the fact that while talking about distinct features of the local Shi'i belief I am primarily referring to villages densely populated with Talysh people, in which these distinctions are better preserved, I also claim that at least the main elements of the local religious traditions that I will describe here are common to the entire southern region of Azerbaijan.

To describe the religious situation in the region I will focus on mass ceremonies. I will examine the rituals, their place in the life of the local social milieu, and the mechanisms of their transmission from one generation to another. At the same time, I highlight the changes brought on by a thriving religious revival during the last decades caused by foreign influence.

Mass religious ceremonies. Muharram commemorations.

It goes without saying that when I refer to mass religious ceremonies in the region, I am primarily signifying commemorations during the month of Muharram of the Muslim Hijri calendar. In comparison with Muharram gatherings, other Islamic mass rituals have been less commonly performed in the region, at least until recently. One example is collective daily prayers, which returned to the religious life of locals only in the last decade. While it has recently become common to see collective prayers, especially Friday prayers, performed in the mosques of cities, regional centers, and towns, these practices are relative novelties in the region.

The disappearance of these prayer and fasting rituals during Soviet times cannot be explained only by the pressure of the government and the risks posed by their performance. As I will demonstrate, despite the same pressures and risks, throughout the Soviet times the mass attendance of Muharram commemorations continued. The main reason behind the near disappearance of daily and weekly mass prayers during the soviet rule was thus that, until recently, an insignificant percentage of the region's population performed such obligatory Islamic rituals as individual daily prayers and Ramadan fasting, while the vast majority abandoned them. This fact, was of course to some extent a result of the Soviet's atheistic policies.

By the same token, traditionally the most important Muslim holidays i.e. Eid al Adha (*Qurban*) and Eid al Fitr (*Ramazan*)

bayramı) have been celebrated less enthusiastically in comparison with Muharram commemorations. In line with the policies of "Soviet İslam" which limited the religion to the remembrance of the deceased and mourning, local holy Ramadan rituals included only asking mullahs to recite the *Qur'ān* for the souls of lost loved ones, donations during sacred *Ahya* (Qadr or Power) nights and for pilgrimages to graveyards during holidays.

However, regarding Muharram commemorations, the situation was exactly the opposite. The mass attendance of Muharram ceremonies cannot be explained only by the strict religiosity of individuals participating in these gatherings. Especially in the villages, both believers and non-believers alike attended these ceremonies, whatever their lifestyle. These ceremonies signified a manifestation of community socialization, rather than the fulfillment of religious duties. They serve as signs of identity and belonging, more than markers of religiosity.

Commemorated with strong enthusiasm, the mass scale and peculiarities of the rituals of Muharram ceremonies have had a major impact on the social life of this region. Due to the changes that these ceremonies underwent in the region, they have to some extent diverged from their religious origins and have become part of a unique local tradition. However, as I will demonstrate, some customs in these local ritual ceremonies keep traces of pre-Islamic beliefs alive as well.

There are several central concepts that should be taken into consideration when discussing the most significant peculiarities of Muharram ceremonies in Talysh populated areas. In this way, I will describe some of these elements, which illustrate the distinctions of local traditions. These include practices and symbols such as: *teke*, *alam*, *shakhsey*, and some of their integral elements.

Teke

Teke (or takya) is an Arabic term that mainly signifies the place where members of Sufi sects perform their rituals. It is also the name of a Muslim cap worn particularly during prayers. However, tekes are not prayer houses specially built for this occasion. They are individual homes (or living rooms in individual houses) exclusively decorated for the Muharram months during which commemoration ceremonies are organized.

Different houses are decorated as tekes each year according to patriarchal norms. Separate tekes are decorated for males and females. If there is a mosque in the village (until recently there were a lot of villages without mosques) tekes for men are organized in the mosque, while for women (and children) separate tekes are organized in houses in each neighborhood. According to the local tradition, a family that has lost a member during the year bears the right to organize a teke. Only if this family excuses itself, can tekes be organized in another home.

The most imported decoration of teke is the alam. The decoration of the teke begins with bringing the alam into the room (**teke noy** in Talysh) and the teke ceases to exist once alam is removed from the premises. Each person entering the teke during ceremonies first must present him/herself to the alam to offer greetings and make donations. Mourning ceremonies in tekes last 17 days. They start on the first day of the Muharram month of Muslim calendar (teke premises are decorated one day before the Muharram month, on the last day of the Zihillijah month) and end seven days after Ashura (the most important day Muharram).[\[2\]](#) Ceremonies are held in the evenings with the exception of the day of Ashura. Each evening, the ceremony starts with the recitation of the thirty-sixth chapter of *Qur'ān* (Yasin). Then commemoration continues with reading elegiac poems called marsiya and afterwards with telling various mythic stories about the Karbala battle in which Imam Hussein and his family and companions were killed in 680 a.d.

Ceremonies reach their culmination on the day of Ashura. On the eve of Ashura, the night of Tasua, those who vow “to accompany alam” must remain awake in the tekes until the following midday when the most crowded ceremonies of Muharram start.

Alam

Among those listed above, the most important concept of Muharram commemorations in the region is the alam. All of the ceremonies circulate around the mystic aura of the alam. Alam in Arabic means symbol, flag, and more precisely refers to the metal at the top of the flagpole, an object of special symbolic significance.[\[3\]](#) The significance of this symbol is emphasized in Talysh expressions denoting various aspects of Muharram commemorations. For instance, Talysh people call Muharram the month of alam (“*aləmə mang*”), and traditional commemorative feasts of Muharram mourning are called the pilaf[\[4\]](#) of alam (“*aləmə polo*”).

The alam symbolizes the flag of the martyred of Karbala, Imam Hussein, and his rebellion. However it is more directly associated with his loyal brother Abbas bin Ali (Abulfazl Abbas) who was also murdered in that battle. Alams brought by pilgrims from Karbala, Iraq, and especially old ones are considered to be more valuable.

Faith in the divinity of the alam resembles, and may be, a remnant of old animistic religious beliefs. For instance, if an alam is met with disrespect, that is, if someone laughs, speaks loudly near it, offers donations to it with dishonestly earned money, or drops it on the floor, then “it will be offended and will fly back to Karbala.” It is also believed that the alam will gain additional strength if divinely powerful persons (in most cases seyids i.e. alleged descendants of the Islamic prophet) touch them.

Although alams are often formed in the shape of a hand, they are also fashioned as spearheads, pitchforks, and other forms.

The alam is the property of the person who brought it from Karbala, unless donated to a mosque or other shrine. Donations given to the alam also remain under supervision of the alam's owner. Until recently most pilgrims to Karbala, Iraq were local clerics, so in most cases alams were mainly held in their possession. As a result, the ownership of these relics enabled local clerics to acquire additional economic benefits in addition to their religious privileges.

The most crowded part of the Muharram mourning places the alam at the center of the event through a procession with the relic ("*alām novnye*"). This ceremony is held in the days of Tasua and Ashura. A crowd gathers around the teke and follows the cleric as he exits with the alam raised in the air. Then the crowd accompanies the alam through village or neighborhood shouting various religious slogans. The occupants of each house in the village greet the alam, make donations, and then join the procession to the neighboring house. If multiple processions with alams start in different neighborhoods, these processions ultimately meet and greet one another. Sometimes an alam procession marches from one teke to another to greet a neighboring community. Unlike the patriarchal rules dominating the tekes, these processions are joint marches of women and men. This joint participation is observed throughout all mass ceremonies of Tasua and Ashura.

The alam processions foster interaction between different villages within the region as well. Crowds from one village walk to the teke or mosque of another. Sometimes the crowds of multiple alam processions from various villages meet in nearby local shrines, so called *pirs* and *imamzadas*.

The alam processions are considered completed when the relic is returned to its teke and the next important tradition called the shakhsey begins.

Shakhsey

One of the most interesting rituals of Muharram ceremonies in

the region is the shakhsey. The shakhsey resembles a group dance rather than a formal mourning ritual. It has a clear influence on pre-Islamic beliefs and possibly Sufi rituals. Known by the Talysh people as Şaxsoy (**Şaxsoy qəte** – “observe shakhsey” or şaxsoy **şə** – “performing shakhsey”) or Şaxsoy-vaxsoy (from the original scream expression: Shah Hussein! Vah Hussein!) this ritual is one of the most important moments of the entire Muharram ceremony. Interestingly, its form of implementation shares strong similarities with the Ashura prayers, or the performance of a dance in a circular motion, practiced by the Anatolian Alawites (another Shi’i sect that is distinct from orthodox Shi’ism).

The shakhsey is performed by two different groups consisting of only men. These two groups “dance” by rotating counter clockwise. The shakhsey begins with the special sign of the mullah and is performed by the groups who stand ready at the square. Shakhsey “dancing” is accompanied by religious slogans. The creativity of the compositions of slogans is not considered important. Usually these slogans are well-known verbal utterances that are transmitted in pairs. A pair of slogans is implemented as a dialogue. The slogans of one group are answered by another fixed slogan from the other group. Slogans are shouted in Azerbaijani, Talysh, and sometimes Persian. This dialogue of slogans is repeated several times by dancing groups. The function of the slogans is often to eulogize the Shi’i imams (mostly Ali, Hasan and Hussein) and send curses to Caliph Yazid and his followers. The dance rhythms of the two groups are not the same; the group that starts the ritual dance keeps a faster rhythm, while the responding group maintains a slow dance rhythm. However, turns are usually shifted during the ritual.

It is believed that the circle created by the shakhsey performing groups has a sacred, mystical power. Those who hold the alam stand in the center and change direction in accordance with the dancing group while dancing groups move back and forth toward the alam bearer. According to local

belief, this shakhsey circle possesses healing powers and is capable of preventing misfortunes. People who seek cures from diseases and those who want to quit undesired habits try to reach the center of the teke, to touch the alam during the ceremony, and to remain surrounded by the dancing circle. The children are put in the middle of the circle as well to cure illnesses. The dancing people touch the children lightly with their feet, thus inviting the children under protective forces of the sacred circle.

Commemorative feasts of Muharram

Commemorative feasts are one of the important social elements of the Muharram tradition. They are called "*Imam Xeyratı*" (dinner in the name of the Imam) or "*Aləmə polo*" (Alam pilaf) and start days before Ashura and finish during the night of Tasua. These feasts are organized with the participation of all of the families of the village or neighborhood (families experiencing financial difficulties are excluded). In fact, the goal of these feasts is more directed toward strengthening ties between members of the community rather than providing food to the poor. The task of hosting feasts is rotated, allowing each participant to host the community members for the ceremony. However, invitations to attend cannot be sent by hosts. It is the job of the elders of village or neighborhood to select the guests. Choices are based on the spontaneous decisions of the elders.

Atmosphere during Muharram mourning, roots and social functions of this tradition

It is interesting that grief, a characteristic of the ritual of Muharram mourning, is less observed here in comparison with other regions. If carefully observed, these ceremonies are more reminiscent of old religious holidays or festivals, rather than torment and grief. There is no doubt that the dominating discourse of these ceremonies, imported from traditional religious centers abroad, promotes the expression

of grief and lamentation while observing rituals. However the overall atmosphere of the Muharram in this region illustrates that these "instructions" are not strictly followed.

A careful observation of these ceremonies reveals many remnants from pre-Islamic religions expressed in this tradition.[\[5\]](#) The central place of the alam, which is the animistic symbol, as well as the shakhsey, which is camouflaged with the Shi'i belief form of old religious dances and circular movements, illustrate the essential role played by ancient religious traditions in current Muharram ceremonies.

Muharram ceremonies in this region resemble religious rituals (*cem*) of the Alawite sect in Anatolia. It is worth mention that such critically discussed Muharram rituals as self-flagellation are not commonly observed in this region. They are particularly rare in remote villages.

Although the term "religion of lament" invented by Elias Canetti is an extreme assessment, when applied to religious traditions of this region, to some extent I agree with the importance he places on the role of the Muharram tragedy in shaping Shi'i belief.[\[6\]](#) For instance, all of the funeral ceremonies in the region, regardless of whether they coincide with the month of Muharram or not, always include rituals remembering the tragic events of Karbala.

The paramount significance of the Muharram for locals is not limited only to the spiritual-religious realm. Muharram ceremonies, as an informal regulator of public relations, play a key role in the everyday life of the community. The exuberance with which these ceremonies are conducted can be compared only to that of Nowruz celebrations. However, more crowded in comparison with Nowruz, Muharram plays a much more important role in fostering inner community ties.

Mechanisms of the inheritance of the ceremonies

Under Soviet rule, when formal religious education, publication and distribution of religious literature was completely banned in the region, knowledge and texts about ceremonies and rituals passed from one generation to another semi-clandestinely through informal local religious education.

Dubbed "Marsiya notes", religious instructions containing almost the same texts passed from mullahs and professional elegy reciters called "marsiyakhans" to their students or children. In the early 1990's new publications began circulating and became very popular due to the existing shortages of religious texts. These new texts, which mainly consisted of Azerbaijani classical poetry dedicated to the Ashura, shaped the renewed repertoire of marsiyakhans. In recent years, the reading list was enriched further, primarily due to the comparatively easy accessibility of texts by authors, who are mainly Iranian Azerbaijanis.

Local vs Imported

One can observe that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the opening of the borders exposed country's religious life to direct external influences local Shi'ism experienced a significant transformation over a relatively short period of time. This process, which began in the early 1990s, has since gained momentum. A breakthrough in the development and usage of information technologies, which led to the domination of imported religious literature in the country, impacted the impressive pace of this change.

In the early 1990's when the internet was not accessible to locals, Iranian TV and radio stations pervasively broadcasted to bordering regions of the Azerbaijani Republic. These broadcasts played a significant role in the dissemination of new texts. The transformation has also been impacted by local religious clerics who studied in Iran after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Returning from their studies, they handily forced out traditional mullahs, who had never enjoyed high

esteem and serious authority among local population anyway, and thus heavily influenced both religious discourse and the practices of worship houses.

The appearance of specialized print houses in Iran for the publication of religious literature in Azerbaijani language was one of the most important factors in accelerating of desecularization process. In this way, the restoration of textual/scriptural ties and the introduction of the Marja' institution, i.e. the recognition of the Iranian Ayatollahs by Shiites in Azerbaijan as their spiritual leaders, sustained this foreign influence. Furthermore, apace with the internet, this impact expanded further.

Due to this influence, the local features of the Muharram ceremonies in Azerbaijan have become less visible. The greater expertise of Iranian educated mullahs, as well as a general, growing sense of mistrust towards local semi-official clerics paved the way for the former to install their authority over the local population. Thus, gradually, Iranian-style Muharram ceremonies (including marsiya texts) began to replace local traditions, first in larger settlements and then in villages. It should be emphasized that these new, popular, young Iranian educated clerics confronted the state-controlled, semi-official, poorly educated, and unpopular local mullahs, as well as rivals from other foreign countries engaging in export of religion into Azerbaijan. However, the most important novelty brought by Iranian influence in the region has been the rapid politicization of once apolitical Ashura traditions.

Reflection of politicization of Islam in the religious life in the region

Political Shi'ism in Azerbaijan became particularly active after the war in Syria under the influence of external factors. Year after year more political slogans accompanied the Ashura marches of believers in Lankaran city, which attracted people from neighboring regions as well. The most

crowded of these marches occurred in 2015. After the series of bloody Nardaran events of 2015, the Azerbaijani government increased the systematic pressure on active Shi'i groups and banned these marches as well as all religious ceremonies held outside of worship houses. A series of sweeping arrests of clerics after the Nardaran operation included such influential persons in the region as clergyman Zulfugar Mikayilzadeh and Elman Agayev.[\[7\]](#)

The state tried to regulate the religious life of the region, and the country more broadly, by exercising the power of law enforcement agencies as well as those structures responsible for religion, such as the State Committee for Work with Religious Communities and The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB). However, these aims do not seem easily achievable because the main apparatus of the state in promoting its religious policy, the semi-official CMB, does not have any real moral authority over the population. Therefore, such attempts to assert control over religious life and particularly regulate the organization of Ashura ceremonies in line with the authority of the CMB has not yielded any results. The intervention of law enforcement bodies and imposition of restrictions on ceremonies remains the only available tool in the hands of the government.[\[8\]](#) Blood donations, actions organized by the CMB during Ashura in order to replace such rituals as self-flagellation, have had very limited reach and so far mainly only covered the employees of public institutions.

Summary

As I have demonstrated, changes in the religious life of the region since the collapse of Soviet rule cannot be simply characterized as a return of those traditions, which were formerly oppressed and contained by ideological policies of the atheist state, to public life. The essence of this problem is that this "renewed Islam" is in fact a different Islam. The region offers a wide range of examples, which illuminate how these foreign influences affected the local traditions of

religion. In this region, where religion to some extent was never abandoned in the public sphere, the impact of imported religious culture is more evident. There could be different reasons for these changes. However, the most important among them is that Islam after the revolution in Iran entered a new phase of its political history and these changes penetrated into Azerbaijan after collapse of the Soviet Union. Armed with the power of today's information technologies and globalization, foreign influences are rapidly impacting this particular region and the country more broadly. As a result, the local, specific characteristics of the religion in the region have begun to quickly erode.

Currently, Iranian religious influences impact Shi'i practitioners in the region, not only at the level of political ideology, but to a greater extent in the ways in which local ceremonies are conducted. It is necessary to note that the dominance of the Iranian influence over the tradition of local ceremonies is not merely a result of a "fight against heterodoxy", but it is an assimilation of local, oral traditions by better funded, better organized, and better supported institutions with a large corpus of religious literature.

Another important reason for the weakening of local traditions is economic. In the early 1990's, the crisis in agriculture caused a mass exodus from the villages. The emigration of villagers to find work in cities and particularly in Russian labor markets resulted in the collapse of communities. The local Muharram traditions supported and shaped by local community lifestyles have thus gradually transformed. So, I conclude that the form of religion, which expanded its influence over both the daily routines and political ideologies of locals, has to a greater extent changed its appearance and that this transformation or metamorphosis continues today.

References

[1] An Iranian speaking ethnic minority living in Azerbaijan

[2] Ashura is the tenth day of Muharram and the day of Imam Hussein's death in Karabala, Iraq in 680.a.d.

[3] In the Explanatory Dictionary of the Azerbaijani Language: "*Alam denotes a flag (usually a flag used in religious ceremonies)*".

Azərbaycan Dilinin İzahlı Lüğəti, (Bakı, Şərq-Qərb, 2006) II cild, səh. 101. (*The Explanatory Dictionary of the Azerbaijani Language* (Baku: Sharg-Garb, 2006), Volume II, p. 101,)

[4] A rice dish common to many parts of the world

[5] However, this assumption needs further research. Besides Mukharram ceremonies, there are many other instances of archaic elements in the belief system of Talyshes. They exist in their daily life as well. For example, when Talyshes take oath, in addition to Islamic references, they also swear to fire and objects in the sky, such as the sun: "Bə həşi çəş" (I swear to the eye of the Sun), Bə otəşi çəş (I swear to the eye of fire) and so on. It is also interesting that Talyshes never use the word "Allah." Instead, they use the word "xıdo". Allah is expressed only when reading or reciting texts in Arabic or when Talyshes speak Azerbaijani.

[6] Canetti, Elias, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Continuum Press, 1981), pp.146-154,

[7] <http://axar.az/news/planet/231699.html>, accessed 19 March 2018.

[8] <https://www.azadliq.info/160311.html> , accessed 18 March 2018.