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Liminality and Experience: The 1979 Revolution in Iran and Shia Religious Symbols

ABSTRACT: Drawing on Victor Turner's emphasis on the importance of symbols and his analyses of liminality together with Wilhelm Dilthey's explanations of experience, and considering the mimetic theory of René Girard, this article focuses on the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran to explore Shia religion, particularly its symbols, before and after the 1979 revolution in Iran, where religion and politics influence each other. It demonstrates how a Shia ritual performance such as Ta'ziyeh and its symbols played key roles in mobilising crowds for the revolution, and how these symbols began to dominate political life, pervade all levels of society, and enable political actors and revolutionary clerics to legitimise their actions and violence after the revolution. In other words, it investigates how, under such liminal condition, Shia Muslims means of commemorating the past shapes their present and future.

KEYWORDS: religion, revolution, Ta'ziyeh, liminality, symbols, Iran, culture, imitation, sacrifice, ritual

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Introduction

Modernisation policies of the Shah (King) of Iran in 1950s resulted in a widespread split between his secularised supporters and vocal minority of Shia clerics in Iran. The gap between them grew as the Shah and his circle extended their authority and influence over areas previously was dominated by the clerics. The Shah hoped that Western-oriented reforms would encourage people to start thinking in secular terms, which inherently challenge the traditional clerics, but he failed to foresee that some Shia clerics can utilise religious symbols and rhetoric to question his authority and modernisation policies.

At the same time, the writings of Islamic intellectuals, such as Sayyid Qutb (1950s-1960s) and activities of the *Ikhwan ul Muslim* (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt, helped to develop the idea that a powerful and strong Islamic faith and its rules should constitute the dominant principles of social life and politics. Indeed, their original concept and aim, creating an Islamic state with Sharia canons, principles and laws, was brought into existence by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (Heywood 2007, 66).

In 1964, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was exiled from Iran for his criticism of the shah, but he could mobilise a powerful force in Iran against the Shah, which led to the 1979 revolution. Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran has been ruled by an Islamic regime led by the revolutionary clerics. At the top of Iran's power structure presently is the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Ruhollah Khomeini. Iran has an intertwined political system operating under the framework of Islamic (Shia) theocracy. The Supreme Leader holds the ultimate authority, and publicly elected (such as the president, the parliament and the Assembly of Experts) and unelected institutions (such as the Supreme Leader, the Head of Judiciary and the Expediency Council) influence each other in the power structure.

During the revolution Shia symbols were utilised as much as possible to gather protesters against the Shah (King). Anthropologists, such as Turner (1967; 1982) and Schneider (1977), put a great emphasise on symbols and their meanings. Alternatively, a system of symbols may be understood as defining the culture of a society. In other words, the culture is created, developed and maintained by a system of symbols. In Turner's (1967) words, it is a forest of symbols, and in Schneider's (1977) account, it is a system of symbols and meanings. In terms of religious performances such as Ta'ziyeh, these symbols and their meanings are used to make crowds unify, create, laugh, cry, sacrifice, violate rules and hierarchy, destroy, fight, and lastly kill or be killed.

Ta'ziyeh create a powerful emotion. Therefore, through the study of Ta'ziyeh as a liminal event and performance, as well as examining the 1979 Revolution as a liminal period, this paper aims to explore how the symbols

of Shia ritual performances were employed during the Revolution to create an emotional reaction and to mobilise Shia Muslims in Iran for a pre-planned aim.

Liminality and Experience

Turner (1988, 75) describes ritual as the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts, revealing major classifications, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes. It is a dramatic endeavour to bring a certain part of life into systematic control, to structure cultural and historical processes (ibid, 190). He cites Moore and Myerhoff's '*Secular Ritual*' (1977) to emphasise that any collective ritual is an organized event and has some order. 'It may contain within it moments of, or elements of chaos and spontaneity, but these are in prescribed times and places' (Myerhoff and Moore 1977, 7). Any collective ritual has a social message and meaning, which is the 'collective dimension' of ritual. In Turner's (1988, 154) words,

> meaning is assigned verbally through speech and nonverbally through ritual and ceremonial action and is often stored in symbols which become indexical counters in subsequent situational contexts.

One of the characters of collective ritual that Myerhoff (1977) listed is evocative presentational style of 'staging', which 'produce at least an attentive state of mind' (Myerhoff and Moore 1977, 7). The staging and utilising of symbols in ritual during the liminal period is the central theme of this paper. As Myerhoff and Moore (1977, 8) assert, ritual may be a framework that generates creativity in individuals to produce a concentration so extreme that there is a loss of self-consciousness and a feeling 'flow', whether through liminal experiences of visions or trances, or through highly structured, rule bounded activities.

Turner introduced the idea of the multivocality of ritual and their bipolar character to indicate that one symbol may stand for many things (Turner 1967, 50). However, his work on liminality and communitas, is considered the most important contribution that he made to the field of anthropology. Van Gennep preceded him, in developing the term 'liminal' to describe the transition stage in rites of passages, 'but he never followed up the implications of his discovery of the liminal' (Turner 1985, 159). Turner took this up and developed the concept of liminality seeing it as a crucial component of ritual and symbolic experience. Defining liminality as the condition of being between a status sequence, Turner argues 'liminars', who are undergoing transition, 'are neither here nor there; they curve betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (ibid). He understood that the previous

models of anthropological investigation were inadequate, and so he employed this concept of liminality, and followed Wilhelm Dilthey, who argued that the essential basis for human knowledge was the lived experience of human beings, to analyse 'ritual performance', social dramas' and 'cultural artefacts'. Turner (1985: 201) argues that the major genres of cultural performance and narration originate in, and continue to draw meaning and force from, social drama. He uses the word 'force' in the Diltheyan sense, meaning

> the influence which any experience has in determining what other experiences shall succeed it. Thus, a memory has force insofar as it affects our present experience and actions (ibid).

Drawing on Dilthey's concept of experience, Turner claims that cultural performances and the perception of 'cultural artefacts' are entities of experience that bring out what is normally sealed up or inaccessible (Turner 1985). In other words, 'ritual', 'social dramas' and 'cultural artefacts' can be explained by an anthropology of 'experience', through exploring the symbolic and emotive impact of the structures of society rather than focusing on the structures. In this way, major studies should particularly be devoted to circumstances between the structures, which are, in fact, 'liminality'. 'Liminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural "cosmos"' (Turner 1982, 41-42). Consequently, rituals are full of meaningful symbols, which deal with the vital values of a group, community or society and are transformative in terms of behaviour and attitudes. Thus, to understand a cultural and religious performance, it is necessary to be aware of the symbols and their shared understanding in terms of linguistics.

In a liminal time or/and place, there is a sort of break in the structures and rules, which bear a resemblance to periods of heightened emotion and experience. Thus, liminality is inconsistent with ordinary day-to-day life. If this breaks in time and space becomes unlimited, then, according to Szakolczai (2000), a permanent liminality occurs, amounting to continually living in uncertainty, such as in a period of prolonged crisis. This concept enables us to perceive the way in which uncertainty can emerge and helps us to find answers to questions such as; why and how such liminal periods can be used and even artificially provoked? (Szakolczai 2013). Thus, the transition stage of the rites of passage and the concept of 'liminality' introduced by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967; 1982) respectively and the concept of 'permanent liminality' developed by Szakolczai enables us to understand how symbols and images of ritual performances, which is an experience of past, can be utilised during liminal periods, such as a revolution, to mobilise crowds and even to manipulate them.

The 'force' of a social drama and collective ritual is made up of an experience or sequence of experiences

> which significantly influences the form and function of cultural performative genres. Such genres partly 'imitate' (by mimesis), the processual form of the social drama, and they partly, through reflection, assign 'meaning' to it (Turner 1985, 201).

Consequently, during liminal periods (such as crisis and revolutions) mimesis and the political actors can activate this force through utilising cultural and religious symbols and images embedded in social drama and ritual.

Imitation and Sacrifice

In '*Violence and the Sacred*', Girard (1977, 315) notes that the importance of the relationship between theatre and religion has been little discussed by scholars. According to Girard's mimetic theory, human beings imitate each other, as mimetic creatures, and this imitation ultimately gives rise to rivalries and violent conflicts, which have historically ended through a scapegoat mechanism. During a revolution, this mimetic effect can escalate uncontrollably, with crowd behaviour coming to dominate, risking in particular an escalation of violence. In crowd culture and behaviour, people reproduce each other's behaviour and follow each other's desires, therefore,

> beyond a certain threshold, perhaps simply beyond a certain size population, human groups cannot restore peace through dominance patterns after conflict breaks out. Brute power and intimidation can only carry so far (Johnsen 2012, 575).

Girard gives the name 'deviated transcendency' to the constant parallel that novelists construct between this mechanism of mimetic desire and religious experience. Taking the title 'men become Gods in the eyes of each other' from Dostoyevsky, Girard argued that in the modern world, humans sacrifice themselves to each other (ibid, 577). The target is to reunite the community, but this cannot be done through fighting factions. Thus, the highly paradoxical idea of creating an enemy remains the only solution. This means, finding or designing an individual, a group, a system, a nation and a state as scapegoat, and unifying the community against this new target. Accordingly, the logic of sacrifice follows the mechanism inherent in mimetic behaviour.

Arguing that blood sacrifice is at the origin of every archaic society, Girard (1977) highlights the double character of sacrifice: it is the most sacred of things and it is considered as something almost criminal. This led

Hubert and Mauss (1899) to come up with idea of the sacred character of the victim. They argue that sacrifice is the origin of religion, but the origin of sacrifice is a question they were not able to even pose.

Girard (1966) uncovers the real functions of sacrifice through his analysis of ritual, myths (both classical and ethnological), and tragedies (both classical Greek and Shakespearian). He comes to the idea that sacrifice does fulfil a real function, even a central one: this is the prevention of violence in societies lacking a judicial system. In his view, the problem is violence, the escalation of a mimetic conflict within the community and the solution is the exteriorisation of violence by the designation of a single individual as a sacrificial victim. This mechanism is 'the source of rituals' and 'the origin of culture'. In this way, Girard (1966) distinguishes Biblical story from myths, arguing that in myths victims (who are collectively executed), are presented as monstrous criminals, lawbreakers and wrongdoers that deserve to be punished. However, in the Bible, it is the opposite, with victims presented as innocent that are unfairly persecuted and punished. In comparison to Islam, in Christianity the dominant figure is the innocent victim, but the dominant figure of Islam is the warrior. In Shia Islam these two are mixed, the dominant figure is both the innocent victim and the warrior. Shia Muslims believe that Hussein sacrificed himself to redeem humanity, just as Christ did, but Hussein fought against oppressor in a liminal time and place until he and his companions were killed. This is visibly demonstrated in Ta'ziyeh performance, particularly when Imam Hussein confronts the Yazid's army with his seventy-two followers and scarifies himself and them.

Ta'ziyeh Drama

Ta'ziyeh, which literally translates as mourning, is a religious ritual play and the theatrical expression based on the battle of Karbala and marked as the day of Imam Hussein's martyrdom. It is performed annually on the tenth day of Muharram. In this day, which is known as Ashura, Shia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his followers. It is a drama, which is conveyed predominantly through music and dramatic narration (Homayuni 1989) to demonstrate how Hussein and his admirers were killed by Yazid and his army in the 7th century. Chelkowski (1979; 2005) argues that it is a dramatic form of commemoration the Shia Muslims in Persia have created, in order to immortalise the tragedy of Hussein, and thus it is comparable to the Christian passion play. One of the reasons that it seems to be similar to the Christian Passion play is that Imam Hussein's character in Ta'ziyeh is portrayed as the innocent victim. The common themes in this dramatic narration include the heroic tales of 'resistance against the evil', and 'sacrifice'.

According to Ibn Kathir, Ta'ziyeh appeared in the reign of Mu'izz al-Dawla, the King of the Buyid dynasty, in 963 AD (Mirrazavi 2011). Subsequently, in 1501, when the Safavid dynasty was established in Iran and the Shi'ism of the Twelvers was adopted as the official sect, the Safavid Kings were interested in theatre as a tool to propagate Shi'ism (ibid). Ta'ziyeh dramas are performed outdoors, at crossroads and other public places where substantial audiences and spectators can be gathered. It also takes place in the courtyards of inns, private homes, and places called 'Tekiyeh' or 'Husseiniyeh', which are constructed by groups of people for Muharram's mourning. The main performance space is simple, blunt and curtain-less. Characteristically, the empty stage in Ta'ziyeh represents the uninhabited and deserted plain of Karbala. Both symbolic and non-symbolic props can be witnessed on stage: a basin of water represents the Euphrates River, green or black flags are marked with the name of Imam/Ya Hussein or Ya Abolfazle/Ya Abbas or other family members of Hussein taken in the Karbala tragedy, while a little tent (khimmeh), and a branch of a tree represents a palm grove, and things such as chairs, tables and musical instruments are examples of non-symbolic props. Actors/actresses who are identified with green attire and emblems represent Hussein and his followers, while actors displaying red dress and insignia play the parts of Yazid's officers and soldiers. Thus, in Shia religion red dress symbolises blood, oppression and negativity. By contrast, the green colour is a symbol of the garden paradise and goodness.

By performing Ta'ziyeh, they magnify and strengthen the memory of the lives of the heroes of Karbala and fill gaps with details that may or may not seem probable (Chelkowski 2005). Therefore, as in Turner's (1982) sense of the word, Ta'ziyeh is a ritual performance of a liminal event that is timeless and space-less as the stage is an empty place that is neither Karbala nor a real current place. It is a liminal performance for a liminal event that happened in the past. In other words, it is between real and imaginary world. Even, the actors' clothes, tools, recitation are from neither the Imam Hussein era nor this period. For example, while both audiences and performers commemorating Imam Hussein and his family, who are related to Prophet Mohammad and subsequently to the divine, they practice self-flagellation and sacrifice during and at the end of Ta'ziyeh.

The Origin of Ta'ziyeh

Despite religious theatrics being embedded in the inception of Ta'ziyeh, it also encompassed other forms of folklore. In this way, Ta'ziyeh absorbed and could illustrate entertaining characteristics.

At the root of Ta'ziyeh, ancient Persian ceremonies and rituals such as Sogehe Siavash (a sacred dramatic mourning ritual) became recognisable

and visible (Yarshater 1979, 93). In Farsi language, the word 'Sogehe' means sorrow, mourning and grief. While Siavash is a Persian ancient mythological hero, whose destiny was marked by tragedy and became a symbol of innocence in Persian literature. Indeed, he is a major figure in Ferdowsi's great national epic of Persia '*The Shahnameh*' (Davis 2006). Siavash was a Persian Prince from the earliest days of the Persian Empire and was a son of Kay Kavus who reigned as King. After being exiled to Turan, he was killed innocently by the order of the Turanian King Afrasiab. Siavash's death is still commemorated in some areas, such as Shiraz, on a day called Siavashun. Undoubtedly, there is still considerable interest in viewing the performance of Sivash's tragedy in Persian theatre, and acknowledging its similarity to a Ta'ziyeh performance. Thus, Ta'ziyeh performance is the experience of thousands of years, which transformed gradually from mourning of Siavash to mourning of Imam Hussein after the Muslim conquest of the Persian Empire.

The Islamic Revolution and Shia Ritual Symbols

Historically, images and symbols of Shia Islam have been used since the Safavid dynasty to unify Iranians for war against external enemies, and additionally for propaganda, to bolster the state's powers. The revolutionary clerics also used their knowledge of Iranian-specific culture including religious habits, customs, thoughts and language to employ Ta'ziyeh images and symbols effectively to gather crowd for the 1979 revolution. They used religious narratives and cultural habits as a political weapon to form and control people and to mobilise crowds in Iranian society. Consequently, people imitated each other's desires and then the crowds consciously or unconsciously harmed and sacrificed themselves to benefit the revolutionary clerics.

During the revolution, the revolutionary clerics formed the public sphere by creating and using Ta'ziyeh images and symbols via different types of instruments, such as posters, wall paints, mottos, slogans, performances, films, flags, music, speeches and sermons. In every means, the *goriz* (relating a current event to a past event) technique of Iranian theatre and improvised performance were employed to link Shah's act to Yazid's (the enemy of Imam Hussein) act in Karbala.

Before the revolution, Khomeini whose job, as a leading cleric, was to interpret or explain Islamic law and canons to his followers started to question the legitimacy of the Shah. When the Shah's authorities attacked a madrasa (Shia's theological school for clerics) seminary at Qom city on March 22, 1963, they arrested and beat some of *tollabs* to death, 'Khomeini used the annual remembrance of Hussein martyrdom at Karbala as an occasion to deliver a blistering attack on the Shah' (January 2008, 26). His

rhetorical speech using the symbols and narratives of the Muharram, especially Ta'ziyeh in Ashura, presented a serious challenge to Shah's authority.

Khomeini was not the first person to use the symbols, images and narratives of Ta'ziyeh to protest. Similar strategies were used during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution by clerics (Poulson 2005: 213) and before that in the 1890 Tobacco Protest by Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi. Khomeini used the assault on the *tollabs'* madrasa as a focal point in his speeches and related it professionally to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Ashura. The following Khomeini speech, given in Fayziya Madrasa, Qom city, on June 3, 1963 (Khurdad 13, 1342 (AHS)/Muharram 10, 1383 (AH), the day of Ashura, clearly illustrates his rhetorical technique which used Ashura symbols and narratives to evoke the emotions of the crowd:

> It is now the afternoon of Ashura. Sometimes when I recall the events of Ashura, a question occurs to me: if the Umayyads and the regime of Yazid ibn Mu'awiya wished to make war against Hussein, why did they commit such savage and inhuman crimes against the defenceless women and innocent children? What was the offense of the women and children? It seems to me the Umayyads had a far more basic aim: they were opposed to the very existence of the family of the Prophet. They did not wish the Hashim to exist and their goal was to root out this "Godly tree".
> A similar question occurs to me now. If the tyrannical regime of Iran simply wished to wage war on marja, to oppose the Ulama, what business did it have tearing the Qur'an to shreds on the day it attacked the Fayziya Madrasa? Indeed, what business did it have with the madrasa or with its students, like the eighteen-year-old seyyed who was killed? [...] we come to the conclusion that this regime also has a more basic aim: they are fundamentally opposed to Islam itself and the existence of the religious class. They do not wish this institution to exist; they do not wish any of us to exist, the great and small alike (Algar 1981, 177; Poulson 2005, 214- 15).

Khomeini used the powerful *goriz* technique in his speech, in order to relate two different events that occurred in past and present times. He likened the Shah to Yazid, who was the enemy of Iman Hussein. This speech was a direct challenge to the Shah and led the crowds in Qom to protest. As a result, Khomeini was arrested the next morning, but pro-Khomeini crowds gathered in Tehran, clashing with the authorities in support of him. Consequently, Khomeini was released, but was expelled on November 4, 1964 from Iran (January 2008, 27) to Turkey, from where he made his way to Shia's religious city, Najaf, in Iraq. From Najaf and later from Neauphle-le-Château in a suburb of Paris, he united various political and religious groups with different ideologies and agendas (Keddie 1981; January 2008). In fact, they were agreed that justice is not delivered to the people by the

Shah; that one's freedom of speech or freedom of press was being oppressed by the authorities; and that inequality, poverty and a loss of values resulted from the westernisation of the country by the Mohammad Reza Shah and his father; whilst political activities were being repressed by the SAVAK (the secret police).

While in exile in Iraq, Khomeini spoke directly regarding these issues, by regularly using well-known images and symbols related to Ta'ziyeh. For example, he likened the clergy to Imam Hussein in Karbala fighting against tyranny and injustice (January 2008, 34). Khomeini's tapes were secretly spread to every part of Iran through his followers and physically through a network of mosques. Although he was speaking as a poorly educated person, with strong Farsi accent and with wrong pronunciations, he was using simple words, sentences and Shia symbols that everyone could understand. Indeed, his understanding and knowledge of language and culture enabled him to use the rhetoric symbols which were powerful tools with an immediate impact on listeners. Powerfully, on many occasions audiences were left crying out loud and beating their chests and heads softly with their hands while listening to Khomeini's rhetoric, as they do in annual Ta'ziyeh performance. This led some journalists, academics and social scientists to identify Khomeini as a charismatic leader. According to Weber, Charisma is 'the gift of grace' (Weber 1978: 216), implying

> a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which [one] is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities (ibid: 241).

Some social scientists such as Arjomand (2009) applied this definition and the term routinisation to explain Khomeini's charismatic authority during and after the revolution. The application of the term 'charismatic' to political leaders like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and the revolutionary clerics in Iran, creates more confusion than clarity. In order to discriminate between various types of political and religious leaders, charisma should be complemented and contrasted with the figure of the 'trickster', (Radin 1957, Szakolczai 2006). This problem becomes especially serious when combined with another shortcoming. Weber (1978) assumes that crisis situations calling for charismatic action are derived from external threats, when there is clear consensus about the desirable outcome. However, the model does not work for internal dissolutions of order, when the entire community is divided, and when furthermore the opportunities for divisive, demagogic, 'trickster'-type political actors and religious leaders are particularly ripe (see Szakolczai 2006). Here it should be complemented with works like Girard's theoretisation of the 'sacrificial crisis' and the 'scapegoat mechanism (Girard 1989; Szakolczai 2003).

Political Shai and the 1979 Islamic Revolution

On December 2, 1978, at the beginning of Muharram, the Shah ordered curfews at specified times, but instead millions of the population crowded into the streets, chanting, 'God is great - Khomeini is our leader' (January 2008, 42). Leading from Paris, Khomeini was able to mobilise a massive crowd to demonstrate against the Shah in Iran on December 11, 1978. This day was the holy day, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. 'Traditionally, religious leaders stimulated passions through public narration (rowzeh-khani) and re-enactment (Ta'ziyeh) of Hussein's martyrdom' (Kurzman 2004, 122). Therefore, Ashura was the best day for gathering and connecting crowds, for both the commemoration of Hussein's and his followers' suffering, sacrifice, wounds and martyrdom, as well as for the remembrance of Black Friday's martyrs in Zhaleh Square on September 8, 1978 (17 Shahrivar, 1357). Zhaleh Square was called Martyrs Square (Maydan-e Shohada) after the revolution, as it is a significant place where protesters were massacred by Shah's authorities. To honour this memory, shortly after the massacre, artists and writers started to create portraits and describe martyrs of the Zhaleh Square. For instance, Mohammad Reza Shajarian sang the piece '*Zhaleh Khun Shod*' (Zhaleh became bloody), while images of the square were painted illustrating the blood of the martyrs with roses on it (during and after the revolution these images were on every wall). Hussein Alizadeh set Siavash Kasraie's poem about the event to music, while some film makers presented a documentary of the event, such as Shahed Azad Soltani's documentary in 1980 called '*Rooz-e Khoda*' (Day of God). The image of blood was everywhere and Khomeini and his followers were constantly linking the Zhaleh Square massacre to the Karbala tragedy and sacrifice of Imam Hussein and his companions.

As a result, the crowds were easy to mobilise. The whole country, from small villages to large cities, had risen up to march against the Shah. This demonstration sent a clear message to the Shah. Subsequently, the Shah tried to introduce a new democratic government headed by Bakhtiar. However, the crowds rejected his effort and accepted Khomeini's leadership. Now, crowds were calling the Shah 'Yazid' and Khomeini 'Imam'. The title 'Imam' was a reference to the twelfth (Hidden) Imam Mahdi, who was born in 869. Shia Muslims (Twelvers) believe that he never died, only went into hiding, and will return as a messiah with Jesus to bring peace to the world. His ancestor is Imam Hussein followed by Hussein's father Ali and his grandfather Prophet Mohammad.

Consequently, the Shah was forced to leave Iran on January 16, 1979 and following that on February 1, 1979, Khomeini flew from Paris to Tehran to directly lead the revolution, and on February 11, 1979, the final victory

over the American-backed Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and his government, was announced and celebrated (Keddie 1981, 238-9).

After the 1979 Revolution, Khomeini, under the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Jurist), transformed the Iranian religious and political settings and made Shia Islam an inseparable element of political structure. In his speeches, Khomeini condemned democratisation, westernisation, modernisation (similar to the West), capitalism, and communism. In contrast to the Pahlavi dynasty, he tried to Islamise all institutions and organisations. He even closed down all universities in Spring 1980, and nominated Abdolkarim Soroush and others as members of *Shoray-e Englab-e Farhangi* (Advisory Council on Cultural Revolution) for Islamising universities.

Soroush played a role in the victory of the 1979 Revolution and engaged actively in forming and establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was Khomeini's desire in his book *'Islamic Government'* (1970). He is now tracking Sufism and believes that Khomeini never reformed Islam as a group of doctrine, but he tried only to empower Islamic identity (Soroush 2010). Calling this 'political Islam' and criticising it, he conceptualises religious democracy and proposes an 'Islamic democracy' (Soroush 2000). The debate on 'Islamic democracy' is beyond the scope of this article, but it is necessary to highlight that there are two significant issues with these analyses of Soroush. First, he generalises Khomeini's reform, disregarding that Khomeini's reform did not empower Islamic identity, but only Shia identity. Second, he does not explain why he categorises Khomeini's 'Islamic government' or reform as 'political Islam', but he exempts his own proposed 'Islamic democratic government' from this category.

A brief outline of Sufism in Iran is necessary due to Sufis responses either to modernity (or to the secular modernism) and to the 1979 Revolution. Sufism is Islamic mysticism, which is an aspect or dimension of Islam. In Lewisohn's (1999, xv) words, it is 'principally a school of the Unity of Being (wahdat-e wujud)'. Although Shia Sufism's origins begin after the Arab Muslims conquest of Iran, which led to the end of the Sassanian Empire in 651 AC and later to the decline of Zoroastrian religion, 'they are not often thought to occupy an historical locus, i.e. one restricted by temporal and spatial dimensions' (Van den Bos 2002, 31).

Ali Shariati and Corbin were Massignon's[1] research assistants, his student and successor respectively. Both had attempted to redeem 'authenticity', but Shariati's idea of '*baz gasht be khishtan'* (return to the self) remained a socio-political ideology, while Corbin's idea of '*return to origin'* is understood as a mysticism trying to stay away from petty politics (Shayegan 1990, 280 cited in Van den Bos 2005, 120). Later, Heidegger's

[1] Louis Massignon (1883-1962) was a scholar of Islamic mysticism and a professor at the Collège de France from 1925 onwards. He had also been a priest and a dedicated member of a small but international Catholic group of mystics.

intellectual influence on Corbin convinced the latter to bring Heidegger's hermeneutics to Iran, together with his Western criticism, which in turn influenced spiritual perspectives of Shia thinkers who were in Corbin's circle (ibid: 36). Shariati, who had studied in Paris and was influenced by French and German Marxists, also caught national attention and played a significant role in politicising and revolutionising Shi'ism in Iran at the time, especially by his writings such as '*On the Sociology of Islam*' (see Shariati 1979). Unexpectedly, Iranian Shi'ism became promptly politicised, and Khomeini's rhetoric sped it up in the 1970s.

Both Shariati and Corbin died before the 1979 Revolution, but there is still debate between their followers. For instance, Reza Davari Ardakani, one of the students of Corbin, who refers to Heidegger's critics of the West in his philosophy, was engaged in a series of philosophical debates against Soroush (Van den Bos 2002, 43). Ardakani criticises contemporary modernity in the West and recognises the only redemptive path for Iranians as leaving the West as an integrated whole. In contrast, Soroush takes sympathetic approaches to the West, known as the Popperian approach, and tries to justify modernism by a philosophical analysis of religion (Roohani *et al*. 2014), particularly after settling down in the US. *Kayhan-e Farhangi* (Cultural Universe) magazine published a series of Soroush's articles entitled '*Qabd va Bast-e Ti'urik-e Shariat*' (The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Islamic Religion), which laid the foundation of Soroush's epistemological approach to religious modernism (Jahanbakhsh 2001, 142). By welcoming modernity, Soroush criticised tradition, with ups and downs in his intellectual constellation. His philosophical discourses and debates during the first decade of the 1979 Revolution do not show his enthusiasm to modernity, but in some cases present him as an adversary to modernity and technology. Soroush gradually shaped a combination of modernist, post-modernist and mystical ideas in the second and third decades of the Islamic revolution, particularly during the 'reconstruction' and 'reform' influenced by the post-modernist environment in the world (Roohani *et al*. 2014, 556).

> The problem with Corbin's analysis of Shi'ism was his ignoring the revolutionary potential in the Shi'ite concept of martyrdom and its symbols, while the problem with Shariati's analysis of Shi'ism was his inspiration by the political and revolutionary Shia, without considering its dangerous potential, which already was experienced during the French and the Russian revolutions. Now, the problem with Ardakani is his acceptance of a totalitarian system in Iran (Isaloo 2017).

In contrast, the most considerable issue of Shoroush's explanation of Islamic democracy is disregarding the scapegoat mechanism, sacrifice, memetic desire, and Shia symbols and images that political actors and the corrupted

religious leaders are able to utilise during the liminal periods, such as the 1979 Revolution, and ignoring issues of his proposed 'Islamic democracy' in Iran.

Liminality During the 1979 Revolution

During the 1979 Revolution the country was in a liminal period. In other words, the Iranian society was torn between two orders; an old order, which was abolished, and a new order that was not yet established (Isaloo 2017). As Fischer- Lichte (2005, 97) pointed out in his study of 'the Soviet mass spectacles', in revolutionary times

> society undergoes substantial changes and decisive transformations. A multitude of possibilities seem to emerge; contradictions can coexist in peace; anything might happen.

Just as revolutionary actors, Khomeini used existing symbols and rhetorical techniques to mobilise a considerable crowd. He employed Shia cultural narratives, symbols and language to establish a collective Shia identity and to unify or mobilise the population as required. In fact, he used the potent symbols of Ta'ziyeh in Ashura and the narrative of '*Hidden Imam*' to justify his authority and to charge the revolution. 'Khomeini never claimed to be the twelfth imam' (January 2008: 36), but by accepting the title of Imam, implicitly he did. In this way, he constructed and introduced political Shia Islam to society, by promising to solve the social problems, which he identified during the monarchy pre 1979. His performance and rhetoric resulted in changing the existing social order. The web of mosques and the network of merchants in Bazaar's mosques and their financial support, particularly for the 1979 revolution (Keshavarzian 2007), helped Khomeini to use his religious position as Ayatollah to mobilise a tremendous and powerful crowd in Iran, a crowd that was not easy to control, opposite mobilising it, and a crowd that was destroying, breaking, firing, torturing, injuring and killing (Isaloo 2017). Any revolution is a time of liminality. Violence and disobedience, which was one of the undeniable characteristics of the Islamic revolution, could be seen everywhere in Iran, especially in large cities. In this liminal time, order was replaced with chaos and lawlessness: a fearful, a deadly and an exhilarating period.

Rationality had less to say and emotion was governing everyone. The evoking of emotion between people was fast, frenetic, and easily transferable to others. In other words, emotions were dividing, splitting, and changing similar to the cell division in a body. In Szakolczai's (2013a) account, other factors played a part, such as a combination of will and emotion, which overshadowed rationality in achieving the successful response in this liminal situation. In liminal period any crowd and

movement only need a minimal number of people to feed the frenzy and then propel join the crowd to larger numbers. Similar to Canetti's (1960) explanation of the crowds behaviour, everyone was joining the crowd, even if they did not know exactly what was their goal and purpose of joining, or indeed, what the target of the behaviour was. The memetic desire was visible everywhere. This was due to crowd characteristics, whereby an individual's behaviour adapts to suit the crowd behaviour in which it is immersed. Due to this, the crowd was growing and after a short time, an endless crowd were on streets. Burning car tyres, firing and destroying cinemas and government buildings, shouting, shooting and breaking down anything related to the previous regime became a daily pleasurable activity for the crowds (Isaloo 2017).

During this liminality, everyone felt free to do anything, endless possibilities seemed available, so there were no limits to crowd behaviour. Dangerously, many individuals and groups took a more personal vengeance not only against the Shah and his supporters, but also against people who they simply did not like. Since many people believed that Khomeini has supernatural power and can perform a miracle, they believed and stated that Khomeini could stop all modern weapons and gun machines, such as the war tanks and fighter airplanes belonging to the enemy (especially America). In a literal sense, this demonstrated a carbon copy of Imam Hussein's power in the Ta'ziyeh narrative. Shia in Iran believe that in the Karbala tragedy, Imam Hussein could use his Godly power to kill and destroy all of Yazid's army, but he did not use it. Many people believed that Khomeini's return would fulfil all of the Shia Muslims' dreams, such as the dream of being free and equal under Islamic justice. Every day, crowds were marching on the streets or in public places carrying slogans and chanting revolutionary mottos such as 'freedom', 'equality', 'brotherhood' and Islamic republic. Consequently, the crowds were ready to be used for revolutionary actors' goals, targets, and their own political ends (see Isaloo 2017). Utilising Shia cultural narratives and Ta'ziyeh symbols gave excellent results for the revolutionary clerics. For example, the revolutionary clerics could hijack the revolution, which was a broad coalition, by calling other revolutionary political parties 'Kufyan' which refers to the people of Kufa (a city in Iraq) who sent letters to Imam Hussein in order to invite him to Kufa and give allegiance to him, but they did opposite to what they had written and abandoned Imam Hussein in the Tragedy of Karbala. This was the easiest way to manipulate people and to justify killing, imprisoning and torturing their potential oppositions.

Now everything started to change, even personal outlooks. Men now wore long sleeves and grew their beards, and women were told to cover their hair and wear a hijab. Actually, everything reflecting the old regime, such as books, money and arts were demanded to be destroyed and forgotten. After the Shah's departure and the failure of his nominated

government 'Shapoor Bakhtiar', the place of power was empty and the public sphere was filled with revolutionary standards and mottos. In this liminality, revolutionary leaders and actors, who were united in order to defeat the monarchy, were struggling to be the first to grab the power. Successively, Khomeini appointed Bazargan, who was Western educated, nationalist and deeply religious, to form a new government. Believing that the laws of Islam could coexist peacefully with the secular laws of the state, Bazargan attempted to propose two choices for people in order to get a referendum on the existence of ballot after the revolution: a religious government and a secular government. However, Khomeini rejected it and offered only one choice; 'yes' or 'no' to a religious government, which resulted in ninety percent of the votes in favour of an Islamic republic on March 30, 1979 (see Takeyh 2009). Accordingly, Bazargan was confronted with the Revolutionary Council (a group of clerics backed by Khomeini) and ultimately clerics who prevailed in their quest to have a single Islamic government. In this way, Khomeini and his allies gained more power and confidence of the people that aided and prompted further action and operations.

After the referendum and grabbing the power, no one was safe and everyone could be targeted by others. Importantly, anyone criticising and questioning Khomeini and his followers (especially revolutionary clerics) could be marked as a 'hypocrite' or 'infidel' and consequently could be killed, tortured and put in prison. Thereafter, people were either killed or imprisoned for their past association with the old regime (Shah). Even people, who co-operated with each other and with Islamic group to ensure the revolution was a success, were punished because of their membership and activities in revolutionary groups such as the liberals, nationalists and other moderate forces. For instance, even members of the Mojahidin-e Khalq organisation (MEK or MKO), who played a significant role in the 1979 revolutionary victory, who fought on the side of clerics against the Shah pre 1979 and against the other revolutionary groups after the revolution, were marked as 'hypocrites'. Accordingly, all of their offices and houses were attacked and members were either killed or arrested (Isaloo 2017).

Khomeini's supporters prosecuted and imprisoned thousands of people (January 2008; Takeyh 2009), and on many occasions, without trial. Therefore, after the revolution, living conditions and choices became extremely limited and repressed, compared to that of Shah's time. Although Khomeini claimed he is not a dictator and acts on God's will and people's behalf, an absolute totalitarian regime was created and developed under his despotic rule and his advanced theological concept *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist or Providence of the Jurist) (Takeyh 2009). Even though George Orwell two famous Novels '*Animal Farm*' and '*1984*' were more related to the communism system established after the 1917 Russian

Revolution (Orwell 1976), but a very similar events happened in Iran after the 1979 Revolution.

Prolonged Liminality After the 1979 Revolution

Within the liminal period of the revolution, Khomeini and his allies interpreted any speech, comment and movement of their oppositions as a mark of disrespect towards Prophet, Imams and Islam. Therefore, the Muharram ceremony, especially Ashura and Ta'ziyeh performance, started to receive the full support of the new regime. Revolutionary clerics confidently utilised symbols, images and narratives of Ta'ziyeh to manipulate people. Not only could they professionally use them for mobilising crowds, but they also utilised them for calming down the crowd when the need arose (Isaloo 2017).

People who were protesting aggressively against the Shah, with revolutionary slogans and mottos, calling for freedom, equality and brotherhood could not get any requests fulfilled. In fact, they have been forcibly silenced for decades. Minority religious groups have been oppressed and repressive measures have ruled every day for the majority of the population. Subsequently, the liminal period of the revolution produced new liminalities such as economic crisis and political insanities, which evolved and developed into a permanent and prolonged liminality. Mass murder, killing, terror, torture and imprisonment never stopped and is still continuing. For example, the chain murders of dissidents and intellectuals from 1988 to 1998 (Sahimi 2011). Some conservative clerics, such as Sadegh Khalkhali, believed 'unsuitable individuals should be liquidated or killed so that others can live free' (January 2008: 49). In fact, they used phrases out of the Quran, such as '*Mofsed-e fil'arz*' (corrupt on earth) or *Mahareb* (enemy of Islam), to justify their decision to convict people under the auspices of capital crime.

Sometimes unexpected events, incidents, accidents, circumstances and occurrences in liminal periods help revolutionary actors transform into supernatural figures or powerful magicians. These provide perfect instances for these actors to manoeuvre and manipulate symbols and meanings. For example, the failure of the 'Operation Eagle Claw', the United States Armed Forces operation to free American hostages in Iran on 24 April, 1980, was explained as a miraculous successful event in Iran, in order to strengthen Khomeini and his allies' positions. They claimed that their God and their prayers destroyed the American Delta force with sand clouds. Indeed, some of Khomeini's followers related it to the godly and supernatural power of Khomeini (see Fox News 2008). In this way, the figure of Khomeini, who was already identified with Imam, became a pure and sacred force of good struggling against the evil and satanic forces.

The best and the most powerful way to encourage Shia in Iran to participate in a movement, a revolution or war is by employing and embedding Ta'ziyeh thematic into real time, and by utilising its symbols that it clearly illustrates the struggle of good versus evil, albeit manipulatively. Any symbol has meaning and its meaning lies in the belly of the symbol itself. Although meanings of symbols can be interpreted differently in various liminal times, depending on their objectives, but symbols stay the same. For example, the Ta'ziyeh symbols employed during the revolution to identify the Shah as 'Yazid' and the United States of America as 'Great Satan', get different meaning when they are displayed or used in a merchant stores or business places. In business realm and market places, the Ta'ziyeh symbols can be used for goodwill or for justifying trades. However, these symbols are used to manipulate customers in marked place as well, especially during the liminal periods, such as the economic crisis, revolution and war. Thus, since the 1979 Revolution religion and its symbols are used by the regime as a tool to manipulate the pubic.

After the revolution, a range of political groups, from the far left to the far right, from secular to ultra-Islamic, were vying for political power, but at the end the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), led by Khomeini and his allies, took the power over and established a tyrannical regime based on Sharia rules. Gradually, particularly after the decease of Khomeini, a process of conflict started and two politico-religious groups became significantly powerful and influential in Iran. The first group was following the concepts and writings of the highly influential ultra-hardline cleric Mesbah Yazdi (Mohammad-Taqi). His philosophy was embedded in *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Jurist). His fundamental and extreme Islamic ideology is advocating the balance of power being held by an Islamic leader who is called *velayat-e faqih*, such as Khamenei presently. Therefore, Mesbah Yazdi, in his website, requests Iranian to obey any decision made by *velayat-e faqih*. Not only does Yazdi have his own ambition to succeed Khamenei as supreme leader, but he also is vehemently against reformers seeking more democratic representation in Iran (Beaumont 2009). He has referred to theological and historical traits and archives to conclude that the secularisation and democratisation of Iran is against the religious order (Boroumand 2002). This decree is continually endorsed by the Islamic regime in Iran aiming to justify its Islamic rules. Ahmadinejad, who has been the President for two terms (2005-2013), was one of the well-known followers of Mesbah Yazdi and strived to practice his philosophy and ideology. In order to protect this position coupled with the aim of gaining people's support, Ahmadinejad started to use Shia Imams' names in his speeches, especially Imam Mahdi (the Twelfth Shia Imam). Notably, even before the end of presidency he claimed that he communicates with Imam Mahdi. Ultimately, this was a powerful armour to protect himself from both

legalists and reformers in Iran. This is a clear example of permanent and prolonged liminality, which enables the political actors to employ Shia and Ta'ziyeh symbols and images to form the public sphere.

The second influential group that evolved after the 1979 Revolution were followers of the Islamic reformists and philosophers, such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar. They introduce Islamic pluralism, which challenges the first Supreme Leader of the Islamic revolution in Iran (Khomeini) who claimed that Ayatollahs have a God-given right to govern (MacLeod 2005). Notably in the last decade, their writings have attracted global attention about the compatibility of Islam with democracy, as they argue that people can be democrats whilst equally remaining faithful Muslims (ibid). Both the former president Khatami and the leader of the Green Movement, Hossein Mousavi, in Iran are influenced by reformist philosophies. In comparison, Soroush followed the philosophical arguments of other Islamic thinkers, such as Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shariati (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008, 92). Soroush (2000) criticised the view of divine rights of political rulers and their absolute and unlimited power by employing one of the most commonly used terms for Islamic theology called *Kalam*. The Arabic word *Kalam* has several meanings, such as words, talk, statement, conversation, and remark, but this term in Islamic theology is linked to speech, debate, discussion and augment, which is called *Ilm al-kalam* (science of discourse) in Arabic and *Elm-e Kalam* in Persian speaking areas. Some Islamic thinkers, such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal and his followers called Hanbalis criticised the use of *Kalam* and considered the discipline as sinful.

> For them the creeds of Islam were manifestly established by the Quran and explained by the prophet, thus there was no need to prove the beliefs of a Muslim rationally (Saeed 2006, 60).

Soroush claims that he uses *Kalam* to signal for a liberation of citizens and freedom for a collective society, in order to enable the performance of political agency, to aid the genuine cultivation of ethnical and religious believers, and for the seeker of justice (Soroush 2000 and Dallmayr 2011). People always yearn for freedom, economic growth, social justice and security. Political actors are aware of these desires and they usually use them as catchphrase to mobilise crowds or to blame the existing leaders for failing to produce these public goods, needs and wishes. Importantly, these slogans are well-known to Iranians, especially before and during the 1979 Revolution, as Iranians were surrounded by this kind of magic rhetoric. Indeed, Soroush's (2000; 2010) and Kadivar's (2011) analyses of the 'Islamic democracy' confuse the reader, as it is unclear whether they criticise modern democracy or support it.

Some authors such as Engineer (2006) aims to solve this puzzle by arguing, 'Islam is not incompatible with secularism if it does not mean

rejection of religious faith' (Engineer 2006, 344). Nevertheless, the puzzle remains unsolved due to two significant issues. First, unexpectedly, Soroush and Kadivar, who were active members of the 1979 Revolution and are still Shia thinkers, overlook the Shia culture and symbols which were an essential tool for political actors in Iran in last four decades. Second, Soroush never clarified properly the position of women, minority groups, and other religious political groups and parties, such as Zoroastrian, Christian, Jewish, and Baha'i, in his proposed Islamic democracy in 'Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam' (2000). Indeed, Soroush's proposal leads us to imagine a type of prolonged and/or permanent liminality. A system whereby the political actors and the corrupted religious leaders can use religious and cultural symbols, images and signs to form the public sphere and to manipulate the population for their pre-planned goals.

Conclusion

During liminal periods, such as revolutions, experience of the past can be used in the form of rhetorical, religious and cultural symbols without the backing of truth, virtue, or justice. By forming the public sphere and manipulating large numbers of people, through utilising Shia symbols and images, the political actors and the corrupted religious leaders in Iran could mobilise a crowd to pursue their own interests and goals.

In liminal situations, the political actors and the revolutionary clerics lead people, through mimesis, to sacrifice themselves consciously or unconsciously. This was particularly visible during the 1979 revolution when the revolutionary clerics employed Ta'ziyeh symbols, images, and signs to promote sacrifice for their own self-interest. Indeed, the sacrificial and scapegoat mechanism was used to convince people that the Shah caused all problems and if they will be killed fighting against him, they are martyrs as Imam Hussein and his companions and they will go directly to paradise.

To sum up the arguments of Turner, Dilthey and Girard, social or collective memory plays a vital role in forming the public sphere of a society. A memory has the power to affect our present experience and actions, and collective memory is able to produce both order and disorder, sustained and punctuated by the ritual performances in which this is evoked. Ritual performances remind us events that occurred in past, shape our present, and create a potential force for the future. Exploring Ta'ziyeh during the 1979 Revolution illustrates that symbols of this ritual performance and its commemoration has a potential power, which can have the effect of locking a society in prolonged liminality. But, this does not mean that cultural and religious performances and their symbols,

images and signs cannot use for building a better society. We need to create a mechanism for preventing the political actors and the revolutionary religious leaders from employing symbols, images and signs in liminal times and places to fulfil their own desire and dreams.

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