

IN THE PRESENCE OF THE MARTYRS: THE *Ālam* IN POPULAR SHĪ'Ī PIETY

The central orienting event of Shī'ī religious belief is the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the grandson of Prophet Muḥammad.¹ Although this event took place more than thirteen hundred years ago, it remains a living and present tragedy for Shī'ī men and women today. As Peter Chelkowski rightly points out, for the believer the martyrdom has "transcended history to become metahistory, having acquired cosmic proportions. This places the 'Āshūrā' passion of the imam Ḥusayn at a time that is 'no time' and in a space that is 'no space'."² In other words, the events of Karbalā' are readily accessible to modern believers who not only see and react to the tragedy in the present tense, but also make sense of their own lives in its reflected light.³ Mohammed Fazel conveys this well in his recounting of his childhood in Bombay, particularly his participation in the Muḥarram re-enactment of the passion of Ḥusayn, otherwise known as the *ta'ziya*:

The drums and cymbals, Zuljenah's neighing, an occasional glimpse of Shimr and the women screaming and squirming in upstairs classroom windows like nestling crows at feeding time, would transport me to what can best be described as an altered state of consciousness. As the *ta'ziya* grip tightened on my being, so did the toll of the *zanjir* [flail] on my back. One could easily latch onto a particular wail from the storm of sorrow pelting us from the upstairs classrooms. The heavier my flagellation, the louder the wail. I was both grieving and the object of grief. . . . The *ta'ziya* was a crucible where Hussain's

¹ Cf. Gustav von Grunebaum's comment: "It would be incorrect to say that Husain stands in the centre of Shī'ī dogma, but it is unquestionably true that contemplation of his personality and fate is the emotional mainspring of the believers' religious experience. The principal and most characteristic festival of the Shī'a is built around his death, which has made him, in the phrase of an early mourner, 'the bond of reconciliation with God on the Day of Judgement.'" G. E. von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, rpt. (1951; London: Curzon Press, 1981), 87.

² Peter Chelkowski, "Āshūrā" in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (henceforth *Oxford Encyclopaedia*), editor-in-chief John Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), I, 141. Mahmud Ayoub puts it this way: "Every Muḥarram becomes the month of the tragedy of Karbalā' and every 'Āshūrā' the day of the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn." Mahmud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shī'ism* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton Publications, 1978), 149.

³ There are many sources describing the events of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and his followers. See among others, Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, ed. *Imām Ḥusayn: The Savior of Islam* (Richmond, Canada, n.p., 1984), especially the extract reproduced from Shaykh al-Mufid's *Kitābu al-Irshād*, translated by I. K. A. Howard.

monumental sorrow and my existential trappings coalesced. My suffering paled against Hussain's cataclysmic tragedy. . . .⁴

This article deals with Shī'ī ritual and belief with a special focus on one of its central icons,⁵ the *alam* (pl. *'alām*),⁶ literally a "signpost" or "flag."⁷ Peter Chelkowski observes that the *alam* is universally revered, being the most important object carried in Muḥarram ritual processions world-wide.⁸ Conceived as a replica of the battle standard of Ḥusayn, an *alam* usually represents one of the martyrs of Karbalā', some member of the family of the Prophet, or one of the twelve *imāms* (spiritual leaders). In India, these distinctive pieces are an important presence in Shī'ī shrines or homes,⁹ as well as being a component of ritualized practice including processions (*jalūs*) and assemblies (*majālis*) commemorating the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and his followers. While there exists some tension in the Shī'ī community lest these sacred objects be deified, there is a sense in which they transcend the boundary of mere symbolism to become an empowering presence for the community of believers.

⁴ Mohammed K. Fazel, "The Politics of Passion: Growing up Shia," *Iranian Studies*, 21: nos. 3-4 (1988), 46. Note that Chelkowski's observation that the *ta'ziya* drama is unknown in India is not precisely true; see Chelkowski, "Āshūrā," 141-43. Although perhaps assuming a different form from the Iranian variety, the *ta'ziya* was clearly—at least for some Indian Muslims—an important part of the observance of Muḥarram. For a brief description of "Pitna Dalna" as it is called in Rajasthan see, Hashmia Kamil, "Karbala and the People of India" in *Red Sand*, ed. Mehdi Nazmi (New Delhi: Abu Talib Academy, 1984), 157-65. For an account of nineteenth century *ta'ziya* enactments in Lucknow, see John J. Pool, *Studies in Mohammedanism* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., 1892), 89-96. Brief mention of the *ta'ziya* performance is also made by Abdul Halim Sharar (1860-1926) in *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, trans. and ed. E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (1875; Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 216 and *passim*. I have yet to verify whether or not the *ta'ziya* is still performed in either Bombay or Lucknow. Hyderabad does not, at least to my knowledge, have either a history or a contemporary practice of this drama.

⁵ The other main Shī'ī icon is the *ta'ziya* or *zarīh*—a replica of the tomb of either Ḥusayn or one of the martyrs, *Imāms* or members of the family of the Prophet.

⁶ To ease confusion for English readers of this article I will use the word "*alams*" to designate the plural.

⁷ The literal definition is from J. David-Weill, "*Alam*" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., eds. H. A. R. Gibb, *et. al.*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), I:349. This entry is written from a historical focus and, interestingly, makes no reference to the *alam* as a component of Shī'ī ritual.

⁸ Peter Chelkowski in *Alserat, Imam Ḥusayn Conference Number*, 12: no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 209-226; quoted in *Shī'ism: Doctrines, Thought and Spirituality*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 265.

⁹ In the Deccan, the Qutb Shahi kings (rulers of the empire of Golconda/Hyderabad, 1512-1687) even incorporated the symbol of the *alam* into the facade of mosques and other buildings and monuments. See M. Abdulla Chughtai, "The Deccan's Contribution to Indian Culture," *Islamic Culture*, 10, no. 1 (Jan. 1936): 59.

Origins of the Tradition

In tracing the origins of the word *Ālam*, J. David-Weill points out that in Arabia before the time of the Prophet, a white cloth attached to a lance would function as a symbol of the Quraysh tribe while on the battlefield. During the Prophet Muḥammad's time, such flags representing tribes or groups were known by several names including *Ālam*.¹⁰ Their chief purpose seems to have been martial, providing both identification of a given group during times of war and, perhaps, a psychological rallying point for the warriors. Generally also the fall of a flag was the signal of defeat.¹¹ Tradition suggests that ʿAlī carried the flag of the Prophet during battle; a generation later, ʿAbbās, the half-brother of Ḥusayn, carried the battle standard during the fight against Yazīd.

Although originally the word *Ālam* referred to the flag of a particular group, significant meaning also seems to have been given to the emblematic crest which either topped the pole to which the flag was attached or was borne on a separate pole. Whether or not it was a battle standard with an emblematic crest or a flag borne on a staff which was carried by ʿAbbās at Karbalāʾ, centuries later it is the crest rather than the flag itself which is primarily identified with Ḥusayn and his followers.¹² Today in South India, for example, the word *Ālam* designates what is usually a metalwork crest decorated with calligraphy or other embellishments and displayed on a supporting pole.¹³ The most popular design is the raised palm called a *panjatan* which symbolizes the five members of the *ahl al-bayt*, the holy family of the Prophet: Muḥammad, Fāṭima, ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Hang-

¹⁰ David-Weill, *E.I.*, I: 349.

¹¹ See the entry "Flag" in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 811-12.

¹² I have not been able to determine whether the *Ālam* carried by ʿAbbās was a metal emblem, a cloth flag, or a combination of both. In describing the origins of flags, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* suggests that they were invented by either ancient Chinese or Indian civilizations, although they may have had "a common origin in the standards of ancient Egypt and Assyria (standards, in this sense, meaning solid objects, such as metal animals, attached atop poles) . . ." (*ibid.*, 811). Because of the popularity of *ʿĀlam*, most Hyderabad Shīʿas would agree that a metal standard was carried by ʿAbbās. In fact, the actual standard is believed to be enshrined in an *Āshūrkhāna* in Lucknow. For details of this relic and rituals associated with it see Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAlī, *Observations on the Mussulmans of India*, 2 vols. (London: Parbury, Allen & Co., 1832), I: 35ff. Interestingly, in Hassan Ali's observations of 19th century Lucknow, she refers to the Muḥarram "banners of Hosein," describing both the flag and crest as important parts of the symbol. See *ibid.*, I: 38, 48, etc. John N. Hollister similarly notes that "the term *Ālam* is used for the crest and the standard [i.e. the staff], or for the standard alone, to which streamers and pennants may or may not be attached." John Norman Hollister, *The Shīʿa of India* (London: Luzac and Co., 1953), 168-69. It is possible, then, that the locus of meaning has evolved—from flag to crest—over time. It is also possible that this aspect of popular practice differs from Lucknow to Hyderabad.

¹³ For a detailed description of the different parts of an *Ālam*, see Sadiq Naqvi, *Qutb Shāhi Āshūr Khānās of Hyderābād City* (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, 1982), 12-15.

ing from the base of the *ʿalam* is usually a *dhatti*, a rectangular length of cloth which is draped to cover the staff. The *dhatti* can be of simple material or fine, highly embellished cloth including brocade and silk; it is sometimes embroidered with the names of the panjatan, the martyrs, or verses from the Qurʾān.¹⁴ At times it looks almost like a cloak, and when combined with the shining emblem of the *ʿalam* and garlands of jasmine and roses, the effect is regal. Shebhaz Safrani, who devotes a chapter to *ʿāṣām* of the Quli Qutb Shah period (1512-1687) in his edited book on Hyderabad and Golconda, describes the allure of the “shimmering standards”:

Metaphysical to the faithful, overwhelming to zealots, simply moving to the poetic, the Qutb Shahi *alums* have a transcendent power that is still awesome. It is an experience to see them being raised before and lowered after Muḥarram. . . The calligraphy, shaped to take the fullest advantage of the Arabic words Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husain, has circular bases with hollow ends for wooden staffs [sic.]. It is this calligraphic transmission, the polished metal, the *alums* decked with flowers that ordinarily adorn the necks of the living—that creates an impact.¹⁵

Safrani commits a common error in stating that *ʿāṣām* are never left on perennial display, being installed on the 1st of Muḥarram and then put away on the 10th. Although this is true for a number of *ʿāṣām*, it is certainly not universally true. Both in main public *Āshūrkhānas* (structures housing *ʿāṣām* and other sacred objects)¹⁶ and in private homes, some *ʿāṣām* are on view all year round; others for at least a forty-day mourning period. One Shīʿī woman explained to me her own reasons for keeping the family’s *ʿāṣām* on display throughout the year: “Yazīd succeeded once in lowering the *ʿalam* of Ḥusayn. Why should we allow him a larger victory by lowering and putting them away each year?”¹⁷ Another woman, a popu-

¹⁴ In Kashmir it is sometimes referred to as a “*dupatta*,” the veil which Indian women drape across their shoulders. See Zohra Khatoon’s description of the Muḥarram rituals at the tomb of Pir Mitha in her book, *Muslim Saints and Their Shrines* (Jammu: Jaykay Book House, 1990), 23 ff.

¹⁵ Shebhaz H. Safrani, “Golconda Alums—Shimmering Standards” in *idem*, ed. *Golconda and Hyderabad* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1992), 77.

¹⁶ Literally, “the house of ʿĀshūrā,” the tenth of Muḥarram and the day on which Ḥusayn was martyred. These structures are sometimes referred to as a *bargah*, *yadgar*, *alava* or *dargah*. In North India the more common term is *Imāmbārgah* (lit. “enclosure of the *Imām*”), while elsewhere in the world it is known by different names including *usayniyah* (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon), *takiyah* (Iran), and *maʿam* (Bahrain, Oman). For a general discussion of these structures, focusing primarily on the Iranian context, see Gustav Thaiss, “*usayniyah*” in *Oxford Encyclopaedia*, II: 153-55.

¹⁷ Personal conversation with Mrs. Rabap Patel, Hyderabad, June 1995. I would like to take this occasion to thank Hyderabad’s Shīʿī community which has been graciously open to an outsider in their midst. I would like to particularly acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Rabap Patel who gave so much in friendship, and left many bereft by her passing in October 1995.

lar *dhākira* (female orator), pointed out that *'ālām* which are dedicated to the twelfth Imām are always kept on perennial display since Shī'as believe that this final guide is not dead but in occultation. "It makes us feel nice to go and see the *Ālam*. It is a reminder for us that he is with us."¹⁸ I myself have seen *'ālām* dedicated to Zaynab, Sakīna, Zayn al-Ābidīn and Ḥusayn displayed reverently in Āshūrkhānas kept open not only during Muḥarram but throughout the year.¹⁹ If restricting the use of *'ālām* to the first ten days of Muḥarram was once the norm (as some writers suggest), the practice has certainly evolved and changed, the rituals being renewed and reshaped by those for whom they have meaning. Thus, as Peter Chelkowski observes, many mourning practices are still growing and evolving in different Shī'ī communities around the world.²⁰

Āshūrkhānas and the Keeping of *Ālāms*

When the south Indian city of Hyderabad was founded a little more than four hundred years ago,²¹ one of its early important constructions was a hospital known today as Dar al-Shifa. Although the days of patients conferring with doctors are long over, one can still get a feel of graceful planning from within its vast and imposing inner courtyard. Two stories high and nearly half a city block in length, the structure continues to be put to good use housing, among other things, a library, a *madrassa* (religious school), and a few families. It also functions as a central meeting place for Hyderabad's Shī'ī community, its sprawling courtyard being packed with men, women and children during various important days in the annual cycle of remembrance.

In a corner of the courtyard, a gate opens onto a smaller enclosed space containing an inner Āshūrkhāna. Leaving one's shoes behind, one enters to find a vivid tapestry of the *Ka'ba* at Makka and, standing before it, the *Ālam* of Zaynab, the daughter of Ḥusayn. Photographs of the tombs of martyrs hang on the walls and two tomb replicas (*ẓarīh*)²² are displayed on wooden stands to one side. The *Ālam* itself consists of a highly decorated metal crest with fine calligraphy which stands about five feet

¹⁸ Conversation with Dr. Zakia Sultana, Hyderabad, 18 March 1996.

¹⁹ Here I am speaking of three Āshūrkhānas in the Dar al-Shifa complex and *Yadgar Husaynī*—all in the Old City area of Hyderabad.

²⁰ Chelkowski, "*Āshūrā*," 142.

²¹ A city of nearly five million, Hyderabad is divided into the old city area south of the Musi River, and the new city region which includes the former British cantonment town of Secunderabad. The architecture and ambiance of the old city reflects its history of nearly four centuries of Muslim rule, although the present population (approximately one third of the metropolitan population) is divided more or less equally between Muslims and Hindus.

²² In Shī'ī rituals, these tombs are, like *'ālām*, a common, uniting and highly revered symbol. Their name varies locally; in North India they are known as *ta'ziyas*.

high, being mounted on a tall wooden pole fixed to a low stool (*chowkhi*). The crest, however, remains obscured behind a black veil which keeps it respectfully in *pardah* (lit. behind a curtain) for, as one woman devotee explained with an approving nod, "She is a woman."

An *Āshūrkhāna* can be anything from a lavishly designed building of grand proportions to a shelf in a cupboard or a temporarily transformed storeroom in one's house. The main purpose is to provide a space—temporary or permanent—to house sacred relics, primarily *'aṣām* or *zarihs* (tomb replicas). The room which houses the *'alam* is considered sacred space, a designation which has particular significance for women. Just as most menstruating or post-partum women will not touch the Qur'ān or even recite its words until they are again in a "clean" period, so also women refrain from touching an *'alam*—or even entering the room in which *'aṣām* are kept—during cycles when their body emits what is considered impure blood.²³ This is part of the reason that the women I talked with say it is hard to keep *'aṣām*. One woman in her sixties, now living in Canada with her daughter, had come back to Hyderabad to be with her son and his family for the season of Muḥarram. Speaking of Shī'ī faith and practice in the Toronto area she noted, "It is difficult these days for everyone to keep *'aṣām*. You can't touch them during your menses—how can you keep them or take care of them?"²⁴

For the believer, caring for these sacred symbols is a serious business requiring one not only to keep them clean—physically and ritually—but to perform a *majlis* for the personality to whom they are dedicated. The practice of lighting incense and candles and of saying special prayers can also be part of the keeping of *'aṣām*, at least during the main mourning months of Muḥarram, Safar and the first few days of Rabī' al-Awwal. Dr. Zakia Sultana, a retired university professor and a highly respected *dhākira* (orator for *majālis* and other assemblies) identifies other factors which make it difficult for people to keep *'aṣām* in their homes.

People are just as devout as they have always been, the religious feeling is strong, and people are generous. But they are so busy these days, its hard to keep it up. Besides, there are so many big *Āshūrkhānas* coming up, people can go there. For many it's easier.

She notes that the practice of home *Āshūrkhānas* is dying out, partly because of shortages of space. "*Ālams* should really have their own room. But these days, with modern flats, who can spare a separate room for a shrine?" Another difficulty springs from the changes taking place in the

²³ This designation of impurity contrasts with, for example, the blood of martyrs or even blood shed by male devotees in the remembrance of Ḥusayn's martyrdom.

²⁴ Conversation with Mrs. Fatima Samiuddin Mohamed, 20 June 1995.

family. One young woman, recently awarded her doctorate for her work on Shī'ī lamentation poetry, put it this way: "Before women used to be at home. Their only job was taking care of the home, of the family. Now so many are working. How can they find the time to do these things?"²⁵ Also important is the shrinking size of families, the breaking up of the joint family system, and a high emigration rate, all of which mean that there are fewer people with time to care for the *Āshūrkhāna* or to organize and prepare a majlis which honours the martyrs represented by the *Ālām*.²⁶ One full-time housewife, a devout Shī'a with four teen-aged children shook her head when I asked if she kept *Ālām* at home. "We don't have our own *Ālām*. You must be so careful. Keeping them is a lot of work."²⁷

Veneration in the Context of the Majlis

The *Ālam*, like other revered icons including the *zarīh*, *tabūt* (coffin) and *jūlah* (cradle), is not merely a stationary object to be passively viewed, touched or venerated, it also occupies a performative role in Shī'ī rituals like the majlis and jalūs. Here, due to constraints of time and space, I will focus solely on the context of the Muḥarram majlis.²⁸ Each majlis has its own form and style which differs not only from place to place—for example, Lucknow being different from Hyderabad or Tehran from Port-of-Spain—but also from majlis to majlis. This variation reflects differences in individual preferences, the martyr to whom the *Ālam* is dedicated, ritual histories in a given family or shrine, the time which is available for performance, and many other factors. What I describe, then, can only suggest the bare outlines of what is a truly rich and meaning-filled ritual.

As I have already mentioned, *Ālām* kept by a family in their home are always somehow set apart, being displayed either in a room kept strictly or temporarily for that purpose or, if space does not permit, in a cupboard or on a shelf. If possible, the *Ālam* should be kept so that when one sits in

²⁵ Dr. Riaz Fatima, Hyderabad, 18 March 1996.

²⁶ What constitutes a successful majlis has its own definitions and can be the subject of a separate paper. For some description of women's majālis in the Pakistani context see Mary Hegland's articles including: "A Mixed Blessing: The Majles—Shi'a Women's Rituals of Mourning in North-West Pakistan" in *Mixed Blessings: Religious Fundamentalisms and Gender Cross-Culturally*, eds. Judy Brink and Joan Mencher (New York: Routledge, 1995); and "Shi'a Women of Northwest Pakistan and Agency through Practice: Ritual, Resistance, Resilience," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 18, no. 2 (Nov. 1995): 65-79.

²⁷ Conversation with Tasneem Ḥusayn, Hyderabad, 12 June 1995. I suspect that many of the issues raised here in the context of home *Āshūrkhānas* are common to the keeping of a *puja* room in modern Hindu homes, and, to a lesser extent, the keeping of a chapel or altar among Christians.

²⁸ Known in other parts of the Shī'ī world as *rawa-khwānī*, after the famous recounting of the martyrdom event, *Rawat al-Shuhadā'*, written by Ḥusayn Wa'iz Kashifi in 1501.

front of it, one is facing the direction of Makka. Most Āshūrkhāna buildings which are constructed to house *'aṣāṁ* are aligned in this way.

As described earlier, the *'alam* is usually made of metal,²⁹ and when it has been installed (i.e. when it has been ceremoniously taken out of storage), it is displayed upright on a staff. Strings of jasmine and roses are often tied to the crest in a traditional gesture of respect; these are sometimes so numerous that they totally obscure the emblem's well-polished surface. Before a majlis begins, it is not unusual for people to first visit the *'alam* or *'aṣāṁ*. Some men or women kiss the draped flowers or the *'alam* itself, many touch the crest or the *dhatti* in a gesture of receiving blessing, most stand for at least a moment in silent prayer or empathic sadness or weeping. Those who have not visited the *'aṣāṁ* before the majlis begins will sometimes stop for a brief or long visit after the assembly is over.

On the death anniversary of the martyr to which a given *'alam* is dedicated (or sometimes on a day different from the actual historical date), the *'alam* becomes a key symbol in recalling the event. At the majlis, following a passionate oration (*dhikr*) of the tragedy, the *'alam* is "brought out" before the bereft assembly, processed around a given circuit and then ceremoniously laid down, usually completely covered by a shroud. If the shroud is white, there are also often flecks of red on the cloth to symbolize the blood of the martyr. This presentation of the *'alam* occurs during the reciting of dirges (*nawas*), the cadence of which is kept by the rhythmic beating of the chest (*matam*), conveying the mourner's grief, empathy and solidarity with the suffering of the beloved martyr. The sanctity of the moment is often heightened by the burning of incense; in fact, it is sometimes around a smoking incense pot that the *'aṣāṁ* are processed.³⁰ Arms stretch out to touch the sacred symbol; if the majlis is crowded, people may surge forward, pushing to try to reach the *'alam* and to gain, perhaps, a measure of blessing (*baraka*) through this action of love and respect. For many participants, the moment is deeply profound as, immersed in the tragedy, he or she beholds the symbol of the victim who is slain. For some, the symbol dies away, being transformed into the body of Ḥusayn or 'Abbās or one of the other victims of the Karbalā' tragedy.

²⁹ This may vary. I have heard that in certain villages in rural Andhra Pradesh (Hyderabad being the capital) *'aṣāṁ* are made of palm leaf, although this may be in imitation of the *nakh* (date palm) representation of the bier of Ḥusayn. See Chelkowski, *Alserat*, 265. Certainly a diversity of form and materials in the manufacture of *'aṣāṁ* would not be unexpected in the larger context of Shī'ī communities worldwide.

³⁰ Nineteenth and early twentieth century sources describe fire pits, or "Muḥarram fires" as a popular ritual presence during the days of mourning. Some mention has also been made of processing the icons around roaring blazes or merely "a night-light floating at the bottom of an earthen pot or basin sunk in the ground." G. C. M. Birdwood, quoted by Hollister, *The Shī'a*, 167-68. I am not aware of the fire pit being a very popular practice presently, at least in Hyderabad. It is possible that the incense pot and the central locus it sometimes occupies in present rituals is a hold-over from former practices.

When I think of this transformative experience, I recall one black-clad woman, a grandmother, who at a majlis to mark the death of Ḥusayn's young daughter Sakīna had the privilege of holding this particular family *Ālam*. Standing with the symbol of the young child before her, she leaned her forehead against the glinting metal as tears coursed unchecked down her cheeks, her body swaying with grief. A woman deeply moved, she was totally lost in the moment. All around her, the tragedy of Sakīna's passing was evoked through the carefully crafted words of a moving nawa, punctuated only by the sharp slap of the matam and the sobs and cries of the faithful. Moments like this are profoundly intimate, deeply personal and almost impossible to penetrate or communicate. A non-believer, worse yet someone who has never witnessed a majlis, will find it difficult to visualize or to grasp. Once again, perhaps, Mohammed Fazel's words can help us capture what can be, for the believer, a truly transformative experience:

Suddenly, the doors would be flung open. Instantaneously, the drum and the cymbals would begin their dirge. And Imam Hussain, in a blood-smeared shroud, astride his steed Zuljenah would enter. For the crowd, there was no building up to a climax. The instant Hussain appeared, frenzy spread. We would slap our chests with open hands and slash our backs with the *zanjir*, chanting *Vai Hussain kushte shod*—Woe betide, Hussain is slaughtered. . .

. . . In the heat of the *Taziya* experience, amidst the mass of fellow mourners, ego boundaries would give and merge with others. Suddenly, the feeling was of being a bird in a flock. The motley became a pulsating organic whole. Suffering became a collective experience and pain the patter of raindrops on a shared roof.³¹

Although the context is different—here the Bombay *ta'ziya* enactment, with the martyr Ḥusayn symbolized by a living actor rather than a metal emblem—the feeling of immediacy and consuming grief is the same. Note Fazel's identification: "the instant Hussain appeared. . .", not "the instant the actor portraying Hussain appeared. . ." While this might be dismissed as merely literary style, I would argue that Fazel is accurately communicating his own experience at the time. For him and for others, it *was* Ḥusayn who appeared blood-smeared and weary, just as, for the grandmother described above, it *was* the body of Sakīna whom she held in her trembling arms.

Following the remembrance of the death of the martyr, the *Ālam* is then usually kept for a forty-day period (sometimes three days) which is thought to coincide with the forty days which elapsed between the death

³¹ Fazel, "Politics of Passion," 45, 46.

of the Karbalā' martyrs and their burial. On the fortieth day (*Chellum* or *Arba'in*) the 'a'alam are ritually "buried" by being wrapped in a final burial shroud or ceremoniously immersed in water.³² For some, this ritual has transformative associations which are conveyed by the popular expression "*thanda karna*", that is, to make [the 'alam] "cold." This reflects a controversial belief—borrowed from Hindu practice—in the "heatedness" of the 'alam during the period when it is installed, and the necessity of cooling it before it is retired.³³

The Fine Line between Veneration and Deification

When I once asked an educated and forthright friend whether the 'alam in her home had any special personality associated with it, she gave me a long level look before warning me against such an inquiry, "You know we must be cautious about this; there is a danger for us here. These are simply symbols." I felt embarrassed and chastised, but accepted her implicit caveat that charges of "idol worship" can and have been leveled against many Shī'ī ritual practices. My friend's warning was certainly not the only one I heard while doing this research. Time and again, particularly among educated Shī'as, I encountered a hesitancy to discuss the details of belief and practice involving 'a'alam. People are generally quite sensitive about the fine line separating the veneration of a symbolic object and the worship of a power-filled one, the latter being uncomfortably close to the Hindu practice of idol worship.³⁴

Indeed, to the uneducated observer, the kind of veneration given to 'a'alam can be misleading, for it sometimes can appear that a believer is actually worshiping an idol, an idea which horrifies most Shī'as. This is particularly so when the practice is combined with the making of vows, the tangible reminders of which include the keeping of locks, the tying of strings, even the receiving of a special *dupatta* (veil). Yet at the very heart

³² Most descriptions of Muḥarram ritual recount the "burial" of icons (at least those which are temporarily constructed) in land which has been designated "Karbalā'." See, for example, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's chapter on "Muḥarram" in *Guests of the Sheik: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village*, rpt. (1965; New York: Doubleday, 1989). In Bombay, Lewis Pelly describes the immersion of icons in the sea; Colonel Sir Lewis Pelly, *The Miracle Play of Ḥasan and Husain* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1879), xvii-xxiv. Here in Hyderabad, I have not witnessed the procession of 'a'alam to a graveyard "Karbalā'"; as far as I am aware, the river Musi is used for this purpose. However, the "burial" of many of the 'a'alam is enacted within the shrine or home without recourse to an external grave representation.

³³ Cf. Hindu notions and terminology, as well as popular mystical references to *jamali* and *jalali* qualities of God or saints.

³⁴ In my reporting of conversation on this topic, I have deliberately preserved anonymity. The conversations reported took place in Hyderabad in 1995 and 1996.

of these ritual manifestations stand love and respect for the family of the Prophet. Mary Hegland describes it this way:

Relationships with the *ahl al-bayt* are intense and highly personal. Time and space are eliminated as believers think of the *ahl al-bayt* as their own brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. In sharing their sorrows through intense repetitious interaction and demonstrations of loyalty, believers become related to them and thus expect their consideration.³⁵

Hence in Hyderabad, at one famous *Ālam* dedicated to Sakīna, women leave gifts of earrings, recalling with empathy the four year old child's pain, blood and suffering as the ornaments were ruthlessly torn from her ears.

The concern to refrain from crossing the fine line between ritual and idolatry is a particularly Muslim preoccupation and is not shared by Hindus who take part in Muḥarram events.³⁶ In his classic study of Shī'ism in the Indian context, John Hollister cites the following report of Hindu participation from a 1940 edition of one of India's daily newspapers:

A correspondent to *The Statesman*, Calcutta, writing from south India (probably the Deccan), states that Hindus from all castes, excepting Brahmans, call the *Ālams* pirs and have incorporated them into their religion. The *Ālam* of 'Ali is called *Lal Sahib* and the other two are known as riders, "Vendi Sowar (Silver Rider), Ankus Sowar and Tangalur Sowar." The origin of these names is uncertain, but these three *Ālams* are "looked upon and treated with the same reverences as the village Goddesses."³⁷

M. L. Nigam, in his essay on Indian Āshūrkhānas, adds further color to the description of Hindu observances of Muḥarram, explaining the reasons certain rituals gained popularity:

The offerings of *agar* [incense] and flowers, distributing alms to the poor (*lungur*), the reading of emotional verses, *marsiya*s, in honour

³⁵ Mary Elaine Hegland, "Ahl al-Bayt" in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia*, I: 52.

³⁶ That Hindus (and Sunnis) participate and even sometimes take the lead in some Muḥarram activities is a well documented fact. See, for example, the comments and descriptions of Sadiq Naqvi, "The Socio-Cultural Impact of Karbala" in *Red Sand*, ed. Mehdi Nazmi (New Delhi: Abu Taleb Academy, 1984), 219-220 and *passim*; Andreas D'Souza, "Love of the Prophet's Family: The Role of Marāthin in the Devotional Life of Hyderabadī Shī'as," *The Bulletin of Henry Martyn Institute* 12, nos. 3-4 (1993): 31-47; and Rahī Māsoom Razā's semi-autobiographical novel *Ādhā Gāun*, analyzed in depth by Roger Hooker in "Rahī Māsoom Razā's 'Half the Village,'" *the Bulletin of Henry Martyn Institute* 13, nos. 3-4 (1994): 19-43.

³⁷ Hollister, *The Shī'a*, 179. Much more work has since been done on the Hindu observance of Muḥarram by a team of professors in Telugu and Central Universities, Hyderabad. Unfortunately, I am unaware of published sources for their research.

of Husain, and *nazar* to help the maintenance of the shrine echoed the similar ceremonies held inside a Hindu temple. The *udi* or ash, applied on the forehead by the devotees, reminds us of the *vibhuti* of Hindu temples. The offerings of rice, jaggery and coconut to *alam*s is again a typical Hindu custom, popularly known as *prasadam* in temples. The *alam* which contains the relics of Husain,³⁸ was not a new phenomenon to the Hindus. The placing of personal relics of the Jain, Buddhist and Hindu saints inside the religious shrines had been an ancient practice in south India. The *panjetan* representing the "palm of a hand", bearing *tughra* and inscribing the names of Shi'a Imams on a metal plate right in the centre of the *alam*, provided a fresh imagery to the eyes of the Hindu devotees, who had a long-standing tradition in India to worship the feet "*padas*" and "palms" of the Hindu divinity. . . ."³⁹

Nigam goes on to distinguish Hindu and Muslim perceptions of '*alam*', explaining that while Hindus consider them to be objects of worship, symbolizing divinity, Muslims find in them an inspiration to remember the tragedy of Karbalā', as well as a means through which to pay their respects to the martyr. He underlines this difference from the Muslim perspective: "Yet, the element of worship was not there, as a Muslim is supposed to worship only one God as per the canonical injunctions of the Holy Qur'an."⁴⁰

³⁸ For details of relics kept in Āshūrkhāna or incorporated in the '*alam*', see Naqvi, "Socio-Cultural Impact," *passim*.

³⁹ M. L. Nigam, "Indian Ashur Khanas: A Critical Appraisal" in *Red Sand*, 120.

⁴⁰ Nigam, *Ibid.*, 121. As long as Islam has been lived and studied in its Indian context, the question of the role and influence of Hindu culture on Muslim beliefs and practices has come up. Sometimes vehemently. The syncretism of Akbar, the cult of the saints, the nexus between mystical expression and the *Bhakti* movement, and various aspects of popular practice have all been issues of comment or criticism from both Muslims and non-Muslims. As Annemarie Schimmel notes, the rhetoric of Indian Muslim reformers has often aimed at distancing Muslim practices from those of Hindus; see "Islamic Religious Year," in *Oxford Encyclopedia*, II: 455. Certainly the diverse independent groups within the Shi'i community (eg. Bohra, Khoja, Ithna Ashari, etc.) have received a considerable amount of this type of criticism, as a number of scholars have noted; see Marc Gaborieau, "A Nineteenth-Century Indian 'Wahhab' Tract Against the Cult of Muslim Saints: *Al-Balāgh al-Mubīn*" in *Muslim Shrines in India*, ed. Christian W. Troll (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 198-239, especially his reference to fieldwork among Muslims of Nepal. For this kind of reformist attack in a non-Shi'i Indian setting, see my unpublished paper, "The Night of Mercy: Gender and Ritual in Indian Islam," presented at the annual meeting of the Middle Eastern Studies Association, Washington, D.C., December 1995.

That the '*alam*' in particular has often been a lightning rod for these kind of tensions, particularly in the Sunni-Shi'i context, is supported by the following sixteenth century report from Bijapur: "As a clamorous procession of five hundred Shi'as approached Shah Sibghat Allah's *khanagah*, the Sufi sent one of his followers out to destroy the *Shi'a symbol* [emphasis mine] being carried at the head of the procession. This was done, touching off a bloody riot between the Shi'as and a number of Sibghat Allah's *murids*." From *Malfuzat-i Shah Sibghat Allah* (1606-7), fols. 4b-5a, compiled by Habib Allah 'Abd al-Fattah, translated and quoted by Richard M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur: 1300-1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 16.

But for some Shi'as, whatever the inner motivations or finer distinctions, the similarity of *Ālam* rituals with Hindu popular practice is just too close for comfort. One woman confessed what she called her own "radical thinking" about *Ālam*; namely, that "they are fast and dangerously becoming close to idols." The very fact that *Ālam* have "distinct personalities" attached to them, she pointed out, puts them at a particular risk. Moreover, these days the connection between the *Ālam* and the *ahl-i bayt* has become so strong that some Shi'as feel "their personality is missing" unless there is an *Ālam* present.⁴¹

The question this friend asked was, "Do we need *Ālams*?" Underlining the importance of Muḥarram for her own spiritual balance, she pointed to the strong history of oration of the martyrdom events, the evocative poetry of lamentation,⁴² and the value of clarifying one's knowledge and philosophy in light of the tragedy at Karbalā'. Of middle age and well-respected in her own field, she nonetheless confessed that she would not be able to share these thoughts with others, particularly the "older generation," many of whom are especially attached to certain rituals and to *Ālam* which had been in the family for generations.

An Empowered Presence among the Believers

Although many writers have stressed the symbolism of the standard of battle when writing about *Ālam*, I would argue that for many the *Ālam* symbolizes not so much a battle standard, but the empowering presence of the martyr in who's name it stands. In other words, something is missed when, for example, the *Ālam* is described as "a symbol of fighting for the uncompromising cause of right and justice," giving the participants the feeling "of actually fighting at Karbalā'."⁴³ Although this martial emphasis is perhaps true for many Shi'ī men, especially those engaged in injury-

⁴¹ Conversation in Hyderabad on 24 March 1996.

⁴² See Andreas D'Souza, "Zaynab, I am Coming! The Transformative Power of *Nawah*," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Honolulu, 11-14 April 1996.

⁴³ Chelkowski, *Alserat*, 265. Chelkowski is not alone here. In the context of discussing the motif of the *Ālam* in mosques of the Quli Qutb Shah period, M. Abdulla Chughtai notes: "Perhaps its aim was that the *Ālams* would always be considered present even in the mosques as an emblem of the war of Karbala. . ." [emphasis mine]; Chughtai, "Deccan's Contribution," 59. William Knighton, in his book *The Private Life of an Eastern King* (1855)—since republished as *Nawab Nasir-ud-Din Haider of Oudh: His Life and Pastimes* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, n.d.)—uses the word "arms" to convey the meaning of *Ālam* to his Victorian English audience. David Pinault, while detailing various Muḥarram rituals in Hyderabad, repeatedly refers to *Ālam* as "battle standards" or "battle crests," perhaps to buttress his interpretation of the fervent dedication of young men to matam, self-flagellation and the cause of Ḥusayn; David Pinault, *The Shiites* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), *passim*.

inducing *matam*, it fails to capture the fullness of the meaning of the *‘alam*, particularly as experienced by women.⁴⁴

I do not believe that the symbolism described in this article reflects purely female perceptions. Mohammed Fazel’s recollections as well as my own and others’ observations suggest otherwise.⁴⁵ Still, it is interesting to note that women’s tendency to function as individuals in “a network of connections”, in contrast to men’s action as individuals in a hierarchical social order, may perhaps explain some of the differences here described.⁴⁶ It certainly is an avenue which merits further investigation.

In the final analysis, then, the meaning of the *‘alam* is personal, complex, and highly individual. Few Shī‘as would disagree, however, that it is—in the very least—a sacred emblem which must be treated with a certain amount of respect and reverence. For others, the *‘alam* becomes a tangible reminder of a powerful intercessor with God and the focus of prayers and supplications. Like the rituals associated with *dargahs*, these practices, too, remain a source of tension within the Shī‘i community and in the larger Muslim context. But, despite this controversy, the *‘alam* remains a commanding and, for some, a transformation inspiring presence through which men and women physically demonstrate a great love for, respect of, and solidarity with the long-suffering family of the Prophet.

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⁴⁴ I have raised the question of gender bias in Islamic Studies research in my earlier mentioned paper, “The Night of Mercy.”

⁴⁵ See A. D’Souza’s description of rituals at Bargah-i ‘Abbās on the tenth of Muḥarram; “Zaynab I am coming!,” 2-5.

⁴⁶ Here I am using the words of Deborah Tannen, although the underlying concept is supported much more broadly by research by, for example, Carol Gilligan, Evelyn Fox Keller and others. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 24-25 and *passim*.