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Television for Ritual_The Modern Majlis

'Clifford Geertz defines religion as 'a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.' Vernon James Schubel adds "Nowhere does the system of symbols which Geertz designates as religion so fully establish those powerful moods and motivations as it does in ritual performances". From Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia_Pg.1(1)

A number of Muslims around the world have recently been reassessing their religious practices; rituals that were previously followed blindly are now being questioned and understood for their spiritual significance and purpose. Choices are available to worshippers today that did not exist ten years ago. Modern technology has played a significant role by providing the necessary tools to facilitate research and information access, thus providing educated individuals the literary resources they need in order to study Islam the way they choose. A lot of information on Islam can be found using the Internet today. Users are also able to subscribe to newsletters from like-minded groups. As a result of greater communication for those who seek it, there has been an increase in dialogues upon religion that are separate from those conducted through religious institutions.

This paper focuses on a small community of about thirty educated Khoja Shia(2) Muslims in Pakistan and their use of the television to observe a mourning ritual during the Islamic month of Muharram. This new development has surfaced only because there are also available, in new mediums, the rest of the elements required to perform the ritual. The implications of this act on the rest of society have to be studied. Are they occurring concurrent to other similar trends that are taking place globally or locally? How is the greater Pakistani population going to be affected if

small groups of people begin to act apart from the institutions they are part of, creating their own rules, therefore setting their own systems?

Pakistan is a country with a population of 140 million people. It's largest city, Karachi, has a population of 14million people. The Shia population of Pakistan is between 20 to 25% of the total population.(3)

The first ten days of the Muslim New Year month Muharram are not celebrated, rather are sad days for Shias. They mark the anniversary of the death of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) grandson Hussein, who along with his small army, relatives and children was martyred in the field of Karbala, Iraq, by the opposing army of Yazid (4). Imam(5) Hussein was killed because he had refused to give up his position of leadership to Yazid's claim of being the new successor in the line of Muslim spiritual leaders that had followed the Prophet Mohammed's (PBUH)(6) death. After the event at Karbala, Imam Hussein's family was taken captive and imprisoned and they too sacrificed their lives for his cause. Shias believe that the spirit of Islam was upheld by Imam Hussein as he did not allow a cruel and corrupt person to take over the spiritual leadership of the Muslims at that time. Since it had been only about a hundred years since the Prophet Muhammed's(PBUH) death, the propagation of Islam was in it's early stages. The deaths at Karbala happened at a time (in what is today known as) the Middle East when politics and religion were interconnected and religious leaders also had great political influence over their followers. Islam had been vulnerable to the schemes of greedy politicians and Imam Hussein had saved it through his actions at Karbala. By remembering that event each Muharram, Shias feel they keep alive the essence of Islam for which the Prophet's (PBUH) grandson gave his life up. A famous Pakistani poet Maulana Mohammed Ali described it wonderfully as

“ Hussein's murder is actually the slaughter of Yazid
(for) Islam is reborn after every Karbala”.(7)

The events at Karbala happened more than fourteen hundred years ago and have been significant to the history of Islam because of the different ways in which Shias and Sunnis mark them. Unlike the Sunnis in Pakistan, Shias mark the anniversary of this event each year with public displays of mourning and by attending *majalis*(8).

A traditional Muharram *majlis*(9) in Karachi begins with a few verses in praise of God. The speaker of the event then takes the chair and begins a sermon that usually lasts forty-five minutes. There is always a pre-prepared topic upon which the lecture is based. The last fifteen minutes of the *majlis* are used to mourn the tragic events of Karbala. *Matham* takes place after this; it is the beating of chests to show solidarity with those martyred in Karbala. There are varying degrees with which participants involve themselves in *Matham*. Some are very emotionally charged while others take a more passive stand. A small minority also performs *Matham* with chains as part of their grieving ritual on special days. Schubel states "Had we been at Karbala would we have had the courage to stand with Husayn? This is part of the reasoning behind acts of physical matam such as flagellation and firewalking, a desire to demonstrate physically the willingness to suffer the kinds of wounds which they would have incurred had they fought at Karbala."(10) The *matham* is followed by a few verses in praise of God and the Prophet which mark the end of the *majlis*.

This Muharram, my mothers living room was rearranged to accommodate seventeen chairs that were placed around a small television in the center of the room. The setup stayed there for ten nights during which a *majlis* took place at nine pm sharp each night. The guests usually arrived before nine so that they could seat themselves comfortably before the event was initiated. One factor, which regular *majlis* goers would find peculiar about my mother's *majlis* was that no *maulvi* (11) would show up to begin the sermon and none was expected either. At nine pm my parents would slip a video tape into the video cassette player and the event would be initiated. It would end exactly an hour later after which the guests would step out into the patio to discuss issues related and unrelated to the lecture they had just witnessed. A modern *majlis* it could be called, one where great emphasis was placed on learning facts from an event rather than becoming too emotionally involved with it.

Five years ago, a scenario described like this would be laughed upon by my parents and their peers. The *majlis* that they had known since childhood involved sitting amidst crowds of strangers segregated to distance the females from the males at the local imambargah(12) or some-one's house. As children we too were exposed to a voice emanating from the microphone.

A voice we did not know much about except that the mosque had chosen him or her to deliver the sermons that year. This voice would some-times be inaudible due to the static disturbance created when the pitch of the voice exceeded that which the sound system could handle. The speaker under pressure to evoke the right type of emotional response would not shy from exaggerating facts at times that were suitable to him or her. Most members of the audience did not have a solid enough religious background to question the arguments presented by the narrator. The energy level at this event would slowly rise to a peak and towards the end it would not be odd to see a few men or women being totally overwhelmed by grief under the influence of the words which had allowed them to re-live the Karbala tragedy.

Attending such *majalis* is a major part of the Shia culture in Karachi, Pakistan. In his book, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*, Vernon James Schubel writes: "The majlis (thus) plays an important role in helping the community preserve its identity, as it is in majalis that Shi'i Muslims learn the arguments supporting their faith." (13). This is also a community event where among other exchanges that occur, female matchmakers scan the crowds for girls suited to the boys they have in mind.

What had never before been questioned as a religious ritual during my parents' generation was deemed a mindless chore by many from my generation who were a group of Western-educated, doubtful and analytical minds. They found the contents of the *majalis* to be boring and not very easy to understand. Not many wanted to impress the matchmakers either as they had discovered their own new ways of meeting the opposite sex. Simply following traditions that had been natural to their parents was a trend not looked upon very favorably by the children who had been exposed to the West and its seemingly liberal ways. There arose many questions in their minds related to Islam and contemporary life which the parents were not knowledgeable enough to answer and the *maulvis* did not cover in the *majalis*. A chasm was beginning to grow between the older and younger generation.

Allama Iqbal, a great Muslim philosopher and poet who wrote extensively on Islam and spirituality had claimed in "Reconstruction" (14) : "The greatest service that modern thought has rendered to Islam and as a matter of fact to all religions, consists in its criticism of what we call

material or natural, a criticism which discloses that the merely material has no substance until we discover it rooted in the spirit. There is no such thing as a profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for the self-realization of the spirit. All is holy ground."

It is a fact that most of the Pakistani Muslim population does not know real facts about its religion and rituals but just follows rules that the leader of the community puts forward as correct. Many times the preachings are hateful and unIslamic. "Many Shi'a, particularly young, revitalized Muslims, feel that historical distortion is not to be allowed and refuse to patronize those zakirs who play fast and loose with the historical facts in order to elicit grief." writes Schubel. (15) Recently many educated adults who disagree with irrational teachings being preached and justified under the name of religion, want to distance themselves from them. They know their religion is different from the fanatic picture painted in the West but do not have the scholarly ability to justify their claims. The only way out for them is to start researching independently to find their answers and the correct way to practice Islam.

The last fifty years witnessed an increasing number of residents from Muslim countries migrating to North America and Europe. Once settled, the immigrants tried to assimilate their own practices with the rationally derived way of life that is normally prevalent in the secular First World countries. Their children, most of whom were born in the countries they settled in, needed religious education taught in ways that would be comparable to the ones being used by the North American and European school systems. Thus a new form of Islamic education began to evolve which had adapted western teaching methodology into its fundamental approach. Included as one part of this was the way young children are introduced to Islam in a very friendly and fun way. This system eventually won approval even in South East Asia from those followers of Islam who were looking for a way to revamp old traditions to adjust to modern life.

In a paper titled *The Problem of Implementing Iqbal's Ideas in Pakistan* (16), Dr. Javed Iqbal writes that "Iqbal also held the claim of the modern Muslim liberals to re-interpret that foundational legal principles of Islam, in the light of their own experience and the altered conditions of modern life, was perfectly justified. He was convinced that the world of Islam was confronted and effected by new forces set free by the extraordinary development of human

knowledge in all its directions. Therefore, he suggested that each and every generation of Muslims, guided but unhampered, by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems."

This thought of Iqbal's is perfectly exemplified by the action of the group of Khoja Shias who have created the ritual of the television majlis. This group was very keen to maintain their traditional Muharram mourning gatherings but wanted to hear only the lectures of a Shia scholar, Abdul Aziz Sachedina. As they could not see him live they decided to have his prerecorded majlis' shipped over from where they were being taped and then viewed as a group.

Preachers who are not just knowledgeable, but are scholarly enough to explain and rationalize their teachings using contemporary examples have gained popularity with those Muslims looking for new ways of understanding Islam. Abdul Aziz Sachedina, the *maulvi* whose recordings are viewed during the television *majlis*, is one such person. He is a Shia scholar who was born in Tanzania in 1942. Sachedina received a two-faceted education with Eastern and Western influences. He is currently a professor at the University of Virginia in the United States of America. He has written a number of published papers in English that explore avenues of Islam in the modern world. His homepage (17) gives a detailed description of three of his current projects which are (18):

Project # 1:

Reason in Islamic Jurisprudence: A Comparative Study of Legal Methodology in Islamic Schools of Legal Thought

Project # 2*:

Islamic Law for Muslim Physicians: Medical Jurisprudence Related to Modern Biomedicine

Project # 3*:

Islamic Art and Architecture as an expression of Islamic Spirituality

Many in the old school of Islamic thought disapprove of Sachedina. Originally he had permission from the high Shia powers in Iran to preach as a *maulvi*, but these were very recently taken away by them when his lectures were seen to be promoting religious pluralism. Headlines in an online newsletter from the University of Virginia (19) describe how Sachedina is one of the

first few prominent Muslim religious leaders to attempt dialogue between Islam, Christianity and Judaism after 9/11. It is possible that a certain level of insecurity abounds within the walls of the Shia scholarly headquarters in Iran over the teaching methodology being used by Sachedina. A Muslim leader who stands in the center of two opposing cultures, promotes interfaith tolerance and is riding the wave of media technology into the twenty-second century would truly make the others feel unsure about their position in contemporary society.

Sachedina is one of the few Shia scholars who has made himself accessible to his followers. An email address is available for those who want to correspond with him, his curriculum vitae is available online so that readers can be impressed by the recognition he has received by schools of thought all over the world. His knowledge of ten languages including Arabic, English, Urdu and Gujrati enable him to lecture to a variety of followers in their native tongues. Sachedina has in more ways than one, modernized the image of the Islamic scholar by using media and technology to promote his teaching and become accessible to his followers worldwide. He is popular not only among Shias, but Sunnis and non Muslims as well.

The media *majlis* begins with the insertion of a video- cassette into the video cassette recorder. Since the number of people attending is small, seating is not segregated. Men and women are free to sit wherever they choose. The recording being viewed is a taped version of the live *majlis* of Muharram the year before, held wherever Sachedina had accepted the invitation to speak. It is most usually in a city in North America. Sachedina speaks mostly in English adding anecdotes in Gujrati and Urdu, depending upon his audience. His quotations from the Quran (20) are always in Arabic followed by a translation. His sermons over the ten day period of Muharram *majalis* always follow an agenda. The well-researched arguments he presents, that are backed by verifiable sources, could be compared to the way he presents his course lectures at North American Universities.

All of those individuals who prefer to attend the media *majlis* at my mother's home are doing so because they feel they gain more from the content of Sachedina's *majlis* than any other one being held in Karachi. His lectures are moderate, promote interfaith tolerance and offer solutions to real life dilemmas faced by most Muslims as they are exposed to new schools of

thought through new media sources. Sachedina holds the interest of the young and old in his audience as he addresses contemporary issues in the light of age old texts, rooted in the Muslim religion. He wins the respect of all those who listen to his sermons, young or old, Shia or Sunni, Muslim and non-Muslim, so his popularity reaches beyond the boundaries of just one Muslim sect. He is probably not even aware of the new *majlis* culture his teachings have inspired followers in Karachi to invent in order to stay tuned to him.

Some members of the small media *majlis* miss the lack of contact with the crowds of mourners at other *majalis*, others dismiss it as a fleeting contact, not worth holding on to in the name of tradition. With the barriers between men and women down, it would not be fair to rule out the social aspect of the television *majlis* altogether either, especially when after the *majlis* a small period of discussion is allowed over tea. This is a gathering where all those attending have been invited and belong to a section of financially secure, English speaking, Karachi society. There are no walk-in's as is the case with the other kind of event. No surprises, no pressure to be emotionally overwhelmed, just a quiet sit down evening in front of the television.

Given the choice, most Shias would probably not replace their traditional *majlis* with the television *majlis*. Theirs is a deep-rooted *majlis* culture, the spontaneity of which probably draws them to it year after year. One such aspect of the *majlis* culture can be described as sitting till late at night on a public road which has been blocked to traffic, sharing sorrow with hundreds of other people dressed in black. This is a very unifying experience for those participating in it. All the people attending the event are served dinner and drinks that have been invisibly funded by donations. The whole Shia community comes together during the ten days of Muharram mourning. An electrifying atmosphere prevails around the Shia community centers on the last two days as onlookers support the few who display their sorrow using swords and chains and walk over hot coals. If these emotionally driven rituals were to disappear in favor of purely passive individual commemoration, would the Shia community be vulnerable to disintegration within itself? In his book, Schubel quoted Ali Naqi in the Sarfaraz Weekly, Lucknow, responding to a question regarding the real purpose of the *majlis* that "while it is important that the *majalis* remain a source of historical information, they must continue to be *azadari* (mourning) *majlis* because it is *azadari*

which brings the people into the imambargah in the first place. Were it not for the *matam* (chest beating to show grief) and its promise of salvation, the educational function of the majlis could not take place."(21)

Another experience by a group of a live televised event had taken place in Karachi in 2001 when Professor Noam Chomsky came to Pakistan. Due to the war in Afghanistan at the time, his presence in Karachi, a volatile city, was not considered too safe. He spoke on two days to audiences in Lahore and Islamabad. The Karachi crowd, eager to hear the Professor, arranged for a live broadcast in an auditorium, using help from the Karachi University's Information Technology Department. The result of this whole arrangement worked out quite well with the Karachi audience, numbering over a hundred, even being able to ask Dr.Chomsky a few questions after the lecture.

One other scholar who is not a Shia but has taken the whole of the female Pakistani Muslim community by storm is Dr. Farhat Hashmi. Having slowly gained popularity over the past few years in Karachi she now holds her place as a woman scholar who is in great demand for her 'dars' or explanation of Quran. Her religious lectures now attract thousands of women each week all over Pakistan. They are available on the internet though marked 'sold out' on the site selling them.

The methodology used by Dr.Farhat to explain the Quran to Pakistani women from all economic backgrounds has become so popular that Al Huda, her institute has opened up branches all over the country in order to teach the system to others. Apart from learning how to translate the Quran at Al Huda, women are also given a background in Arabic, Quranic Sciences, Hadees Science and Islamic Jurisprudence. After training Al Huda provides diplomas to the women who in turn have begun teaching and explaining the Quran on their own. This new method of religious instruction to women, which is separate from the madressah system which existed before, has expanded very rapidly with qualified graduates even opening Islamic education classes for children. The whole reason for the eruption of these new institutions in Karachi is that none of the ones that existed were satisfying the criteria that a large segment of society wanted, in which Islam was taught in a progressive manner, using new mediums and

techniques which would make the learning experience more intellectually satisfying than before.

An internet reporter, Kamal Siddiqui, described this scenario: "They flock in droves to listen to Dr Farhat Hashmi, who holds a doctorate from Glasgow University and is seen to be setting trends in Pakistan's English speaking elite. What amazes is the fact that the women are as trendy as those in any gathering. A few years back, these women would have been horrified to attend such a sermon: these days in Pakistan, for some of the educated elite, it is the in thing to do. At the appointed hour, the sermon begins with some religious verses and then Dr Hashmi coming over and starting off on an explanation of Islam and the Quran. While no one can quite explain the popularity of Dr Hashmi's brand of Islam, there are many who say that the fact that she is educated and is willing to speak in both English and Urdu to get her message across. Her mode of delivery is also conciliatory as is her approach to many controversial issues."(22)

Dr. Farhat Hashmi, a woman who chooses to cover herself completely in front of others has invoked the wrath of liberal intellectuals like Dr. Riffat Hassan from North America who also is a religious scholar specializing in Quranic translation. On the other hand, she has also been openly attacked by the spiritual leaders in Pakistan who are comparing the qualifications she possesses with those required to lead a religious institution in Pakistan.

"The struggle of Shi'a Muslims is one common to all religions. Like all religious people they are engaged in a complex balancing act by which they exist in a multiplicity of roles simultaneously, all the while striving to remain true to what they see as essential to their religion."(23) My examples of the Shias who have deviated their practices from the norm and the rising popularity of the Al-Huda organization are just two from a number of changes that have taken place recently in the way spiritual education is pursued in Pakistani society. Can live or recorded media performances that discuss politics and religion, away from the shelter of the institutions that used to harbor them, become acceptable all over Pakistani society? Would the larger population of which more than seventy percent are illiterate be able to appreciate or tolerate such discussions? Can a government that is shaky in its foundations risk such exchanges of ideas to take place on any scale, large or small? How would locally educated religious leaders react if they were at risk of being left out of spiritual dialogues amongst ordinary citizens all

together? The answers to these questions will become obvious very soon as religious culture catapults towards a new future in the large cosmopolitan city of Karachi.

One indisputable fact is that the media *majlis* has been successful in reviving the interest of a disoriented young generation towards the religion their parents feared they were losing touch with. It has become the successful example of an event that previously could not have been controlled but now has evolved into a ritual where individuals manipulated new mediums in order to achieve the results they desired. What kind of results can this sort of personal control over institutions like religion or politics bring up in the future? This question remains unanswered at the moment. So for the time being every Muharram in Karachi, thirty chairs will continue to be arranged in front of the television and video cassette recorder in preparation for the *majlis* at my mother's house.

Bibliography:

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- (2) Shias are a sect of Muslims, Khojas Shias are an ethnic community within the Shia sect
- (3) <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSG/da91450e.htm>
- (4) Yazid was the son of Muavia, a political leader during that time
- (5) Imam is the name given to a Muslim Spiritual leader
- (6) Short form for peace be upon him_ a phrase used when using any Muslim Prophet's name
- (7) Maulana Mohammed Ali Aur Jang e Azadi. Dr. Zaheer Ali Siddiqui
- (8) Plural of majlis. See description of majlis below
- (9) A majlis is a gathering of people, in this specific case for the purpose of hearing a sermon related to the events that took place during Muharram more than fourteen hundred years ago.
- (10) Pg.99. Religious performance in contemporary Islam. Shi'i devotional rituals in South Asia. Vernon James Schubel
- (11) Qualified man who preaches at a Muslim religious occasion
- (12) A mosque or community center which caters specifically to the Shia sect of Muslims
- (13) Religious performance in contemporary Islam. Shi'i devotional rituals in South Asia. Pg.95. Vernon James Schubel
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