

WHY DO THEY CRY?
CRITICISMS OF MUHARRAM CELEBRATIONS IN
TSARIST AND SOCIALIST AZERBAIJAN¹

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In his book “Mänim Dinim (My Religion, Baku 1994)”, Abdülkadir Sezgin, then advisor for religious questions to the Turkish Embassy, describes a vision he had when walking on the “Boulevard of the Martyrs” (*şahidlär xiyabam*)² on January 20, 1993. While attending the memorial service for the victims of the Soviet invasion, an elderly Azerbaijani woman attracted his notice, who, sobbing loudly, expressed her grief for the loss of a close relative. She beat her chest rhythmically and repeatedly exclaimed “Şaxsey-Vaxsey”.³ Some Turkish citizens who were present asked Sezgin in astonishment about the strange behaviour of the woman. Sezgin answered sadly: “At the grave of her son this poor woman does not mourn her child, but an Arab who died 1352 years ago.” In Sezgin’s imagination the son, who had fallen in battle, then appeared to his mother and said:

Mother, this is my grave! It is me, who has become a martyr, just like Häzräti Hüseyin. I wish that you mourn me at my grave and cry for me. Oh mother, who has made you forget me!⁴

¹ Several alphabets have been used to write the Azerbaijani language in the twentieth century. For reasons of consistency I have dispensed with using various systems of transcription, and have used the modern Latin script introduced officially in 1993 throughout the paper with one exception: the vowel /ə/, /ɔ/ is transcribed as /ä/, /Ä/.

² Sezgin, *Mänim dinim*, pp. 33–35. On the “Boulevard of Martyrs” the dead of January 20, 1990, when Baku was invested by Soviet troops in order to prevent an anticipated take-over by the Nationalists, and many victims of the bloody fighting in Karabagh are buried.

³ *Şaxsey-vaxsey* is a contraction of the exclamation of sorrow *Şah, Hüseyin! Vah, Hüseyin!*, which is used mainly in the annual celebrations of mourning for Hüseyin during the month of Muharram. On the other hand, *şaxsey-vaxsey* is synonymous with the entire complex of mourning celebrations. *Şaxsey* on its own may express grief in general terms and is used predominantly by women mourning a tragic event. It is frequently accompanied by self-flagellation (expressed with the verb *şaxsey vurmaq*). See *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lügəti*. IV cild. S. Ş. Baku 1987 (ed. by A. A. Orucov), p. 502.

⁴ Sezgin, *Mänim dinim*, p. 35.

We also find critical remarks about the Muḥarram celebrations at other places within Sezgin's book, the objective of which is to reacquaint its Azerbaijani readers with Islam after 70 years of atheism. An event like the tragedy of Karbalā', in which (according to the author) not a single Turk had been involved on either of the two sides, should not be allowed to lead to ritualised mourning and self-flagellation. Sezgin reminded his readers (in the majority Shiites) that not every day was 'Ashūrā', not every place Karbalā'.⁵

One of Sezgin's declared intentions is to protect the Azerbaijani Turks from letting themselves be religiously undermined by Iran, and to strengthen their ties to the Turkic-Sunni world. Other Turkish authors also have dealt with the question whether or not the Azerbaijani Muslims will, after decades of atheist propaganda, readopt Shiite customs like the Muḥarram celebrations. In their view, a reintroduction of such customs would indicate the strength of Iranian influence on the religious life in Azerbaijan.⁶ These authors regard Shiism as a primarily Iranian phenomenon, and consequently as an alien element in the Turkic world. Such views do not pass unheeded in modern Azerbaijan. A publication by İsmayilov, Professor of History at the renowned Oil-Academy of Baku, illustrates this fact. In 1995 İsmayilov expressed his concern lest Shiism should continue to tie his country to the events of Karbalā' and the "Iranian spirit". This can only result in the isolation of Azerbaijan in the Turkic world. Those "Pro-Iranians", who now, after regaining national independence, preach Shiism, are accused of dividing the nation and serving only the interests of the country's enemies.⁷

In this context İsmayilov referred to a historic event, whose evaluation has always been charged with emotion for Azerbaijanis and Turks alike: the battle of Chaldiran (1512) and the centuries-long Ottoman-Safawid wars following in its wake. Thus the Turkish historian Mehmet Saray, in a monograph on the Turks of Azerbaijan, terms the Safawid decision to introduce Shiism as the state religion and its use as a weapon of propaganda against the Ottomans "one

⁵ Sezgin, *Mānīm dīnīm*, pp. 36-38. Sezgin refers to the commonly used Shiite battle cry "Hār gün Aşura, hār yer Kārbāla". This battle cry played an important role during the Islamic revolution in Iran; see Kippenberg, *Jeder Tag Aşura*.

⁶ See Albayrak, *Azerbaycan'da dīn*, pp. 142-143.

⁷ İsmayilov, İsmail Zakir oğlu: *Azerbaycanın XX əsrdə dövlətçilik siyasəti məsələləri*. Baku 1995, pp. 144-165.

of the greatest mistakes in history.” According to Saray Shiism divided the Turkic brothers and paved the way for the rise of the enemies, especially for Russia.⁸ Since the end of the Soviet Union Azerbaijani historians have been in agreement that Chaldıran was a tragic event for the Turkic world, yet have refused to put the blame solely on Shāh Ismā‘īl. In their opinion both sides bore responsibility for religious fanaticism and cruelty in war.⁹ Azerbaijani textbooks, published in 1994/95, explicitly refer to the slaughter of 40,000 Shiites in Anatolia carried out under Sultan Selīm for fear of their potential allegiance to the Safawids.¹⁰

These introductory examples illustrate that topics like “the events of Karbalā’” or “the battle of Chaldıran” are still potentially explosive matters in post-communist Azerbaijan and should not be underestimated in their importance. Surrounded by Turkey, Iran and Russia, each of which pursues its own strategic interests in the region, Azerbaijan is forced to define a cultural identity of its own. One of the questions asked in this context is, therefore, how Turkic identity and Shiite belief might be reconciled with each other.

The discussion about the Muḥarram ceremonies is by no means a recent phenomenon in Azerbaijan, but assumed great importance previously, i.e. between 1877 and 1932, when processions of flagellators as well as passion plays stretching over days increasingly attracted criticism from modernist circles, Pan-Islamic ‘ulamā’ and eventually from the Bolsheviks. I would like to restrict myself to an overview of these criticisms focused on the most important dates of this development. An exhaustive study of this highly interesting topic still requires further preparatory works.¹¹

⁸ Saray, Mehmet: *Azərbaycan Türkləri tarixi*. Istanbul 1993, pp. 13ff., p. 24.

⁹ See e.g. *Azərbaycan tarixi*. I. cild. *An qədim zamanlardan XX əsrədək*. Baku 1994. (ed. by Z. M. Bünyadov/Y. B. Yusifov), pp. 405–409.

¹⁰ Yaqub Mahmudov/Süleyman Məmmədov/Vaqif Piriye: *Azərbaycan tarixi*. 8-ci sinif üçün dərslik. Baku 1995, pp. 154–155.

¹¹ The topic has, however, been cursorily addressed in the articles of Səttarov, *Sosializm quruculuğu*; Abdullayev, *İslamın məhərrəmlik*; Əhədov, *Azərbaycanda din*; Əhədov, *Azərbaycanda islam*. Khadzhibeyli, *Antiislamskaia*, was only published in exile and translated into English as Hadjibeyli, *Anti-Islamic*.

CRITICISM IN TERMS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The spread of Twelver Shiism in Northern and Southern Azerbaijan coincides generally with the rise of the Safawid dynasty in the 16th century. Its geographic position made Azerbaijan for many centuries the battlefield for the conflicts between Shiite Safawids and their Sunnite foes, the Ottomans and their allies such as the Lesginians. Consequently, religious antagonism between the two denominations was felt in particular depth on the territory of modern Azerbaijan. The Tsarist empire, which came to rule Transcaucasia in the early 19th century, inherited this Shiite-Sunnite antagonism.¹² The Transcaucasian lands, annexed by Russia, were shaped by the following phenomena:

- A large percentage of the population was Sunnite. While the ratio between Sunnites and Shiites was still balanced in the middle of the 19th century, the percentage of Shiites rose considerably due to large-scale Sunni emigration. In the early 20th century the ratio was estimated to be 70:30 in favour of the Shiites.¹³
- The Muslims had to accept Christian and later Soviet rule, the representatives of which often regarded Islamic customs as backward or even primitive. Discussions between Muslims about reform of religious customs and habits consequently were conducted in front of an audience following another creed, sometimes even being hostile towards Islam.
- The closeness of the Azerbaijani language to Ottoman Turkish allowed both Pan-Islamic propaganda from Istanbul and (later) Pan-Turkism from Ankara to reach Transcaucasia. Shiite Azerbaijani Turks did face and still face the problem that their belief might be interpreted as an obstacle to unity in the Turkic-Islamic world. This introduces a nationalist dimension in the discussion about their own confession.
- There was no recognised and universally respected *mujtahid* among the Shiite theologians of Transcaucasia. For this reason

¹² On the history of Azerbaijan in the 19th and 20th century see Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan*; id., *Russia and Azerbaijan*; also Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*.

¹³ Sunnites predominantly inhabit Northern Azerbaijan, along the border to Daghestan, and the west of the country, especially in and around the town of Şamaxı.

theologians had to go abroad to pursue their studies, either to Iran or to the Ottoman Empire. This resulted in a rather limited power to impose their own views of contested questions such as the Muḥarram celebrations on their own fellow countrymen.¹⁴

In the 19th century the passion plays remembering the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, grandson of the Prophet, had already reached a peak of popularity.¹⁵ The scenic performances, often accompanied by recitals of mourning lasting for days, and bloody self-flagellations belonged to the most striking phenomena of Shiite religious life in Transcaucasia.¹⁶ Vereschaguine, who visited the town of Şuşa in Karabagh in the middle of the 1860s, found these ceremonies already fully developed. This also held true for the manifold aspects of flagellation, i.e. sword- and chain-flagellation, chest-beating and individuals piercing their naked upper body with all sorts of sharp items. Research has not yet agreed on the origin of such extreme forms of flagellation, nor on the time when they were first incorporated into the ceremony of mourning.¹⁷

European travellers had already reported on flagellations in earlier centuries,¹⁸ but the phenomenon appears to have become increasingly popular in the 19th century due to European penetration of the Near and Middle East. As a matter of fact it has to be stressed that the Muḥarram celebrations were always strongly dependent on actual political conditions. Gradual neglect of such customs or attempts by the state to regulate them do by no means exclude their reinvigoration in times of political tension.

The flagellations seem to have adopted the bloody forms, which later gave rise to so much criticism, at a rather early time (as compared with other parts of the Shiite world) in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan. Critics of these customs like Mähämmäd Sadıq, who

¹⁴ There is still an almost complete absence of studies on the Azerbaijani Shiite clergy. Altstadt-Mirhadi, *The Forgotten Factor*, is one of the rare exceptions.

¹⁵ The origin of these ceremonies is discussed in Calmard "Azādārī." In: *Elr* III, pp. 147–177; also Müller, *Studien zum persischen Passionsspiel*; Chelkowski, *Tafziyeh*.

¹⁶ See also the observations and impressive drawings in Vereschaguine, *Voyage*; furthermore Lassy, *The Muharram Mysteries*. A literary work describing processions, which the Russian author Maxim Gorky witnessed in Tiflis in 1898, is the short story: "The feast of the Shiites" (*Prazdnik Shiitov*); see Gor'kii, M.: *Sobranie sochinenii*. V tridtsati tomakh. Tom 23. Stat'i 1895–1906. Moscow 1953, pp. 273–284. I am grateful to Professor Werner Ende, Freiburg i.Br., for this information.

¹⁷ See e.g. Nakash, "Attempt".

¹⁸ See reports included in Halm, *Der schiitische Islam*, pp. 53–97.

wrote for the Baku newspaper *Ākinçi* (1875–1877), identified the inhabitants of Karabagh as the first to have practised excessive flagellation and later to have proceeded to spread these customs in Tabrīz and other Iranian towns.¹⁹ He emphasised that the custom was of recent origin.

Both contemporaries and later Soviet historians accused the Tsarist authorities of actively fostering the antagonism between Shiites and Sunnites.²⁰ The Soviet historian Klimovich wrote that as early as the 1850s the Russian administration had realised the potential of the Muḥarram celebrations for increasing hostility on the part of the Shiites towards their Sunnite co-religionists.²¹ Several incidents point to the authorities being generous in allowing the construction of Shiite memorials or in granting permission for performances of passion plays.²² In this context it should also be mentioned that the Tsarist empire recruited cavalry units from Shiite Azerbaijanis, which were used in the wars against the Ottomans or the rebellious inhabitants of northern Caucasus. From this it follows quite logically that the Tsarist bureaucracy had quite a strong interest in deepening feelings of hostility against Sunnites.

It was the desire to bridge the widening gap between the denominations that brought about the first public criticism of the existing forms of Muḥarram celebrations in 1877.²³ Between January and March in that year several contributions appeared in the newspaper *Ākinçi*, the first Turkic-language newspaper of Russia, which was edited in Baku by a Sunnite, Hāsān Bāy Zārdabi (1842–1907).²⁴ Out

¹⁹ See Hāsānzadā, Turan (ed.): *Ākinçi 1875–1877. Tam Mātīn*. Baku 1979, pp. 297–298. The letter appears in *Ākinçi* No. 1, 4.1.1877. The people of Karabagh were later blamed by other Iranians, too; see Glassen, *Muharram Ceremonies*, p. 127; further Nakash, “Attempt”, pp. 174–77.

²⁰ The Russian authorities introduced separate courts, presided over by a *shaiḫ al-islām* in the case of the Shiites, and a *muftī* in the case of the Sunnites; see Āhādov, *Azərbaycanda din*, pp. 56–64.

²¹ Klimovich, *Islam. Ocherki*, p. 241.

²² The permission granted for the erection of the memorial Āliyağı in the village of Buzovna on the Abşeron peninsula serves as an example. The memorial, in which a foot imprint of ‘Alī is worshipped, soon became a popular destination for pilgrims and a centre for the performance of mourning celebrations; see Alizadā, *Azərbaycan dərvişləri*, pp. 33–45.

²³ Abdullayev, *İslamın Mähərrämlik*, pp. 42–55.

²⁴ The reference is based on the new edition in Cyrillic script: Hāsānzadā, Turan (ed.): *Ākinçi 1875–1877. Tam Mātīn*. Baku 1979, pp. 297–339. The contributions appeared in 1877 in No. 1 No. 6 (January 4 to March 17, 1877).

of fear of being mistaken for Sunnites mocking Shiite religious customs the authors of the articles took great pains to stress their Shiite background by adding for example “a true Twelver Shiite” (*xalis yia, isnā-āšārī*) to their names. The debate was opened with an article by Mähämmäd Sadiq (pseudonym: *Āhsän-ül Qävaid*) from Rasht in Iran; we have already mentioned that it was Sadiq who had put the blame for the excessive bloodiness of the mourning celebrations on the people of Karabagh. He reproached them for being the first not to paint the wounds symbolically onto their bodies, but to don white sheets and to “flagellate themselves with swords” (*baş yarmaq*). They were accused of perambulating in the streets of Tabrīz in “bands” (*dästü*) and even to have liberated prisoners from the city gaol, in the mistaken belief that they were performing a meritorious deed. For Sadiq it was obvious that such behaviour was by no means ordered by the *sharī‘a*, but rather originated from superstitious beliefs. His article listed many of the points, that were to form the basis of all later criticisms:

- no educated man takes part in such flagellations;
- if a foreigner were to witness the behaviour of the Muslims during such a procession he should have no option but to think them mad;
- the *sharī‘a* explicitly forbids the infliction of bodily harm on the self or onto others. The existing form of mourning therefore is *bid‘a* and *ḥarām*;
- the spilt blood soils both fellow mourners and the holy places, where the mourners assemble;
- it is to be regretted that the *‘ulamā’* have made no move to forbid such actions.

Shortly afterwards a Muslim officer in the Tsarist army, captain Sultanov from Quba, defended the rituals of mourning as they were practised at the time:²⁵

- everybody has his own personal fashion of mourning. The fact that educated men do not participate in the criticised rituals cannot be held against the rituals;
- it is no proof of the unlawfulness of the sword flagellations that foreigner might regard them as madness. If this were indeed proof,

²⁵ Häsänzadä, *Tam mätin*, pp. 314–316. The letter was published in No. 3, February 1877.

it should also be necessary to outlaw the “ritual prayer” (*uamaʒ*), as foreigners might ridicule this habit, too;

– sword flagellations do not cause harm, but are, to a given extent, conducive to health;

– even his opponent admitted that the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ have not forbidden the sword flagellations. If they were indeed a forbidden habit, why should ‘*ulamāʾ*’ accompany the flagellators during their processions?

– the claim of the flagellations being of recent origins was untrue. They are a time-honoured custom among the Shiites, but in earlier years the Shiites had frequently been forced to perform the flagellations in secret.

At the end of his letter captain Sultanov expressed his gratitude to the Tsar for freely permitting the *taʿziya* performances. His statement led to numerous further reactions until the editor of *Ākinçi* eventually decided to put the debate to an end. The newspaper published only contributions in opposition to Sultanov’s views.²⁶ They accused him of intending to deepen the rift between Shiites and Sunnites by defending outdated traditions. The result was “enmity” (*ādavāt*) between the Muslims at a time when the five law schools should on the contrary be standing together.²⁷ The authors of these letters expressed their regret that even a member of the upper classes, an officer in the army, was found defending such “revolting actions” (*qābih āmāl*) and believed in their being ordered by the *sharīʿa*.

It is quite obvious from these statements that the critics of 1877 were primarily concerned with contemporary rituals in the Muḥarram celebrations and the antagonism between Sunnites and Shiites. Nationality of the participants was not an issue, and only became a topic of discussion in the more polemical debates of the 20th century. One should also note that not a single member of the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ had openly expressed his disapproval of the mourning rituals. This, however, was to change in the years leading up to the First World War.²⁸

²⁶ The famous reformer Mirzā Fātāli Axundov (1812–1878) also was outraged by Sultanov’s argumentation; yet his letter to *Ākinçi* was not published: Abdullayev, *İslamın Mäharrämlik*, p. 48.

²⁷ In the 18th century Nādir Shāh attempted to have Twelver Shiism recognised by the Sunnites as the fifth law school, under the name of the *Jaʿfariyya*. See Halm, *Die Shia*, pp. 127–128; also Brunner, *Annäherung und Distanz*, pp. 20–22.

²⁸ It was not before the 1920s that Arab Shiite ‘*ulamāʾ*’ openly took up positions against the flagellations. See Ende, “Flagellations”.

TOWARDS ISLAMIC UNITY (1902–1920)

The turn from the 19th to the 20th century saw an increasing influence of Pan-Islamic ideas in Transcaucasia, such as those espoused by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī. Thus the Shiite leader Şeyxülislam Axund Äbdüssälām Axundzadä (in office from 1880–1907) proclaimed in 1902 in a work dealing with the basic ideas of Twelver Shiism that every human being believing in God, his Prophet, the Koran and the Day of Judgement should be regarded as a Muslim, even were he not to follow the teachings of Twelver Shiism.²⁹

The years of the Russian revolution of 1905, and the fighting between Muslims and Armenians from 1905 to 1906 had a catalytic effect for the spread of this idea. Experience had shown that denominational divisions were able all but to cripple the ability of the community of Islam to act together in moments of crisis. The aftermath of the revolution witnessed the rise of a highly active press in Baku, in which Western-educated intellectuals participated together with religious scholars.³⁰ In these years the Azerbaijani language achieved closer proximity to Ottoman Turkish, while Persian as intellectual language was clearly in decline. The call for “Islamic unity” (*ittihad-i islam*) now also included the request to accept the Ottoman Turks as “brothers in Islam” instead of treating them as “Sunnite enemies”. The Young Turk revolution of 1908 raised new expectations from the Pan-Islamists, the most famous of which were the authors Äli Bāy Hüseynzadä (1864–1941) and Ähmäd Ağayev (1869–1939): they now expected impulses for the modernisation of Azerbaijani society from Istanbul.

Ähmäd Ağayev’s Baku-based newspaper *İrşad* (1906–1908) was the first to organise a campaign against the then popular forms of Muḥarrām celebrations. The newspaper requested the believers to express their grief in a fashion worthy of the memory of Ḥusayn: the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson should contribute to unity and not to disunion in the Muslim community.³¹ In a departure from

²⁹ Abdullayev, *İslamın Mähärrämlik*, p. 6. The book is Axundzadä, Äbdüssälām: *Risaleyi-ümdätül-ühkam*. Bačkubä 1320 h [1902]; quoted from *Azərbaycan kitabı. Bibliografiya*. Üç cildä. I cild 1780–1920. Baku 1963. (ed. by Ä. J. Äliyev), p. 41, No. 271.

³⁰ About the Azerbaijani press before the war see Bennigsen, Alexandre/Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay: *La presse et le mouvement national chez les musulmans de Russie avant 1920*. Paris 1964, pp. 104–133.

³¹ *İrşad* 1907, No. 14, 17. Zilhiccä 1324, (*Qädir-i Xumm*); No. 17, 4. Mähärräm

the norm, the description of the event was deliberately not taken from one of the Shiite texts then commonly used for recitals of mourning. Instead, the newspaper gave the report of the historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), who, being both Iranian and Shāfiʿī, was believed to be reliable.³² One year later, in Muḥarram 1326, *İrşad* printed the articles *Muaviye*, *Yezid* and *Hüseyn* from the famous Ottoman encyclopedia *Kamusulʾlâm* by Sami Bey Fraşeri. In a postscript, Āli Bāy Hüseyinzadā brought to the attention of his readers the fact that these articles were compulsory texts in Ottoman schools and that their contents were historically true.³³ In both cases the newspaper endeavoured to convince its readers that the Sunnite community also condemned those responsible for the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and were, as the Shiites themselves, filled with grieve about his death.

İrşad attacked the self-flagellations and processions with particular energy. It was able to win the support of the higher-ranking Shiite clergy: on 5th Muḥarram 1325 the members of the society *Hidayāt* assembled in Baku. In the chair was the *qāḍī* of Baku province, Axund Mir Mähämmäd Kärim Mircäfärzadä (1843–1938).³⁴ Two Sunnite members had requested an interpretation of the *shariʿa*: if it were permitted that Muslims flagellate themselves and participate in processions with musical instruments and standards, they, as Sunnites, also asked for permission to participate in these activities. They did not want to be excluded from the honour of publicly expressing their love for Ḥusayn.

It comes as no surprise that the assembled *ākhūnds* answered unanimously: the activities mentioned by the two applicants, particularly the flagellations with swords and chains, the theatrical performances depicting the historical events and the processions with music and great commotion were “a great sin” (*artıq günah*). No work of Islamic jurisprudence mentioned, let alone recommended them; he who participated in such actions deserved to be regarded as a “great sinner” (*böyük günahkar*). On the other hand the *ākhūnds* stressed that

1325, (*Täʿziyâ-i seyid-i şühada*); No. 20, 7. Mähärräm 1325, and so No. 22, 9. Mähärräm 1325 (*İzadarlıq*).

³² *İrşad* published the series between Nos. 18 and 22, 5–9. Mähärräm 1325 under the title *Şühadät-i Hüseyin İbn Āli (ä. s.)*.

³³ *İrşad* 1908, No. 13, 8. Mähärräm 1326, (*Mähärräm vü bazı həqiqətlər*).

³⁴ This society had been founded in 1904 and had predominantly clerics and city notables among its membership. About Mircäfärzadä and the *Hidayāt*-society see İlkin, Qılıman: *Bakı vü Bakılılar*. Baku 1998, pp. 307–311.

mourning as such was meritorious.³⁵ Elaborating on their views, they requested the believers to preserve “decency” (*ādāb*) during the current Muḥarram celebrations. Flagellations and music in and around the mosque were “erroneous and forbidden” (*batil, haram*). They referred to the scenic performances, which included the presentation of the symbolic corpses of the *imām* and his family, as “nonsensical” (*sāfihanā*).³⁶

A few numbers later the editors of the newspaper reported that numerous requests had been made for a separate publication of the decision of the *Hidayāt* society. The editors, however, requested their readers to submit the question to Karbalā’ and Najaf, i.e. to the *mujtahids* of the Iraqi ‘*atabāt*, and to wait for their decision.³⁷ This illustrates the careful treatment the subject received from the Baku theologians. Still the newspaper attempted to present its undertakings as a success: it reported from Tiflis, Ashkhabad and Şāki that, due to correct advice from the *qāḍī* of Baku, the Muḥarram celebrations had been performed in a civilised manner—in some cases peacefully together with the Sunnites. But *İrşad* also published protests against the initiative of the clerics: in a letter from the “Baku Youth”, the ‘*ulamā*’ were accused of an intention to transform the Muslims more and more into “Europeans” (*yavrupski*). The “Baku Youth” refuted the argument that violent mourning was forbidden because it was nowhere mentioned in Muslim jurisprudence, by claiming that both Christians and Jews were practising also numerous religious celebrations nowhere mentioned in either Bible or Thora.³⁸

In order to give a detailed overview of popular attitudes in this question, an in-depth analysis of the Azerbaijani press before and during the First World War, particularly during the month of Muḥarram, is essential. A first modest attempt at such an analysis, which forms the basis for the present contribution, has, however, indicated that *İrşad* stood not alone in its approach.³⁹

³⁵ *İrşad* 1907, No. 18, 5. Mähärräm 1325, (“*Hidayāt*” *mäclisindä mühüm bir mäslänin hälli*).

³⁶ *İrşad* 1907, No. 19, 6. Mähärräm 1325, (*Ümum müslimanlara Hidayät mäclisinin täräfindän ä’lan vâ äxbar olunur*).

³⁷ *İrşad* 1907, No. 23, 12. Mähärräm 1325, (*İdarädän*).

³⁸ *İrşad* 1907, No. 23, 12. Mähärräm 1325, (*Ülämalara cavab*).

³⁹ Similar views also appeared e.g. in *Häqiqät* (1909–1910) and *Haqq Yolu* (1911–1912).

The supporters of a gradual rapprochement between Sunnites and Shiites did not restrict their activities to the condemnation of forbidden rituals: they were inspired by the hope to bridge the existing tension between the denominations through a reappraisal of the past. They attempted to re-interpret early Islamic history and to present it in a way acceptable to both Shiites and Sunnites. The works of the Shiite theologian Axund Yusif Talibzadā (1877–1923) constitute a particularly representative example of such treatises. In a school textbook, published shortly before the outbreak of the First World War he attempts to tell the schoolchildren the events following the death of the Prophet in a manner avoiding to create hostile feelings towards the caliphs preceding ‘Alī and also with regard to the *ṣaḥāba*.⁴⁰ Talibzadā distinguishes between religious leadership, which was the prerogative of the *imāms*, and temporary leadership, which might also be executed by others, although in principle came under the *imāms*’ remit. He deliberately lists five “righteous” (*raṣīdīn*) caliphs and stresses the fact that Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān had always honoured ‘Alī and sought his advice in all important questions. Talibzadā depicts the assassination of ‘Uthmān as an event about which ‘Alī had been extremely aggrieved: ‘Alī had reproached his sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn for not having sufficiently defended ‘Uthmān. ‘Alī, as described by Talibzadā, is prepared to forgo the political leadership of the *umma* rather than to fall out with the *ṣaḥāba*. Such a sense of solidarity, according to Talibzadā and other scholars,⁴¹ is also observable in the relationship between Ḥusayn and the sons of the *ṣaḥāba*: they unanimously condemned the accession of Yazīd to the throne, but—unfortunately—had not co-operated with each other in order to prevent it. Consequently it fell to Ḥusayn to rise against the “unlawful occupation of the caliphate” and to be killed. The responsibility for the bloody wars of early Islamic history lay with the Banū Umayya, particularly the later caliph Marwān b. al-Ḥakam, who appears to have been involved in all the tragedies in the role of an “evil spirit”. When contrasted with the ritual coursing of the *ṣaḥāba*, one of the traditions of the Shia, this interpretation of early Islamic history indeed represents a radical break with the past.

⁴⁰ Talibzadā, *Miḫtāsār tarīx-i islam*. A few years earlier he had advocated similar positions in: Talibzadā, *Islam vā māzahib*.

⁴¹ *Irşad* 1908, No. 14, 12. Mäharrām 1326 (*Tā’zīyā günləri. Aşura bittü*).

A second source of criticism, parallel to these Pan-Islamic strictures, of Muḥarram rituals was a modernising school of thought which mainly expressed its views in the satirical periodical *Molla Näsreddin*.¹² Year after year the editors attacked the Muḥarram celebrations with caricatures and biting satirical articles. The first article of this kind was printed in reaction to the decisions of the *Hidayät*-society.¹³ The theologians were accused of having remained silent far too long. The ordinary believer could not but be astonished that a time-honoured ritual should, all of a sudden, be in contradiction to religious law. *Molla Näsreddin* listed a number of arguments, which were also to be repeated by the Bolsheviki in the 1920s:¹⁴

- for all the (outside) world the rituals look ridiculous;
- the ‘*ulamā*’ do not flagellate themselves, but encourage the flagellators;
- those who flagellate themselves most severely on the ‘*Āshūrā*’ day are otherwise the greatest sinners;
- even many intellectuals rather prefer to watch than to condemn the riotous activities of the “Kärbäläyis” and “Mäşädis”;
- the sole aim of the organisers of the processions, particularly the “recitators” (*märsiyäxan, rövzäxan*), was to enrich themselves.

In spite of these criticisms the Muḥarram ceremonies became increasingly popular in Transcaucasia in the years immediately before the First World War. Contemporary observers describe in great length the splendour with which they were celebrated. In Baku they had been outlawed after the Muslim-Armenian riots of 1905/06 and were only permitted again in 1912.¹⁵ During the First World War and the years of the Müsavat Republic (1918–1920) the ceremonies increasingly assumed a political role, which forced the Bolsheviki to deal with them after their invasion of Azerbaijan.¹⁶

¹² Abdullayev, *İslamn mähärrämlik*, p. 22.

¹³ Molla Näsreddin 1907, No. 6, 10.2.1907, (*Baş yarmaq*).

¹⁴ See e.g. Molla Näsreddin 1909, No. 2, 11.1.1909, (*Necä qan ađlamasın daş bu gün, qırxılvır gör neçä mın baş bu gün*); No. 50, 13.12.1909, (*Bikarlar bayramı*); 1910, No. 3, 17.1.1910 (*Düşmännlär*); 1911, No. 43, 4.12.1911 (*Nainsıfıq*).

¹⁵ I owe this information to Jörg Baberowski, a specialist on Eastern European History at Tübingen University, who has kindly granted me insight into the typescript of his professorial dissertation: “Kolonialismus und zivilisatorische Mission. Aserbaidschan 1870–1941.” It is scheduled for publication in 2001.

¹⁶ Klimovich, *Islam*, p. 241; Āhädov, *Azərbaycanda islamı*, p. 101.

THE SOVIET ERA: "DOWN WITH MUHARRAM SUPERSTITION!"

Cäyhun Hacıbəyli, then exiled in Europe, claimed in 1959 that it had been more taxing for the Bolsheviki to fight the Muḥarram ceremonies than all other religious rituals.⁴⁷ Two neighbouring countries, Iran and Turkey, also outlawed public performances in the course of the 1920s.⁴⁸ Only in the Soviet Union, however, did the struggle against the ceremonies—now commonly called *mähür-rämlik*—become the first step towards an atheistic campaign, which was conducted with increasing ruthlessness.⁴⁹

Although the flagellations had been forbidden right after the incorporation of Azerbaijan into the Soviet Empire in 1920, the authorities initially avoided administrative measures. On the contrary, the Bolsheviki hoped to be able to use the "revolutionary potential" of Islam for their own purpose, namely to weaken the influence of Britain and France in Asia. Consequently the Bolsheviki portrayed themselves at first as protectors of the Muslims and Islamic culture. One manifestation of this official attitude in practise was that the *'Āshūrā'* day was made a bank holiday. "The Yazīd of our days is British imperialism", the Soviet propagandists announced. The believers were exhorted not to spill their own blood at Muḥarram, but to take up the sword and rush to the aid of Istanbul, Cairo etc.⁵⁰

Yet this sensitive attitude soon underwent significant changes. From 1922 until the early 1930s annual campaigns were undertaken starting shortly before the beginning of Muḥarram, in which the workers were advised (by means of public lectures, sermons in the mosques, newspaper articles, anti-Muḥarram brochures and theatre plays) not to participate in any Muḥarram celebrations. Specimens of such literature that have been published show clearly that none of the authors in the 1920s was well acquainted with Marxism in general or Historical Materialism in particular. As a result, the literature represents an interesting local attempt to reinterpret early Islamic history

⁴⁷ Khadzhibeili, *Antiislamistskaia*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ Iran outlawed sword flagellations in 1928 and all *ta'ziya* performances in 1935. See Halm, *Die Shia*, p. 183. Turkey had already done so in 1926. Pistor-Hatam, *'Āyūrā in Istanbul*, p. 119.

⁴⁹ See Jörg Baberowski: "Stalinismus als imperiales Phänomen: die islamischen Regionen der Sowjetunion 1920-1941." In: Stefan Plaggenborg (ed.): *Stalinismus: neue Forschungen und Konzepte*. Berlin 1998, pp. 113-150.

⁵⁰ Abdullayev, *Islamun mähür-rämlik*, p. 65.

and the origin of the Shia. The terror of the 1930s, however, put a premature end to this phase.

A number of Soviet propaganda articles against *mähärrämlik* have been used in the compilation of the present study. The following list is far from exhaustive, but nevertheless reflects the gradual development of propaganda in the 1920s and early 1930s.

- Qarayev, Äliheydär: *Matäm kimä lazımdır?* Baku 1923. (henceforth MKL)
- Mämmädzadä, Cälil: *Mähärrämlik baräsindä*. Baku 1924. (henceforth MB)
- Ordubadi, Mähämmäd Säid: *Mähärrämlik vä rövzäxanlıq*. Baku 1924. (henceforth MR)
- *Mähärräm vä märsiyäxanlar*. Baku 1925 (introduction by M. S. Ordubadi)
- Ordubadi, Mähämmäd Säid: *Kərbäla hadisälärinin mänşäi*. Baku 1925.
- *Mähärräm münasibätilä tesimalär*. Baku 1926.
- Ordubadi, Mähämmäd Säid: *Nä üçün ağılayurlar? Kərbäla hadisəsi baräsindä tarixi mä'lumat*. Baku 1927.
- Ordubadi, Mähämmäd Säid: *Mühärräm vä mädämi inqilab*. Baku 1929.
- Ordubadi, Mähämmäd Säid: *Mähärrämlik adätläri äleyhinä*. Baku 1930.
- Ordubadi, Mähämmäd Säid: *Mähärrämlik mevhumatı vä onun sinfi mahıyyätı*. Baku 1931.
- Xuluflu, Väli: *Mähärrämlik münasabätilä*. Baku 1932.

Besides this an appendix to Abdullayev contains numerous articles from the years 1922–1925, which have been published in the newspapers *Kommunist* or *Bakinskü Rabochü*.⁵¹ Further material from the period 1925–1929 is to be found in Hacıbäyli.⁵²

Between 1922 and 1924 the Bolsheviki still frequently resorted to an Islamic terminology and attempted to win the support of the ‘ulamā’. In 1922/23 the ‘ulamā’ indeed saw themselves forced to react to the increasingly powerful accusations of not having done anything against the “forbidden innovations” in the past, and to condemn publicly the ceremonies. It would be incorrect to interpret this only

⁵¹ Abdullayev, *İslamın mähärrämlik*, pp. 136–155.

⁵² Hadjibeyli, “Anti-Islamic”, pp. 30–39.

as *taqīya*. Since 1923 the argumentation of the scholars was in full accordance with the *Hidayāt*-decisions of 1907 and may be regarded as part of the Pan-Islamic and modernist discourse of the early 20th century.

In September 1922 Axund Ābdülrahman Hadızadä, *qāḍī* of Baku, was asked three questions concerning Muḥarram by the newspaper *Kommunist*:

1. What is his personal opinion about the processions?
2. Does the *sharī'a* permit sword flagellations and body-piercing?
3. Is it lawful (according to the *sharī'a*) to stage scenic performances and to emulate funeral processions?

The *qāḍī*'s answer indicated that it was permitted to remind the people of the suffering of Ḥusayn, as long as this was not done in an excited and "wild" (*vāxşi*) manner. It was undignified to do so by screaming and shouting, to carry dolls around or to dress "pretty" boys up as women. Flagellations, however, were forbidden on principle, as were scenic or musical performances in mosques.⁵³

In the following year *Kommunist* published a long article about the subject, in which Hadızadä attacked particularly the "pagan character" (*bütpärästlik*) of the rituals:⁵⁴ In past centuries many of the pagan rituals which had been outlawed by Muḥammad had been readopted into the Islamic creed, and occasionally even attained the status of commandments. Meanwhile the mosque often resembled a temple of idolaters, and became a teahouse and theatre during Muḥarram. This alteration of the function of the mosque represented a serious *bid'a*. Hadızadä regretted that many uneducated people still clung to these rituals, although the *'ulamā'* had always condemned them. A considerable proportion of the Muslims thought it a sin to do away with these ceremonies, in the mistaken belief that they were a "good deed" (*sāvab*). In the name of the scholars of Islam Hadızadä declared:

1. Such forbidden activities cannot be meritorious.
2. If indeed it were a sin to put a stop to these rituals, then the *'ulamā'* were ready to accept the responsibility and turn themselves into sinners.

⁵³ *Kommunist*, 1.9.1922; quoted from Abdullayev, *İslamın mähəvənlilik*, pp. 95–96.

⁵⁴ *Kommunist*, No. 175, 5.3.1923, (*Mähəvənliliyə dair "müslimanlıqda bütpärästlik"*); quoted from MR, pp. 63–65.

Only a few days later the same newspaper published a “Declaration of the Scholars of Azerbaijan” (*Azərbaycan ulümasının bəyanaməsi*),⁵⁵ which stated that the traditional Muḥarram ceremonies were instigated by “false scholars” (*alimnüma*), who only hoped to enrich themselves from the mourning for Ḥusayn. The rituals were both in contradiction to the *sharīʿa* and good manners. The ‘*ulamāʾ*’ had always preached against the celebrations, but had not received any support from the Tsarist government. Instead they had been “cursed” (*lāʾn vā tākfir*) by the people. They now hoped for determined action against the rituals from the Soviet government; the latter should not refrain from the use of force and, should that be necessary, not hesitate to close the border, in the case of uneducated Iranian mollahs or dervishes wishing to enter Azerbaijan from Iran.

This position was by no means adopted merely by the scholars of Baku. In the more rural areas there were also numerous demands from Shiite dignitaries to permit the Muḥarram celebrations only “in an appropriate manner”. Thus the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ of Karabagh issued in 1923 a fatwa against the flagellations and all attempts to portray these practises as a commandment of the *sharīʿa*. Earlier generations of Islamic scholars, whose silence in this matter the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ also held responsible for the present miserable state of affairs, were harshly criticised.⁵⁶

A summary of these arguments shows clearly that the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ were predominantly interested in “cleansing” the memory of Ḥusayn from “pagan” and “wild” rituals, and thus in reconciling Islam with a radically changed political situation. But this will for compromise on the part of the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ did not prevent a general crusade against Islam, which the Bolsheviki were to initiate only a short while later.

In this atheistic campaign their first target was the “uneducated” *rövzāxan*, who had also frequently been attacked by many scholars. The *rövzāxan* and his “superstitious” stories were particularly vulnerable to satirical comments. Consequently they were incorporated in many caricatures and theatre plays in the early 1920s. One of the most productive authors of anti-Muḥarram pamphlets, Mähämmäd

⁵⁵ Besides the active *qāḍī* of Baku, Hadızadä, the ‘*ulamāʾ*’ included the former *qāḍī* Mircäfärzadä and the *shaikh al-islām*, Axund Molla Ağa Ālizada (1870–1954); see *Kommunist* No. 180, 10.8.1923 (*Mähärrämülhäranda täʾziyədarlıq*); quoted from MR, pp. 66–68.

⁵⁶ *Kommunist*, No. 184, 15.8.1923, (*Qayabağ ulümalarının mähärrämlik haqqında fätvası*); quoted from MR, pp. 69–72.

Säid Ordubadi (1872–1950), published in 1924 a lengthy treatise on the history of the mourning recitals (MR). Ordubadi concentrated his attacks on the greatly exaggerated description of the events of Karbalāʾ by Fazil Därbändi, on which many *rövzäxan* had based their own versions.⁵⁷ It is interesting that Ordubadi felt the need to stress that he did not argue against the ceremonies from the position of a Bolshevik or an Atheist, but from that of a Muslim.⁵⁸ Such a cautious attitude would become unthinkable only a few years later. In his writings Ordubadi relied on the works of the Persian scholar Mīrzā Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad Taqī Nūrī Ṭabrisī (1839–1902), who had analysed Därbändi's writings meticulously and found them devoid of any credibility.

Ordubadi and other authors were particularly concerned with the question how such a culture of mourning could have come into existence and have spread. In their answers the Azerbaijani communists did not shy from using nationalistic arguments. As early as 1922 they pointed out that the *rövzäxan* and the Muḥarram ceremonies had originally come from Persia. Many dervishes, mollahs and recitators came to Azerbaijan in order to earn their bread by exhorting the population to cry and mourn throughout the year.⁵⁹ The Turkic workers and farmers were requested not to follow any longer such foreign influences, and the government was advised to expel such “charlatans”.⁶⁰

The population was to be informed of the “true” circumstances of the events of Karbalāʾ, which was expected to lead to the realisation that mourning was thoroughly inappropriate. This approach also allowed the authors to re-evaluate the early history of Islam in materialist terms. The most important arguments were as follows:⁶¹

⁵⁷ The theologian Ağa ibn Abid Fazil Därbändi (ca. 1785–1869) was the author of a report on the battle of Karbalāʾ (*Äsrar äy-şühada*), which enjoyed great popularity in Azerbaijan. His critics accused him of having explicitly recommended the flagellations; see Abdullayev, *İslamın mähärrämlik*, p. 13; also Nakash, “Attempt”, p. 176.

⁵⁸ MR, p. 15.

⁵⁹ This was the argumentation of Äli Heydär Qarayev (1896–1938), who was temporarily secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party. See *Kommunist*, 24. Avqust 1922, (*Yenä mah-i mähärräm gäldi*); quoted from Abdullayev, *İslamın mähärrämlik*, p. 140.

⁶⁰ In 1927 the central committee of the Azerbaijani Communist Party declared officially that the geographic origin of the flagellations was Persia; see Khadzhibeili, *Antüislamistskaia*, pp. 31–33.

⁶¹ The summary is based on the propaganda writings listed above.

1. The battle of Karbalā' was only the last act of a tribal struggle between the Banū Hāshim and the Banū Umayya, which had lasted for several generations. Both clans competed for pre-eminence in Mecca, the economic centre of Arabia. The temporarily defeated Hāshimites had, in the person of Muḥammad, found an ideological weapon with which they were able to regain hegemony. The Umayyads had been forced to surrender after having been defeated by the Prophet, but regarded 'Uthmān's accession to the caliphate as a chance to turn the tables. This time the struggle was not only for Mecca, but a newly founded empire. Thus Ḥusayn's revolt had no religious meaning, but rather a political one. He did not come to Karbalā' in order to die, but in order to put the Banū Hāshim into power again. The so-called "tragedy" was in reality a then perfectly usual skirmish between feudal lords.

2. Still the events gave rise to many "legends" (*dādiqodu*). The Arab opponents of the Umayyads justified their rebellions with the argument that these uprisings were simply a revenge for the death of the Prophet's grandson. Thus the legends gradually assumed a more religious character. The Persian aristocracy, never reconciled with losing national independence, hoped to be able to use the murder of Ḥusayn in order to weaken the power of the Arab caliphs. Therefore they gave strong support to the 'Alīds against the Umayyads and later the Abbasids. The Persian-Ottoman wars were simply a continuation of the Hāshimite-Umayyad struggle in a time when the Abbasids had been replaced with the Ottoman sultan-caliphs. The Persian aristocracy fostered the Muḥarram ceremonies and the "culture of crying" in order to incite hatred for the Sunnites among the Shiites. All these factors contributed to incorporate the battle of Karbalā' unjustifiedly into an Islamic *heilsgeschichte*.

3. While the Umayyads in Syria adopted many elements of Byzantine culture and thus developed Arab feudalism, Ḥusayn represented the heroic culture of the Bedouin of the patriarchal epoch. Thus the battle of Karbalā' logically had to end in the victory of the more "civilised" Umayyads. The battle of Chaldīran in 1514 was a similar example: the Safawids stood for a theocracy, which was much more hostile to innovation than Ottoman feudalism. Thus the more "progressive" side was able to win victory also in the battle of Chaldīrān.

4. The appearance of the Shia was only a "false sidestep" of Islamic history. Shiite religious beliefs and rituals are termed as "ugly"

(*iyranç*) and “wild”. While Islam is generally at least credited with having led the Arabs from nomadism to national unity, the Shia is accused of having represented since the earliest times a force bent on conflict and factionalism. The masses of the people were never able to profit from the Shia.

The last two points in particular clearly show the grotesque shape the struggle against the Muḥarram ceremonies took in the 1920s: a communist used “Pan-Islamic” arguments against the Shia, with a radicalism a Sunnite polemicist would have been hard-pressed to exceed. An Azerbaijani defended the honour of the Ottoman sultans at a time when Kemalist Turkey was struggling to disentangle herself from the Ottoman past.

Public Muḥarram celebrations indeed became increasingly rare towards the end of the 1920s. In 1931 the state leadership already believed itself strong enough to take another step. In a law referring especially to the Muḥarram ceremonies the following rituals were outlawed on May 24, 1931.⁶²

- *Şahsey-Vaxsey* processions;
- inflicting bodily harm on oneself or on others;
- flagellations with swords or chains;
- cutting cut the forehead of children with a razor blade;
- mourning a group of Arab feudalists in specially designated houses.

The decree did not only, as in Iran or Turkey, refer to processions and flagellations, but included also ritual mourning in private assemblies. The Second World War, however, forced the Soviet leadership to re-examine its policies towards religion. The result was the recreation of a religious administration, also in Transcaucasia, with a *shaikh al-islām* in the chair. His duties included advising the Muslims to assemble on ‘*Āshūrā*’ day only in mosques, so that they might “legally” mourn Ḥusayn. Still the authorities were confronted with illegal processions and even sword flagellations in the 1950s and 1960s; in Nakhichevan and the southern regions of Azerbaijan this was particularly common.⁶³

⁶² Abdullayev, *İslamın mäharrämlik*, p. 83.

⁶³ See Abdullayev, *İslamın mäharrämlik*, pp. 104–120; Klimovich, *İslam*, p. 243; Ähädox, *Azärbaycanda islamm*, pp. 104–105; Sättarov, *İslam dini*, pp. 31–35.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union and the foundation of the independent Azerbaijani Republic the discussion about the meaning of *mähärrämlik* has been given a new lease of life, although in a less emotional manner when compared to the early twentieth century. While processions and flagellations are in some places again regularly performed by “believers” (*dindar*) and advocated by mollahs, other Islamic scholars raise strong objections to these rituals and the “culture of mourning”.⁶⁴ It may well be expected that the question whether *mähärrämlik* is a fundamental element of Azerbaijani culture or an outdated, foreign ritual will remain a controversial issue. Its supraregional character is demonstrated by the fact that voices from Turkey and Iran also partake in this debate.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Such processions have again been organised by local clerics in the village of Buzovna from 1993 onwards; see Älizadä, *Azärbaycan därişläri*, p. 37. Qasimoğlu, *Ayä aydınlığında*, pp. 48–49, 104–110, is an example for literature raising objections to the rituals.

⁶⁵ Religious publications from the Islamic Republic of Iran, written in the Azerbaijani language and in Cyrillic script, are available in Azerbaijan; see e.g. Niya, Xosrov Taqäddüsi: *Imam Hüseyin (ä) häräkätü haqqında 72 sual*. Qum 1998. (Äimmä näşriyyatı).