


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# What Sadness for Husain? Comparative ethnographic analysis of two Muharram celebrations in Sindh and Punjab (Pakistan)

Delphine Ortis 

Inalco – Associate Researcher CESA, Paris, France  
Email: [delphine.ortis@gmail.com](mailto:delphine.ortis@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

The commemoration of Husain’s martyrdom named “Muharram” implies for the Shi’ite community that it publicly expresses its grief. This emotion is central to its definition, as Muharram is referred to as the “month of mourning” and the Shi’ite as a “community of mourners.” However, Muharram would not be equivalent across Pakistan, as a young Shi’ite fakir, who will serve as our guide, in this comparative study, points out. According to him, the sadness would be greater in Lahore (Punjab) than in Sehwan (Sindh), and for this reason Muharram would be better celebrated there. The comparison of the ritual process in these two cities, drawn from the experiences of this fakir and the ethnographer, will show how the production and expression of sadness are subject to contrasting experiences on the one hand, and divergent aims on the other, depending on the position of the actors in the social context in which they are lived.

**Keywords:** Emotion; Muharram; Pakistan; Ritual; Shi’ism

This comparative study arose from the remark of a young “ascetic” (*faqīr*) I met in Sehwan (Sindh Province), who will be referred to here as ‘Ali<sup>1</sup>. He had invited me in 2014 to join him at his family home in Lahore (Punjab)<sup>2</sup> shortly before the beginning of the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husain and his followers in Karbala in AD

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Doctor in social anthropology and ethnology from EHESS, associate researcher at CESA, lecturer at ESSEC, INALCO, and EHESS. She has been conducting research for several years on the ritual practices of worship of Muslim saints in South Asia, on the organization of their shrines, and on the relations between Sufism and Shi’ism.

<sup>1</sup> The first name has been changed.

<sup>2</sup> I lived with ‘Ali’s family for a month in 2014 in the Lahori neighborhood Thokar Niaz Baig.

680, named “Muharram.”<sup>3</sup> Implicitly referring to our shared knowledge of the Sehwan rituals,<sup>4</sup> he said to me, “You will see that here [in Lahore] Muharram is celebrated better [than in Sehwan]; there is much more sadness (*bahut zīādā gham*). For those familiar with Muharram, its association with sadness is a truism. Indeed, the new moon of muharram ushers in a 40-day period of sadness,<sup>5</sup> the public display of which is specific to the Shi’ite community “generally known as a ‘community of mourners.’”<sup>6</sup> Having other targets for my fieldwork in Lahore than Muharram (a coincidence of timing), I settled for a distracted “why?” ‘Alī’s answer, “There are more *mātam*” [‘physical acts of mourning’ unique to Muharram], seemed to me at the time just as conventional and unoriginal as sadness. Today, his remark catches my attention, because it implies that emotion is a criterion of evaluation, of judgement, which makes it possible to establish appreciable and shareable hierarchies beyond the individuality of each person.

Historians and sociologists, following Émile Durkheim<sup>7</sup> who associated emotion and religious experience, have also made emotions an object of study.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to psychologists, they have apprehended them as “dispositions that we cultivate”<sup>9</sup> and have thus given back to the passive subject of psychologists its active part “to be moved or to resist emotion.”<sup>10</sup> For anthropologists, emotions are also “a singular way – but not individual – of relating to the collective, to the world, to others”<sup>11</sup> and of negotiating the relationship with oneself.<sup>12</sup> If we consider emotions as “modes of defining and negotiating social relations and the self in a moral order”<sup>13</sup> (Ibid.: 282–83), we need to question the way ‘Alī defines himself in relation to the world around him.

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<sup>3</sup> It is named after the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar, muharram (written with a lowercase to distinguish it from the name of the commemoration), in which it takes place. It lasts for 40 days, but the main rituals are concentrated on the first 10 days.

<sup>4</sup> I observed two Muharrams in Sehwan (2009 and 2013), in which ‘Alī participated. Here the term “ritual” refers to the Urdu word used by my interlocutors “*rasm-rivāī*”; the Arabic word *‘ibādāt* is rarely used.

<sup>5</sup> Akbar Hyder Syed, *Reliving Karbala. Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press 2006), 14–19.

<sup>6</sup> Nadeem Hasnain and Husain Abrar, *Shias and Shia Islam in India. A Study in Society and Culture* (New Delhi: Harnam Publications, 1988), 157.

<sup>7</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: PUF Quadrige, 1994 [1912]), 327.

<sup>8</sup> See among others, William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Charles-Henry Cuin, “Emotions et rationalité dans la sociologie classique: les cas de Weber et Durkheim,” *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, XXXIX-120 (2001): 77–100; and Yannick Fer, “Emotion,” in *Dictionnaire des faits religieux*, eds., Régine Azria and Danièle Hervieu-Léger (Paris: PUF Quadrige, 2010), 313–16.

<sup>9</sup> Vinciane Despret, *Ces émotions qui nous fabriquent. Ethnopsychologie des émotions/de l’authenticité* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2001), 106.

<sup>10</sup> Despret, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Despret, 246.

<sup>12</sup> Despret, 283.

<sup>13</sup> Despret, 282–83.

‘Alī presents himself as a *malañg*, that is an ascetic of the Qalandarī Sufi order<sup>14</sup> and a *momin* (“believer”).<sup>15</sup> In both respects, he is opposed to his birth background, as he was born into a Sunni family affiliated with the Naqshbandiyyā order.<sup>16</sup> His conversion to Shi’ism was based on a twofold process. On the one hand, the influence of his Shi’ite “aunt” (*māmī*)<sup>17</sup> who raised him, and on the other hand his mystical commitment to Lāl Shahbāz Qalandar<sup>18</sup> and his companion Bodlo Bahār at Sehwan, which involves paying allegiance to a Shi’ite spiritual master and to the Prophet’s Family and the Shi’ite Imams. His position in Sehwan is that of an ascetic, while in Lahore it is that of a Shi’ite from a popular and outlying neighbourhood (Thokar Niaz Baig). “Alī’s dual position reflected my own. Indeed, my hosts had given me different positions in Sehwan and Lahore, resulting in the production of two ethnographies, one unbalanced in relation to the other, on the basis of which I aim to construct a comparison in this article. For Sehwan’s Muharram, I have a relatively complete and detailed ethnography, based on an in-depth knowledge of local society.<sup>19</sup> To put it in Mauss’ terms “I know what people do there and who they are.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast, my observations of Muharram in Thokar Niaz Baig, a neighbourhood that has remained unfamiliar to me, are lacunar. They are reduced to the few rituals in which Aunt<sup>21</sup> and I took part, with no precise idea of their place in the chronology of commemoration, nor of their organizers.<sup>22</sup> So my view of this Muharram is fragmented and gendered. Although this imbalance is not a priori optimal for comparison, it has proved heuristic. It prompted me to shift my gaze on ritual, from collective mobilization to personal action on the one hand, and to rethink relationships to the self and to the world<sup>23</sup> as a function of place and context on the other, and consequently to the various possibilities of (being) experienced (by) the rituals.

I therefore seize on his remark today to compare the Muharram rituals of these two Pakistani localities, through the angle of the production of emotions, and more

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<sup>14</sup> About *malañg*, see Alexandre Papas, “Malang,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (3) (Leiden, Netherlands, and Boston: Brill, 2020b), 117–120; and about the lives of the ascetics of Sehwan, see Ortis “Building Up Oneself as an Ascetic in the Shadow of Devotional Artifacts: The Case of the *Malañg-Fuqarā* of Pakistan,” *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World*, no. 1, (2020): 309–25.

<sup>15</sup> This term is generally used in Pakistan by Shi’ites to assert themselves as the “true believers” of Islam, in opposition to Sunni Muslims.

<sup>16</sup> In terms of values and practices, the Naqshbandī and Qalandarī orders are the opposite, see Ahmed. T. Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends. Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period 1200–1550* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2006); and Papas, “Antinomianism (*Ibāha*, *Ibāhiyya*)” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (three) (Leiden, Netherlands, and Boston: Brill, 2020a), 22–27.

<sup>17</sup> She is the wife of ‘Alī’s mother’s brother. In the following text, she will be referred to as “Aunt.”

<sup>18</sup> Among many of Michel Boivin’s works on Lāl Shahbāz Qalandar, see *Artefacts of Devotion. A Sufi Repertoire of the Qalandariyya in Sehwan Sharif (South Pakistan)* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Between 2009 and 2022, I carried out seven ethnographic fieldworks focusing on different aspects of local society and participated in the Muharram twice (2009 and 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Louis Dumont, “Une science en devenir,” *Revue L’Arc*, no. 48 (1972): 8–21.

<sup>21</sup> At the time, she had four small children and a bedridden mother-in-law to care for, so she had little time for Muharram.

<sup>22</sup> Alī’s family did not let me find out from others and even prevented me from doing so.

<sup>23</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard Tel, 1945).

precisely of the social construction of sadness.<sup>24</sup> And I hypothesise that this “much more sadness” is less to do with ritual<sup>25</sup> differences than with the relationships this young man has to others and to himself in each of these localities.

### Sadness, A Singular Emotional Disposition of the Shi'ite Community

Expressing sadness and restraining any expression of joy during the month of muharram is central to Shi'ite piety. As Regula Burckhardt Qureshi<sup>26</sup> says “to the Shi'a, Husainiyat – a term encompassing all that Husain and his martyrdom stand for . . . is the emotional mainspring of the Shi'a religious experience.” Weeping for Husain is, on the one hand, personal and collective evidence of Alide loyalty<sup>27</sup> or devotional allegiance to the Family of the Prophet,<sup>28</sup> in other words the public affirmation of personal and collective support for Husain's side in the battle of Karbala. The tears shed are, on the other hand, proof of sincere faith. Moreover, in this sense they have a price. They are a means of obtaining the intercession of the heroes of Karbala to overcome the obstacles of daily life and to acquire “merits” (*sawāb*) for the future life.<sup>29</sup> This is not the case for other Indo-Pakistani communities (Sunni and Hindu) who also commemorate this historic event.

The few studies concerning the Sunni community give a very different picture, such as those of Saiyid<sup>30</sup> who states for Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, “accordingly, in many communities, Muharram has become a curious amalgam in which the festive and recreational aspects stand out.” Hollister<sup>31</sup> is even more explicit “in many places the spirit of *carnival* has entered into this portion of commemoration [Procession] as in others,” and again “the Sunnis take part only as a *tamāsha* or carnival.” G. E. Brown<sup>32</sup> says that in the Deccan the Muḥarram “is the carnival of the year; observed more by Sunnis than Shi'as . . . . Sunni participation in the *ta'zia* Procession at Shahjahanpur, United Provinces, has transformed it until the element of mourning has been almost completely eliminated.” The expression of sadness during Muḥarram is thus primarily specific to the Shi'a community.

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<sup>24</sup> This study offers neither historical analysis nor historical depth but focuses on the social construction of sadness in Pakistani society at a given time.

<sup>25</sup> As Sabrina Mervin noted, “Ashūrā' Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India)” (2014: 507),” in *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law* (Shi'i Heritage Series), eds., F. Daftary and G. Miskinzoda (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 161–81, there is “unity and [the] extreme diversity of the discourses and the practices at work in commemoration of Muharram.”

<sup>26</sup> Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, “Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shi'a Majlis,” *Society for Ethnomusicology* 25–1 (1981): 41–71.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 372.

<sup>28</sup> Vernon J. Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam. Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>29</sup> It is commonly believed that Fatima and her daughter Zainab collect the tears of the mourners to present them to God on the Day of Judgement; see David Pinault, *The Shi'ites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 116; and Karen Ruffle, “May Fatimah Gather Our Tears: The Mystical and Intercessory Powers of Fatimah al-Zahra in Indo-Persian, Shi'i Devotional Literature and Performance,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010b): 386–97.

<sup>30</sup> A. R. Saiyid, “Ideal and Reality in the Observance of Moharram: A Behavioural Interpretation,” in *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India*, ed., Imtiaz Ahmad (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), 113–41.

<sup>31</sup> John N. Hollister, *The Shi'a of India* (London: Luzac and Compagny, LTD, 1953), 166.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted by Hollister, 177.

According to the moral values of this community, the battle and martyrdom of Husain in Karbala are eminently sad events. And it is through the public expression of this emotion that they claim their adherence to the cause of Husain and mark their disagreement with the attitude of those who became the Sunnis. The Shi'a universe therefore cultivates its singular sadness. The value of this sadness lies in the fact that it must clearly stand out from ordinary sorrows. The death of 'Alī's maternal grandmother a few days after 10 muharram did not result in public displays of grief by family members, although it is clear that 'Alī and his uncle were personally very affected by the loss. As Toby M. Howarth<sup>33</sup> writes, "the Sufferings of Karbala encompass and eclipse all others, relativizing all 'ordinary' personal suffering by individual believers." The suffering endured by Husain and his family for the cause of Islam is therefore incomparable. For this to be truly so, those who stand in solidarity with them must mourn more intensely for them than for their own family members, by performing a set of rituals during Muharram called the "mourning ceremony" ('*azādārī*).

The '*azādārī* complex in Pakistan consists mainly of three types of rites.<sup>34</sup> The "Assembly" (*majlis*) at which an "orator" (*zākir*) brings to life gradually the exploits and sufferings of the heroes of Karbala to the community through the power of his words. The "Procession" (*julūs*) by which the community parades the artefacts of its heroes: the standard of Husain's half-brother Ghāzī 'Abbas ('*alam*),<sup>35</sup> the cradle of 'Alī Asghar (*jhūlā*), Zūljinaḥ,<sup>36</sup> and the replica of their tomb (*tabūt*) or mausoleum (*ta'ziyah*). Finally, the "physical acts of mourning" (*mātam*),<sup>37</sup> which consist of self-inflicted physical suffering of various kinds. The most common is the "*mātam* of the chest" (*hāth kā mātam, sinā kā mātam* or *sinazani*), a rhythmic repetitive chest-/breast-beating by the hands. The most extreme forms are the "*mātam* of chains" (*zanjir kā mātam, zanjirī mātam*) flogging of the back with knives hung on chains, and the "*mātam* of the sword" (*talwār kā mātam*) slashing of the skull with sabre blows. As we shall see, these rituals, detailed in the remainder of the article according to their local characteristics, aim to cultivate sadness, which itself produces the Shi'ite community.

It is recalled that for 'Alī the commemoration in Lahore is sadder "because there are more *mātam*" than in Sehwan. My data do not allow me to confirm or deny this claim. However, it can be noted that the *mātam* of the hands takes place in different ritual contexts. In Lahore, it closes the Assemblies, performed to the rhythm of a

<sup>33</sup> Toby M. Howarth, *The Twelver Shi'a as a Muslim Minority in India. Pulpit of Tears* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 158.

<sup>34</sup> According to Mervin, 161–81, five rituals characterize Muharram, two of which are absent from our observations: the pious visitation (*ziyārat*) of Ḥusain's shrine in Karbalā and the dramatic representation of the drama of Karbala and of the *Ahl al-Bayt*'s epic (*ta'ziyah* or *shabīh*). *Ahl al-Bayt* or Prophet's Family is Muhammad, 'Alī, Fatima, Hasan, and Husain

<sup>35</sup> The '*alam* is associated with Ghāzī 'Abbas, the standard-bearer ('*alamdār*) of Husain's army and the archetypal warrior, whose story is central to the martyrology of Karbala; 'Alī put 'Abbās in charge of protecting Ḥusain. Caught in an ambush as he went to get water for Husain's children, who were deprived of water by the enemy, he was injured several times. While his pouch full of the precious liquid is punctured and both his arms cut off, he does not let go of Husain's standard. See 'Abbas Shemeem Burney, "Sakineh, the Narrator of Karbala: An Ethnographic Description of a Women's Majles Ritual in Pakistan," in *Islam and Society in Pakistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed., Marcus Marsden (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 283–98.

<sup>36</sup> Zūljinaḥ is Husain's riderless mount; he recalls that the women learned of his death when his horse returned to camp alone.

<sup>37</sup> *Mātam* is a polysemous term embracing the ideas of funeral, mourning, and grief.

versified elegy called *nauhah*, while in Sehwan it is performed in the Processions to the rhythm of another type of versified elegy the *marsiyyā*,<sup>38</sup> or of instrumental music. In my opinion, what distinguishes these two Muharrams above all is the reversed place of the Assembly and the Procession. In Lahore, the commemoration opens with an evening mixed-sex Procession<sup>39</sup> from the square of the *imāmbārgāh*<sup>40</sup> in the neighbourhood to the shrine of Bībī Pāk Dāman<sup>41</sup> (about 20 kilometres). And it closes at the end of the ‘*Āshūrā*’ day with a Procession that silently carries the “coffin” (*tābūt*) of Husain from the square to the place called Karbala (a few hundred metres away). Nevertheless, Muharram consists mainly of Assemblies.<sup>42</sup> In Sehwan it is the opposite. The Assemblies are very rare and mainly concern women (*zanānā majālis*); on the other hand, the Processions occupy the space of the city for 10 days.

Let us now go into the details of these two commemorations, starting with Lahore, to understand how each one cultivates sadness.

### Lahore’s Muharram: Sadness, Unifying Force of the Shi’ites Against the Sunnis

What characterises the Muḥarram of Lahore is therefore the Assembly. The first of the day for Aunt is a women’s Assembly organised by a Syed and rich family from a neighbourhood near her home.<sup>43</sup> At nightfall, Aunt meets the women of her family (mother, sisters and nieces)<sup>44</sup> and her neighbours there. Women and children dressed in black<sup>45</sup> on the floor, facing the “orator” (female *zākīrā*) sitting on a high chair and the women of the house at her feet, press against each other to fit in the room. Absorbed in listening to the sermon, the bickering of the children and the cries of the babies barely disturb their listening. Aunt and her relatives then go to an *imāmbārgāh* in the neighbourhood to participate this time in a mixed-sex Assembly, which is held in a large hall open to the outside.<sup>46</sup> They sit in the space reserved for women, on the left-hand side behind the men who face the “orator” (*male zākīr*) installed on a minbar

<sup>38</sup> Both *marsiyyā* and *nauhah* are of Iranian origin. The former is ancient (ninth century) and the latter recent. They will be described in the following text.

<sup>39</sup> The men are at the head of the procession and the women at the tail, while walking they perform a gentle *mātam* of the chest.

<sup>40</sup> A building used for the performance of Shi’a religious activities, also called *Husainiyyā* or *ziyarat khānā*.

<sup>41</sup> This shrine is associated with six women of the House of Imam ‘Alī (including Ruqqaiya, ‘Alī’s daughter), who migrated to the Indian subcontinent after the Karbala massacre.

<sup>42</sup> After ‘*Āshūrā*, *majālis* continue to be held for 30 days in neighbourhood mosques or by private individuals.

<sup>43</sup> Holding an Assembly in one’s home is considered the best way to show love for the Prophet’s Family, and therefore as a meritorious act. It also involves the presence of Fatima (daughter of the Prophet), who is said to attend every *majlis* held to mourn the death of her son.

<sup>44</sup> This commemoration is also a *happy* occasion for Aunt to meet her parents and siblings living outside Lahore, who are coming to spend 10 days there.

<sup>45</sup> Black clothes are preferred for the Assemblies.

<sup>46</sup> Diane D’Souza sees the freedom that Shi’a women have to lead their own *majālis* and move from Assembly to Assembly as an important element in their empowerment and the building of self-esteem (quoted by Howarth, 2005: 40); see also Mervin, 161–18, who refers to numerous works on this subject. Although the study shows that various performances are gender-specific and the author recognizes the importance of gendered perspective, this aspect is absent from this article. It will be the subject of a future publication.

(a pulpit). In this space designed to accommodate a large audience, people form small groups slightly spaced apart from each other. Loudspeakers and a television screen ensure that the speech is broadcast outside for those who cannot find a place inside. How does this Assembly ritual cultivate sadness?

### *The Lahore Assemblies: Producing a sad and suffering body*

The emotion comes from, on the one hand, the content of the sermon (about 60 minutes). It has two parts: (1) the General Discourse; and (2) the “Virtues and Sufferings” (*fazāil* and *masāib*).<sup>47</sup> The first part is not sad, as the Sunnis are mocked and laughed at by the audience.<sup>48</sup> It is mostly about religion and ethics, mainly influenced by the teachings of sixth Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq.<sup>49</sup> It teaches in an argumentative mode the Shi’a’s own doctrines and gives them the means to distinguish themselves from the Sunnis and argue against them. In Thokar Niaz Baig’s Assemblies, it tends to fuel anger and even hatred against Sunnis. With his aggressive intonations, the orator at times sounds more like a tribune haranguing a crowd than a scholar or poet. This part is punctuated by the enthusiastic exclamations of the audience such as “Shout Haydar!” (*nad-e haidari* [‘Alī]), “Oh ‘Alī!” (*yā ‘Alī*), or by slogans opposing “love and respect” (*tawallā*) of the Prophet’s Family and “cursing” (*tabarrā*) of his enemies: “Long live the way of Husain! Death to the way of Yazid!” (*hussayniyat zindābād! yāzidiyat mundābād!*); “Curses to the enemies of ‘Alī!” (*‘Alī ke dushman par la’nat!*), with the response “No doubt!” (*be shak!*). The belligerent and sarcastic aspect of this part of the sermon is certainly peculiar to this neighbourhood. This latter was led in the 1990s by the dissident Shi’ite militant movement the Sipah-e-Muhammad, and more broadly related to the Punjabi context, where animosity between the two sects has taken on a murderous dimension since the 1980s.<sup>50</sup>

Exalted by the General Discourse, certain that they are on the side of the Good, the audience is ripe to listen to the second part of the sermon, which gradually leads them to sadness. The “Virtues” narrative carefully prepares for this, which praises Shi’a morality in an edifying manner, illustrating it with the deeds and miracles performed by the members of the Prophet’s Family, who always act to safeguard Islam. Their merits are glorified in a way that makes them exceptional and therefore inimitable, and consequently will make their “Sufferings” all the more unbearable.

The Sufferings narrative is the emotional climax of the sermon. It provides a detailed and vivid account of the hardships and trials endured by the members of Husain’s caravan during the tragedy of Karbala, with a precise chronology of events. As the suffering of the members of the Prophet’s Family becomes more and more acute with each passing day, the emotion increases and becomes more apparent (see the table 1.

<sup>47</sup> For the structure and analysis of the Assembly in South Asia, see Burckhardt Qureshi, 41–71; Hasnain and Abrar, 145; Schubel, 97–100; Howarth, 39; and Hyder, 23–47.

<sup>48</sup> Hyder, 209, also notes the presence of humour in these Assemblies.

<sup>49</sup> Sarfraz Khan, Waheed Iqbal Chaudhry, and Ikram Badshah, “Ethnographic Study of Muharram Rituals in a Punjabi Village in Pakistan,” *Journal of Asian Civilizations* 37, no. 2 (2014): 181–96.

<sup>50</sup> Sipah-e-Muhammad was formed in the early 1990s following the assassination of the leader of the Tehrik-e Nifaz-e Fiqh-e Jafria, which was founded in 1979 to protect Shi’ites from violence orchestrated by Sunni movements such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. President Pervez Musharraf banned The Sipah-e-Muhammad in 2001 as a terrorist organisation. See Ian Talbot, “Understanding Religious Violence in Contemporary Pakistan: Themes and Theories,” in *Religion, Violence and Political Mobilisation in South Asia*, ed., R. Kaur (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 145–64.

Table 1. Sehwan Muharram procession schedule

Majlis-Lahore		Procession-Sehwan			
Date	Theme of the meeting	Date	Paraded object	Organizer	Procession route
from 1 <sup>er</sup> to 3	Husain's refusal to pledge allegiance to Yazīd; rumours that Yazīd wants to kill him; Husain's caravan journey to Karbala	1 <sup>er</sup>	<i>Tab t</i> of Abu Muslim	Sabzwārī	Of the <i>imāmbargāh</i> to their <i>pedh</i> , the place where the objects paraded for the performance of the visit are displayed
		2	<i>Jh lā</i> of Ibrahim and Muhammad		
		3	<i>Jh lā</i> by 'Alī Asghar		
4	Mourning of General Al-Hurr	4	<i>Tab t</i> of 'Abbas		
5	Mourning of brothers Awn and Muhammad	5 – night	<i>Zarih pāk</i>	Kattedani (Sabzwārī)	From their Sufi lodge to their Sufi lodge
			<i>Tab t</i> of Husain and 'Abbas	Sabzwārī	From their <i>imāmbargāh</i> to their <i>pedh</i>
			<i>Tab t</i> of Husain	Lakīārī	From their Sufi lodge to their Sufi lodge
5 – day	Zuljinah	Dr. Majid	From his home to the shrine of Chot Pīr Umrānī		
6	Mourning of 'Alī Akbar	6 – night	<i>Jh lā</i> by 'Alī Asghar	Lakīārī	From their <i>imāmbargāh</i> to their <i>pedh</i>
		6 – day	Zuljinah	Bodlo Bahār	From the shrine to the Tajjir Mohalla
7	Mourning of Qasim	7 – night	Zuljinah	Sabzwārī	From the <i>othaq</i> to the family cemetery
8	Mourning of Ġāzī 'Abbas	8 – night	<i>Jh lā</i> by 'Alī Asghar	Sabzwārī	From their <i>imāmbargāh</i> to their <i>pedh</i>
9	Mourning of 'Alī Asghar	8 – day	Zuljinah	Lakīārī	Of their <i>imāmbargāh</i> in Karbala
		9 – night	Bridal bed of Qasim and Fatima Kubra	Lakīārī	From the <i>imāmbargāh</i> to their <i>pedh</i>
		9 – day	Preparation of the <i>tab t</i> of Husain of Bodlo Bahār, the Lakīārī, and the Sabzwārī		
<i>āsh rā</i>	Husain's mourning	10 – night	<i>Tab t</i> of Husain and 'Alī Asghar	Bodlo Bahār	From the shrine to the <i>pedh</i> of the Lakīārī
		10 – night	<i>Tab t</i> of Husain and 'Abbas	Sabzwārī	From the <i>imāmbargāh</i> to their <i>pedh</i>
		<i>āsh rā</i>	<i>Tab t</i> of Husain, 'Abbas, and 'Alī Asghar	Lakīārī and BB	Of their <i>pedh</i> in Karbala
		11 – evening	<i>Tab t</i> of Husain and 'Abbas	Sabzwārī	From their <i>pedh</i> to their cemetery



Program of the Muharrams of Lahore and Sehwan, p. 8).<sup>51</sup> The orator also uses poetic and sensitive language. The use of the present tense, the direct style, and the dialogue give the impression that the events are taking place before our eyes. Through their mouth, we hear the mother crying over the loss of her child or the sister lamenting the loss of her brother. The vileness of the facts is all the more bitter and difficult to bear, as it contrasts with the perfection of the Prophet's Family and the nobility of his action portrayed by the Virtues narrative. The latter has made the Prophet's Family incommensurable, and it is difficult and unethical to identify with them. It is therefore essential that the orator provides the means for the audience to relate the sufferings of the Prophet's Family to their own. In his narration, he therefore incorporates the misfortunes of people seeking blessings, who have come to ask him to pray to the Prophet's Family on their behalf. He urges the audience to do the same, and in particular to join them in their "prayers" (*dū'ā*) during the pious visit to the artefacts of Karbala. Aunt and her sisters showed concern and prayed for these people whom they did not know. As mere mortals, it was certainly more moral and easier for them to identify with them. Living in precarious conditions themselves, they do not feel safe from a blow of fate either. And crying over the suffering of these strangers is a bit like crying over oneself, while vicariously experiencing solidarity in adversity. This expression of pity is not without reward either, since one reaps merit from it. In sum, in this alliance between the sufferings of Karbala and the sufferings of the here and now, the audience experiences the collective grief of the Shi'ite community. This collective grief is particularly strong for the women on the day of the martyrdom of Husain's six-month-old son, 'Alī Asghar, by an arrow shot by Yazid's forces while he was in his father's embrace. Aunt says that if she can only go to one Assembly, she will choose this one, and she never fails to touch and kiss all the cradles of 'Alī Asghar displayed in her neighbourhood.

The entrance to the "Suffering" part is clearly marked by the body posture of the orator. During the General Discourse and the Virtues, he stands upright in his chair, his upper body slightly bent forward to better inflame the audience and win their support. He begins each part with a calm voice and a moderate rhythm, which he amplifies and accelerates as he goes along, emphasising his words with increasingly rapid arm or hand movements. Suddenly he pauses. He folds his body in on himself. He moans, takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes away some tears. The audience immediately reacts by sobbing in turn. In a pained voice, the orator then begins the story of the sufferings. At the first mention of the word "Karbala," the audience is filled with sadness. Blows to the forehead and chest follow sobs. Then, gradually, the lamentations, cries, and shouts of the audience begin to compete with the voice of the orator, to the point where they can no longer hear his words clearly.

The effectiveness of the "Virtues and Sufferings" narrative cannot be based solely on the content of the message delivered and the handling of the language, for the audience knows its plot by heart, having heard it year after year since childhood, following the example of 'Alī's nieces.<sup>52</sup> It thus comes from the orator's ability to embody his story, but also to stage his own sadness. The audience reacts equally to the

<sup>51</sup> For examples of programs, see Hollister, 164; Schubel, 106–108; and Howarth, 45–47.

<sup>52</sup> Aged 10 and 7 in 2014, they were away from school for 10 days, participating all day in different Assemblies with their maternal grandmother. Their younger brother (five years) and sister (two years)

latter. This is evidenced by the fact that, on the one hand, the audience responds to the orator by reproducing his mimicry or by being inspired by it and, on the other hand, communication between the orator and the audience is no longer cognitive. Indeed, while the orator's words end in strangled moans as the narrative progresses, they are gradually covered by the audience's lamentations. One might ask, then, when the audience makes as much noise as the orator (or more), is it still a matter of producing meaning in order to move and listening in order to be moved? While it has become uncertain whether orator and audience are still communicating cognitively at this point, it is certain that they are communing through/in sadness.

The case of the Assembly is a perfect illustration of William James' proposition that "we are afflicted because we weep."<sup>53</sup> In other words, it is not a question of weeping because one is afflicted, but rather the opposite. By opening the account of the "Sufferings" with a few tears, the orator creates a "sad body" for himself<sup>54</sup> (Ibid.), and allows the audience to do the same. In this way, they can commiserate together, each in their own role, with the sufferings of the Prophet's Family. The emotion that the orator produces, thanks to the intelligence of his sermon, the beauty of his poetry, and his *showmanship*, is not only "what is felt but [especially] *what make feel*"<sup>55</sup> (Ibid., 255). It implies that the audience is also in an active process, despite appearances. At the end of the sermon, all these "sad bodies" are ripe to suffer concretely in their flesh like the heroes of Karbala.

People then spontaneously form non-mixed rounds of various sizes and sing a cappella elegies in verse called *nauhah*,<sup>56</sup> to the rhythm of the *mātam* of the chest. According to Burckhardt Qureshi (1981),<sup>57</sup> the Indian *nauhah* corresponds to the Iranian practice of amateur group singing accompanied by chest-beating, an heir to the rhythmic style known as "song." It consists of verses or stanzas with a refrain. Its style, inspired by the *masnavi*<sup>58</sup> poetic genre and the Urdu ghazal, is popular. It is free and light in form, with few literary requirements – oral style, short sentences, and common words – and is easily memorised, so anyone can sing it. Its simple and expressive message is conducive to weep. Finally, its melodic structure – regular and repetitive – is designed to be sung along with the practice of *mātam*, so that the rhythmic beating of the hands on the chest reinforces the metre of the poem. Through its association with *mātam*, the *nauhah* is finally characterised by its vigorous rhythm.<sup>59</sup> As the days pass and the *nauhah* sessions lengthen, the strength of the *mātam* intensifies, following in this the emotional crescendo of the events of Karbala. The more the "sermon" produces a "sad body," the more the *nauhah-mātam* session

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accompanied their mother. On this topic, see Ruffle, "Wounds of Devotion: Reconceiving Mātam in Shi'i Islam," *History of Religions* 55, n° 2 (2015): 172–95.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Despret, 249.

<sup>54</sup> Despret, 256.

<sup>55</sup> Emphasis added; Despret, 255.

<sup>56</sup> Ali's family rented a hi-fi system to listen to *nauhah*. In fact, the device was rarely used, as Ali preferred to listen (to watch) those recorded on his smartphone.

<sup>57</sup> Burckhardt Qureshi, 41–71.

<sup>58</sup> The *masnavi* is a long lyrical and narrative poem, composed of flat rhyming distiches.

<sup>59</sup> See on the *mātam* in general, Pinault, 246–49, and on women's *mātam*, Mary, E. Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning," *American Ethnologist* (1998): 240–66.

physically experiences that body and in turn produces a suffering body bearing the stigma of the blows, such as a red, hot, painful chest.

Finally, this sad and suffering body can present itself unashamedly before the Karbala artefacts installed in the *imāmbārgāh* or brought to the audience, and communicate through them with the heroes of Karbala, touching them, kissing them, and making offerings to them in the hope of a wish being fulfilled. Similarly, this body can receive the “consecrated food” (*niyāz*) through the Fatiha and prayers (*dū‘ā*), the distribution of which closes the Assembly. All members of the ‘Alī family (even the children) take an active part in this “hunt,” which involves a good deal of persistence, cunning, and bad faith in order to be served several times. The business is serious, both economic and spiritual. It is as much about bringing back the family’s daily food<sup>60</sup> as it is about enjoying its beneficial effects, since it contains the intercessory potency of the Prophet’s Family. Far from despairing over its poor taste, it is emphasised<sup>61</sup> because it enhances the efforts made to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala, such as the refusal of all comforts (sleeping on the floor, without a pillow, not washing) and of simple pleasures (delicacies or *pān*).

These assemblies are said to be “the oldest vehicle for creating and transmitting the memory of Karbala,”<sup>62</sup> and modelled on the first funeral commemorations that took place in Karbala itself.<sup>63</sup> They are designed to encourage sympathy for the martyrdom of the heroes of Karbala, but also to encourage support for Husain’s cause, hence their politically subversive nature.<sup>64</sup> It can be hypothesised that Shi’ite political parties mobilise the symbols of Karbala in their struggle against Sunni parties, as Khomeini did. To establish his power and mobilise his troops against Iraq, he used the Assemblies and supported neighbourhood “associations” (*anjuman*) demonstrating their strength and determination, through the practice of *mātam* of chains accompanied by *nauhah* singers.<sup>65</sup>

### **Mātam of the chains: Building a brave and scary body**

As has been said, the practice of the *mātam* of the chest gradually takes place as the days go by. Starting gently in the first Procession, it is prolonged and intensified as the Assemblies produce more and more “sad bodies.” However, the *mātam* that counts for ‘Alī, the one he mentions and values, is the *mātam* of chains. It is performed only by men and publicly on 10 muharram or ‘*Āshūrā*, the day of Husain’s martyrdom.

At the beginning of the month, ‘Alī asked Aunt to clean his chains. On several occasions, he handled them in front of me and proudly mentioned his future participation in ‘*Āshūrā*. He seemed in these moments to be in a process of re-appropriation of his chains and preparing for the *mātam*. In this, he was in tune with the shops in his neighbourhood, where grinders were busy producing chains. The

<sup>60</sup> Economic resources are fewer in this period, as men work less.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Alī’s family finds it bland and monotonous.

<sup>62</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, “An Attempt to Trace the Origins of the Rituals of ‘*Āshūrā*,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 33 (1993): 161–81.

<sup>63</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Redemptive Suffering in Islam. A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ‘Āshūrā in Twelver Shī‘ism* (La Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1978), 152.

<sup>64</sup> Howarth, 6.

<sup>65</sup> See Sepideh Parsapajouh “Le mal subi, le mal rendu. Une lecture anthropologique des pratiques de lamentations et de mal diction dans le shī‘isme populaire iranien,” *Oriens* 49, nos. 20–21 (2021): 370–97. In general, the Iranian Revolution influences Pakistani Shi’ites through their Iraqi- and Iranian-trained elites. Such Punjabi associations used to visit Sehwan (see below).

shrill cry of grinding wheels and the smell of burning iron gave the main thoroughfare (leading from the *imāmbārgāh*) a special atmosphere. ‘Alī also attached importance to his outfit as a “*mātam* of chains’ practitioner” (*mātamī* or *mātamdār*) and pressed Aunt to clean and iron it neatly. This consists of a black shirt in the colour of the Prophet’s Family<sup>66</sup> and white trousers. According to ‘Alī, these, stained with blood, should take the colour of Husain’s shroud.

On D-day, ‘Alī left the house as soon as he woke up, fasting, barefoot, and without having spoken. Aunt, the children, and I went in the late morning to the *imāmbārgāh* district, also fasting and barefoot. Like the other women, we amassed on the roof terrace of one of the large mansions that their owner made accessible for the occasion. Men below, women above, shout together the same slogans as in the Assemblies, cursing Yazīd and his descendants and affirming the permanence of Husain. Among the men, “standards” (*alam*) are circulating, their flagpoles draped with red-stained cloth. This artefact is the icon par excellence of the South Asian Shi’ites. It is the symbol of the authority of the “Five Holy Ones” (*pañjatan pāk*, Muhammad, Fatima, ‘Alī, Hasan, and Husain), represented in the form of a hand. It also carries their potency of protection and intercession and for this reason women vow bearers tie a “head veil” (*dūpattā*) to it. According to ‘Alī, it also has the ability to curse Sunnis and therefore every Shi’a family should hoist one on the terrace of their home.<sup>67</sup>

In this atmosphere of communal affirmation, everyone waits feverishly for the “midday Quranic prayer” (*asr*), the time at which Husain was beheaded. This fateful moment is signalled by the release of a dove from the roof of the largest *imāmbārgāh*. This signal immediately sets off the *mātam* of chains. From where we were, we could not see the men. Only the sound of their chains and the smell of their blood reached us. Nevertheless, this was enough to instantly charge the atmosphere with dread, make the young children cry and the babies scream. The women began to lament loudly and to strike their heads with the flat of their hands. Then everything stopped as suddenly as it had started.

We then went to Aunt’s sister’s house to await the return of the men. Arriving in scattered order, all the men’s back were the subject of the women’s comments and the elder sister’s thoughtful care.<sup>68</sup> Unlike the *mātam* of the chest, the *mātam* of the chains is a technical act requiring practice to achieve the desired effect, that is, a clean cut in the skin resulting in a flow of blood. Looking together at the wounds of the men of the house, whose size grew larger and deeper with age, Aunt’s mother said to me, “you see how great the love for Husain is in our family.” When only ‘Alī was missing, Aunt began to express her concern. Her brother recounted having met him before the *mātam* and described with admiration his chains, whose knives he said, joining gesture to word, were larger than the palm of one’s hand. ‘Alī returned late, straight to Aunt’s house and made no comment on his performance. When I broached the subject of his injuries in the following days, he claimed that he was not in pain thanks

<sup>66</sup> In South Asia, unlike other Shi’a countries, black is not the colour of mourning, which is white, but is associated with the Family of the Prophet.

<sup>67</sup> On the function of *alam* in popular Shi’a piety, see Diane D’Souza’s, “In the Presence of the Martyrs: The ‘*Alam* in Popular Shi’i Piety,” *The Muslim World*, vol. LXXXVIII-1 (1998): 67–80, article, which rightly points out the thin line between veneration and deification of the object.

<sup>68</sup> She applies warm mustard oil (with or without rose water) to her brother’s back for a few days.

to the *Ahl al-Bayt* (the Prophet's family).<sup>69</sup> The subject of the *mātām* of chains seemed closed to him. However, before putting away his chains, he asked me to take a picture of him with them in his hands in order, he said with a laugh, to scare the French.

This request made in a joking tone illustrates the meaning of this male mortification. It is no longer a matter of showing sadness as with the *mātām* of the chest, but of publicly attesting that one would have fought alongside Husain at Karbala, with courage and determination. This *mātām*, where one sheds one's blood in lieu of the enemy's, is a demonstration of bravery. Moreover, while 'Alī takes the pretext of frightening the French with his chains, it is the Pakistani Sunnis he is targeting. His demonstration of courage, as already mentioned, is also an act of love and faith towards the Family of the Prophet, since it is credited with the quick, painless, and unaffected recovery of his wounds. According to Vernon James Schubel, this devotion is also a form of proselytising aimed at convincing non-Shi'ites of the efficacy of faith in the Prophet's Family. Through its intense emotional charge, the *mātām* of the chains finally shows that despite the passage of time Husain still has the capacity to nurture the most intense devotion, unlike his enemies.

Let us remember for the moment that the various rituals in Lahore aim to construct a sad body, a suffering body, and a fighting body, which testify to the sadness of the Shi'ite community in the face of the events of Karbala, but also to its love and faith towards the Family of the Prophet. From the point of view of emotional expression, the Assembly and the 'Āshūrā are in an inverse relationship: while there is a simulation of sadness in the former, there is a dissimulation of suffering in the latter. This courageous and fervent community builds itself here in opposition to the Sunnis, in whom it seeks to inspire fear. One last little ethnographic fact will attest to this. The day after 'Āshūrā, Aunt's Sunni neighbour organised a *dhikr* (act of remembrance of God), whom she and 'Alī mocked by ridiculing the special pronunciation of "Allah hu" (Allah Him) in accordance with breath exercises," before they interpreted it angrily and contemptuously as Sunni revenge on the Shi'ite community that had been heard from and seen for 10 days.<sup>70</sup>

### The Muharram of Sehwan: In the Name of Lāl Shāhbāz Qalandar

While Schubel's<sup>71</sup> remark that "*the majlis [assembly] is the most important of all of the activities performed during Muharram*" is true for Lahore, it is not so in Sehwan. Here, the Processions are striking the mind, by their number and magnificence.<sup>72</sup> They are not only visible because they invade the urban space for 10 days, but also audible because of the essential role played by music. The music consists of six musical rhythms classified locally as "sad" (*gham*). They are played on "kettledrum" (*naqqarā*),

<sup>69</sup> Like Schubel's interlocutors, 153–55, 'Alī does not link his healing to his personal piety, but to the powers of the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

<sup>70</sup> Parsapajouh, 370–97, describes an old Iranian cursing ritual – 'Umar-Koši – now forbidden by the state but still celebrated clandestinely, which shows that the concept of love for the Prophet's Family goes hand in hand with hatred of his enemies.

<sup>71</sup> Schubel, 106.

<sup>72</sup> About Procession in Sehwan, see Rémy Delage, "Soufisme et and espace urbain. Circulations rituelles dans la localité de Sehwan Sharif," in *Territoires du religieux dans les mondes indiens Parcourir, mettre en scène, franchir*, eds., Mathieu Claveyrolas and Rémy Delage (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, Puruṣārtha n°34), 149–75.

*dhol* drum, and oboe, alone or in parallel, depending on the progress of the procession through the city. This heady, lament-like music completely alters the emotional soundscape, diffusing an atmosphere of sadness. For 10 days, the city is saturated with this music, which is complemented by the broadcasting of recordings of *nauhah* and *marsiya* sung by the stars of the moment through different sound systems from the city's shops.

The second striking feature is the importance that the saint of this small pilgrimage town, Lāl Shahbāz Qalandar, occupies in this commemoration. He is one of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and doubly linked to the Shi'ite Imams. He is the descendant of the sixth Imam Ja'far Sadiq, and possesses as relic the Imam Zayn al-'Abidin's stone.<sup>73</sup> One of the purposes of his existence is to keep alive the memory of the tragedy of Karbala, the place where he was conceived and where his father is buried. The link between Shahbāz and *Ahl al-Bayt* is so strong that according to Schubel<sup>74</sup>: "Many Sindhis believe that the real Na'ib-i Imām [Deputy of the Imam] is the famous Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar."<sup>75</sup> As Michel Boivin<sup>76</sup> also states: "The identification of Lal Shabaz Qalandar with the Imam is such that Shi'ites performed *matam* for his 'urs' [feast celebrating the anniversary of his death]."

Music also plays an essential role in the cult of this saint, as this Sufi is famous in South Asia for his ecstatic dance called *dhamāl*.<sup>77</sup> In contrast to Muharram, the rhythms played by a *naubat* orchestra (kettledrum and oboe) each evening in the courtyard of his shrine to make the pilgrims dance, are classified as "joyful" (*shahdman*). It is precisely the incorporation into the music of the *dhamāl* from 19 Zil-Hajj onwards of the funeral rhythm "ya Husain," characteristic of this Muharram since it accompanies all its rituals, that marks the forthcoming entry into Muharram. Then, during the last week of Zil-Hajj, the kettledrums of Shahbāz are refurbished, so that from the 1st<sup>er</sup> to the 11th of muharram the Dhamāli<sup>78</sup> play "ya Husain," instead of the music of the *dhamāl*, which is not danced to, due to its cheerfulness. They are divided between the two great lineages of spiritual masters of the city who organise the Processions: the Lakiārī and the Sabzwārī. The sadness of Muharram is thus produced and expressed in Sehwan through the soundscape.

Similarly, the city changes its colour by covering itself in black for 40 days, while the rest of the year it sports the red colour of Shahbāz. From the end of Zil-Hajj, the red flags flying from the flagpoles (*'alam*) planted at the entrances of the city's Sufi lodges and shrines are changed to the black flag of Ghāzī 'Abbas. A member of the

<sup>73</sup> The stone that the Umayyad caliph Yazid attached to the imam's neck to humiliate him.

<sup>74</sup> Schubel, 128.

<sup>75</sup> Our fieldwork in Sindh (Pakistan) and Uttar Pradesh (India) shows that Alide devotion also plays an important role among Sunnis influenced by Sufism and saint worship. Schubel, 20, makes the same observation in his study in Karachi.

<sup>76</sup> Michel Boivin, "Representations and Symbols in Muharram and Other Rituals: Fragments of Shiite Worlds from Bombay to Karachi," in *The Other Shiites from the Mediterranean to Central Asia*, eds., A. Monsutti, S. Naef, and F. Sabahi (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007), 149–72.

<sup>77</sup> About this dance, see Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, "Dhamāl and the Performing Body: Trance Dance in the Devotional Sufi Practice of Pakistan," *Journal of Sufi Studies* (2012): 77–113; and Ortis, "Dancing to Show Love; Practicing to Show Authority. The Practice of Dhamāl in the Qalandārī Sufi Order (Sehwan Sharif, Pakistan)," *Journal of Sindh Studies* 3 (2023): 1–28.

<sup>78</sup> Name given to kettledrum players, the interpreters par excellence of the *dhamāl*.

Indus boatmen's community (Mohānā) makes the change. This is so because 600 years ago this river brought the standard of Ghāzī 'Abbas to Sehwan, and it was justly fished out by a Mohānā.<sup>79</sup> As can be seen here, through the presence of Shahbāz and the mediation of the Indus, the locality of Sehwan is directly related to the Iraqi site of Karbala. The change of flag that unites the town concerns the 30-metre high *qadīmī 'alam* in front of the main entrance gate of the Shahbāz shrine (east side). The flag of Ghāzī 'Abbas is kept by the Lakiārī. The men go to this first Muharram ritual in procession from the two *imāmbargāh* of the city,<sup>80</sup> performing a soft *mātam* of the chest. The women occupy the roofs of the surrounding houses. They will occupy this space throughout Muharram, taking on a passive supporting role facing the active role of the men. In front of the door of the Shahbāz shrine, the Dhamālī play "ya Husain," while the drums and oboes play the slow version of the *tahū* rhythm<sup>81</sup> in the *imāmbargāh* of the Lakiārī. They accompany the raising of the Mohānā flagpole and the placing of the new flag. When the boatman has descended, drummers and oboists take over the sound space on their own, joining the men at the foot of the mast. They accompany the "circular *mātam*" (*gol mātam, gol pit*) in honour of Ghāzī 'Abbas on the same rhythm but in its fast version. This *mātam* is in the form of a round revolving around the 'alam. After each step, the men pause, hit their upper right arm with their left hand, then both upper arms with both hands crossed. This choreography is a reminder that Ghāzī 'Abbas had both arms cut off at the battle of Karbala. The men rotate in this way until the first in the round, normally the spiritual master Lakiārī (or one of his sons), has returned to the starting point, that is, the eastern gate. At the end of this *mātam*, the men touch the ground and the 'alam, and rush to the shops and *imāmbargāh* to receive *niyāz*. 'Alī participates in this rite in the company of his spiritual master.

It is not only the city that swaps its red flags for black, the tombs of the city's many holy figures are covered with black cloth, first and foremost that of Shahbāz, which is usually covered with red. Similarly, the inhabitants of Sehwan swap their coloured clothes for black ones and begin to parade in this way from 1 muharram.

### **The Sehwan Processions: Funeral for the martyrs of Karbala**

On the first four nights of Muharram, only the Sabzwārī spiritual masters hold Processions. They are simpler than the following and organised in the following order: (1) mobile 'alams carried by ascetics lead the way; (2) the *Mātamī* slowly performing a chest *mātam* called *nor pit*, accompanied by drummers and oboists playing the *ossert* (slow or fast) rhythm; (3) two choirs of *marsiya* elegy singers; (4) the paraded artefact carried on men's backs; (5) the sound system; and (6) the scouts and police. They take the same route: from the Sabzwārī's *imāmbargāh* to the eastern gate

<sup>79</sup> About the Mohānā in Sehwan, see Michel Boivin, "Le pèlerinage de Sehwan Sharif, Sindh (Pakistan): Territoires, protagonistes et rituels," in *Les pèlerinages au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient*, eds., S. Chiffolleau and A. Madoeuf (Damascus: Institut Français du Proche-Orient), 2005), 311–45 ; about the relation between Sehwan and the Indus, see Rémy Delage and Delphine Ortis, "Sehwān Sharif et l'Indus: Histoire d'une mise à distance (Sindh, Pakistan)," in *Ville et Fleuve en Asie du Sud. Regards Croisés*, eds., Joshi Harit and Anne Viguier (Paris: Collection Colloque Inalco, 2014), 59–79.

<sup>80</sup> These two *imāmbargāh* belong to the Lakiārī and the Sabzwārī and are located near the Shahbāz shrine.

<sup>81</sup> It belongs to the category of *dhamdh* funeral rhythms.

of Shahbāz shrine and here to their *pedh* (the place where the artefacts are displayed for pious visitation, located near their *imāmbargāh*). This short journey is designed to incorporate Shahbāz. During these four nights, the Sabzwārī alone occupy the public space of the city. Nevertheless, the Lakīārī are not left out, as they occupy the sound space making the Dhamālī play “ya Husain” in their *imāmbargāh*, the time the Sabzwārī go to the shrine. The powerful sound of the kettledrum easily covers the music and choirs of the Processions.

Then, between 5 and 11 muharram, 16 Processions march by day and night. This time the Sabzwārī share space with the Lakīārī; A. Hussein (the spiritual master of the Bodlo Bahār shrine and of ‘Alī), who marches alone or with the Lakīārī; and a local personality Dr. Majid.<sup>82</sup> Like the Lahore Assemblies, they follow the calendar of events in Karbala recognisable by the paraded artefact (see table 1. Program of the Muharrams of Lahore and Sehwan, p. 8). However, as there are several organisers, all episodes from 5 muharram onwards are commemorated several times. For example, there are four Zuljinah Processions, including that of Dr. Majid.<sup>83</sup> The latter (the day of the 5th) is preceded by the change of ‘*alam* of his house and an Assembly.<sup>84</sup> It goes from his house to Shahbāz shrine, and then to the shrine of Chotū Pīr Umrānī.<sup>85</sup> Although this man is not a spiritual master, his Procession is very popular and many women participate. Notable artefacts include on 9 muharram the “nuptial bed” (*sej*) of Qāsim’s wedding to Fāṭima Kubrā (Ḥusayn’s daughter), which took place before his departure for the battle and his martyrdom.<sup>86</sup> The Lakīārī women arrange a simulacrum wedding, including preparing the dowry for the girl. A rare happy event in Muharram, it involves no one doing the *mātam* of chains on this day.

From the 5 muharram onwards, the Processions become more complex with the introduction of Shahbāz’s personal mobile ‘*alam* (or *panja* in the form of an open hand representing the Panjatan Pāk or *Ahl al-Bayt*), called *gajgah*. It is recognisable by its stylized and uncluttered shape.<sup>87</sup> It is a loan for Muharram to the Lakīārī and Sabzwārī by the administration of the shrine, which keeps it for the rest of the year. Lakīārī and Sabzwārī parade it in turn through their “most accomplished ascetic” (*wado faqīr* or *kotvāl*), who, like Shahbāz, is of the Sayyed caste, that is, descendants of the Prophet’s Family. The ascetic is riding the finest dromedary available to his master with one of Shahbāz’s two “pet wild beasts” (stuffed): his lion for the Lakīārī, his tiger for the Sabzwārī. The *gajgah* is finally paraded surrounded by at least four Dhamālī, also riding dromedaries with a kettledrum on each side of the animal. Together these make up the complete set of kettledrums.

<sup>82</sup> His paternal grandfather was a Sabzwārī ascetic.

<sup>83</sup> The horse is on loan from A. Hussein, the spiritual master of the Bodlo Bahār shrine.

<sup>84</sup> The only one in Sehwan that I know of that was organised for men.

<sup>85</sup> Chotū Pīr Umrānī, one of the great saints of Sehwan, who resided there even before the arrival of Shahbāz.

<sup>86</sup> About this subject, see Ruffle, “Karbala’ in the Indo-Persian Imaginaire: The Indianizing of the Wedding of Qasem and Fatima Kubra,” in *Muslim Cultures in the Indo-Iranian World during the Early-Modern and Modern Periods*, eds., Denis Hermann and Fabrizio Speciale (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2010), 181–200.

<sup>87</sup> In Ja’far Sharif, *Islam in India or the Qānūn-i-Islām. The Customs of the Musalmāns of India Comprising a Full and Exact Account of Their Various Rites and Ceremonies from the Moment of the Birth to the Hour of Death* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, [1921] 1972), 160, one can find a similar model, the fourth fig. 5.



Table 2. Shape of the procession

Course Position	From their point of departure to the Golden Gate of the Shahbāz Shrine	From the Golden Gate to their destination
1	On camels: the <i>wado faqīr</i> and <i>gajgah</i> ; the Dhamālī; ascetics and children (on foot too)	<i>Mātamī</i> , drummers, and oboists
2	<i>Mātamī</i> ; drummers and oboists; two <i>marsiya</i> choirs	Parade artefact and mobile <i>'alam</i> of the organisers
3	Parade artefact and mobile <i>'alam</i> of the organisers	<i>Wado faqīr</i> and <i>gajgah</i> ; Dhamālī
4	sound system; scouts and police	Scouts and police

The camel plays a symbolic role in Sehwan's Muharram. According to many Sehwanis, this animal, both indigenous and Arab allows it to be as close as possible to the events of Karbala: Processions being similar to Husain's caravan crossing the Iraqi desert. 'Alī also argues that the Sehwanī Muharram is a kind of historical reconstruction. Yet all these camels are richly adorned in the very colourful Sindhi and Baluchi aesthetic. However, as evidence, the Sehwanis point to the presence of the traditional communication instruments of the caravaneers: the gong and the horn, *nadā-e 'Alī*.<sup>88</sup> The ascetics and children at the head of the Procession are usually in charge of them. They play them to inform the other processionaries when the head has reached the next station. Similarly, at the tail of the Procession, drummers and oboists, who accompany the paraded artefact, play the *keḏḏāro* (or *keḏāro*) or *Husaini todhi* rhythms of Shāh 'Abdul Latīf (see below), depending on the manipulations it undergoes (posed, raised, turned, etc.) during the Procession. The communicative function of the music is more necessary as the Processions tend to distend during the course of the journey.

Although these Processions follow specific itineraries depending on their organiser or the date, they are all arranged according to the same model, which implies a reversal of positions at the halfway point (see below table 2).

### Reversal of the order of the Processions

The start of the Procession is announced by the "breath" (*dam*) rhythm of the Dhamālī on the two largest kettledrums. Although it is the *gajgah* of Shahbāz marching to the tragic Dhamālī's "ya Husain" rhythm that leads the Procession, it advances during its first part to the rhythm of the recitation of *marsiya*. It thus progresses extremely slowly through the narrow streets of the city, making frequent stops at regular intervals for the performance of the *marsiya* and the practice of *mātam*. While the Procession walks and reads the *marsiya*, the drums and oboes play the slow rhythm *tahu*, and during the *mātam* session they perform *ossert* (slow or fast).

The two choirs of "marsiya singers" (*marsiya xavā* or *marsiya go*) perform each elegy verse a cappella in turn, and then together. The performance is amplified by a sound system, making it audible in most of the city. These are not professional choirs, but

<sup>88</sup> Its name refers to the historical event of the Supplication of Ali, in which he was called to take part in the Battle of Khaybar (628–29) at the sound of a similar horn.

local amateurs linked to the procession organiser, or even the organiser himself and his family members. The other processionaries listen while gently beating their chests at heart level with their right hands, and join in with the chorus in singing the refrains. Like the *nauhah*, the *marsiya* is designed to move and it is common to see singers and audience members with tears in their eyes. However, there are no loud, tearful outpourings as in Lahore. One could say that this role is left to the *Mātami* and their *mātam sīna-zanī*.<sup>89</sup> By tuning the strength of their hand beats on their bare torsos to the emotional intensity of the verses, they echo the emotion elicited by the poetry. The strokes thus fluctuate between soft and slow or violent and fast. An older person guides the youngest. The composition of the group is not fixed and often changes during the Procession. Depending on the width of the street, the *Mātami* stand in two (or four) rows facing each other. At the end of the *mātam* session, everyone shouts “ya Husain,” touches the ground, and moves a few steps. Then a new session of *marsiya-mātam* begins. At this rate, the Procession moves extremely slowly, 1.5 hours for about 500 metres. The Sehwanī, who watch the Processions pass, take advantage of these halts to touch and kiss the paraded artefact.

The *marsiya* is also a plaintive poem, belonging to the classical literary genre, which commemorates in narrative form tragic events, and gives an account of the suffering associated with absence, loss, and death. According to Yitzhak Nakash,<sup>90</sup> it is said to be the oldest vehicle for the transmission of the memory of Karbala. Its origin is traced to the pre-Islamic Arabic poetic style, the *qasida*. According to Burckhardt Qureshi,<sup>91</sup> it has the same form and narrative character as the poetic genre *musaddas*.<sup>92</sup> In the Indian subcontinent, it spread from the Iranian-Persian versions of the ninth-tenth century, and in particular the work of Ḥosayn Vâ'iz Kâshefi, the *Garden of Martyrs* (*Rowzat al-Shuhadâ'*, 1503).<sup>93</sup> Because of its vocabulary and references to classical literature, its message is more difficult to access than that of the *nauhah*. In Sindh, from the sixteenth century onwards, this funeral poetry underwent a local adaptation: the *marsiyo* in the Sindhi language,<sup>94</sup> which reached its apogee in the eighteenth century in the *Shāh jo risālo* of Shāh 'Abdul Latīf (1689–1752).<sup>95</sup> The eighteenth chapter of this poem, named *Sur kedḍāro* or *kedāro*, describes in six parts the sufferings of Karbala. Its name means in Sindhi “war,” according to Michel Boivin,<sup>96</sup> and refers to the popular and local metrical/melodic system (*sur*) used to

<sup>89</sup> Literally: the act of beating the chest.

<sup>90</sup> Nakas, 161–81.

<sup>91</sup> Burckhardt Qureshi, 41–71.

<sup>92</sup> Poem composed of several stanzas of six lines each: the first four end on the same rhyme, and the last two on another (aa aa bb). Its rhythmic style is recitative and iambic, that is, composed of short and long, irregular units reflecting the poetic metre (it resembles the Persian *āvāz* rhythm).

<sup>93</sup> Ḥosayn Vâ'iz Kâshefi's influence is such in the Indian subcontinent, that the orator of the *majālis* is called *rawḍa khwān* (“reciter of rawḍa”), see T. M. Howarth, citing Nakash, 161–81.

<sup>94</sup> See Annemarie Schimmel, “The *Marsiya* in Sindhi Poetry,” in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed., Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 210–21.

<sup>95</sup> About this poet, see Boivin, *Historical Dictionary of the Sufi Culture of Sindh in Pakistan and in India* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2015), 285–88.

<sup>96</sup> Boivin, “Sufism and Shi'ism in South Asia: Shahadat and the Evidence of the Sindhi marthiya.” *Shi'i Islam and Sufism. Classical Views and Modern Perspectives* (2020): 286–320, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03090157/document>, accessed 26/01/2022.

celebrate fallen heroes on the battlefield.<sup>97</sup> Remember that drummers and oboists use this rhythm to indicate the different manipulations of the artefacts. However, Sābit ‘Alī Shāh (1740–1810)<sup>98</sup> is credited with inventing the *marṣiyo*. This poet, who is said to have made the pilgrimage to Karbala, is an important figure for the Sehwni, as he was a devotee of Shahbāz and is buried in their locality. His grave is even located next to the cenotaph of Husain at the local site of Karbala. His genre, named *suwari*, unlike that of Shāh ‘Abdul Laṭīf, is inspired by the Arab-Persian poetic form *maṣnavi*<sup>99</sup> and local meters. It was to persist in Sindh until the nineteenth century and was taken up by many Sufi poets, such as Sachal Sarmast, who also had followers in Sehwan.<sup>100</sup> The main characteristic of these *marṣiyo* is that they were written by mystics who blended their own mystical experience with the Shi’a folk tradition. For example, Shāh ‘Abdul Laṭīf expresses Ḥusain’s martyrdom within the Sufi lexicon.<sup>101</sup> The tragedy of Karbala is thus embedded in the Sufi tradition. It is interpreted as the manifestation of the highest divine love, and martyrdom to the experience of encountering God, through references to Mansur al Hallaj<sup>102</sup> and the Prophet’s Miraj. It is still the *marṣiyo* of Sābit ‘Alī Shāh that is sung in Sehwan today, with passages translated into Urdu or Siraiki.<sup>103</sup>

During the second part of the Procession the choirs fall silent, and the Procession moves forward to the rapid rhythm of the *Mātami* who have taken the lead and perform a “rapid *mātam*” (*jaldi mātam*) to the rapid tempo “Alī maula Haider maula” of the drums and oboes. The short *mātam* sessions are interspersed with brief pacing marches during which drums and oboes play the fast *ossert* rhythm. Nevertheless, the Procession still seems disorganised because of the gaps that are created between the different segments. Also because of the crowd, both participants and spectators, which enters and leaves the Procession as it progresses. Each procession lasts between six and nine hours, and few Sehwni, apart from the organisers and their men, accompany it along its entire route. It is common to join it when it passes near one’s home and to follow it for a short or long time. Hence, it is difficult to distinguish between participants and simple spectators. All the more so as, along the route, the inhabitants, like the shopkeepers, distribute *niyāz* and drinks to the processionaries. As with its beginning, the end of the Procession is signalled by the triple accomplishment of the “breath” rhythm of the two largest Dhamālī kettledrums. This rhythm is also played the moment the Procession stations itself in front of the eastern gate of the Shahbāz shrine.

In Sehwan, Muharram is thus commemorated by the ritual of the Procession. How does it evoke sadness? How does it produce it? manifest it? The Procession produces a tragic atmosphere of mourning, which gives the impression of participating in the

<sup>97</sup> Schimmel, 210–21; Boivin, “Sufism and Shi’ism,” 286–320, states “in classical Indian music, the *rāga Kedār* is said to be associated with the god Shiva and is to be sung at midday.

<sup>98</sup> About this poet, see Boivin, *Historical Dictionary*, 270; and Zahir Bhalloo, “Le culte de l’imām Ḥusayn chez les Khojas ismaéliens āghā khānī-s dans la deuxième moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup>s,” *Studia Islamica* (forthcoming).

<sup>99</sup> The rhyme scheme changes with each couplet, in the following form: aa/bb/cc/dd, etc.

<sup>100</sup> About this poet, see Boivin, *Historical Dictionary*, 271–72.

<sup>101</sup> See Boivin, “Sufism and Shi’ism,” 286–320.

<sup>102</sup> Mansur al Hallaj was crucified in 922 for proclaiming, “I am God,” see Louis Massignon, *La passion de Husayn ibn Mansûr Hallâj*, 4 vol. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

<sup>103</sup> The use of these two other languages seems to me to be more a matter of prestige.

funeral of each of the martyrs of Karbala. Indeed, these Processions essentially parade *tābūt*, that is, simulacra of graves, and by this very element resemble funeral processions. Moreover, the Lakiārī and Sabzwārī have themselves compared the funeral rites of the Sayyid (their own) to the Procession of Muharram. It is not so much the sad commemoration of martyrdom that is aimed at here – the mystical and positive aspect of which we have seen the *marsiya* emphasise – as the reparation of an injustice inflicted on the Family of the Prophet by his enemies in denying them a dignified burial. The Muharram of Sehwan, by proceeding with their funerals, thus redressed this cruel injustice and consequently did justice to the martyrs of Karbala. This atmosphere of mourning produces sad processionaries, and its manifestation involves sobriety and restraint of emotions.

It should also be noted that the production and manifestation of sadness is based on the fervour of the Sehwanī, even though the city is predominantly Sunni. It is this local society, marked by its Shi'ite elites and the master-disciple relationship (*pīrī-murīdī*), which takes charge of it without any specialist or outside professional. The Sehwan's Muharram is in a way a commemoration of amateurs,<sup>104</sup> who have divided the roles among themselves according to their place in society and their competence. Thus, each spiritual master calls upon his clientele of disciples to find his *marsiya* performers, his *Mātāmī*, his musicians, his dromedaries, etc., who will give shape to his Processions. And one may be surprised with Boivin<sup>105</sup> (2005: 333) at the contrast between the munificence of the ceremonies and the relatively small number of participants and spectators. According to this author<sup>106</sup> (2007: 168), for these Shi'ite elites “the Muharram celebrations are the best opportunity to display their power and wealth.” Through the example of camels, lent to spiritual masters by their peasant disciples, we can see that this competition concerns both terms of the relationship. Indeed, around this animal a double competition is played out. On the one hand, the spiritual masters/organisers compete among themselves to have the most beautiful specimens and to decorate them as richly as possible. On the other hand, their peasant disciples hope that their dromedaries will be chosen to parade the *gajjah* at best, or at least the Dhamālī. However, if the competition between the two great lineages of spiritual masters to have the most beautiful Processions is patent, it is mitigated by the fact that men of the Lakiārī and the Sabzwārī participate in each other's Processions.

Certainly, this collectively shared work to produce sadness results in a less spectacular and less individual demonstration of sadness, compared to in Lahore. This does not imply that the sadness felt is less, but only that its manifestation is the only responsibility of some. In this case, the music has the responsibility to express the emotions of Muharram. This heady music, composed by seven rhythms classified as “sad or mourning” (*gham*), gives the feeling that it is the city itself that mourns the martyrs of Karbala for five days. To music, then, devolves the role of producing and manifesting the sadness specific to Muharram, as it produces and manifests in

<sup>104</sup> Except for the drummers and oboists who are professional and caste musicians.

<sup>105</sup> See Boivin, “Le pèlerinage de Sehwan Sharif”, 333.

<sup>106</sup> See Boivin, “Representations and Symbols in Muharram and Other Rituals: Fragments of Shiite Worlds from Bombay to Karachi”, eds., A. Monsutti, S. Naef & F. Sabahi (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 149–72.

ordinary times the atmosphere of joy and intoxication specific to the *dhamāl* dance of Shahbāz. The sadness is also in this collective effort to transform this joyous city into a sad one. If Sehwanī Muharram is not a matter of individual sadness, it is because it is celebrated in the name of its saint, as we shall see later.

### A *Mātām* of chains on the very ground of Karbala

As in Lahore, 10 muharram is dedicated to the *mātām* of chains. On this ‘*Āshūrā* day, the city is dead; no shops are open. As the Sehwanī say, Everyone is in Karbala. Sehwan’s Karbala is a vast open field now on the edge of the city, formerly outside in the cemetery area. According to locals, because of the slight depression of the land, it resembles the Iraqi site. But more importantly, thanks to a miracle of Shahbāz, it is the very land of Karbala that is in this spot and the land of Sehwan that is in Karbala.<sup>107</sup> It is thus on the “land that heals” (*mittī shafā* or *khāq shifā*), as the land of Karbala is called here, that men make the *mātām* of chains. In this spot there is also a cenotaph of Husain and the mausoleum of Sābit ‘Alī Shāh. The spiritual masters, who no longer perform the *mātām*, sit in the cenotaph of Husain. Their sons and ascetics stand outside, with their backs to the two mausoleums and as close to them as possible. In front of them, the disciples and the Sehwanī set up. Many women come to see the men flogging themselves; a space is reserved for them. Everyone waits in silence for the arrival (expected before nightfall) of the last Procession of the Lakiārī and A. Hussein. As soon as the *tabūt* appear, the men take off their shirts and start flogging themselves. They are supported by the rhythm “Alī maula haider maula” played quickly by the drummers and oboists. Then, as the *tabūt* pass by them, they display their bloody chains towards them. The Dhamālī also take part in this *mātām*: arriving at the site, they dismount from their dromedary, flog themselves, and then climb back up to accompany the Shahbāz *gajgāh* to Husain’s cenotaph and close the Procession by playing the rhythm “breath.”

Here, as in Lahore, we find the demonstration of courage and determination to fight alongside Husain. Nevertheless, one takes as witness (the *tabūt* of) Ghāzī ‘Abbas,<sup>108</sup> and (the shrine of) Husain and Sābit ‘Alī Shāh, to whom, in a way, one faces since one performs the *mātām* by showing them one’s back. Likewise, this practice proves to be even more safe and harmless as it is performed on the “healing earth” and under the gaze of Fatima and Zaynab bint ‘Alī present in the sky of Sehwan at that very moment.<sup>109</sup>

My data do not settle ‘Alī’s claim that there is more *matām* in Lahore than in Sehwan, but the variety of *matām* is greater in Sehwan.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, this practice is not accompanied by the expression of hostility to Sunnis. Neither mockery, nor sinister slogans, nor a desire to impress are openly expressed against them. Is this

<sup>107</sup> About Sehwan’s space, see Ortis, “From Potent Dead to Potent Places? Reflections on Muslim Saint Shrines in South Asia,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* (2017): 483–500.

<sup>108</sup> This *tabūt* of Ghāzī ‘Abbas remains somewhat mysterious to me. If, according to the *Mātāmī*, it is his appearance that triggers their floggings. It is not mentioned by the ascetics preparing the Processions, and for whom the two *tabūt* processioned are Husain’s, one prepared by the Lakiārī and the other by A. Hussein (see below).

<sup>109</sup> Only the most advanced Sufis are able to see them.

<sup>110</sup> I have found no trace of *gol mātām* in the scientific literature.

related to the sociology of Sehwan? To the fact that its Muharram is not an individual affair? To the fact that its main protagonist is Shahbāz?

### *A Muharram in the name of Lāl Shahbāz Qalandar*

The excerpt from a conversation between a Pakistani friend Nazeem and an ascetic of Bodlo Bahār clearly shows the place of the great saint of Sehwan in this Muharram.

- The ascetic: “Around midnight the *tabūt* of Bodlo [Bahār] goes out . . . . In the morning the *tabūt* leaves for Karbala with the *tabūt* of Lāl Sāin [Shahbāz].”
- Nazeem: “Muharram is related to Husain, why do the *tabūt* of Bodlo Bahār and Lāl Shahbāz come out?”
- The ascetic: “These are the *tabūt* of Husain in the name of Lāl Sāin and Bodlo.

There are many other facts that show that the Muharram of Sehwan is performed in the name of Shahbāz. The most visible is the presence of his *gajgāh*, an artefact representing precisely the “leadership” (*qādat*) in a Procession. Usually attached to his tomb,<sup>111</sup> his absence from 5 to 12 muharram signals that Shahbāz is leaving his tomb to commemorate the martyrdom of Husain. Moreover, his tomb is no longer bathed during this period and covered with a black cloth, like the bodies of the most fervent Shi’ites who stop washing and wear dark clothes.<sup>112</sup> His devotees are not mistaken since they also abandon his shrine during this period. For the master Sabzwārī, who is the last to parade *gajgāh*, “giving back the *gajgāh* means closing Muharram.” The *gajgāh* is not the only Shahbāz’s relic involved in Muharram. As we have seen his two “pet wild beasts” also participate in the Processions. We must also add his “ascetic’s blanket” (*godrī*) hidden in Husain’s *tabūt* brought by the ‘*Āshūrā* Procession of the Lakīārī and A. Hussein, to spend the night in the cenotaph of Husain. Furthermore, one does not dance his ecstatic dance for 11 days because, as the Dhamālī say “it is no longer the time of joy, it is the time of sorrow.” Still, the musicians of the *dhamāl* continue to play an essential role in the ritual activity of the city. Just as in ordinary times they open and close the *dhamāl* dance with the rhythm “breath,” they do the same for the Processions. It is not only through Shahbāz’s relics that he participates in Muharram, it is also through the mobilisation of its musicians.

The route of the Processions also reveals the central role of the saint of Sehwan. Indeed, all of them pass through his shrine. The shorter ones go to the eastern gate of his shrine and return to their starting point. The longer ones circumambulate it, like the visitors around his tomb. They mark two long stations at the East and South (or Golden Gate) Gates of his shrine.<sup>113</sup> At the first one, East Gate, the Procession acts as if it is coming to fetch Shahbāz, joining his *gajgāh* and the Dhamālī, who take the leadership from there. It is also a matter of bringing the processioned artefact into contact with Shahbāz’s grave. Thus, the organizer of the Procession, placed under the

<sup>111</sup> More precisely, it is a replica; the real *gajgāh* is kept in a trunk.

<sup>112</sup> At the Alī Sufi Lodge, the water is stopped from 7 Muharram; the Bodlo Bahar shrine and his ascetics stop washing for three days.

<sup>113</sup> These are the Gates through which one enters and leaves one’s shrine.

porch, acts as if he is welcoming the artifact that the bearers place on the threshold. He places on it some elements that have come into contact with his grave (cloth, flower garland, earth, perfume). The second station at the Golden Gate marks the end of the circumambulation. It coincides with the end of the recitation of the *marsiya*, the first bloody *mātām*, and the reversal of the order of the Procession. From this point on, Shahbāz no longer leads the Procession, he closes the march. His change of position marks the shift from commemorating martyrdom through poetry, to expressing sadness through *matām*.

On the other hand, the aesthetics of this Muharram are similar to that of Shahbāz's grave. The fabrics given to him on his death anniversary (*urs*) are used to decorate the various processional artefacts, the *imāmbargāh*, and the "free stands set up for the drink distribution" (*sabīl*). Radiating from these things and places is the same good smell of rosewater and perfume as at Shahbāz's grave. As with his tomb, the decoration of the *tabūt* and Zuljinah is centred on the "turban" (*dastār*) made with the same materials: tree leaves, fabric, feather and white egret feathers, enhanced with multicoloured glass jewellery.<sup>114</sup> This aesthetic, imbued with royal symbols typical of the cult of saints in South Asia, emphasises the preeminent status of the Prophet's Family. But also, its miraculous powers, since in the turban of Zuljinah are stuck double-pointed spears with impaled fruits to which many virtues are attributed, and which the Sehwanis come to take in exchange for another fruit. In contrast, the aesthetics of the Lahore Muharram are macabre and underline the stigmata of the massacre, with red-stained white fabrics that replicate blood. In Sehwan, only the legs and hooves of Zuljinah are stained red.

More broadly, the Muharram of Sehwan is confused with the cult of its saint, as it involves practices specific to the latter and unrelated to the events of Karbala, such as polite exchanges between spiritual masters during the Processions,<sup>115</sup> or at the end of the Processions, the homage of disciples to their master and ritualised exchanges of commensality between ascetics of different Sufi lodges. For ascetics attached to Bodlo Bahār, such as 'Alī, the commemoration of Husain's martyrdom is even intertwined with that of their saint, since Bodlo's martyrdom on 8 Muharram has its own rituals performed in parallel with Muharram. Similarly, the cult of Shahbāz and Bodlo is based on Shi'ite elements, such as the *'alam* of Ghazi 'Abbas. As an ascetic, 'Alī had the duty several times of guarding the *'alam* at the entrance to the Bodlo shrine and guiding visitors in their devotion. Similarly, he had to cradle the cradle of 'Alī Asghar for hours near Bodlo's tomb. In Sehwan, Shi'ism, Sufism, and the cult of the saints share many practices and ideas, which are in fact reflected in the town's mystical Muharram rituals. The ritual process makes sense in reference to Shahbāz's personal connections with the heroes of Karbala and the first Imam 'Alī.

Finally, Muharram in Sehwan is inseparable from the worship of Shahbāz because both are funded, organised, and performed by the same people: the spiritual masters; their ascetics, disciples, and clients; and the musicians (Dhamālī, drummers, and

<sup>114</sup> The Sabzwārī pride themselves on having the largest in the city, weighing 60 kg.

<sup>115</sup> Spiritual masters may leave the Procession with a few ascetics to take tea in the Sufi lodge of another spiritual master who has invited them.

oboists). All work gratuitously in honour of Shahbāz as they say and hope to be rewarded by the “spiritual merits” (*sawāb*) he will kindly bestow upon them. The same is true of camel drivers, electricians, and light bearers. In the sharing of responsibilities and tasks, there is even a configuration comparable to that of ordinary time, as in the case of the musicians where the Dhamālī play to/for Shahbāz while the drummers play for his devotees. It is thus a city united behind its saint, held to be the sacrificer of the commemoration, which is self-empowered at the remembrance of the Karbala tragedy and leaves it to the music to express, to manifest its deep sadness.

### Conclusion: Globalized Version Versus Vernacularized Version

While this comparative ethnographic study does not settle the question of the amount of sadness, it has shown that the ritual devices that Shi’ites create to cultivate, feel, and express their sadness, and through which they make themselves as Shi’ites, and the pact that binds them to Husain, vary greatly from place to place, even within the same country.

Within these two versions of Muharram, ‘Alī’s articulation of himself and the collective is necessarily different. I therefore hypothesise that because of his personal history, in which his Sufi commitment and his Shi’a faith tend to merge, ‘Alī needs to commemorate Husain’s martyrdom in a way that strongly distinguishes him both from the Sunnis (his origins) and from his ascetic commitment (his new destiny). In other words, he needs to uniquely express his Shi’ite faith within and outside his community. Generally, this is what Muharram allows as a paroxysmal Shi’a public performance. This is less obvious in the context of Sehwan, where Shi’ism, Sufism, and the cult of saints are intertwined. Here, ‘Alī can never leave his ascetic’s uniform, regain his freedom (which he has placed in the hands of his master) to live Muharram as he sees fit, as is the case in Lahore. Most of his time is devoted to the community life of the ascetics and the decoration of artefacts. The time he can dedicate to the practice of *mātām* is reduced and subject to the permission of his master. The experience of the Assembly is certainly emotionally stronger for ‘Alī than performing tasks that allow Bodlo to commemorate Muharram in the company of Shahbāz. Regarding the *mātām* of chains to which he attaches great value,<sup>116</sup> although he is one of Bodlo’s most experienced ascetics (as his scars attest), he is not recognised in Sehwan as a *Mātāmī* (a title given to others). Invariably, in that city he can only act as an ascetic. In Lahore, on the other hand, the men of Aunt’s family recognise him as a great *Mātāmī*, whose chains impress. Ultimately, by claiming that there is more sadness where he is recognised as a great *Mātāmī* by a community that moreover has a strong Shi’ite political identity, he proves in the same movement, to others and to himself, that he is a true “believer” (*momin*), a good Shi’ite.

One might have expected ‘Alī to insist on this question of place and, as a Lahori, to invoke the question of culture to explain the “much more” sadness of Lahore, contrasting Punjabi and Sindhi ways. But this was not the case. Should we be surprised? Perhaps not. In fact, the Lahori Muharram is not part of any specific local

<sup>116</sup> Whether in Lahore or Sehwan, I observed him trying to convert those around him to this practice.



tradition. It conforms to the descriptions in South Asian literature, right down to the Urdu sermons of its Assemblies, the national language of Pakistan, and the *marsiya*.<sup>117</sup> This South Asian version of Muharram is in some ways a globalised version, in the sense that it follows global trends, such as the transformation of rituals under the effect of the development of individualism, or at least the empowerment of individuals. Indeed, the Assembly allows participants to be active in the production of their sadness, to set up internal and personal devices that make them masters of its expression. The individual character of the Lahori Muharram is evident in the very fact that 'Alī, his uncle, and his aunt each experienced it on their own. They shared neither the words of the orator and the *nauhah*, nor the tears and blows; only the *niyāz* reported by each of them were shared (but not yet consumed together).<sup>118</sup> Similarly, only confession and neighbourhood seemed to link Aunt to the other women in the Assemblies. This individual dimension goes hand in hand, it seems to me, with 'Alī's emphasis on *mātam* as a measure of sadness.

Burckhardt Qureshi<sup>119</sup> (1981) had already noted that the decline of the patronage of professional *marsiya* interpreters had been accompanied by the development of neighbourhood associations practising *nauhah* and *mātam* for free. Such Punjabi associations meet frequently today in Sehwan, coming for a weekend to offer their blood to Shahbāz without any reference to Muharram. This transformation certainly followed the Iranian trajectory (a reference for Indo-Pakistani Shi'ites) where, according to Sepideh Parsapajouh,<sup>120</sup> the emergence of the *nauhah*, to accompany the practices of self-flagellation under the Qâjâr (1876–1925), marks the transition from a literary production of court poets to an oral production of popular singers. In today's Iran, one observes that the youth are abandoning the traditional theatre, called *ta'zieh*, to participate in *nauhah* performances in nightclubs in techno or ecstasy parties.<sup>121</sup> While in Pakistan there seems to be a craze for the *mātam* of chains, that is, a more frequent, more violent, and more autonomous or disassociated practice from the ritual device. Abou-Zahab noted this craze in a village in the Mianvalli Valley, where the *mātam* of chains tends to eclipse other rituals;<sup>122</sup> Paul Rollier made the same observation in Lahore among the younger generation.<sup>123</sup> One can also see in the valorization of rituals that require neither professional nor advanced education and that offer individuals active participation, a form of religious democratization parallel to the rise of individualism.<sup>124</sup> In contrast, Sehwan seems to resist this movement by maintaining a localised,

<sup>117</sup> The *marsiya* was the flagship of Urdu poetry, especially under the pen of the Lucknow poet Anis.

<sup>118</sup> Aunt and I never even met them, either in our travels or in the rituals. In Lahore, although I lived under the same roof as 'Alī, I could only follow his participation in Muharram from a distance, while in Sehwan I could easily observe his doings although he performed them within a collective encompassing his mere person, and we did not reside together.

<sup>119</sup> Burckhardt Qureshi, 1981.

<sup>120</sup> Parsapajouh, 370–97.

<sup>121</sup> Lecture by Sara Kalantari, November 8, 2015, as part of the ethnomusiKa group, and Parsapajouh, 370–97.

<sup>122</sup> Abou-Zahab's lecture on practices in the village of Pakki Shah Mardan (Panjab), in the seminar *History and Anthropology of Muslim Societies in Contemporary South Asia* (EHESS), May 3, 2017.

<sup>123</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>124</sup> It is found in Buddhism (personal communication from Brac de la Perrière).

vernacularised<sup>125</sup> version of its Muharram. It is culturally anchored in Sindh by its language, its aesthetics, and the place that Sufism occupies in it; it is socially anchored in Sehwan's sociology and works to reiterate and reconcile the positions of each individual in the economy of this small local society united under the banner of its saint.

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<sup>125</sup> See Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); I thank Michel Boivin for having made me know Pollock and Boivin, "Sufism and Shi'ism," 286–320.