Chapter 2

Ta'ziyeh: The History in Play

The Ta'ziyeh of Iran is ritual theatre and derives its form and content from deep-rooted religious traditions. But although it is Islamic in appearance, it is strongly Persian, drawing vital inspiration from its special political and cultural heritage. Its genius is that it combines immediacy and flexibility with universality. Uniting rural folk art with urban, royal entertainment, it admits no barriers between the archetype and the human, the wealthy and the poor, the sophisticated and the simple, the spectator and the actor. Each participates with and enriches the other.69

As Peter J. Chelkowski explains, Ta’ziyeh is a religious drama that has deep roots in the history and spirituality of Islam, and especially the Shiyah Islam.

Ta'ziyeh, a unique passion play practised in Iran, is an expression of Islamic culture and its struggles within. It takes place during the annual ten day period spent in mourning by the Shiyah sect, during Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar. The performance commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The understanding of Ta’ziyeh will not be complete without the understanding of the specific political, spiritual and social circumstances in which it took shape.

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At the centre of Ta’ziyeh is the heroic tale of Hussein. The circumstances leading to Hussein’s martyrdom take shape followed by the death of the Prophet (11 AH, 632 AD). The death of Muhammad sparked off a war of succession. The successor was to lead the Muslims as the political and spiritual head. The dispute rocked the still young Muslim community. The entire community was divided into two camps: One that favoured the ancient Arabic tradition of election of a successor and one that favoured succession by inheritance, through blood relation. Now, the Prophet died without a male heir. There were four main contenders for the throne: Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman and Ali. All of them were closely associated with the Prophet in one way or the other. Two of them were his fathers-in-law while the other two his sons-in-law. All of them had their chances to hold the position but the manner in which the events unfolded left the community divided. Immediately after the Prophet’s demise, Abu Bakr, a trusted friend and the father of Ayesha, took over. At his death bed, Abu Bakr passed
the mantle to Umar. But after the assassination of Umar, the mantle was claimed by both Usman and Ali. This dispute also reflected the rivalry between two flourishing clans of Mecca. One section felt that Ali, as a Hashemite and the father of the Prophet’s only surviving descendent, should get the leadership. For them, 'Ali, "the Hand of God," is so exalted that it is said: "Mohammed is a city of learning, 'Ali is its gate." But eventually the Usman faction carried the day and he was elected. But when Usman was assassinated in 656 the mantle fell to Ali. But this was contested by the Governor of Syria Mu’awiyah. He alleged that Ali had a hand in Usman’s assassination and pressed for revenge while Ali continued to push the Hashemite back into prominence. Before the resolution of the crisis Ali was assassinated and Mu’awiyah took over as the new Caliph. Ali had two sons: Hassan and Hussein. Hassan had renounced any claims and led the way to Mu’awiyah’s accession. As he approached his end, Mu’awiyah proposed his son Yazid as the new Caliph and this sparked off fresh trouble. A section of the community saw this as an effort to cut the descendents of the Prophet from the mantle and an effort to establish hereditary rule. The residents of Kufah, who had their grievances against the Syrian rule, invited Hussein to take over. Responding to the request, Hussein proceeded to Kufah with a contingent of his followers. He was stopped by Yazid’s army outside the city of Kufah and was killed on plains of Karbala on the tenth day of Muharram in 680 AD. As Chelkowski quotes the renowned historian Abu Reyhan Biruni: ". . . then fire was set to their camp and the bodies were trampled by the hoofs of the horses: nobody in the history of the human kind [sic] has seen such atrocities."71

This is the culmination of a protracted struggle within the community:

Hussein's murder was the outcome of a protracted power struggle for control of the nascent Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Two factions are confronted with competing views on the leadership selection process for the head of the community. Shiites advocated that the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad possessed a divine right to authority in both spiritual and temporal matters for karbala. As Rebecca Ansary Pettys points out, this was a turning point in the history of Islam.

The tragic events at Karbala provided the Shi'yahs with the perfect dramatic incident and Hussein furnished them with the perfect martyred hero. The prolonged dispute regarding the criterion for leadership of the new theocracy was the first seed of a divisive rift within Islam. The tragedy at Karbala consolidated what had been a loosely bound separatist group into a different sect with a separate and well-defined doctrine. Thus, the Shi'yah mourning ritual commemorates the birth of the Shi'yah sect. As the hero of this ritual, Hussein supplied the required attributes. Unlike his father, Ali, Hussein was not assassinated unexpectedly, but rather embarked on his fateful journey fully aware of the possible consequences. Thus, it was possible to characterize his eventual death as a willing sacrifice which not only gave his martyrdom tragic proportion, but also accorded well with the Shi'yah doctrine of free will.

Pettys goes on to point out the significance of the event for the Persians:

72 Jabber Anasori, History of Iranian drama (Tehran: Shikh safi Publications, 1992) 87
The divine right of kings, which was an established Persian tradition when the Islamic conquest toppled their Sassanid dynasty, served to color Persian response to the struggle for succession. Already favorably inclined towards Ali because of their kingship traditions and alarmed at the growing power of the Omayyuds, the Persians began to view the cause of Ali as the cause of the oppressed. Persian resentment of Arab chauvinism crystallized into a hatred directed specifically at the expanding authority of Omayyud leadership, and their sympathy for Ali's cause became active partisanship of his family. Shahrbanu's marriage to Hussein provided an additional link between Persian sympathy and Ali, since it united the Persian ruling line to Ali's house. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Shi'yah ritual in Persia should focus on the tragedy of Karbala or that Hussein should function as their martyr par excellence. The Persian resentment of Arab rule, the establishment of the Shi'yah sect, and the ritual mourning ceremonies are interrelated factors influencing the development and function of the Ta'zieh.

The movement now needed a rallying point. Hussein's only surviving son refused to take this role. Instead, there appeared the Imamate. The imamate rejected the notion of election. They had the belief that Ali was directly elected by the Prophet and that this qualification was inherited by his descendents. Each Imam, therefore, possessed superhuman qualities which raised him above the level of the rest of mankind and allowed him to guide the faithful with infallible wisdom. So Ali’s followers rejected the first three Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman). They replaced the Caliphate system by their own Imamate system. As Pettys points out, the Persians had a political point in adopting the system.

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The Iranian Shi'yahs believe in a chain of twelve Imams, the last of whom disappeared mysteriously and is expected to return. This unbroken chain of divinely inspired leaders has special significance for the Persians since Zain-al-abid-din (the fourth link) was also the son of Shahrbanu and, therefore, the succeeding Imams carried the blood of the overthrown Persian dynasty as well as that of Muhammad\textsuperscript{75}.

Slowly the Muharram celebrations took over the public imagination in Persia and they increasingly became a public spectacle. Although the martyrdom took place in 680 AD, it took several centuries for the Muharram mourning and Ta’ziyeh to crystallise. As Pettys notes, the first public and officially sanctioned mourning rituals took place in Baghdad during Muharram in 963 AD. And by the end of this century, the performance was well established. Chelkowski quotes the reliable historian, Ibn al- Athir, who narrates the great numbers of participants, with black painted faces and dishevelled hair, circling round and round the city of Baghdad, beating their chests and moaning the mourning songs at the festival of Muharram. It was at the time when the Persian Buid dynasty ruled from Baghdad\textsuperscript{76}. The commemoration while reliving the political and sectarian struggles of the past, also caused further rift and tensions between the Sunnis and the Shi'ahs.

Although the hated Omayyud dynasty had long since been replaced by the Abbassid dynasty (also gasping its last in 963), the ritual included curses against Mu'awiyah. Normal business activities were suspended and the Shi'ah population expressed their mourning in a ritual procession which wound through the streets of the city. By 973 the Sunni population of Baghdad


countered with a procession of their own, resulting in a bloody battle.

Undaunted, the Shi‘yah mourning processions continued and grew more elaborate with the passage of years.\textsuperscript{77}

The establishment of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1502 gave fresh momentum to the Muharram mourning. The intervening six centuries had seen the slow and steady development of the Ta’ziyeh. Shiyah sect was declared the national religion by the Safavids and thus the Persian nationalism came to be bound to the Shiyah beliefs. The Muharram observances received an impetus with the royal household lending all help and support. The monarchs saw Hussein's martyrdom as a patriotic as well as religious act. “Many accounts of the processions, written mostly by European envoys, missionaries, merchants and travellers, tell of characters dressed in colourful costumes marching, or mounted on horses and camels, depicting the events leading up to the final tragedy at Kerbela.”\textsuperscript{78} The monarchs asked the court poets to compose elegies about the martyrdom of Hussein and the sacrifice on the plains of Karbala came to dominate the public consciousness.

These elegies had a definite effect on the already existent culture of telling the story of Hussein. The recital of these verses came to be known as Rowzeh-khani, and they became an integral part of the Muharram celebrations. Unlike the Muharram processions, the Rowzeh-khani—garden recitations—were stationary, the narrator usually seated on a raised pulpit, his audience gathered in a semi-circle beneath his feet. Through the choice of episodes and the voice modulation and dramatic presentation, the narrator was able to excite the audience and raise them to a state of intense sadness. More visual elements were added to make it more colourful to and to arouse the public imagination. Riderless horses and coffins were the new


symbols of tragedy. Such Tableau became the integral part of the ceremony. From 1704, it became a practice to use a series of tableaus to represent the events in a chronological order. The self-flagellation was further inspired by these representations. Quoting European and missionary sources, Chelkowski relives such a procession:

Living tableaux of butchered martyrs stained with blood, their bodies showing simulated amputations, were moved along on wheeled platforms. Mock battles were mimed by hundreds of uniformed mourners armed with bows, swords and other weapons. The entire pageant was accomplished by funeral music and spectators, lined up along its path, beat their breasts and shouted "Hossein, O Hossein, the King of the Martyrs" as it passed by⁷⁹.

Some scholars have pointed out that Ta’ziyeh had its roots in the worship of ancient heroes and acts of heroism and on its way to development it may have adapted other forms that had existed earlier:

Taziyeh can be found in the stories of pre-Islamic heroes, Rostam and Siavash. Stories which are, at heart, legends from Zoroastrian times handed down through Ferdosi’s Shahnameh. Perhaps the habit of eulogizing heroes simply got transferred. Another sign of non-Islamic influence is the imagery – fantasy portraits of the Imam Hussein full-bearded but with glowing almond eyes, almost feminine – an unquestionably Persian beauty⁸⁰.

Ta’ziyeh flourished further under the Qajar dynasty, which was another strong dynasty that followed the Safavids. Around this time the two practises of recitals and the mourning processions merged to produce an actual dramatic representation of Hussein’s sacrifice on the

plains of Karbala. Also around this time we see the reference to a permanent structure (Tekieh Khana) specifically built to house the mourning rituals from this time. This is the time when we see the passion play coming of age.

Ta'zieh reached its fullest development under the Qajar rulers and attained its zenith during the reign of Nasir-al-din Shah. This Qajar ruler was responsible for the construction of Takiyah-i-Dawlat (the Takiyah of the State), modeled after London's Albert Hall and capable of housing three thousand spectators. This expensive structure exemplified the height of state support for the Ta'zieh performance tradition.\(^{81}\)

But this progress was arrested during the Pahlavi Rule. The dynasty, in its desire to secularise Iran and to push the country into the main stream, discouraged Ta’ziyeh. It was eventually banned during the Pahlavi rule. But the ritualistic base and the strong religious links and the emotional outpouring that the performance aroused in the people could not have been banished by a royal decree. This was amply proved by the fact that the symbolism and myth behind Ta’ziyeh were central to the Islamic revolution that toppled the Pahlavis.

Ta’ziyeh literally means expressions of sympathy, mourning and consolation. As a dramatic form, it has its origins in the Muharram processions commemorating Hussein's martyrdom and throughout its evolution the representation of the siege and carnage at Kerbela has remained its central point. Now, we will move on to discuss the cycle of Ta’ziyeh. Pettys studies the cycle based on a collection made at the zenith of the performance tradition by Sir Lewis Pelly (Pelly was a representative of British Government in Iran and India). The

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collection was published in 1879 as *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain*. He gathered 52 scenes from oral tradition and presented 37. The 37 scenes are the following:

1. *Joseph and His Brothers*

2. *Death of Abraham, the Son of Mohammed*

3. *The Disobedient Son*

4. *The Magnanimous offer of Ali to Sacrifice his Life for a Fellow Creature*

5. *Death of the Prophet Mohammed*

6. *The Seizure of the Caliphate by Abu Bekr*

7. *The Death of Fatima, the Daughter of the Prophet Mohammed*

8. *The Martyrdom of Ali, the Son of Abu-Taleb*

9. *The Martyrdom of Hassan, the Son of Ali*

10. *The Martyrdom of Muslim, the Envoy of Hussein*

11. *The Murder of the Sons of Muslim*

12. *The Departure of Hussein from Medina on his Way to Kufah*

13. *The Withdrawal of Hussein from the Road to Kufah*

14. *The Martyrdom of Hurr*

15. *The Martyrdom of Abis and Shuzab in Defence of Hussein*

16. *A Night Assault on Hussein’s Camp*

17. *The Death of Ali Akbar, Eldest Son of Hussein*
18. The Death of Ghasim, the Bridegroom

19. The Death of Abbas, the Brother of Hussein

20. The Martyrdom of Hashim

21. The Rescue by Hussein of Sultan Ghyas from the Jaws of a Lion

22. The Lamentation of Hussein and His Family for the Loss of the Martyrs in Karbala

23. The Martyrdom of Hussein

24. The Camp at Karbala after the Death of Hussein

25. The Field of Karbala after the Death of Hussein

26. The Fight of Shahr-Banu from the Plain of Karbala

27. Hussein’s Faithless Camel Driver

28. The Release of Fatima, Owing to the Intervention of the Persians

29. The Despatch of Hussein Family as Captive to Syria

30. The Arrival of Hussein’s Family at Damascus

31. The Conversion and Murder of Ambassador from Europe

32. Death of Rukayyah, the Daughter of Hussein

33. The Release of Hussein’s family from Captivity

34. The Death of Zeinab

35. The Conversion of Christian Lady to the Muhammadan Faith

36. The Conversion of King Kania
37. The Resurrection

Pelly does not make clear why the other 15 of the dramas were omitted or what happened to them. He only says ‘for even in harrowing the feelings, one must draw the line somewhere; and it has been said that a sad tale saddens double when it’s long’. The very act of compiling reduces the orality of the tradition. Pelly was an eyewitness to the early performances of Ta’ziyeh and recounted the development of the art form. His compilation is also comes from his experience of watching various performances. He writes in 1859: “From the palace to the bazaar there was wailing and beating of breasts and bursts of impassioned grief from scores of houses wheresoever a noble, or the merchants, or others were giving a tazia.”

The centre of the narrative is the martyrdom and it begins with the narrative of Jacob’s loss of Joseph. Although part of a cycle, each scene can be performed as stand-alone pieces. In the first scene, taken from the ancient religious history, jealous brothers throw Joseph into the well. Here, the suffering of Joseph is compared to that of Hussein bringing the focus back to Karbala. Jacob cries, "O Lord God, although I know that no wolf has eaten my Joseph, still I am extremely moved at the sign of his foully stained coat. I wonder what will be the feelings of Fatimah, the mother of Hussein, when she sees her son's blood-stained torn coat or shirt after he shall have been put to death in a most cruel manner?" (I, 17). Karbala comes to the focus again and again. The next nine scenes are about Muhammad and his family prior to Karbala tragedy. It is about Muhammad’s dilemma of choosing between his son Ibrahim and grandson Hussein. Ibrahim is sacrificed and Hussein is chosen. The scene indicates how important Hussein is to the Muslims.

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The Prophet acknowledges the importance of Hussein. He says “God knows that my beloved people, being my true family, my poor broken-winged birds, ought to be more pitied. I will, therefore, in order to save my people from the wrath to come, make Husain a propitiation for their sins”\(^8^4\). The last four scenes are about the deaths of Muhammad, Fatima, Ali and Hasan. The scene that represents the Prophet’s death is fashioned especially to connect to Shiyah doctrine. We see Muhammad appointing Ali as his lawful successor. It is titled, according to the Shiyah sentiments, “The Seizure of the Khilafat by Abu Bakr”. The following scenes lead the audience through the various events that preceded the tragedy at Karbala and end with the scene that depicts the martyrdom of Hussein. Each scene bears witness to the death of each of Hussein’s supporters. Many of these supporters are depicted as the members of his family. The scenes build up the pressure and then there is the relief of the martyrdom of Kasim, the bridegroom, in the eighteenth scene. Hasan had, while drawing his last breath, requested the union of Kasim with Hussein’s daughter Fatima. In the midst of the war and desperation, the contingent of Hussein celebrates the marriage. Kasim completes the formalities and goes on to the battle and death and the bride is left a widow. But as the historians suggest, Fatima was not present at Karbala. Here, we see that the history has been manipulated to serve the purpose of dramatisation. Fatima has always been an integral part of the mourning ritual. The marriage brings out the pathos as the heat of the battle and the tenderness alternates heightening the dramatic element.

The desperation and tragedy heightens in the 21\(^\text{st}\) scene. Hussein is growing more and more sad as he discovers the corpses of his followers lying dead in the battle field. On the other hand, the performance brings out the actions of the enemy general Ibn Sa’d, who appoints new warrior to behead the followers of Hussein. At the end, Hussein is alone in the battlefield. He is surrounded by the dead bodies of his followers. Sa’d on the other hand has a

\(^8^4\) Ibid.
number of able warriors at his disposal. Hussein is now left with a group of weeping widows and orphans. Now, comes the final assault and in the twenty-third scene we see Hussein getting ready to brave the final assault. The attack leaves Hussein mutilated and dead. The next episodes show the sorrow of the widows left behind by the brave warriors of Hussein. Here, Pelly brings in a Christian character into the play:

The central figure of a Christian ambassador at the court of Yazid unifies the entire scene. The ambassador, impressed by the suffering of the holy family, protests their treatment and accepts Islam prior to being executed for attempting to interfere. Two conversions are the subject of scenes thirty-five and thirty-six. In the first, a Christian lady, attracted by the fragrance and beauty of the Karbala plain, decides to break her journey and set up camp. Disturbed by the blood that gushes from the soil as the tent stakes are driven, she has a series of dreams in which she witnesses the tragedy of this plain. The revelation of Hussein's suffering converts her to Islam.

“The Resurrection”, the final scene, portrays the resurrection of all the dead warriors and is in tune with the Islamic doctrine. Hussein is also resurrected. But Pelly’s composition does not hint that Hussein will rise from the dead and thus limits the comparison with the Christian cycle. Archangel Sarafil blows the trumpet signalling the end of the world. While the Prophets of the bygone era ask for personal salvation, Muhammad asks for the salvation of the suffering people. Hussein’s aid is requested and given through the narration of his story at Karbala:

Gabriel arrives with the following message: "None has suffered the pain and afflictions which Husain has undergone. None has, like him, been obedient in

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my service. As he has taken no steps save in sincerity in all that he has done, thou [Muhammad] must put the key of paradise in his hand. The privilege of making intercession for sinners is exclusively his. Husain is, by My peculiar grace, the mediator of all (II, 347).86

Muhammad tells his grandson, "Go thou and deliver from the flame everyone who has in his life-time shed but a single tear for thee, everyone who has in any way helped thee, everyone who has performed a pilgrimage to thy shrine, or mourned for thee, and to everyone who has written tragic verse for thee. Bear each and all with thee to Paradise" (II, 347)87. We come to this last section of the performance and learn the reason for its existence. Hussein justifies his sacrifice and says that his martyrdom was the only way the suffering of the people could be put to an end. He was the only one who could save the people from the wrath of god. So in a way Ta’ziyeh, while celebrating the martyrdom of Hussein, also reminds the people that they have sinned and Hussein had died for them:

This issue of pre-destination versus free will was itself magnified due to the tragedy of Karbala because of the questions which it raised in the minds of the umma. Do not forget that the people who committed the atrocities against Imam Hussein were themselves Muslims who believed in Towhid (worship Allah) and another life and said their prayers and made their fasts. How could they behead the person whom their own Prophet would place on his lap and kiss as a child, and not feel guilt? How could they justify having stripped naked and trampled with horses the body of the man called the "Chief of the

87 Ibid.
Youths of Heaven”? After realizing what they had done, how could they have not revolted against Yazid?”

The structure of the performance of Ta’ziyeh has also evolved over the years. The space where the performance is held also changed over the centuries through which the art form grew. Tahziyeh began as street performances. From the streets it found its way to bazaars, households and palaces. Then developed the Tekieh, which became the space for the performances. Usually an open air space, Tekieh may also be constructed to accommodate large crowds and live animals as in many scenes dozens of players come on horseback and with real weapons. The monarchs and the well-to-do built Tekieh as a religious service. Some of them could accommodate thousands. The space is specially structured to help the performance.

In contrast to the richness of the theater decoration, taziyeh stage décor and props are quite stark. All Takieh (small house and temporary for mourning) regardless of their size, are constructed as theaters in the round to intensify the dynamic between actors and audience. The spectators are literally surrounded by the action and often become physical participants in the play in enwalled Takieh. It is not unusual for combat scenes to occur behind the audience and people.

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Figure 2 Performance in, and structure of, Tekieh

The main drama occurs on a raised, curtainless platform in the center of a building or courtyard. Subplots and battles take place in a sand-covered circular band of space around the stage. There are passageways from the stage through the seating area. These serve as passageways for troops, messengers, and animals. The starkness of the stage represents the barrenness of the desert plain at Karbala. The stage props are minimal and most of them are symbolic. The Euphrates River is denoted by a basin of water, a tree branch indicates a grove of palms. More utilitarian props such as chairs or bedding and cooking utensils are carried onstage by the actors themselves or even by the members of the audience. A horse without a rider denotes martyrdom.

Music also has an important part to play in the performance of Ta’ziyeh:
Singers are accompanied by a variety of drums, trumpets, flutes, and cymbals. An orchestra can be quite substantial or consist of just a few musicians depending on the financial resources or theatrical experience of the troupe. Drum music announces that the drama is about to begin. It may be repeated several times, particularly if the audience needs more time to assemble. Once the spectators have gathered, a fanfare is played while the actors and performer file into the performance area in procession.

Ta’ziyeh also employs a colour coding to denote the different dramatic personalities and situations. When a white cloth is put on a protagonist's shoulders or when he dons a white shirt, it is understood that the white symbolizes a shroud and he will soon sacrifice his life and be killed.

Women, in other words, did not participate as actors on the public stage. So to depict female characters such as the daughter of the prophet, Fatimih, mortal men donned the veil. On the stage, the grain of the voice and the tint of the veil determined the gender of the character in the Taziyeh performances. Young men with soft voices portrayed female characters and young girls under the age of nine (the age of maturity) performed certain minor roles. One of the early Qajar performers of women's roles, Haji Mulla Husayn from Peek Zarand-Saveh, played female characters so well that each year he had to leave

his farm for the months of Muharram and Safar in order to perform at the Royal Takiyeh—Takiyeh Dowlat\(^9\).

The scene of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom is the saddest scene of all. It works the devotees up to a state of extreme sadness. At this point, soldiers come on stage and cover the scene. They block the audiences’ vision, indicating that the sight is terrible and the people may not be able to bear it.

The Tekieh also bear witness to the community’s whole hearted participation in the mourning rituals.

Community cooperation was encouraged in the building and decoration of the Takiyeh whether the funds for the enterprise were provided by a wealthy, public-minded benefactor or by contributions from the citizens of a particular district. The Takiyeh varied in seating capacity from intimate structures able to accommodate a few dozen people to large buildings capable of holding 1000 spectators or more. Often the Takiyeh were temporary, erected especially for the observance of the Muharram festival. During the festival period, the Takiyeh were lavishly decorated with the prized personal possessions of the local community\(^2\).

The most famous Tekieh in Iran was Tekieh Dowlat. The construction of this splendid building started in 1304. The dizzying splendor of this building had been a wonder to the


visitors, many of whom attested that the building was grander than the grand opera houses of Europe. Chelkowski narrates the grand experience of visiting Tekieh Dowlat:

I was invited to attend on the fifth day of the Ta'ziyeh. We arrived at the Tekieh toward noon. On alighting from the carriage I was surprised to see an immense circular building as large as the amphitheatre of Verona, solidly constructed of brick. Ferashes, or liveried footmen, cleared the way before us. Thrashing their staves right and left, they opened a way through the crowd that packed the great portal; and entering a dark, vaulted vestibule I groped, or rather was impelled by the throng, towards a staircase crowded with servants whose masters had already arrived. Like all stairs in Persia, these were adapted to the stride of giants.

The grand structure of Tekieh Dowlat represents the heights Ta’ziyeh had reached under the encouragement of Naser-ed-Din Shah, who ruled Persia from 1848 to 1896. In any case, the Tekieh was central to the performance of Ta’ziyeh. As Chelkowski points out,

The tekieh was indeed a model of the plain of Kerbela; it was a tradition that actors in plays about the Kerbela massacre never left the central playing area as a symbol of the martyrs encircled by the enemy. It would probably not be going too far to say that the tekieh was a kind of Shi’ite omphalos.

It is also interesting to note that although Ta’ziyeh is performed in other countries including India, it is in Iran that it finds its fullest expression. Iran has always had a rich cultural heritage and it has been famous for its painters and poets. The rich tradition and the monarchs who encouraged the cultural and artistic endeavors must have been the causes for this.

94 Ibid.
In its performance, Ta’ziyeh had immense effect on the devotees. The dramatization of Hussein’s martyrdom was heightened by the structure of the Tekieh and the use of apace by the performers. Chelkowsky points to the performance of the Ta'ziyeh play called "The Marriage of Kasim" as a case in point. As we have seen in the previous section, the story of Kasim is usually played between the fifth and the tenth day of Muharram as an introduction to the culmination of the martyrdom of Hussein. This part of the play, Chelkowsky points out, also acts as the dynamics of the interaction between the audience and the actors and the performers’ use of the Tekieh. As the scene opens, Hussein is certain of the death of his followers and himself. Besieged by the enemies who have easily outnumbered his contingent and cut off from the waters, he knows he has no chance of survival. But even as the last moment appears, he is determined to fulfill the word given by his elder brother Hassan. The preparations for the marriage are made as Ali Akbar, the elder son of Hussein, is singlehandedly fighting off the attackers' army (the fight is not staged, but is referred to). Both the actors and the audience take part in these preparations. The preparations are being made on the central stage and in the area surrounding it. Finally they bring in the colourfully beribboned nuptial tent and lead the bride and bridegroom through one of the pit corridors to it. The entire scene is accompanied by the wedding music. The actors distribute goodies among the audience. But suddenly the jolly crowd is disturbed by the appearance of Ali Akbar’s horse. It enters from behind the audience. It does not have the rider on it and we know that the brave warrior has been killed by the enemy armies. This appearance makes the actors, audience and the jolly procession come to a freeze. Kasim leaves the jolly group and proceeds to the battlefield behind the audience. And he comes back leading the procession carrying Ali Akbar’s dead body. As it is the custom in Muslim countries for the entire community to participate in the last rites of the dead, the whole audience rises to its feet and weeps. According to the custom that everyone should help in carrying the dead body, the
audiences also take part in this funeral procession. Those who are at the far end will stretch their hands towards the direction to symbolically indicate their participation. As the body enters the stage, the entire audience participates in the mourning by beating their chests. As the marriage rituals continue, the audience can also hear the cries from the battle field. As Kasim completes the rituals, he is called to the battle field. He succeeds in defeating the sons of the army general. But then he is faced with the whole army and he is killed. As we notice, in the entire process the audience has a dual role: "They are both on the plains of Kerbala, symbolically representing the forces surrounding Hussein and his followers, and simultaneously in the present-day world, mourning because of the event". The audience is there for the ritual catharsis and they also provide the multitudes when the story demands it. The process of watching the performance ends in the audience completely identifying with the tragedy of Kerbala:

Taziyeh, a passion play depicting the Muharram tragedy, was developed, in which the people were not passive spectators, but provided the emotional response, weeping and beating their breasts, and joining their own sorrows to the suffering of Imam Hussein. The rituals provided an important safety valve. As they moaned, slapped their foreheads, and wept uncontrollably, the audience aroused in themselves that yearning for justice, who is at the heart of piety, asking him or her why the good always seemed to suffer and evil nearly always prevailed.


96 Hasan Sojodi, Taziyeh in Iran, (Tehran: Ghatreh Publications, 2006) 36
This participation of the audience is central to Ta’ziyeh, more importantly since it aims to instill in them a group identity and a sense of belonging.

There is distinctiveness within the Taziyeh theatre that identifies it as a culturally specific art form. The Taziyeh, glorifies its religious and political figures as heroes, it allows the viewer to be drawn in as part of the performance by association. There is no free expression, there is no individual identity or room to analyse one’s position within the group, the audience are trained to behave and respond in a specific way as the performers were trained, and to complete the indoctrination the group discuss the performance and their response to it within the group’s setting. When leaving a performance the individual feels a strong sense of identity and association with the group, there is no feeling of alienation, one does not walk the streets alone or question one’s position within Iranian culture.\(^97\)

The performance of Ta’ziyeh does not alienate the viewers. Instead, it reaffirms their sense of belonging. The history that is presented is that of their ancestors, it is presented as their history and the performance itself demands their participation as players. And at the end the entire audience is united in communal grieving and they go away as one. The ritual of watching and being a part of a Ta’ziyeh performance also includes a discussion of the performance. After the performance the audience, as they disperse, discuss the performance, the actors, how good or bad they were etc. Thus the performance continues to live in their minds.

Another interesting fact about the performance of Ta’ziyeh is its complete lack of realism in costumes. Add to this the ambiguity about the historical validity of the events narrated in the performance. As is pointed out,

> Although there is strict control over the storyline and dialogue, costuming has become superfluous, it is not uncommon to see performers waving their swords as fine examples of heroes from Iran’s ancient past, but dressed in local police costumes or modern battle fatigues. Although the historical references may be poor the large performances are always dramatic. It is from these performances that young Iranians learn of their cultural heritage, and begin to identify themselves with their Islamic tradition.\(^98\)

Chelkowski also points to this fact:

> Costumes are also meant to be representational. Although fabulously elegant stage attire was common at the Royal Ta'ziyeh and Takiyeh dowlat (government) there was no attempt to make the actors' garments historically accurate. The main goal of costume design was to help the spectators identify a character and his nature by his clothing. This practice has continued over time with certain characters adopting the prevailing fashions of the day for their particular roles.\(^99\)

Likewise makeup is also minimal in Ta’ziyeh as from the distance audience can barely see the faces of the actors clearly. But one of the most important rules is that the faces of Imam


\(^{99}\) Chelkowski, Peter J. *Ta'ziyeh, the Total Drama* (USA: New York University press, 1979) 98
Hussein and his family are never shown. It is *Haraam* (forbidden) and not recommended to impersonate the Prophet and Imams. But others outside the family and evil characters have clear made-up faces.

![Figure 3 Actors in action during a Ta’ziyeh performance](image)

Like the props, the colours of characters’ costumes are highly emblematic. The protagonists, or the sympathetic characters, are dressed in black, deep green and white. If they are wearing them, their turbans or shawls are also likely to be green. The antagonists, or the unsympathetic characters, are in red or orange or else colors in the red range such as brown. The antagonists also tend to wear dazzling ornaments and jewellery.

Rather than the realism in costumes or the historical validity, the end of Ta’ziyeh is pedagogic. The art form aims to educate the masses about their heritage and inheritance. It works as propaganda for religious, spiritual and nationalistic concepts. And this is exactly the reason why Ta’ziyeh finds official support and patronage. Also, one should not forget the
aspect of spectacle involved in the performance. Look at this description of the experience of watching a Ta’ziyeh performance:

Often the Taziyeh is performed on a much larger scale. As a child I attended a performance held within a circus style tent, which sat several hundred people around the central stage area. In the past, performances have involved literally a cast of thousands, as has been recorded by Drouville in the 1860’s. Drouville ‘could not fathom how the realistic and chaotic battle of four thousand performers left no one hurt and wounded’.

It should be noted that the performance of Ta’ziyeh had always remained a completely male domain. The religious restrictions have kept female actors at bay and the acting of Ta’ziyeh remained essentially an all-male profession. Even from 1938, when a new attitude towards modernism emerged in Iran and women were able to join theatre troupes and play regularly in theatre, Ta’ziyeh has still remained exclusively a male domain. Consequently women have never appeared on the Ta’ziyeh stage. The male actors representing female characters come to the stage covering the lower part of their faces and below with a black veil. The veil hangs loose down to the waist. Heads are also covered with a black shawl wrapped tightly above the eyebrows. Only their eyes are visible.

The women’s characters wore long black costumes (rarely flowered), with other long scarves, which cover their hands; other shawls covered their faces in such a manner that only their eyes could be seen. If the women characters were protagonists, they were covered in the same way but in red. Girls’ and boys’ characters had long Arabic costumes in black color but, their faces were uncovered. The angels wore cashmere costumes with crowns. For showing

their invisibility, their faces were covered with very thin cloths in white or blue flowered. […] Demons’ costumes were colored and spotted. […] the women use bracelet and necklaces with part covering the breast and anklets.\textsuperscript{101} Ta’ziyeh performances also make extraordinary demands on the actors. The commitment is extraordinary. Look at this description quoted by Shehriari.

It is not only the non-actors who are brought onto the stage to become involved in a real experience and confront spectators with the contemporary event, but it is also the actor whose role goes beyond mere acting as he becomes engaged in an actual experience. In one of these scenes reported by Morier and described by him as ‘the most extraordinary part of the whole exhibition’, actors are buried in the ground for so long that in hot weather some die! In this scene, a row of decapitated dead bodies is simulated, ‘each body with a head close to it’, as the actors are ‘buried alive’, ‘leaving the head out just above ground; whilst others put their heads under ground, leaving out the body. The heads and bodies were placed in such relative positions to each other, as to make it appear that they had been severed.’\textsuperscript{102} Ta’ziyeh has been an influential art form and has had strong impact on the various art forms in Iran through the centuries. As the predominant art form of Iran, it got adapted in various ways to suit a variety of occasions. For example, with the influence of western theatre forms, there emerged a happy and jovial variety of Ta’ziyeh. These were performed during wedding and birthday celebrations. They used happy and pleasant occasions and stories from the Shia

\textsuperscript{102} Shahriari, Khursow. \textit{Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers}. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.
history. The wedding of the daughter of Prophet Muhammad with Imam Ali is one example. They are also performed during the Hajis’ return from Mecca, aid days of Islam calendar like Ghorban, the last day of Ramadan and to commemorate the birthdays of the twelve Shiyah Imams. William O. Beeman mentions this variety of Ta’ziyeh:

Moses and the Pharaoh, and Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are happy Taiyeh and there were even 'comic' Taziyeh performances, such as 'The Binding of the Thumbs of the Demon' which has a masked figure playing the demon's role, whose thumbs are bound by the child, Ali, until he repents of his bad behavior. However, all of these performances eventually turn back to the events of Kerbala.103

As Chelkowsky points out, the history of Ta’ziyeh is a fine example of the fact that the beginnings of drama are in the everyday happenings like funeral songs and remembering the dead heroes. He goes on to point out that “in the development of the theatrical art, the text is one of the last elements to be added"104. As for the text of Ta’ziyeh, it began as simple and uncomplicated. Gradually, it attained refinement and added several layers of exposition and ornamentation.

During the course of the nineteenth century, they became more developed and refined as literature. They also became more secular in content as the "high" court tradition, resplendent in its external aspects, began to filter down to the rural areas, while the folk tradition, more organic and more natural, based on folk art, folk stories, popular religion and ingrained with social connotation, percolated up. Digressions or "Goriz"

103 William, O. Beeman. Taziye Performance Conventions (Tehran: Sahneh issue 12, 1999) 31

were introduced to extend the scope of the Ta'ziyeh and to add variety and secular
detail. These were based on episodes from Biblical or Koranic stories, and from
national legend and tradition. Spectators were led to identify their own sufferings with
these lesser heroes. For women especially, they served as a wound-healing agent, for
the point was always made that all suffering was slight when compared to that of the

As is amply evident, it was first the performance. The refinement of literature and
nationalism, and the patriotic elements came much later. Chelkowsky also draws our
attention to what happened to Ta’ziyeh as commercialization took its toll:

Ta’ziyeh then became a commercial enterprise, centered not in the cities,
which at that time were given to imitating western art forms, but rather in the
rural areas. Troupes fought for the most lucrative places to perform and were
often forced to lease them from the provincial governors. Actors collected
contributions from the audience, usually interrupting the play in the middle of
the most crucial episode. Rivalry among Ta'ziyeh troupes led to theft of
manuscripts and shifting of actors from one troupe to another. Dissident
political groups began using theatrical gatherings to further their own goals

It is interesting to look at Ta’ziyeh in terms of the concept of Passion Play. The Passion Play
by definition is a Catholic concept. It is parallel to the Easter Plays that depict the suffering
and death of Jesus Christ. It has its origins in the church rituals. In the church, the Good
Friday Gospel was sung in parts by a number of singers. Later, the Passion Play proper
appeared first in Latin. Later, it was also staged in various vernacular languages. This involved the free translation of church hymns. By the fifteenth century the Passion Plays became huge productions staged in various European cities and also found its way to places like Sri Lanka.

Like the Jesus Christ, Ta’ziyeh positions Hussein as one who sacrificed his own life for the greater good of the mankind. Hussein’s sacrifice and the staging of it are in a sense reminders of the mankind’s sin. Hussein’s martyrdom, much like Christ’s, is aimed at the salvation of mankind. Hussein’s words to his sister Zeinab are reminiscent of Christ’s sacrifice:

Hussein tells his sister Zainab, "The helpless people of the Prophet of God have no rock of salvation to fly to for refuge except Husain. They have no advocate with God on the Day of Judgment except Husain. The way of salvation is shut against them on account of their manifold sins; and, except Husain, none can make a proper atonement or propitiation for transgression. Who could save the people of God from the wrath to come, seeing the empire of Faith has no other king, but Husain”\(^\text{107}\)

And the religious and redemptive features of Ta’ziyeh remain the magnetic quality for the viewers:

The plays devoted to the tragedy at Karbala and its surrounding events form the core of the Taziyeh repertory. Although the massacre of Hussein and his followers historically took place in one day on the tenth of Muharram, the battle is divided into many different episodes performed on separate days. All element of Taziyeh did develop political and cultural themes but all

performances hark back to the martyrdoms at Karbala, especially of Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad. Because Shiites revere Hussein's death as redemption and consider participation in Taziyeh, either as actors or spectators, as pious acts that would gain them intercession on the Day of Judgment, the dramas remain magnetic. But is it justified to compare Ta’ziyeh to the Passion Plays in Europe? Some scholars disagree. For example, William O. Beeman writes that,

> It is a great disservice to Taziyeh to consider it a variety of theatre in Western terms. The purpose of Taziyeh performances, the dramatic conventions thus employed, and the unique configurations of techniques of symbolic representation in the Taziyeh serve to identify it as a unique Iranian performance genre which, although it bears superficial resemblances to Western theatre (especially when viewed through Western and Western-trained eyes), should not be robbed of its special status among the unique dramatic traditions of the world.

Now, let’s look at Ta’ziyeh from the point of view of folklore theatre. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the study of the folklore is a study of togetherness of the community. In this sense, Ta’ziyeh can be looked at as a point around which a collective identity takes place. One can first go into the roots of the art form and see that the promotion of the art form

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itself was a well thought out political move. As has been often pointed out, the mourning ceremony itself was a serious political propaganda used by an Iranian Sultan. He wanted to establish himself as the undisputed leader of the political opposition to the existing Arab Caliphate. He also wanted to draw a parallel with the Iranian political situation under the occupation of a Sunnite/Arab power by referring to the stories relating to that event and to the oppression of the characters. The intention here is clear: To identify the Iranians allegorically with the historical characters and unite Iranians against the Arabs and their Caliphate. Though these aims could not be achieved eventually, it is clear that a serious identity politics revolved around the birth and growth of the art form. The devotees point around which they could rally. They found the tragedy at Karbala at the centre of their identity. In this sense, Ta’ziyeh emerges as the fulcrum of the community, a truly folklorist art form. Shahriyari has in his work on Ta’ziyeh pointed out the political strings attached to the art form. As he says,

One year later, Ibn Khathir, in his description of the second mourning ceremony in 964, reported: On the tenth of Muharram of this year [A.H.353], the Shi’a community (arrafidah) celebrated the mourning (‘aza’) of Hussein as they did the year before. The Shi’ites and the Sunnites fought violently among each other on this day, and property was looted. \(^{110}\)

But, as Shahriyari aptly points out, it is not prudent to believe that the art form was only based on political intentions. The community had its own ends in celebrating the Martyrdom of Hussein.

Tenth century annual mourning ceremonies, indeed, were not created overnight by the orders of an Iranian Sultan. If so, the ceremonies would not have had such a deep impact on the society. It was the fire under the ashes that

\(^{110}\) Shahriari, Khursow. *Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers*. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006.
provided two strong motivations for the ceremonies: firstly, they represented a return to ancient roots and ritual, still in the collective memory of the masses, which could not be performed for two centuries due to Arab occupation; and secondly, they indicated a social movement against the occupiers. 111

A folklorist analysis will make it amply clear that the roots of the Ta’ziyeh tradition will go back further into the peculiarities of the Iranian society. Iran was a wounded society that had lost its identity, culture, civilisation, language, religion and history as a result of colonisation by Arab imperialism. It needed a point around which the society could be unified. It needed a point around which the traditions could be revived. The mourning ceremony emerged as the pretext for this desired revival. In tenth century Iranian society identified with this event, which was very relevant to their situation, and opened up their deepest and innermost collective unconscious to give it sudden attention after three hundred years of silence against Arab occupation and the Arab’s absolute domination of all aspects of Iranians’ lives. The performance of the art form was also a revolt against the Arab colonial masters. Hussein’s sacrifice was appropriated by the people for their own causes. For the next twelve centuries, Iranians rallied around Ta’ziyeh and its myth.

This order and its revolutionary movement can be well understood when we remember that the descendants of the rulers who were responsible for the martyrdom of the grandson of the prophet and his family in Karbala were still in power as the Caliphs of the Islamic world, a world that included Iran. The mourning ceremonies, as a form of action against the occupiers, were largely welcomed by the public and became a regularly observed custom, in which the tragic fates of the prophet’s grandson and his family on the one hand, and that

111 Shahriari, Khursow. Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006
of the Iranians as an oppressed and lost nation on the other, ran parallel to each other to meet with Iranian mysticism and end up as the Shiite sects of Islam in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{112}

The allegorical nature of Hussein’s character adds to the folklorist nature of Ta’ziyeh. In his character, Hussein reflects all the human desires and aspirations. He has a complex and multidimensional character. He is both heroic and timid, hopeful and bewildered, sympathetic and complaining, compassionate and willful. What we see is a real, flesh and blood figure. He confronts reality in its most brutal and cruel form. He has all the failings of a mortal. He is never given or elevated to a divine status. Even in his superior heroism and his otherworldly sacrifice, he remains a simple human being, a man who lost his family, his sons, his friends in a cause that he believed in. He does not make any claims to superior knowledge but believes strongly in his duty to free his people from the foreign yolk. This is a figure that the community can easily identify with. He is their representative. He is a figure around which a community of victims can form their togetherness. His nostalgia and anguish become reflective of their own fears. Like them, Hussein is another victim of injustice. Thus the performance Ta’ziyeh confirms his allegorical status and becomes a symbol of the folk’s own resistance and struggle.

This identification does not stop with the celebration of the martyrdom. There are other characters that enunciate the fears and anxieties that enveloped the Iranian society reeling under the colonial tyranny of the Arabs. These characters and their dialogues in the performance become points on which the community sees their own worries reflected. After the massacre at Karbala, Hussein and all the male members of the family were killed. The female members had to flee. Otherwise, they will be captured and kept by the masters as

\textsuperscript{112} Shahriari, Khursow. \textit{Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers}. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006
slave women. Shahrbanu, Hussein’s wife, is one of them. She had come to Madina as a slave girl now she has to return home a sad old woman. In the play, she says:

SHAHR BANU: But when at last I reached Madina’s town

A whole world’s sorrow seemed to weigh me down.

One cried, ‘This girl a serving girl shall be!’

Another ‘Nay, she was of high degree!’

The women thronged the roofs; the mosques, the men:

O mother! Me they bore to Omar then,

Who spoke a word that caused me pain untold?

‘These hopeless wretches shall as slaves be sold!’

But Ali then appeared upon the scene,

And cried, ‘be silent, fool and coward mean!

This gentlewoman, traitor, void of grace!

Shall not stand naked in the market-place.’

Light of mine eyes! After much treatment dire’

They gave me to Husayn [Hussein], thy noble sire,

Who did advise poor me, to spare me pain,

That after him I should not here remain.

Should I remain, enslaved, in fashion base,
I should be driven through the market-place.\textsuperscript{113}

The issues of slavery and misery under the colonial masters were relevant to the Persian society and these words no doubt found echoes in the Persian consciousness. These points of identification are hard to miss in the performance of Ta’ziyeh and form the basis of my argument that Ta’ziyeh is a folk art form.

The death and resurrection of Hussein is another point at which the performance harks back to the primitive societal consciousness. As Shehriari points out, the representation of ‘dying and rising’ gods, celebrated in springtime – the moment of rebirth in the natural cycle – may be understood as an allegorical response to man’s anxiety over death and his/her desire for revival and immortality. This is a quality that we see in many other deities across the world. The figure of Christ can be seen as a parallel. These appeals to the primitive mind’s constant worries about the incessant cycle of life and death. These points prove beyond doubt that Ta’ziyeh has a folk element to it.

\textsuperscript{113} Shahriari, Khursow. Breaking Down Borders and Bridging Barriers. A thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy School of Media, Film and Theatre University of New South Wales, July 2006