



The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran (Publications on the Near East)

By Kamran Scot Aghaie

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This innovative study examines patterns of change in Shi'i symbols and rituals over the past two centuries to reveal how modernization has influenced the societal, political, and religious culture of Iran. Shi'is, who support the Prophet Mohammad's progeny as his successors in opposition to the Sunni caliphate tradition, make up 10 to 15 percent of the world's Muslim population, roughly half of whom live in Iran. Throughout the early history of the Islamic Middle East, the Sunnis have been associated with the state and the ruling elite, while Shi'is have most often represented the political opposition and have had broad appeal among the masses. Moharram symbols and rituals commemorate the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, in which the Prophet Mohammad's grandson Hoseyn and most of his family and supporters were massacred by the troops of the Umayyad caliph Yazid.

Moharram symbols and rituals are among the most pervasive and popular aspects of Iranian culture and society. This book traces patterns of continuity and change of Moharran symbols and rituals in three aspects of Iranian life: the importance of these rituals in promoting social bonds, status, identities, and ideals; ways in which the three major successive regimes (Qujars, Pahlavis, and the Islamic Republic), have either used these rituals to promote their legitimacy, or have suppressed them because they viewed them as a potential political threat; and the uses of Moharram symbolism by opposition groups interested in overthrowing the regime.

While the patterns of government patronage have been radically discontinuous over the past two centuries, the roles of these rituals in popular society and culture have been relatively continuous or have evolved independently of the state. The political uses of modern-day rituals and the enduring symbolism of the Karbala narratives continue today.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In 680 CE, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hoseyn and 70 associates were slaughtered by troops of the rival Umayyad caliphate. This massacre, known as the Battle of Karbala, was a decisive event in the schism between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, and as such is remembered by Shi'ites in story, song, drama and ritual procession. In this book, Islamic historian Aghaie traces the political uses of Karbala symbolism in 19th- and 20th-century Iran, arguing that it has been a "very flexible" narrative for Iranian rulers. Some, like the Qajar regime (1796–1925), enthusiastically sponsored the story in drama and song, and found that their use of Karbala symbolism helped legitimate their rule. Others, like the more secular and Westernized Pahlavi regime (1925–1979), ignored or suppressed the story's retelling—at their peril. Although the prose is dry and formal, Aghaie is sensitive to the way that Karbala symbolism serves as a valuable lens for examining change in modern Iranian society.

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Review

Overall, for fusing together cultural, social, and political history of the Moharram rituals and symbols, Aghaie's book is highly recommended to all those interested in modern Shi'i and Iranian history.

(American Historical Review)

For those concerned with the political currency of religious ritual and symbolism among the Shi'ites of Iran, take heed of Kamran Scot Aghaie's *Martyrs of Karbala*. An essential study for our leaders and general readers alike.

(Virginia Quarterly Review)

Review

Aghaie brings to the fore the complex interplay and interaction between ritualistic religious observations and pressing political action, and demonstrates how religion and politics have been mixed in Iran at least since the early 1500s.

(Ahmad Karimi—Hakkak, University of Washington)

This is an erudite, highly textured, multivoiced study of perhaps the most essential aspect of Shi'ism.

(Yasser Tabbaa, Oberlin College)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Marcotte:

Your reading 6th sense will not betray a person, why because this The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran (Publications on the Near East) reserve written by well-known writer who knows well how to make book which might be understand by anyone who also read the book. Written inside good manner for you, dripping every ideas and producing skill only for eliminate your own personal hunger then you still doubt The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran (Publications on the Near East) as good book but not only by the cover but also with the content. This is one publication that can break don't judge book by its handle, so do you still needing an additional sixth sense to pick this!? Oh come on your reading through sixth sense already alerted you so why you have to listening to one more sixth sense.

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