

RAHIMI Babak,
*Theater State and the Formation of Early
 Modern Public Sphere in Iran. Studies on
 Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590-1641 CE.*

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With the aim of examining the transition to modernity in Iran in the light of the Muharram protests, in this original study Babak Rahimi combines cultural theory with historical research and explores the dynamic connections of ritual, social audiences, politics, and the formation of the state in the Safavid era.

Originally a PhD dissertation and in its present form a revised and modified version thereof (p. ix), the idea of this work comes – as Rahimi himself claims (p. xii) – from questions raised by the French scholar Jean Calmard, who wonders⁽¹⁾ whether it is possible to write a “narrative” of the Iranian public sphere in which ritual may be regarded as a “distinct audience”. The book of Rahimi is structured as an articulate and well-argued answer to that question.

The study draws on an extensive literature including primary sources (Persian and Arabic texts, as well as European Travel Reports), secondary sources and archival documents (such as the diaries and letters of Pietro della Valle kept in the Vatican Library).

Rahimi analyzes the rituals of Muharram and how these evolved from an originally devotional practice, informed by religious ideologies and ethical issues, to public events also having political implications. In doing so, the author places the formation of a pre-modern ‘public sphere’ in the Safavid epoch, in the first half of the seventeenth century (p. 12), and identifies two distinct, yet interrelated historical phases. The first one is characterized by increasing significance of “state patronage of the mourning rituals, as a manifestation of state power” (p. 13), with “an extraordinarily rich repertoire of ceremonial spaces devoted to creating [...] ‘theater state’ under the reign of ‘Abbas I’; the second phase, witnesses the rise of “complex spaces of carnivalesque under the reign of Shah Safi (1629-1642)” with “dialogical interaction within the public life of Safavid society” (p. 13).

The book has two overarching goals: on the one hand, to offer a many-sided view of the rituals of Muharram, showing how various performative practices are interrelated with “both devotional and

carnavalesque patterns to render a public space a site of ambiguous interaction” (p. 19); on the other hand, “to fuse the language of ritual action with the discourse of public sphere” (p. 20) and tentatively outline what may be the crystallization of a non-Western form of public sphere with specifically Iranian cultural features (cf. p. 20).

The book pursues a thematic approach based on an “interplay between theoretical and historical themes in the presentation of the material” (p. 20). The Preface and Acknowledgments are followed by the main text, which is divided into two sections and accompanied by a rich apparatus of bibliographical references.

The methodological problems are highlighted by the author himself early in the introduction. They include the paucity of Persian primary sources compared to European ones, “inconsistencies, omissions, variations, and (re)production processes of the travel texts” (p. 25), many of which were published long after the journey, and, finally, the lack of ethnographic data on the rituals.

The first section, which comprises two chapters, is of a theoretical character. It offers an articulate illustration “of the current discourse of ritual studies and public sphere in contemporary academic discourses” (p. 20).

In the first chapter (« The Carnavalesque Paradigm: Muharram as Transgression », p. 31-81), where the term ‘carnavalesque paradigm’ “is meant to underline the disjointed or transgressive nature of Muharram rituality” (p. 20), the author offers an overview of the genealogy of academic discourses on the Muharram. This genealogy is based on a survey of a group of “classic” texts, which also offer new research perspectives. Rahimi places the rise of an authoritative exegesis of the Muharram in the post-World War II period, which saw a proliferation of investigations on the Muharram, in the context of a general surge of interest in Iranian culture (p. 37). These investigations mostly fall within the fields of anthropology and drama studies, and were mostly produced between 1960 and 1980. Notably, Rahimi cites William Beeman, Michael J. Fischer, Margaret Gulick, Marie Helaine Hegland, Richard Tapper, Peter Chelkowski and Jean Calmard. This last scholar, in particular, “produced the first historical and cultural analysis of Muharram as a cultic ‘popular’ practice” (p. 39). With the studies of M. Ayoub, M.M.J. Fischer and S. Arjomand, Rahimi argues, the investigation on the Muharram took on a “more cohesive and yet theoretically complex” (p. 40) character, which led, in the following two decades, to important studies such as those by Farhad Khosrokhavar and David Thurfjell. In this chapter, the author, besides

(1) Notably in his “Shi’i Rituals and Power”, in Ch. Melville (ed.), *Safavid Persia*, London-New York, 1996, p. 139-190.

discussing “normative and situational approaches of the Muharram” through the theories developed by different scholars, puts forward his own personal opinions on the subject, prelude to a more in depth discussion in the following chapters. Regarding “performance”, for example, he regards “ritual as a type of reflexive act that constructs and disrupts spaces of interaction and social relations in non-deterministic ways” (p. 69). Further on in the book (p. 73), Rahimi stresses that “Muharram entails carnivalesque strategies that include motifs of misrule that disrupt a cohesive meaning of orchestrated performances with unpredictable consequences” (this statement is repeated in almost exactly the same words on p. 80).

In the second chapter (« The Carnavalesque Public: Beyond Habermas », p. 83-138), assuming Habermas’s notion of public sphere as the focus of his critical discourse (cf. p. 87), Rahimi analyzes the modern notion of ‘public sphere’ as a discourse combining a range of rhetoric strategies which concur in conceptualizing “self, Other, and reality within socio-historical network relations and a set of power relations across regions and histories” (p. 85). The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, Rahimi examines what he regards as the most relevant theoretical aspects of Habermas’s notion of ‘public sphere’. In the second, the focus is on a Muslim historical conception of the public sphere as opposed to “Habermas’s mono-centric (or Eurocentric) historical account of public sphere” (p. 89). Regarding ‘Muslim public spheres’, Rahimi argues that “from the late ‘Abbasid to the Ottoman periods, the Euro-Mediterranean and Mesopotamian-Iranian complexes, closely connected with subcontinent and east Asian areas, have historically served as transregional loci where new expression of Islamic culture led to the creation of distinct official and non-official publics” (p. 127). The last five pages of the second chapter are specifically devoted to various public spaces in Iran which, from the Safavid age down to post-revolutionary times, underwent ideological and institutional transformations. Rahimi argues that in Iran public spaces (such as mosques, madrasahs, public baths, bazaars, theatrical rituals, sanctuaries, mausoleum buildings, cemeteries, etc.) “became the intermediate arenas in the conflict between popular and state religious culture that led to deep-seated transformation in the context of state and society relations” (p. 134).

In the second part, comprising five chapters, the author’s analysis, as he had announced in the introduction, “takes the form of a historical anthropology/sociology of political ritual and ritual as public sphere” (p. 21).

In the long third chapter (« The Safavids in the Transcultural Context », p. 141-197), Rahimi strives

to examine Safavid history “from the perspective of civilizational theory” (p. 141). Here the term ‘transcultural’ – borrowed from the title of A. Höfert and A. Salvatore’s *Between Europe and Islam. Shaping Modernity in a Transcultural Space* (Brussels 2000) – refers to “liminal complexes that signify an intricate set of interdependent and across-fertilizing historical processes in the production of public spaces of exchange and negotiation, encounter and communication, travel and migration” (p. 143). Rahimi sets out to situate the emergence of the Safavid State within this specific transcultural context, underlying its importance “as an outcome of intricate historical and global processes” (p. 145). His examination takes the form of a historical overview of the most significant moments that led up to the rise of the Safavid empire and the city of Isfahan. The central theme of the chapter is addressed in sections 3 and 4 (p. 164-197), while in the two previous sections the author, to further corroborate his argument, looks at other historical realities, notably those of China, Japan and India, to then return to the Turkish-Persian *oikoumene*.

Rahimi concludes the third chapter with the statement that the new urban sites reveal an intricate relationship between “state-building and spatial practices in the context of centralized urbanization and, by extension, in the formation of collective identities” (p. 197). The evolution of Isfahan from an urban center to an imperial one also laid the socioeconomic and sociopolitical foundation “for the emergence of Muharram publicity in the early seventeenth century” (p. 197). The Muharram ceremonies held during the reign of ‘Abbās I should thus be regarded as an integral part of the “production of spatial practices unleashed with the building of Isfahan” (p. 197).

At the end of this chapter, Rahimi asks two questions that introduce the subjects of the following chapters: “How does Muharram as a distinct urban space of sociability involve both features of power and resistance? How is Muharram a social space of distinct urban character?” (p. 197).

In Chapter Four (« A History of (Safavid) Muharram Rituals », p. 199-234), before illustrating his theoretical approach, Rahimi offers an in-depth historical account of the ceremonies and rituals connected to the Muharram in the pre-Safavid period, from 680 to 1501 (p. 201-215). He then goes into a description of the rites of the Muharram, in particular those performed in the city of Isfahan during the Safavid period, drawing extensively on travel reports, such as those of the Venetian diplomat Michele Membré, the Portuguese traveler António de Gouvea, and the Italian Pietro della Valle. The European travelers’ descriptions offer a series of interesting elements

regarding not only the performance of the ritual by the participants but also banners, turbans, and ceremonial armory. Rahimi uses his sources to propose a reconstruction of the evolution of the ceremonies of the Muḥarram in the course of the seventeenth century, coming to the conclusion that “with increasing ritualization of Safavid society through ceremonies like Muharram, the rituals became intensely carnivalesque and, accordingly, the growth of relatively state-independent public ritual spaces increased” (p. 234).

In the Fifth Chapter («Necro-public and the Safavid Ritual Theater State: City, Social Death, and Power », p. 235-271), Rahimi discusses the symbolic meaning and importance of the various elements of the Muḥarram ceremonies. What he does here is, in his own words, taking a “theoretical look at the multifaceted performances of Safavid Muharram” (p. 235). The intent is to show how individual perceptions and behaviors can be “socially appropriated and politically conditioned” (p. 235). Rahimi adopts a “performative perspective” on ritual funerary practices, which he defines as “collective symbolic performances” or “collective memories” (as in the case of ceremonies commemorating Ḥusayn and the Karbala events). These aspects are discussed in two distinct sections: 1. *Politics as Ritual Performances* (p. 237-245); 2. *Safavid Muharram as Mortuary Urban Spaces*, p. 245-271). In the latter, Rahimi looks at the social evolution of Muḥarram ceremonies, from the cult of Ḥusayn to the official State commemorations of Ḥusayn under the Safavids. Rahimi sees Safavid state theater as a series of official spaces where power was staged to the purpose of transmitting a sense of belonging and identity. In this context, death played a central role in the process of formation of state power.

In Chapter Six (« Spaces of Misrule: the Carnivalesque Safavid-Isfahani Muharram », p. 273-320), Rahimi’s main focus is, in his own words, “on certain carnivalesque performances as a form of camouflage practice that recognizes the social agents and ritual participants as producers of hidden public spaces, unnoticed sites of resistance *inserted* within officially visible spaces that surpass ritual norms, tied to the political order” (p. 274). In this chapter, Rahimi analyzes some Muḥarram rituals and some of their allegorical and symbolic meanings, as in the case of camel sacrifice, discussed in section 1.3 (p. 286-288). His analysis also extends to the performance and textual levels, and to literary vernacularization, which “paved the way for perhaps the earliest representation of the Iranian national language under the Safavids” and “led the way to the growing popularization or fragmentation of sacred literature” (p. 308).

In Chapter Seven (« Conclusion: the Isfahani Public Sphere », p. 321-327), Rahimi sums up the argumentations put forward in the previous chapters, stressing once again his conviction that the Muḥarram rituals have historically retained an ambiguous authenticity and are both an extension of power and an affirmation of empowerment in the subversion of official culture. “Muharram”, the author concludes, “has continued to play a significant socio-political role in the everyday reconfiguration of established concepts and norms” (p. 326), even in the post-revolutionary period with the ritualization of street politics and the ideologization of ritual performances.

The volume is supplemented by an extensive Bibliography (p. 329-364) consisting of three sections, *Reference Works and Abbreviations*; *Primary Sources* (Arabic, Europeans Travel Reports, and Safavid Sources) and *Secondary Sources*, and is concluded by a useful Index.

This “theoretical exercise” (p. xiii) – as Rahimi himself defines it – is a way of renarrating the public sphere in the context of the early modern history of Iran. In presenting his own ideas and arguments by disrupting and occasionally provoking the dominant academic and public discourses, Rahimi’s aim is to produce a useful contribution to the understanding and discussion of the relationship between ritual, public space and state power in the Safavid period.

Natalia L. Tornesello
Università degli Studi di Napoli