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TA'ZIYEH RITUAL AND DRAMA IN IRAN

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Foreword

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It would be commonplace to say that tradition, both good and bad, is being swept away by the onslaught of technology and modernism. We need not concern ourselves here with the reasons except to inquire: is this because of a hatred for the impoverished conditions of yesteryear's living, or because of an eagerness to embrace new Western ways, or because of an inherent weakness of the traditions themselves—or possibly a combination of the three? What is definite is that the third world, with the exception of miraculous Japan (these monks that brew modern electronics) and to a certain extent India, is giving up its traditions.

I am certain that if students of anthropology had turned to Ta'ziyeh forty-eight years ago when it was banned by the Iranian Government for sociopolitical reasons, a major share of the Iranian National Theatre today would be plays (with or without religious subject-matter) directly derived from Ta'ziyeh: but much to our regret, this was not the case. Ta'ziyeh had almost been isolated in certain distant villages when individual Iranian scholars such as Bahram Baizai (1965), Mayel Baktash and myself (1971) began to turn their attention to it.

In the autumn of 1959 a Ta'ziyeh fragment was included in Parviz

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Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'ziyeh

WILLIAM O. BEEMAN

INTRODUCTION ¹

Past research on Ta'ziyeh has emphasized literary and historical aspects of this performance tradition.² In these studies the Ta'ziyeh has been the *object* of investigation, and knowledge about literary and historical traditions surrounding it have been used to elucidate it. Another dimension which has been less explored, and which will be treated here concerns investigation of Ta'ziyeh as an aspect of cultural performance in Iran and the wider Shi'a Islamic world.

From literature on the anthropology of performance ³ we understand that the shapes and conventions of performance traditions are not universal, but are inextricably bound up in more complex patterns of cultural symbolism, logic, and presentational conventions. Further, performance traditions are among the most dynamic and powerful components of a given culture. They bear a strong relationship to ritual, as Richard Schechner has pointed out on numerous occasions,⁴ in that they consist of symbolic elements made manifest through the offices of specialized practi-

tioners whose purpose is to transform the spectators at the performance in some preconceived manner: to make them laugh, persuade them, create in them a sense of heightened reality, elevate their sensibilities, or in the case of Ta'ziyeh, to create a powerful catharsis of emotion.

Performance traditions also bear a resemblance to many aspects of everyday life. As Victor Turner has pointed out, such public events as elections, demonstrations, and public meetings have their performative and ritualistic aspects.⁵ These "social dramas" likewise aim to achieve a change in a state of affairs through specific performance. Following this line of reasoning, we see that events like the Ta'ziyeh hold a place somewhere between the sacred and the secular in all cultures. They are "liminal" events in Turner's sense of the word.⁶ Thus, through the study of the Ta'ziyeh as performance, rather than strictly as literature or history, we are in a position to turn the tables on the focal concerns of earlier studies ⁷ and use analysis of the Ta'ziyeh as a tool for investigation of both the sacred and secular worlds within which it is contained.

TA'ZIYEH AS A PERFORMANCE GENRE

Although virtually every commentator on the Ta'ziyeh has identified it as theatre, there is good reason to consider it in other terms. Lassy points out that in Soviet Azerbaijan a strict distinction is made between Ta'ziyeh and other dramatic forms:

A point to be noticed is that the Tartars themselves expressly deny that the passion play is a drama proper. It is a *Shabih*, that is an "imitation," or a *ta'ziyeh-ye shabih*, a "consoling imitation," nothing more. To a Tartar there exists no sort of tragedy in the form of a drama, comedy being considered by him to be the only form of dramatic art. Therefore when the speeches and songs of the passion play are written, no attempt is made to create impressive *roles* or situations, the sole purpose being to compose more-or-less lengthy monologues in the same fragmentary, crabbed, plaintive and sentimental style as that of the elegies.⁸

It is my contention that it is a great disservice to Ta'ziyeh to consider it a variety of theatre in Western terms. The purpose of Ta'ziyeh performances, the dramatic conventions thus employed, and the unique configuration of techniques of symbolic representation in the Ta'ziyeh serves to identify it as a unique Iranian performance genre which, although it bears superficial resemblance 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.

First, it cannot be emphasized enough (especially to the lay public)

that Ta'ziyeh is not *one* drama (i.e., "*the Persian Passion Play*") or even a definitive set of dramas, but is a performance tradition which has an organic existence of own. It is changing, modifiable, and enormously flexible in its realization.

Secondary, although Ta'ziyeh performances are scripted, to identify the written script with the Ta'ziyeh proper is to entertain only a limited view of the tradition as a whole. In point of fact, the tradition allows for extraordinary flexibility in the realization of script material. It is doubtful whether any of the scripts which have been collected were ever conceived as permanent by their authors. In present-day settings, scripts are continually modified, rewritten, amended, lengthened and combined with other scripts both before a given performance, and from the *takiyeh* itself during performance. The series of episodes presented as a cohesive unit can likewise be numerous (Pelly⁹ records fifty-two) or few. Furthermore, until recent times, the performance material was being rapidly expanded into a series of nearly secular themes which were not necessarily presented during the month of Muharram at all.¹⁰

Thirdly, perhaps almost self-evidently, we see the Ta'ziyeh performance consisting almost entirely of verse—most often couplets. This is in sharp contrast to almost all Western theatrical tradition.

Finally, and most importantly, the relationship between audience and performer in Ta'ziyeh is unique among performance traditions of the world. It is this one feature that most completely accounts for the particular representational forms that are embodied within Ta'ziyeh performance. It is therefore to this topic that I turn my attention next.

REPRESENTATION IN TA'ZIYEH

The very special relationship of the Ta'ziyeh audience to the performance has been noted by virtually all commentators writing on the tradition. It stands out particularly against Western theatrical tradition because the spectators are clearly both inside and outside of the drama. They are both on the plains of Kerbela, symbolically representing the forces surrounding Hussein and his followers, and simultaneously in the present-day world mourning because of the event.

The actors in the drama express their sorrow and grief through the verbal text of the performance, but it is the people in the audience who provide the explicit, forceful, and sometimes violent expression of grief and mourning which is absent from the performance representation. Thus they complete a portion of the dramatic action which is otherwise lacking.

The explicit expressions of grief produced by the spectators, however, are prompted by their own life experiences, and only triggered by the presentation of the events they witness in the *takiyeh*. Indeed, the audience is exhorted to weep for their own sins, their own troubles, remembering how much greater was the suffering of Hussein and his followers.

As Chelkowski¹¹ has suggested, this has great import for all who are concerned with the nature and purpose of dramatic expression in the West. The so-called "audience" problem has been one that has been confronted continually in Western theatre. The last twenty years have seen a particularly active experimentation in trying to break down the audience-performer "barrier" and actively engage spectators in the dramatic action. The Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, and Richard Schechner's Performance Group are only a few of the groups who have tried to devise new performance methodologies to deal with this problem.

For the structure of representation within Ta'ziyeh the centrality of the audience-performer tradition becomes crucial. The liminal status of the audience as performer-spectator, existing both within the present and in the past as part of the dramatic action, and being situated both within its own community and on the plains of Kerbela forms the central axis around which principles of representation are ordered.

In order to encompass the situation of the audience within the time frame of the drama at least three modes of temporal representation are necessary. The first is "literal time," e.g., the actual time it takes for a dialogue to take place from beginning to end. "Representational time" is truncated, elongated, or distorted time: most of the battles are represented in this way, taking less time than they might otherwise. Mourning sequences, or the famous "lion" sequence, do not represent literal time. Finally, "non-time" is a kind of dimension which allows the co-occurrence of all sorts of characters and events which could not possibly have existed together at the same time. Even the known dead, such as the body of Qasem after his martyrdom, are able to take part in the stage dialogue. Further, it should be noted that these three time dimensions totally interpenetrate each other with no indication of shift through theatrical devices such as lighting, scene change, etc., as must occur in Western theatre for audiences to understand what is going on. The audience views literal time and representational time in the performance; but it is the dimension of non-time which encompasses the audience along with the action and allows the spectators to be at once in the present and in the past.

A similar practice exists with the representation of space. "Literal space" surrounds most encounters between characters, and events, such as the wedding of Qasem. "Representational space" compresses or elongates actual space. In mobile action such as walking or riding the difference between representational and literal space is marked in that the former involves moving in an arc, and the latter moving in a straight line. Representational space involves also such areas as the battlefield. This area also contains the viewers in their representational roles as the forces surrounding Hussein and his followers. Finally "non-space" creates the co-occurrence of personages far removed from each other spatially as well as temporally, allowing figures such as Yazid, or Za'far, king of the Jinn, to address Hussein as the drama unfolds.

The spectators are placed in a liminal position not only in terms of time and space, but in their dramatic role within the performance as well. As participants in the drama they represent not only the mourners of Hussein but also his murderers. Thus the distinction between those who are on the side of Hussein and those who are his enemies becomes crucial in the dramatic representation. There are, to be sure, many ways that one can tell the sympathetic from the unsympathetic characters. In classical tradition the sympathetic characters wear either green or white; the unsympathetic characters, red. Chelkowski notes that the adherents of Yazid might wear sun glasses to mark them as bad characters.¹² Most importantly, however, good characters chant their lines, and bad characters declaim, or shout them. When a bad character converts and becomes a good character he changes his mode of line delivery.

There is very little else in the representation of the drama which needs be fixed. Costumes need adhere to no particular historic period. All sorts of historic characters may be brought into the course of the drama. The production can be upgraded through the use of more realistic props, costumes, or live animals, but these are not necessary components. Neither is the language of the Ta'ziyeh fixed. Performances are given in Turkish, Arabic, mixed Persian-Turkish, Urdu, and most probably other languages as well.

The flexibility of representation in Ta'ziyeh through costumes, props, and language serves to reinforce the connections between the action and the everyday lives of spectators. Nonetheless, the actors must costume themselves in a way that is different from the normal dress of the audience. In a performance I witnessed in Fars this was accomplished by draping the actors in simple red, green, or white tunics which covered their normal dress.

THE MEANING OF REPRESENTATIONAL CONVENTIONS IN TA'ZIYEH

In order to understand something about the meaning of the representational conventions in Ta'ziyeh it will be useful to compare them with some of the conventions that obtain for other dramatic traditions throughout the world.

Indonesian *wayang kulit* is one species of the tradition of leather shadow-puppet drama found throughout most of Asia. This dramatic tradition involves the presentation of stories which are both entertaining and of a sacred nature. The "high" characters in the Balinese form of this drama—royal persons, major demons and gods—speak entirely in an ancient liturgical language which no one in the audience understands at all. The "low" characters—servants for the most part—speak in the vernacular of the spectators, and interpret the action while making broad jokes and humorous remarks.

Indian dance-drama traditions, notably the *Kathakali* tradition of

Kerala, involve a similar set of conventions. The actor-dancers in *Kathakali* do not speak their text, but indicate the plot of the drama through the use of gestures, called *mudras*. The gesture language is somewhat esoteric, and singers in the background narrate the story for the spectators in song simultaneously with the dance presentation.

In Western "naturalistic" theatre actors draw their stage movement and expressions from the stuff of "real life," and are encouraged to research their roles at great length through observing and attempting to create in themselves the feeling and emotions of the real-life prototypes of the characters they are to portray. In their training they are encouraged to draw heavily on their own feelings and self-knowledge for the expression of emotion and action. The audience in Western theatre is supposed to enter into the stage action and be moved by it on the basis of each one's own knowledge of human nature, conventional expression, and probable behavior patterns.

In the two Asian dramatic traditions, the story material portrayed in the dramatic situation is largely known to the audience before it is seen in performance. If anything, the performance is designed to reinforce for the members of the audience in a particularly effective manner the important aspects of their cultural, ideological, and religious tradition. In Western naturalistic theatre the spectators expect to witness story material which is novel, but which is expressed in a manner comprehensible to them on the basis of their own knowledge of life that they bring with them to the theatre. What is repeated in Western theatrical traditions then, is not particular literal stories, but particular human themes played and replayed in infinite variation.

Western drama is successful when it produces a catharsis: when it moves the audience in some way. Making the viewers laugh, cry, feel indignant, ennobled, or angry are all ways that Western theatre touches the emotions. Thus paradoxically, by using the commonplace as a basis for expression in performance, Western theatre aims at removing the spectators from the commonplace and transporting them to an emotional plane achieved only occasionally in everyday life. The Asian traditions mentioned above are not at all naturalistic in their form of expression. The shadow figures in *wayang kulit* are exaggerated representations of humans, they speak in exaggerated vocal contours in either an esoteric language which no one in the audience speaks or understands, or in broad humorous speech which no one in the audience really uses in everyday life. Similarly, in *Kathakali* the stage characters dress in surrealistic costumes and make-up and perform elaborate dance movements which require for their execution special arduous training from childhood on, together with a gesture language which very few spectators can interpret. Asian drama is successful when it is able to create in the audience a sense that there is order in the world, that events are as they should be; that despite adversity and extremes in the vicissitudes of events, proper morality is reasserted.

Given these parameters, it should not be difficult to see that Ta'ziyeh as a performance tradition falls between the two Asian traditions mentioned and Western naturalistic theatre. Ta'ziyeh presents familiar materials to the audience in an unnaturalistic fashion. However, the mode of linguistic expression is not esoteric, and does not require interpretation. Although the mode of performance does not replicate real life, the settings, props and costumes are designed to be comprehensible to the audience without special previous knowledge. Most importantly, however, the Ta'ziyeh performance is designed to reassert moral and religious ideological order for the audience, and to accomplish this by producing cathartic reactions.

Those in the audience in Ta'ziyeh are placed in the position of being both the symbolic murderers of Hussein in Kerbela, and being the mourners of Hussein after his death. At the conclusion of the performance they must end up being converted, or renewed, through their profound expression of grief at Hussein's death, and through their demonstrations of loyalty to the ideological order that Hussein represents. There are numerous characters in the drama itself—nonpartisans of Hussein—who undergo the same transformation: Hurr, general of Ibn Ziyad; the foreign ambassador; Za'far, king of the Jinn; and others. The implication presented here is that if even Hussein's enemies, foreigners, and Jinn weep for, and defend Hussein, how can the spectators refrain from demonstrating their emotions in this matter?

Thus Ta'ziyeh performance offers the opportunity for the spectators ritually to renew their commitment to a religious and ideological order of which they are already an integral part. This ideological order does not limit itself strictly to religious dimensions but includes a political and nationalistic dimension as well. The saga of the family of Ali is very much the saga of Great Iran—those areas from Kerbela and Kufa to the Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Northern India—overrun again and again by conquering hordes, but possessing an inner spiritual unity which has sustained the thread of a unique cultural tradition down to the present.

Lassy¹³ identifies the complex of practices surrounding the commemoration of the death of Hussein in yet other historical-religious terms. He astutely notes that the Ta'ziyeh and other Muharram practices are similar to rituals marking the death of Christ, Dionysius, Osiris, and many other figures in Indo-European and Semitic tradition. The theme of birth and renewal in ritual practice is virtually universal, carrying with it the message of the renewal of the fertility and productivity of the world's flora and fauna, as well as the beginning of a new cycle in the transit of the heavens. This cosmological interpretation, it seems, cannot be excluded as one of the ritual roots of Ta'ziyeh performance. Thus through participation in the Ta'ziyeh, the audience is also taking part in the modern version of an ancient tradition of cosmic renewal and rebirth.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to describe Ta'ziyeh in Iran not as a literary or historical product, but as a performance tradition. Ta'ziyeh embodies representational features which make it unique among the performance traditions of the world. The particular representational conventions of Ta'ziyeh arise from the special relationship that obtains between the audience and performers. Further, these modes of representation allow the Ta'ziyeh performance to achieve a particular effect on its audience which is not only emotionally satisfying, but serves also as a reinforcement to the religious, ideological and cosmic order of the Shi'a world.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Brown University for support during the summer of 1974 which enabled me to carry out preliminary work on Iranian dramatic tradition. I am grateful also to Byron and Mary Jo Good, who have worked extensively on aspects of Ta'ziyeh in Azerbaijan, for much useful discussion leading to the formulation of the ideas in this paper, for which, of which, of course I alone am responsible.
2. I have not provided a full survey of research on Ta'ziyeh by Iranians and Westerners. Peter Chelkowski has provided a most useful bibliography, which contains most of the available sources, in *Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theater of Iran* (Tehran: Festival of Arts Series, 1975); see also his "Dramatic and Literary Aspects of Ta'ziyeh-Khani—Iranian Passion Play," *Review of National Literatures*, 2 (1971): 121-38. The excellent works of Bahrām Baižā'i, *Namāyish dar Irān* (Tehran: Kavyān 1344/1965), and by Šadiq Humāyūnī, *Ta'ziyeh va Ta'ziyeh-khvānī* (Tehran: Festival of Arts Series, 1353/1974) are especially useful.
3. See Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," *American Anthropologist*, 77 (1975), 290-311.
4. Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater* (New York: Hawthorne, 1973); and "Selective Inattention: A Traditional Way of Spectating—Now Part of the Avantgarde," *Performing Arts Journal*, 1 (1976), 1-12.
5. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).
6. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); and *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).
7. With the possible exception of the brilliant early study by Ivar J. Lassy, *The Muharram Mysteries among the Azerbaijan Turks of Caucasia* (Helsingfors: Lilius and Hertzberg, 1916), which deserves much greater attention from scholars than it has received in the past.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
9. Lewis Pelly, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain*, 2 vols. (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1879).
10. cf. Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, p. 15.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
13. *The Muharram Mysteries*, pp. 283-84.