

Commemoration of Muharram, a historical review

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The long history of Commemoration of Muharram can be divided into three phases, which are as follows:

- (I) The first phase began soon after the Shahadah of Imam Husain and it continued until the fall of the Abbasi Empire, by the sword of Halaku Khan.*
- (II) The second phase began at the time of the fall of the Abbasi Empire or shortly prior to departure of the Fatemi Imam from Egypt in to the Satar-seclusion. It continued through out the dark ages of Muslim history until the renaissance.*
- (III) The third phase began from the renaissance of the Muslims and continues to the present time.*

These are the phases from which Majalis al Aza has passed through, and achieved perpetual life. We do not have the sources for an exhaustive investigation of above mentioned phases, development, of the Majalis al Aza through their history. The admirers of Ahl al Bait who held the Majalis al Aza had to suffer many cruelties at the hands of many tyrannical rulers of Bani Umayyah and Bani Abbas. They chopped off hands and feet of the devotees of Ahl al Bait due to their devotion. Thousands of admirers were beheaded, forced to die alive in walls which were built around them. The walls were smeared with blood. Bani Abbas practiced all mode of torture to eliminate their signs. Tongues were pulled out from the backside of the throats. All this was done simply to stop Majalis al Aza, but it is still continuing and shall continue till the Qiyamat. The reason is, it does not culminate on weeping and lamentation; but it invites all sensible people to ponder on the lesson which Imam Husain left.

Lesson given by Imam Husain in Karbala is an interpretation of the Qur'an. There is benefit in this tribute only when we mould our characters and deeds accordingly. When firm belief in Allah is our aim, we shall listen to and remember the teachings of Imam Husain, and the deeds of his Ash'ab, which will surely influence our actions, for the better. The philosophy of Muharram commemoration is that we must try to understand the reason and purpose of Imam Husain. We stand in dire need of assessing our actions and assertions, so that we may lead our lives with Marifat. It is therefore very necessary to correct this erroneous and misleading concept. In Islam, there is no concept or scope for Baptism, like in Christianity, through which sins are forgiven. Majalis al Aza is beneficial only for those who act according to the teachings of Husain. Majalis al Aza can not benefit those who indulge in sins and yet think that it helps them as a shield from the Hell fire. No, it is repugnant to the injunctions of the Shariat.

In Muslim history, throughout the ages, tyrannical rulers' have feared Majalis, thinking that the people assembling in these congregations would lead a political movement against their regime. They banned the Mamalis but they were held in secrecy. During the era of Bani Umayyah and Bani Abbas, it was made compulsory for any congregation to end it open criticism on Ahl al Bait. After the Ban, the guiltiness of the authorities has to come to an end with Tabarra, cursing on Ahl al Bait. The cursing followed as official policy of Bani Umayyah and Bani Abbas and become a fixed characteristic. The Majalis al Aza was not limited to Karbala, but spread like the fragrance of Musk in the Muslim World, wherever the admirers of Ahl al Bait were settled.

During the rule of the Buwayhi Umara the occasion of Muharram was turned in to an official event. The Buwayhis may have delayed the announcement of Majalis al Aza as an official institution, out of their concern at the beginning of their establishment of their power, to test the feelings of the general Muslim population because on the eve of the Buwayhis assumption of power, the Hanbalies had become hostile towards the Majalis al Aza. They demonstrated religious intolerance against commemoration of Muharram and the Ziyarat publicly. This religious intolerance hurt the feelings of the Muslims at large. Followers of Sunni Hanafi and Sunni Shafai Schools however participated in Muharram Majalis, with religious zeal, between the end of the third century A.H. and the beginning of the fourth.

History has recorded series of events, which shows religious intolerance, in opposition of Majalis al Aza and the Ziyarat by the Hanbalies. [Ibn Aseer](#) says in "[Al Kamil Fil Tarikh](#)": "the Hanbalies were helpless to prevent these congregations, as the rival wing was in power. The Sunnis in Iraq even participated in the Majalis al Aza. Those among the Sunnis who opposed these rituals were only the Hanbalies. Sectarian clashes seem to have started at an early time in this period. That was when the Shia in the Abbasi era tried to perform the Majalis al Aza associated with Imam al Husain publicly and especially in the month of Muharram". [Ibn Taghriburdi](#) has reported in "[Al Nujum al Zahirah fi Muluk al Misar wal Qahirah](#)", regarding the events of the year 174: "Then partisanship rose and there were disturbances between the Sunni and the Shia". He does not give the reason for that but it seems likely to be the one which we have suggested. While the Hamdanis in Sh'am and Musal and the Buwayhis in Iraq and Iran were establishing their authority firmly, the Majalis al Aza and the other rituals associated with Imam al Husain were flourishing under these Shia governments. The Fatemiyin were extending their control over the West, from their seat al Qaherah, which they conquered in 358. In that time of history, Majalis al Aza flourished and increased far beyond what they had been in the past.

When the Fatemiyin took control of Misar-Egypt, it did not introduce Majalis al Aza to those areas where its practice did not exist. It existed during the weak rule of the Ikhshidis, who were overthrown by the Fatemiyin. In "[al Khitat wal Aas'ar](#)", [Al Miqrizi](#) has explained: "the call for grief for Imam al Husain took place during the time of the

Ikhshidis and its scope broadened during the time of the Fatemiyin. The observance of the Majalis al Aza in Misar prior to the Fatemiyin was the same as it was in Iraq before the Buwayhis, where Majalis al Aza existed, but the strong opposition of the fanatical sectarian elements did not allow the regular practice. In the year 350, in Aashurah, a major disturbance occurred between the soldiers and a group of citizens at the Shrine of Syedah Umme Kulsum. It appears that this was because of Majlis al Aza that was held on that day. However, we may notice that the situation was not always like this during the Abbasi period. There was a long period of time for the Shia in Misar when they were exposed to persecution. An example of what happened to them was, when Yazid Ibn Abdullah Ibn Dinar was appointed Governor of Misar by the Abbasi Emperor, al Muntasar, in Rajab 242(A.H). He searched for all the Shia in Misar, executed them, and punished severely those survived and afflicted them. Their important members were hounded groups of them were taken to Iraq in the worst possible manner. It seemed to have been happened in the year 245(A.H)”.

After the arrival of the Aimmat Fatemiyin, the Majalis al Aza became official ceremonies and one of the cultural events of the Fatemi Empire. The favorable political situation in Iraq, Iran, Misar and North Africa gave Majalis al Aza a golden opportunity to spread. Under the protection of the state such occasions were commemorated. This did not stop them from arousing the opposition of religious militant groups, especially the Hanbalies in Iraq. In the atmosphere of freedom and security, which political development provided over a vast geographical area, Majalis al Aza developed in to a strong institution.

The root of Shia influence in Misar was cruelly and savagely removed after the departure of the Fatemi Power which was succeeded by Ayyubis. The same was the case in Sh'am, at the same time Ottomans spread their authority to Iraq. Sectarian fanaticism and religious intolerance hurt a lot to this small wing of Shia Muslims, and due to harassment, the Majalis were curtailed. This was the reason, why these activities were restricted to Al Atab'at, where Majalis al Aza could be held in secret. The only area where Majalis al Aza flourished was Iran after the Safavi Emperors came to power. In Iran, Shia influence became strong and its activities flourished in every field. Under the Safavi Emperors, Majalis al Aza held a significant value among other religious ceremonies.

In the first phase, Majalis al Aza was limited to the poetic narration of what was originally connected with the Tragedy of Karbala, like the Rajaz rhymes of the fighters and similar things. Then during the second phase, Majalis al Aza developed and Marsiyah was included as a basic component in it, in which virtues were composed in form of verses by later poets. However in the Ottoman Empire, there was oppression and persecution of the Shia population. In terms of form, the security and freedom which the Shia community has enjoyed in most places have enabled Majalis al Aza to be performed publicly at every time in the year without fear of prohibition by the authorities or the populace. However, in areas where the Shia influence does not enjoy religious freedom, limitations on the performance of Majalis al Aza have continued. This problem did not

arise in non Muslim countries; very unfortunately it is still objectionable in Arab countries to hold Majalis al Aza.

One of the most magnificent academic institutions in Qaherah during the Fatemi Power was the “Dar al Hikmat”. Majalis al Aza was arranged in the premises of this institution of higher lore. This was an authoritative institution where Fatemi Du’at conducted Majalis and held congregations of Az’a, for Imam al Husain. Historian [Miqrezi](#) has transmitted some details, as to how Muharram was celebrated during the era of Imam Moiz, with reference to [Ibn Zulaq’s “Sirat al Moiz Ledeenillah”](#). He has mentioned briefly as follows: “Crowds of admirers gathered at the Shrines of Syedah Kulsum, Syedah Ruqayyah and Syedah Nafisa. Majalis al Aza was arranged and mourners showed their grief and performed Matam. Groups of mourners included solders of the Fatemi forces. They marched ahead until they reached their destination. Religious fanatics of the rival wing showed their displeasure on these Majalis and in 363 (A.H) serious sectarian clashes occurred. To control unpleasant situations markets were closed and public were not allowed to move from their residence.

In the year 396 (A.H), during the era of Imam al Hakim, riots broke out during the month of Muharram. The cause was professional Marsiyah reciters, who gathered opposite of shops and loudly recited Marsiyah and demanded money. In protest, business community went on strike. Qazi al Quz’at, Dai Abd al Aziz bin Syedna Numan called the professional Marsiyah readers, later on and ordered them: if you wish to continue your practices, don’t compel people to give you something, when you pass by their shops, do not hurt them and do not earn by means of Az’a. Those who did not like to follow the instruction could leave the city and do whatever they like in the desert, so that peace could be maintained. It is recorded by historians that once a group of mourners gathered after Jumuah Sal’at in Jame al Atiq, and they started Az’a procession on the main street all together, and defiled the tenets of the other sects. The leader of the procession was arrested and executed; as every individual had the rights of religious freedom.

[Ibn Mamun](#) has mentioned in “[Nusus min Akhbar Misar](#)” as follows: “In the year 515 (A.H) on the day of Aashurah, at the residence of Dai Afzal a wide special Safrah-Dastar Khawan was laid down. It was specially arranged for Aashurah, and arranged at the same place where in Eid, the Dastar Khawan was spread out. This day, instead of a round Dastar Khawan, a wide sheet was spread out. Cheese, pickles, vinegar and bread of barley were served. Wazir & Commander of the Fatemi Empire, Dai Afzal attended the congregation. He came out from the Gate and sat on the woolen carpet, without any support. The Majlis was begun with the Tilawat of the Qur’an. Afterwards, as per protocol, dignitaries were called according to their ranks and food was served before them. From the large pot, which was placed before the Wazir, black lentils were served to each person. In the last, favorite sweet of Arabs- syrup of Dates was served”.

In the year 516 (A.H), on the day of Aashurah, the 20th Fatemi Khalifah, Imam Aamir gave audience to the people on the Gate of his Qasar. He sat on a mat, made of grass.

Wazir Mamun offered him Sal'am and afterwards Du'at, Judge, Courtiers and other notables also got the honour of Sal'am. All were bare foot and wore no turbans. At the precise time, a Dastar Khawan was spread out, which was similar in variety served by Dai Afzal. As per tradition, funds were generously distributed among the Qaris of the Qur'an, Waizeen and poets who discussed the merits of Ahl al Bait.

Miqrizi, has mentioned in "*Al Khitat wal Aas'ar*", vol IV as follows: in the year 517 (A.H), on the night of Aashurah, the Wazir Mamun visited Jame al Juyushi. All dignitaries and scholars were present there. They spent the night in Ibadat, and afterwards returned to their homes. In the morning they again gathered, where the Fatemi Imam sat on a simple sheet of cloth. On his face, sorrow and grief was visible. Each individual appeared before him and took blessing by kissing his feet.

Ibn al Tuwair has reported in "*Nuzhat al Muqlataiyin*": On 10th of Muharram, the Fatemi Imam used to go in privacy. In the early hours of the day, the Qazi al Quz'at along with his retinue in the dress of mourning visited al Mashhad al Husain, where according to the authentic records; the sacred head of Imam Husain is buried. Prior to this practice, this gathering was arranged in the Jame al Azhar. When the nobles, including the Qaris, Scholars and courtiers were seated, the Wazir would come and would seat himself in the center. Qazi al Quz'at and Du'at were seated besides him as per protocol. The Majlis started with Tilawat of the Qur'an and then poets from the masses presented Marasi of Imam Husain. This Majlis lasted more than three hours. From this Mashhad, as per the instruction of the Imam, people visited the Qasar. The Wazir wore a small turban, instead of the normal prestigious turban. The Qazi al Quz'at and the Du'at entered B'ab al Zahab with others, where simple mats were spread instead of fine carpets. One of the highest dignitaries of the Fatemi Power was seated in the centre. After Tilawat of the Qur'an, poets and scholars discussed tragedy of Karbala. Then Dastar Khawan was spread and pots filled with black lentils, Halwa, pickle, cheese, milk, honey, Sanbusa and dark colored breads were served. Afterwards people returned to their homes and groups of Zakirin visited in different parts of the city and narrated tragic events of Karbala, in poetic form. The Business remained closed on the day of Aashurah and people used to open after the Asar time.

Syedna Qazi al Numan had written in "*Al Majalis wal Musaer'at*": As per the guidance of the Imams, I had decided to discuss the tragedy of Karbala and its teaching in congregation. The day was now close so I have prepared to discuss it in the Jumuah Khutbah, following the day of Aashurah, and would narrate the Shahadat of Imam Husain. May Allah honour him (Husain) by selecting this revered day for his Shahadat, as similarly he honored Ali, Amir al Muminin in a great day of the month of Ramazan. Then I reviewed my decision and decided first to inform Imam Moiz about it. So I briefed him about what I intended to communicate in the Khutbah. In his reply, the Imam himself wrote: "O Numan! You have not mentioned anything except which has been passed on to us correctly by the 'People Who Speak the Truth". You know the ignorant, how much

they respect Aashurah day, but it is for reasons other than that, which Allah has glorified it. They have turned “Aashurah” into a day of celebration and festivities due to Bani Ummayah, who has accustomed them to it. So explain to them the reasons, Aashurah should be observed with reverence, for example tell them: ‘O’ creation of Allah! You should hold this day in high esteem as Allah has exalted it, and follow the Sunnat of your Nabi, Mohammad, Rasulullah (S) in respecting it – do not celebrate it as a day of rejoicing and Eid merriment, as was celebrated by the enemies of Allah, friends of Shait’an and the foes of Rehman, the children of Marw’an”. There is a direction to the followers of the Fatemiyin, living in global village, to attend the Majalis al Aza, and offer condolences to the Dai al Husain, through shedding tears.

Tyrants celebrate Aashurah as a day of joy and entertainment not as a day of repentance. May Allah bless the one who offers Ibadat for his own soul, and follows the Sunnat of His Nabi and is interested in Shaf’at. La’nah of Allah upon those who love and support Yazid and ignore the divine status of Husain ibn Ali. Imam Husain was mourned every day for the first year, and the following three years since the day of his assassination. The mourners were Imam Ali Zain al Abedin and the ladies of Bani Abd al Muttalib, as well as those who were alive amongst the Ash’ab and the Tabeyin, who used to gather in the Majalis, listened and cried. Salahuddin Ayyubi and his associates celebrated Aashurah as an Eid day of rejoicing. Historical records provide us details, that on 10th Muharram, the coronation ceremony of Salahuddin was celebrated with great pomp and grandeur, with gifts and honours to his family members and courtiers, and arranging feasts and grand parties, in which special sweet-dishes were served in brand new utensils. They used to put mascara in their eyes and took the baths, and wore new cloths.

Natives of Sh’am-Syria, from the time of bloody Hajjaj bin Yusuf al Saqafi, celebrated the day of Aashurah as festival of joy. Unfortunately this practice also prevailed amongst the Muslims of Spain, through which they showed their animosity against the Ahl al Bait. Aashurah was a symbol of victory of joy for the children of Abu Sufiyan, while Ahl al Bait and their devotees designated this day for Az’a of Imam Husain as he was mercilessly slaughtered on this day by Yazid. In the third phase of Majalis al Aza, this institution has become a universal phenomenon among Shia Muslims. In every Shia town, in Arabia, Africa, Central Asia, South East Asia, Iran, the admirers first erect a building for this purpose, known as “Husainiyah”. Still today, this name is used for the places or buildings, exclusively used for Majalis al Aza. The institution of Aza has now become one of the established cultural phenomena in the global village. These developments have led to the growth of new religious endowments. Lessons in Islam and the call to Islam occupy a very important place in Majalis al Aza. They reject the arguments of the atheists about Islam, as well as the attack made by atheistic and immoral claims. Similarly Majalis al Aza is concerned largely with the studies of the Qur’an.

The occasions for performing Majalis al Aza have become more numerous. Around the global village, Majalis al Aza is performed during the two lunar months of Muharram

and Safar, throughout the night and at the beginning and end of the day. This is done in every place which is appropriate for such a meeting. These congregations are arranged in every place where the Shia population resides. Similarly Majalis are held in memoriam of Mohammad(S) and his Ahl al Bait around the world, even where a single devotee resides. Majalis have acquired great favor with the common class. In the same manner, many people have adopted the practice of holding Majalis in their houses or in Masjid in the quarters of cities on the night of Jumuah, during the day or the night, each week or on other days in the week, suitable for them. The people who attend such congregations are frequently neighbors, friends or relatives of the invitee, holding Majalis. The practice has arisen of holding Majlis in order to celebrate new house for blessings. Zikar of Allah, His Rasul (S) Aimmat and Awliya is source of spiritual satisfaction. Sometimes, some people hold Majlis when returning from the Haj, Umrah or Ziyarat and on other occasions. The custom has also arisen of Majalis al Aza being part of an opening session of a service for the dead or a gathering for commemoration. Majalis al Aza are held in public places: squares, Masjid, and places dedicated to religious activities. A great number of people share in providing finance for them. The money which they contribute is spent on Tabarruk feast. These developments have turned the Majalis al Aza as a perpetual institution of frequent gathering held throughout the year and attract a large number of people.

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