

## INTRODUCTION

This book is entitled *The Rite of Urban Passage*, inspired by van Gennep's classic book, *The Rites of Passage*. The reason behind this was not to have a catchy title nor to imply that this book is greatly influenced by van Gennep. The title of the book should be read as a set of keywords referring to 'Muharram rituals', 'the Iranian city', and 'the process of modern urban transformation'. I actually coined 'the rite of urban passage' to describe the re-arrangement of Muharram procession routes in the city of Dezful in the early 1950s. I explain in chapter four that this historic event was a ritual *per se*, that signified a major change in the social constitution of Dezful during the Iranian modernization. The re-arrangement of processions ritualized the passage of the urban society from the traditional constitution into a new social make-up. Thus, 'the rite of urban passage' discursively implies the dynamics of Muharram rituals and urban transformation. The investigation into Muharram procession dynamics during the Iranian modernization was the starting point of this book, yet the investigation unfolded in a much broader historical and theoretical landscape. Ultimately, this book is not just about Iranian cities or Muharram rituals, by which Shi'i Muslims annually commemorate the tragic martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali in the seventh century. It offers an alternative approach to investigating the process of urban transformation and develops a fresh spatial approach in ritual studies.

The chapters of this book are developed in two main parts. The first part includes chapter one, which formulates the ritual as a spatial practice, and chapter two, which offers a spatial reading of the evolution of Muharram rituals throughout Shi'i history. Through this alternative history, the idea of the 'spatial manifestation' of ritual is formulated. This idea is one of the theoretical components of ritual theory that is developed in this book. The second part predominantly focuses on 'the spatial organization' of Muharram processions, throughout chapters three, four and five. These chapters extensively investigate the social and spatial logic of Muharram processions before and after urban transformation, as well as the complex process of changing procession routes. The overarching aim of these chapters is to carefully examine the process of urban transformation through the prism

of ritual. Muharram rituals are considered as part of an urban process by which the traditional Iranian cities transitioned into a new era. Although the second part of the book presents first-hand ethnographic and oral history materials, its main contribution is to show an alternative approach to urban studies. Each chapter contributes to developing the idea of this book that is to entwine urban and ritual studies, and the discussions in each chapter are structured so they can be read as independent texts. In other words, this book has a kind of fractal structure: while each segment is a component of a larger system, it can also be individually recognized in its own right.

Chapter one is a theoretical review of the framework of ritual studies and the paradigm shifts that have taken place in this field of research. This chapter does not offer a broad, general and extensive literature review in ritual theory; rather, it outlines the theoretical framework of this research, considering Muharram commemoration as a changing social-spatial collective performance. Although there is extensive discussion around the idea of the religious ritual as a changing social practice, the heart of this chapter is a section on the relationship between ritual, place and space. The discussion distinguishes ‘the place of ritual’ from ‘the ritual spatiality’. This idea is the theoretical foundation of chapter two, which explores the spatial genealogy of Muharram rituals.

Chapter two introduces the tragic battle of Karbala when Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, and his few companions were brutally massacred in the Muharram of 680. This historic tragedy unfolded after the political dispute over the legitimacy of the Umayyad Caliphate. The discussion then explains how this historic tragedy has since transcended into meta-history. From the Shi’i point of view this tragedy is not merely one of the historic events that established the Shi’i–Sunni division, but the Shi’i myth around which their creed and rituals are constituted. After this general introduction to the Karbala tragedy, chapter two extensively reviews the development of Muharram rituals throughout history. In parallel, the establishment of Shi’i religious buildings, such as *husseinyeh* and *tekyeh*, is also discussed. The main contribution of this chapter is to offer a spatial reading of the history of Shi’i rituals, dealing with the spatial evolution of rituals. It shifts the focus from what participants do during rituals or where they practise it, to how rituals are spatially manifested. The key point is the shift of attention from action to spatial manifestation. As I shall discuss, the rituals are either manifested in concentrated or dispersed forms (such as the service session and the procession) that produce fundamentally different social engagements. The spatial reading of Muharram ritual history shows that the evolution of a concentrated ritual into a dispersed one, or vice versa, is the process by which the new rituals were often invented. This chapter does not solely address Muharram rituals in Iran, but explores the

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development of rituals in its broad historical and geographical landscape. Nonetheless, the main aim is to investigate the broad historical background of rituals practised in Iran.

The second part of the book, throughout four chapters, specifically looks at Muharram processions in the city of Dezful in the southwest of Iran. It concentrates on the social and spatial logic of the processions and how they have changed during the twentieth century.

Chapter three focuses on the social logic of Muharram processions in their traditional format. This chapter begins with a discussion about traditional Iranian urban society that was constituted based on the Heydari and Nemati parts, described as social moieties by Perry (1999). Heydari-Nemati as a social organization was constituted based on the traditional ruling system in which each borough was ruled by an elite family, aka landlord families. The local elite families teamed up in two socio-political groups that competed for greater power in the city, therefore the city was governed by a polarized system. In this political landscape, the urban boroughs divided into two rival groups, Heydaris and Nematis. The discussions in this chapter review the historical background of the Heydari–Nemati division, and explains how this division is reflected in urban realities in general and Muharram processions in particular. This chapter also discusses the other features of urban society, articulating how local communities are socially constituted within each urban moiety. These discussions reveal that Muharram processions were the primary medium of practising and negotiating the social division, cohesion and solidarity by which local communities are constituted as urban society. The social investigation, through the lens of Muharram rituals, reveals that the traditional social struggle occurred among urban communities, not social classes. The social moieties of Heydari and Nemati predominated the logic of these urban negotiations. This investigation reveals the nature of this unique urbanism that cannot be fully articulated by conventional ideas that explain urban processes as being merely based on the idea of ‘class struggles’ and ‘everyday life’.

Chapter four, ‘The Rite of Urban Passage’, investigates the complex landscape of the transformational period of Iranian cities since the 1920s, when the modern Pahlavi dynasty was established. This chapter begins with a depiction of the broad landscape of the Iranian modernization and then zeroes in on the city of Dezful. The discussions investigate the physical and very complex socio-political transformations of this city. In this chapter, I argue that although the physical transformation of the city is the most visible manifestation of urban modernization, the end of the Heydari–Nemati division encapsulates the urban transformation. This was not a smooth process; it was a socially tense and violent period. The establishment of new procession routes signified the end of urban violence and the abolition of

traditional social divisions. I argue that the re-arrangement of processions is also a ritual, and I call it ‘the rite of urban passage’. The rite mediated the passage from the traditional urban society to a new social make-up. This chapter examines the complex relationship between rituals and urban violence and conciliation. While chapter four focuses on describing the social and political context of urban transformation and re-arrangement of Muharram processions, chapter five examines the spatial complexity of re-arranged procession routes.

Chapter five analyses ‘the spatial organization’ of the transformed Muharram processions. The processions were historically organized in each part of the city because of the traditional Heydari–Nemati division. The processions were then reorganized to ritualize social integration. However, the new processions are more complex than merely representing the integration of the two moieties. They mediate practising the new social make-up, in which Heydari and Nemati parties are integrated, simultaneously keep alive the idea of traditional social division. I formulate how the spatial organization of processions constitutes a lived/performed space, or ritual space, in which the past and present are discursively performed, revealing a sophisticated way of performing urban history. Moreover, I differentiate ‘the spatial organization of processions’ from ‘performed ritual space’, then conceptually formulate ‘performed ritual space’ as a ‘topological space’ in which past and present can be simultaneously performed. These discussions bridge ritual and urban studies, demonstrating how these two fields can contribute to theoretical development in other disciplines.

One of my arguments in chapter five is that the spatial organization of processions will change only when the urban society is fundamentally transformed. The urban society may not fundamentally transform, but it is a changing institution. Therefore, the question is: how does a ritual that is essentially supposed to reflect social reality represent the gradual social dynamics? Chapter six is dedicated to answering this question by looking at the reinvention of the shawl exchange custom during Muharram in the city of Dezful in recent years. This chapter is not aimed at enhancing our knowledge about ‘the spatial dynamics’ of Muharram rituals, but it captures the process of maintaining the relevance of Muharram commemoration in a changing society.

The concluding chapter lays out the full picture of the framework of spatial study of rituals as developed in this book, and formulizes the idea of ritual space. The formulation of the framework for studying the spatial dynamics of rituals is based upon two components: ‘the spatial manifestation’ and ‘the spatial organization’ of the ritual, as discussed in the book. The concluding discussion will explain that ‘the spatial dynamic’ of rituals is driven by two independent but parallel processes: the evolution of ritual manifestation and

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the transformation of the spatial organization of ritual. The discussion will then formulate the notion of ritual space on a more conceptual level. Finally, I will explain how this new idea of ritual space differs from key conceptual ideas that have been discussed, such as those offered by Lefebvre and J.Z. Smith, and how this book contributes to the field of ritual and urban studies.