

Ashura Rituals: A Tool for Freedom or Oppression? A Critical Examination of the Ashura Rituals of Shia Islam in Regards to Catherine Bell's Theory of Ritual

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Introduction

This essay will use Catherine Bell's theory of rituals to explain and analyze the rituals of the Ashura ceremony undertaken on the tenth day of the month of *Muharram* in Shia Islam. Ashura is a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein—ibn—Ali, the grandson of Muhammad at the Battle of Karbala in the year 680 CE. He is highly regarded as a religious freedom fighter among Shia Muslims, and public mourning ceremonies are held in Muslim countries such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, India, Lebanon, and Bahrain to mark the day which is remembered as a symbolic day of freedom from the oppressor.

Theoretical Framework

The study of rituals is an important aspect of the study of religion and society, and there are many theories that look at rituals from different perspectives. In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell analyzes these various theories and shows how they are constructed based on a dichotomy of thought and action. The theories of Max Müller, Herbert Spencer, William James, and others emphasize that religion is about ideas and that, as such, ritual, which is considered action, is an expression of belief and of secondary significance, while Hubert and Mauss claim that rites are of primary significance. Bell also questions the ethos—worldview dichotomy of Geertz, which is similar to the thought—action dichotomy. Bell asserts that this fabricated opposition of thought and action brings a

dichotomy between the participant in the ritual who “acts” and the observer who “thinks,” making the two unequal and in effect subordinating the actor to the observer. In addition, this dichotomy means that the theorist can only understand ritual as a cultural phenomenon when he or she recognizes the mechanisms of meaningfulness of the participants. Contrary to these theories, Bell proposes that rituals are meaningful, and, as such, are a mixture of both thought and action. She stresses that the relationship between rituals and symbols is the same as that between action and thought. Furthermore, ritual integrates thought and action, and on another level it integrates the theorists’ thought with the actions of ritual participants.¹

By rejecting the dichotomy between thought and action, Bell is able to introduce a new framework which understands rituals as social acts. She labels this as “ritualization” and defines it as strategic ways of acting in specific social contexts. This definition emphasizes that the context of rituals is key and that they cannot be abstracted from it. Another problem with past ritual theories that Bell seeks to address is that they either define rituals as a very distinct form of activity or assimilate rituals to other forms of activity. The former approach leads to an endless number of ritual types: for example, religious/secular; ritual/magical; symbolic/non-instrumental; technical/utilitarian; emotional/logical, etc. Bell explains that these distinctions are imposed by the researcher rather than being indigenous to the ritual and that they also lead theorists to talk past each other. The latter approach is also problematic, since it leads to all human activity being seen as ritual. Bell takes a position between the two extremes, defining rituals as practices that are situational, strategic, embedded in misrecognition and able to reproduce an order of power in the world. The situational nature of ritual means that the act must be understood within the context in which it takes place. The tendency to abstract action from the context eliminates the structures of influences of the act, in effect misleading the researcher. The strategic nature of ritual means that practices form part of schemes and tactics to reach particular goals. However, their logic is not necessarily intellectualist logic, but must rather be understood according to the characteristics of the situation (in line with the previous argument). The practice is fundamentally misrecognized in that those involved in ritual do

1. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19–55.

not see the whole explanation that can only be achieved through objective analysis. For example, those involved in gift exchange see it as an act of generosity; whereas objective analysis makes clear that it is in fact a reciprocal exchange of items with no inherent value. In addition, ritual practice is part of the mechanism that re-orders power relationships in society and is used by powerful classes to implement and reinforce cultural and political “hegemony” (similar to Gramsci’s theory). Bell, however, modifies Gramsci’s theory, stressing that this hegemony is only limited in the sense that rituals can create only limited power relationships, meaning that one group of people does not gain absolute control over another; rather, the dynamics of hegemony involve both consent and resistance. Bell introduces the title of “redemptive hegemony” to account for this new concept of hegemony, according to which agents not only act according to the shared sense of reality imposed by the powerful but also reproduce that reality in ways that empower them.²

Another important insight provided by this new framework relates to the relationship between tradition and rituals. Bell acknowledges the influence of tradition and past precedents on rituals, as other theories stress; however, she points out that these theories neglect the fact that rituals can also construct tradition. Thus in Bell’s framework there is a two-way relationship between rituals and tradition, in which both are dynamic and mutually affect each other.³

Hussein and the battle of Karbala

Shia Muslims around the world hold Ashura ceremonies every year on the tenth day of the month of *Muharram* to commemorate the death of Hussein–ibn–Ali. Hussein was the second son of Ali and Fatima and the grandson of the prophet Mohammad. He is the 3rd Imam, a divinely-guided leader in Shia Islam, and a revered member of *ahl al-bayt* (Prophet Muhammad’s family).⁴ In 680 CE, following the death of Moaviya I, the first Caliph of the Umayyad Dynasty, his son Yazid became the ruler of the

2. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 69–94.

3. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 118–130.

4. Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

Islamic world. Hussein who at the time lived in Mecca refused to pledge allegiance to the Umayyad Caliph,⁵ whom he saw as a corrupt tyrant using Islam as a cloak to increase the power and wealth of his family.⁶ After receiving thousands of letters from Kufa (adjacent to present day Najaf) in support of a revolt to overthrow the Caliph, Hussein left Mecca for Kufa with his entire family and a following of several thousand men (the exact number of his army is disputed among historians and ranges from 3 to 10 thousand).⁷ With the help of his governors in Iraq cities, Yazid raised a vast and well-equipped army. As news started to reach Hussein's ranks—now on their way to Kufa—about the much larger army that was approaching them, his followers started to desert him to the point that fewer than a hundred men remained of his army; nevertheless he refused to stand down and pledge allegiance to Yazid.⁸ Hussein and his very small army fought with the Caliph's army in *Neynava*, a desert area in the south of Iraq (a city was later erected in the place of Hussein's death and the city became known as Karbala). In the end, Hussein and all of his male companions were killed, and their heads were taken as trophies back to Yazid, while the women and children were taken as prisoners.⁹

Hussein's place in Shia Islam cannot be overstated: since he is seen as the “Martyr of all martyrs,” fighting injustice and oppression, he is seen as the ultimate source of what it means to be a “true” Muslim. The death of Hussein was also instrumental in the breakaway of Shia Islam (the followers of Ali) from mainstream Sunni Islam later on. As word of the slaughter of the prophet's grandson reached the cities of the Islamic world, various mourning ceremonies were held, especially in the cities of Kufa, Basra, and Mecca.¹⁰ Initially, these ceremonies were nearly identical to those held on the occasion of the death of any Muslim, except that they usually

5. Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (London: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 94.

6. Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter With Modernity* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 151.

7. Babak Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals* (Leiden: Brill Publication, 2012), 203.

8. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad*, 348.

9. Rasoul Jafarian, *Tarikhe Kholafa: The History of the Caliphs* (Tehran: Dalile Ma Publishers, 2009), 120–230; Rasoul Jafarian, *Taamoli dar nehgate Ashura* (Tehran: Elm, 2009), 25–65.

10. Gerald Hawtin, *The History of Al-Tabari Vol. XX* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 164.

included fiery speeches against those responsible for Hussein's death and the Umayyad Caliph. The following section discusses how these rituals later evolved throughout history.

The evolution of Ashura rituals

Although present-day Ashura rituals are somewhat diverse, there are common practices among most Shia Muslims: these include the holding of memorial services (*Majalis al-Taziya*) which involve dirge like recitations of the battle of Karbala's tragic events; plays re-enacting the epic battle of Karbala (*Taziya* and *Tashabih*) usually involving multiple actors and concluding with lessons about living and acting according to the "correct path" of Islam; the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala (*Ziyarat*) which usually attracts millions of people from around the world to modern day Iraq; and public mourning in the streets (*Al-Mawakib al-Husayniyya*) that usually involves self-flagellation (*Zanjeer* and *Tatbir*). Most of the Ashura ceremonies listed above also include the ritual of chest beating.¹¹

Ashura rituals have evolved significantly during their thirteen hundred year history. Specifically, the rule of vast areas of Muslim land by each of the Umayyad, Abbasid, Buyid and Fatimid dynasties, as well as the Safavid, and Qajar dynasties in Iran, have brought changes to the rituals.¹² Based on Bell's theory, we can identify some of these changes as being influenced by the circumstances and the context in which they were being practiced.

During the Umayyad period, Ashura ceremonies were held almost immediately after the death of Hussein; however, since the second Umayyad Caliph Yazid, son of Moaviya, was responsible for the killing of Hussein, and, as such, any reminder of it was equated as an open revolt against the ruling establishment, they were mostly held in private and in small numbers out of fear of prosecution. For example, in the years following the battle of Karbala, Ashura ceremonies were used as a rallying cry to drum up support for two large rebellions; namely, the Tawvabin rebellion and the rebellion of Mokhtar Saghafi.¹³

11. Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of Ashura," *Die Welt des Islam* 33 (November 1993).

12. Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 207–209.

13. Hawtin, *The History of Al-Tabari* vol. XX, 182.

Suleiman–ibn–Khozai, who was among the nobles of Kufa and who had supported Hussein initially, but who had later backed down out of fear, used *majalis al-ta'ziya* to ask for God's repentance for leaving Hussein. In fact, the word Tawwab in Arabic means "one who repents."¹⁴ Suleiman was able to use the mourning ceremonies of Ashura to rally four thousand men and lead a large rebellion against the Umayyad dynasty four years after Hussein's death, which culminated in Suleiman and all his men being slaughtered at the battle of Nukhaila in 684 CE. Interestingly, before entering Nukhaila, Suleiman led his army into Karbala to ask God for forgiveness next to Hussein's tomb, saying that, even though he had abandoned Hussein, he would make amends by following his path. This is possibly the first mass pilgrimage to Hussein's shrine (and the beginning of the *Ziyarat* ritual).¹⁵

The second rebellion, led by Mokhtar Saghafi, used Ashura rituals to signify the unjust and oppressive nature of the Umayyad dynasty and the need for a just and righteous ruler. The rebellion, which took place five years after Hussein's death, nearly toppled the Umayyad dynasty and gave control of nearly all of present-day Iraq to Mokhtar for 18 months, before he and his followers were defeated and killed. The Tawvabin rebellion as well as Mokhtar's uprising have been detailed by many Shia and Sunni historians, including arguably the most noted Sunni historian, Al-Tabari; however, they have been interpreted and characterized differently, with Shia scholars such as Sheikh Mofid emphasizing the legitimacy of the uprisings while some Sunni scholars characterizing them as sources of unrest and insecurity, with Al-Tabari taking a more coolheaded mediating approach.¹⁶

After over a decade of unrest, the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn-Marwan (646–705) was able to restore the establishment's rule and completely prohibited Ashura ceremonies from taking place. The Umayyad dynasty even introduced festivities on the day of Ashura claiming that Prophet Mohammad had celebrated this day. The festivities are still practiced in some Sunni countries, such as Morocco. After the fall of Mokhtar, Ashura ceremonies were held privately and secretly for most of the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. These dynasties also saw it as a rallying instrument against

14. Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 206.

15. Jafarian, *Taamoli dar nehgate Ashura*, 130–165.

16. Hawtin, *The History of Al-Tabari* vol. XX, 182.

their establishment, and Abbasid rulers even razed Hussein's shrine several times, issuing death sentences to people who took part in Ashura rituals.¹⁷

With the decline of Abbasid rule and the rise of various dynasties in Muslim lands including the Hamdanid dynasty of northern Iraq (890–1004), the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt (909–1171) and the Buyid dynasty of Iran (934–1062), Ashura rituals returned to the public sphere and were openly critical of the Umayyad; however, some scholars, such as Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, have argued that the rituals had now lost their political and social meanings, since they were criticizing an establishment that no longer existed. The erosion of the political content of Ashura rituals were compensated for by increasing its organization and introducing new practices such as breast beating (*latm*).¹⁸

Bell's ritual theory tells us to look at the political, cultural and traditional context of the ritual and pay attention to the situational, strategic, misrecognition, and power aspects of the ritual. Under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, which ruled most of Muslim land until the thirteenth century, Ashura rituals were seen and conducted in the context of the oppressed Shia minority's struggle against the dominant ruling establishment. As such, Ashura rituals were highly political in nature and played an effective and strategic role for the leaders of the Shia community. The goal was to overthrow the ruling establishment and Ashura ceremonies were part of acting on that idea. This is in line with Bell's similar assertion of the inseparable nature of thought and action. During this period, Shi'ites were a minority living under rulers who saw them as a threat to the establishment, and, as such, many of their leaders were imprisoned and killed. Because of this, the emphasis of Ashura ceremonies was on speeches that criticized the establishment, carried out within the ritual framework of holding memorial and redemptive services (*Al-Mawakib al-Husayniyya*)¹⁹ and pilgrimages to Karbala (*Ziyarat*). This is a clear example of Bell's theory

17. Ali J. Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 1 (2005).

18. Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society*, trans. Bury St. Edmunds (Great Britain: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1985), 180–185; Rachid Elbadri, *Shia Rituals: The Impact of Shia Rituals on Shia Socio-Political Character* (Naval Postgraduate School, March 2009), 40–43.

19. Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 40.

of ritual as “strategic” in the sense that the memorial services and *Ziyarats* served as a strategic instrument for drumming up support for the goal of overthrowing the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs. In addition, it is important to note that Ashura ceremonies were excellent networking opportunities for revolutionaries and opposition movements. By using Bell’s contextual framework, one can find other elements of Ashura ceremonies in this historical period as well. During the period of Umayyad and Abbasid rule, Shia Imams saw the kind of Islam preached by the ruling establishment and practiced by the masses as corrupt, and they used Ashura ceremonies to preach the “correct” way of Islam to their followers.²⁰ Due to these factors, Ashura ceremonies in this period largely focused on speeches and lectures rather than the more theatrical rituals of *Taziya*, *Tashabih* and *Zanjeer*.²¹

Following the decline of the Abbasids, while the appearance of the rituals largely remained the same, the emphasis was shifted from overthrowing oppressive rulers to being concerned with the hereafter. Furthermore, the rituals started to incorporate inaccurate stories of Hussein’s martyrdom and Abbas’s (Hussein’s brother and head of a small army during the battle of Karbala) miraculous powers in healing the sick.²²

Ashura rituals took on another life with the rise of the Safavid dynasty which ruled Persia from 1501 to 1722. The Safavid dynasty was successful at building a large empire and gradually converting Iranians to Shi’ism in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. During this period, Ashura rituals became very popular, acquiring state sponsorship. Ali Shariati describes, in a series of highly controversial but nevertheless popular books, how many of the present-day Ashura rituals were created, propagated, and funded by the Safavid dynasty, who created a “Black Safavid Shi’ism” in order to empower the monarchy and the clergy, in complete contrast to the original “Red Shi’ism” of Hussein, which concerned itself with justice and salvation for the masses. Shariati claims that many of these rituals were largely adopted from the practices of eastern European Christians who re-enacted

20. Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 206–207.

21. Jafarian, *Tarikhe Kholafa: The History of the Caliphs*, 245.

22. Morteza Motahari, *Hamaseye Hussein* (Tehran: Sadra publications, 1986), 130–195; Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al Husayn*, 181–182.

the crucifixion of Christ every year.²³ It should be noted that other scholars, such as Hamid Dabashi, consider Shariati more of an ideologue than a historian. But, as Dabashi himself explains, Shariati did not accept the claim of modern historians that they have redirected their focus in history from the ruling classes to “the real people.” Therefore, Shariati himself believed that the type of history that he narrates is different from what modern historians narrate.²⁴

There is some historical evidence to support Shariati’s argument. For example, the ritual of *Taziya* or *Tashabih*, re-enacting the events of Ashura in a public play, did not exist prior to the Safavids, and arguably was adopted from the Christian re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ. Also, in public mourning Ashura ceremonies in the streets, a large metal-shaped structure that resembles multiple crosses called the *Alam* leads the row of mourners, a feature also undeniably similar to the re-enactments of the crucifixion, in which people follow behind the person playing Jesus, who carries a cross on his shoulders. The Safavid period was also the time of blood shedding rituals of self-flagellation, rituals that may have been imported into Ashura rituals via Turkmen tribes and Christian Armenians who converted to Shia Islam during the sixteenth century.²⁵

Shariati argues that the Safavids changed Ashura rituals as part of a larger struggle which corrupted Shia Islam, transforming it from a religion that resisted against oppression and fought for justice and equality into one that supported and reinforced the rule of oppressive Caliphs and dictators and this was done with the cooperation of religious leaders and the clergies. Shariati claims that the main goal of Shi’ism and Ashura rituals is to say “No” to the injustice and slavery perpetrated by the ruling government, religious leaders and the aristocracy. Shariati adds: “Ashura reminds us of the teaching of the eternal fact that the present version of Islam, is a criminal Islam in the dress of tradition, and that the real Islam is the hidden Islam, hidden in the red cloak of martyrdom.”²⁶

23. Ali Shariati, *Mazhab Alaye Mazhab* (Tehran: Chapkhar Publication, 2009), 111–149; Ali Shariati, *Red Shi’ism vs Black Shi’ism* (Tehran: Enteshar Publication, 1973), 12–34.

24. Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 104–106.

25. Elbadri, *Shia Rituals*, 6; Rainer Brunner, *The Twelver Shia in Modern times* (Boston: Brill Publication, 2001), 178.

26. Shariati, *Red Shiism vs Black Shiism*, 12.

In support of Shariati's argument, it can be observed that, changing the content of Ashura rituals from one of resistance and rebellion against injustice into a more formal and ceremonial rituals, such as the *Taziya*, and focusing the memorial service on the hereafter (which in no way undermines the rule of the establishment but might even strengthen it by legitimizing their rule over people as something ordained by God and instead promising a better life in the hereafter), has completely changed Hussein's true message.

As can be expected, many clerics have attacked Shariati to the point of calling him a Sunni working to abolish Ashura rituals. However, there are a few that have taken notice of his criticisms. For example, the noted Islamic scholar Morteza Motahari in his famous two-volume book on Ashura rituals acknowledges that these ceremonies have become corrupted by superstition, non-Islamic tradition, as well as fake and over-the-top narrations of the battle of Karbala.²⁷

One of Bell's contributions to the understanding of rituals is the concept of "redemptive hegemony," which entails the use of rituals to reorder society and reinforce power structures. She describes four types of ritual theories that deal with power and social control. The first group of theorists, characterized by the works of Robertson, Smith, Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, and Munn, emphasize that rituals help with social control by promoting consensus and solidarity. The second group of theorists, such as Gluckman and Turner, argue that ritual is a tool to deal with conflict and restore social equilibrium. The third group, led by Burkert, Girard, and Heesterman, say that rituals help with the repression of violence and aggression, while the fourth group, characterized by Geertz, Turner, Douglas, and Lukes, say that rituals do not control society directly; rather, they model society through the promotion of specific cultures and values. Bell's position is closest to the fourth group. However, she rejects the view that rituals have a "magical" power that can shape participants' minds; rather the relationship is one of constant negotiation and resistance.²⁸ Thus, her theory has a more nuanced and specific view of how rituals can be used in the interests of the powerful. As she stresses:

27. Motahari, *Hamaseye Hussein*, 120–230.

28. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 171–179.

The deployment of ritualization, consciously or unconsciously, is the deployment of a particular construction of power relationships, a particular relationship of domination, consent, and resistance. As a strategy of power, ritualization has both positive and effective aspects as well as specific limits to what it can do and how far it can extend.²⁹

By looking at the rituals of Ashura, one can see that Bell's theory, emphasizing the context of the ritual, is more suitable than past theories for analyzing and understanding Ashura. For example, while the Umayyads and Abbasids tried hard to change the day of Ashura from one of mourning into one of festivities, they were largely unsuccessful. On the other hand, the Safavids were very successful at both changing Ashura rituals as well as using them to their own advantage. Thus, the circumstances of the time and the viewpoints of the participants are instrumental in how this power relationship plays itself out. Umayyad leaders were seen as complicit in Hussein's murder and Abbasid leaders were seen as complicit in the murder and imprisonment of Hussein's descendants, whereas the Safavid rulers presented themselves, much to their own advantage, as Shia leaders in contrast to and in defiance of the Sunni Ottoman Empire.³⁰ Furthermore, the political, cultural, and economic context in which Shia participated in Ashura rituals was vastly different. Whereas under Umayyad and Abbasid rule, Shia were the oppressed minority living under hardship; under Safavid rule, the Shia were the majority, living prosperously under a Shia empire. Therefore, Ashura rituals were transformed from one representing an ethos of resisting oppression and changing the status quo into one of legitimizing the status quo and instead focusing on ritual theatrics as well as the hereafter. Therefore, while Safavid rulers were instrumental in perverting Hussein's message, it should also be noted that the new message was also more apposite to the political, cultural, and economic status Shia now enjoyed.³¹ This is a clear example of how, as Bell's theory stresses, power relationships in rituals are "negotiated" to the benefits of both parties rather than being dictated from the top down.

29. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 206.

30. Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 199–200.

31. Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 201.

Limitations of Bell's theory of ritual

A closer look at Ashura rituals and its evolution shows that even Bell's theory is limited in explaining its political significance and effects. Although Bell does stress the power of ritual participants to negotiate and resist more powerful classes, in line with Gramsci she argues that rituals help in reinforcing and legitimizing the hegemony of dominant groups. As discussed earlier, during long periods of history particularly during the Umayyad and Abbasid rule, Ashura rituals were used as a tool to undermine the establishment, and in this sense were counter-hegemonic. This counter-hegemonic aspect of Ashura rituals only began to erode after Safavid rule. Nevertheless, in local power structures, Ashura rituals have continued to be used to alter power relationships: Mary Elaine Hegland, for example, discusses how Peshavar women of Pakistan use Ashura mourning rituals to resist and combat the masculine biased gender structure they were living in.³²

While in many instances, particularly during the time of the Safavids, Ashura rituals have been used to legitimize the status quo, it is important to note that, even in cases where the ruling establishment has been successful in utilizing Ashura rituals to its advantage, there is always the concrete possibility that some groups will use the rituals against it.³³

During the lead up to the Iranian revolution, Ashura rituals were a source of instability for the Pahlavi government, as it created an arena where grievances against its oppression were voiced. The regime was careful in dealing with this, as it did not want to present itself as an anti-Shia government in a country where the majority are Shia Muslims; nevertheless security forces clamped down on protestors. However, on the day of Ashura in 1978, over two million people used the day to protest against the Shah, in what was to become the largest demonstration to that day against the ruling establishment.³⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini also presented himself as following in

32. Mary Elaine Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans) Forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender Through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (May, 1998): 240–266.

33. Rahimi, *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran*, 211–213 and 215.

34. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 624–644.

the footsteps of Hussein, depicting the Shah as following in the footsteps of Yazid I (the Umayyad Caliph responsible for Hussein's slaughter).³⁵ In effect, the lead up to the revolution had changed the emphasis of the Ashura rituals from Hussein as a source of holiness who could help you with your life in the hereafter back into Hussein as an agent of struggle against tyranny that could serve as a "model for emulation."³⁶

The Ashura ceremonies following the disputed presidential elections of 2009 brought an interesting development. During the Ashura rituals in various parts of Iran, men and women chanted "*Abolfazl Alamdar Khamenei ro bardar*" as they beat their chests, which is translated as "O Abolfazl the hero (of Karbala) rid us of Khamenei (Iran's Supreme leader)." Abolfazl-el-Abbas is the brother of Hussein and the head of his small army during the battle of Karbala, and, during the Ashura rituals, it is common to call out his name to help with the acceptance of the prayers of the participants. The day following these rituals, however, other people chanted "*Abolfazl Alamdar Khamenei negah dar*," which means "O Abolfazl guard Khamenei." This shows how Ashura rituals are very difficult for the ruling establishment to control and manipulate in the long run, since these rituals might and can be at any time turned against them.

Another weakness of Bell's theory is that it assumes that, by dismissing the dichotomy between thought and action, it also eliminates the distinction between the observer who "thinks" and the participant who "acts" to the point that the two are identified. In reality, the distinction between the researcher who observes without taking part and the participant in the ritual cannot be eliminated, because the observer cannot ever fully ascertain the thought and idea behind the ritual. By conducting objective and context specific research, the observer can try to understand the ritual as much as possible; however, as seen in the case of the Ashura rituals, there can be complex and even contradictory motives, ideas, and emotions behind the ritual actions. Furthermore, the ritual might mean different things to the various participants of the ritual; as such there is not one "thought" but multiple "thoughts" behind the rituals. For example, a participant in Ashura rituals in Iran might see his or her actions in the ritual as an act of

35. Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Adler and Adler, 1985), 134–135.

36. Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism," 240–241.

defiance against the government while the person next to them might see it as supporting the establishment. Sometimes these thoughts become overt as in the case noted earlier following the 2009 elections, but many times they are completely hidden or very subtle, in effect giving the same ritual different meanings for different people even within the same context. This means that the distinction between observer and participant can never be fully eliminated in practice.

In conclusion, Bell's ritual theory, seeing context as essential, including a sophisticated view of power relationships, and, having a two-way connection between tradition and rituals, brings many insights to the understanding of rituals. The analysis of Ashura rituals in this essay confirms this aspect of her theory. Most other ritual theories suffer from the thought/action dichotomy that she strongly rejects. Theories that treat ritual acts as an abstraction, and therefore as not closely tied to their context, run the risk of seeing the Ashura ritual during the Safavid and Umayyad period as essentially the same; whereas Bell's theory allows for a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of rituals, taking into account the different potential functions of the ritual dependent upon their various contexts. Nevertheless, her theory does have its limitations. Even though she improves upon previous theories of power relationships in rituals by introducing negotiation and resistance, she does not take her addition far enough, neglecting to consider whether that rituals might be used to overthrow the current power structure of society altogether. In addition, her theory implies that observer and participant can become one even though this is not possible in reality. Nevertheless, a major advantage of applying her theory or any theory for that matter, to various rituals, is that their strengths and weaknesses can be found and as a result theories of religion can be improved.