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## TEN DAYS OF MOURNING: THE COMMEMORATION OF *ASHŪRĀ*' BY THE 'ALAMĪ SUFI TARIQAH IN NEW YORK STATE

### NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION:

Arabic terms have been transcribed following IPA transliteration system for Modern Standard Arabic. Diacritics have been included.

The first ten days of the Islamic New Year mark the commemoration of *Ashūrā*, the conflict between Imām Ḥussayn, grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, and Yazīd, son of Mu'āwīyah, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty. Most Muslims have limited or no knowledge of this decisive event except for the Shī'ah, who passionately commemorate it, some even going to the extent of performing rituals of self-inflicted pain. The Alami Sufi community in Western New York State, with whom I conducted my dissertation research, also remembers *Ashūrā*, although in a different manner than the Shī'ah. The most recent commemoration began on December 17<sup>th</sup> and ended on December 27<sup>th</sup> of 2009. The following is an attempt to organise some of my thoughts after spending these ten days as an active participant in this Sufi community.

Sufism is usually defined as the mystical dimension of Islam, although non-academic writers often describe it as the universal mysticism found in all religions (Ernst 1997). The members (*murīds*) of a Sufi tariqah live and study under the guidance of a spiritual teacher (*shaykh*). There are twelve main tariqahs and hundreds of smaller branches located worldwide. The members strive to purify themselves and remove personal attachments that distance them from constant awareness and love for God. This is done by participating in additional observances beyond the usual rituals of Islam, such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God's ninety-nine attributes). The example of a Sufi is often used as a teaching tool for how to live ethically and morally.

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The Alami Sufi community is located on the southern banks of Lake Ontario, in Waterport, New York. There is a main worship building, called the *tekiya*, which was established in the 1970s by



Fig. 1 *Shaykh Asaf* at the *tekiya*.

a *shaykh* from the Balkans. *Shaykh Asaf* has a chain of succession (*silsila*) that connects him to the time of Prophet Muhammad and has permission to teach from the *Rifāʿī* Tariqah, *Hayātī* branch of the *Khalwātī* Tariqah, and the *Malāmī* Tariqah. He was present during these consecutive ten days to give nightly talks. Fifty-three members of the spiritual order and their families live within ten miles of the *tekiya* and it is common for other members to travel from as far as Ohio and Canada to visit it for special occasions. The community consists mostly of both white and black Americans who have embraced

Islam, along with a few families originating from Muslim countries.

The intention to participate in the remembrance of *Ashūrāʾ* was made on the evening of December 17<sup>th</sup> because Islamic days begin at the time of sunset. Although it was the Muslim New Year's Eve, we did not celebrate it as a joyous occasion. Instead, we mourned the 'sad condition of the lost mankind, hoped for a better future, and prayed for forgiveness for all those who have sinned,' as the *shaykh* described. At the *tekiya*, before entering into the meeting room to begin the commemoration, we were each given a sip of water, symbolising the water of salvation and our willingness to open our hearts to the pain of the memories and to strive to improve ourselves such that we might be able join those who stand strong for justice even in the face of overwhelming injustice. It was our last taste of pure water for the subsequent ten days, as this was one luxury we were asked to give-up in remembrance that the family of Prophet Muhammad subsisted on limited supplies during this time and finally were denied water from the nearby river Euphrates for three days leading up to their deaths.

Restrictions during these days of remembrance served the purpose of creating inconvenience in the hope of helping us, who have comfortable and safe lives, to relate to the difficulty experienced by Imām Ḥussayn, his family and companions.

This community followed many restrictions during this time including fasting during the day; not eating meat or animal products; not drinking clear water but mixing it with juice or tea; no full showers that allow the water to run from head to toe; no intimate relations; no cutting of nails or hair; no getting angry or upset; no killing of any creature; no playing games or listening to music for leisure; and wearing only dark and preferably black clothing. This was a time of mourning, and pleasurable activities were to be limited. It was explained that restraining from killing and eating animal products was because there was already too much sadness and death associated with these days throughout history. While some restrictions were strictly followed, others were lessened as a personal choice based on the necessity of co-existing and interacting with neighbours and the outside world.

It is striking that the attendance at the evening talks continued to grow daily regardless of the harsh weather conditions surrounding the *tekiya* each night, going from forty to sixty individuals by the weekend. The outside temperature was well below freezing, and the *tekiya* building was without heating facilities, as they were removed upon instruction from the *shaykh* over twenty years ago. The dress code was strictly black outfits, one of the favoured colours of Prophet Muhammad. We sat on the floor each evening, listening to the *shaykh* relate the events as they occurred and striving to recognize their importance and how they relate to our lives. Many



Fig. 2 *Shaykh Asaf*: Reflections on the Martyrdom of al-Abbas

tears were shed in remembrance of Imām Ḥussayn and his companions.

The participants in the nightly events were dedicated individuals willing to withstand the inconveniences of remembering painful events and enduring cold, muscle pain, and hunger, which are all lessons in overcoming personal attachments to comforts. I

am thankful that I never needed to use the outside facilities, which would have been uncomfortable due to the snow and darkness, but I did remake my ablution (ritual purification with water) during several of the evenings, which required partially undressing outside and washing my arms, head, and feet with cold water. Needless to say, this was invigorating. My digital recorder also experienced difficulty in these conditions, turning off once when the batteries become too cold to function in the *tekiya*.

Each evening, we listened to how Imām Ḥussayn, his family, and his companions set aside physical comforts and worldly ambitions in order to fulfill the destiny that God had determined for them. The seventy-two men and boys plus the women who continued to the end remained strong in the face of extreme adversities, Imām Ḥussayn never giving his allegiance to Yazīd, who had proven to be an unjust and manipulative ruler. This standing for what is true and right, even against impossible odds, exemplifies the Islamic concept of *jihād*, which I would like to briefly explore through my own retelling of the story of *Ma'tam*.

The concept of *jihād* is often described as being foremost a struggle against one's *nafs* (lower self, or ego) and thereafter a physical struggle against injustice, in accordance with a famous *ḥadīth* (prophetic saying). The *jihād* of *Ma'tam* addresses both types of struggle. The family members and supporters who initially set out with Imām Ḥussayn to meet Yazīd's army totalled over 70,000. A majority of them were companions from the *Ḥajj* (pilgrimage), because Ḥussayn was going on *Ḥajj* when he became aware that the following day, while he stood on Mt. Arafat, there would be assassins sent by Yazīd to kill him. Knowing the Qur'anic decree that no blood shall be spilled during the sacred months, and especially during Ḥajj, Ḥussayn and his party left Makkah. Those who joined him expected a war with Yazīd's army. This number, though, dwindled day by day, as it became manifest that success was impossible.

Many people left Imām Ḥussayn's caravan because their *nafs* were stronger than their belief in his cause. They had family that needed care or crops that needed to be tilled. They were thirsty and hungry. The overwhelming heat drained their energy and made them desire their homes. Other tribes, such as the Yemenites, offered shelter and asylum. In the days preceding the battle of Karbala, in present day Iraq, Imām Ḥussayn led the remaining people around the desert sand and described in detail

how each of them would die, ending with a description of his own decapitation. Many saw no way of defeating Yazīd's army, which totaled 80,000, and saw no reason to die in this unfair battle. They were tempted by their worldly attachments from participating in this struggle against injustice.

The physical battle that occurred on the day of *Ashūrā'* was between the weakened family of Prophet Muḥammad and the well-prepared warriors of Yazīd. The seventy-two remaining men and boys who participated on Ḥussayn's side had been starved and without water for three days because the food had run out and Yazīd's army had cut off access to the nearby river. Regardless of this distress, when Yazīd's army attacked Imām Ḥussayn's small army during their *fajr* (dawn) prayer, the battle began, and it lasted until nearly sunset. At one point, a handful of men from Yazīd's army led by Hur, the commander of the cavalry detachment, defected to join Imām Ḥussayn's side, remembering how he had saved their lives with food and water earlier in the week. When all the men and boys had died, Imām Hussein rode out on a camel with his own baby, Ali al-Asghar, held high in his hands, begging for a sip of water such that the dying boy may live. In response, a three-pronged arrow pierced the little baby's neck, shedding the blood of an innocent. Imām Ḥussayn, again searching for a sign of compassion, begged for a sip of water as he lay subdued in the sand before the final sword strike.

An important part of struggling against injustice is accepting and submitting oneself to God's decided outcome, even if it means worldly defeat. Imām Ḥussayn was raised with the knowledge that he would die on that day in the desert. As is recorded in a *ḥadīth*, his grandfather, the Prophet Muḥammad, cried when Ḥussayn was born because he knew the tragic future events.

*Ma'tam* is not just a heartbreaking story in the history of Islam. It is a teaching tool and serves as a reminder not to become complacent when facing injustice. I can see how participating in the remembrance of *Ashūrā'* plays an important role for this Sufi community, whose adherents have dedicated themselves to actively striving for a closer relationship with God.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ernst, C. (1997), *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (London: Shambhala)

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

Fig. 1 *Shaykh* Asaf at the *tekiya*, photograph taken by the author 2010.

Fig. 2 *Shaykh* Asaf: Reflections on the Martyrdom of al-Abbas, photograph taken by the author 2010.