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Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The slogans of Karbala are the slogans of life in its entirety . . . Living Ashura is standing against oppression. Such a stand should fill our hearts and minds each time we face the oppressors and arrogant powers, whether in Muslim countries or in the whole world. It is not living in a tragedy of tears and hitting ourselves with swords or chains . . . for swords should be raised against the enemy as we were taught by the Imam.

(a.s)

—Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah, sermon commemorating the fortieth memorial of Imam Husayn, 2003

As Hajjeh Rula began to narrate the final moments Husayn spent with his eldest son before they both met their deaths, sobs rose heavily around us, filling the room with palpable grief. Her voice cracked as she lamented poetry into her microphone, describing how Husayn looked upon his son, who had come to him for his final blessing. This mournful parting was followed by an all-too-vivid description of the son's death and how the enemy cut up his body with their swords, mutilating it, Hajjeh Rula repeating those details about the swords cutting his body over and over again, weaving in foreshadowings of Husayn's death that was soon to follow, and bringing the sounds of weeping in the room to a crescendo. Then she paused. After waiting a moment for the sobs to subside, she began a lecture, in which she explained very clearly what the Quran, the hadith, and the hadith of Imam Ali all say about love and responsibility in parent-child relationships. Another pause, and the tears returned to their place in her voice. Taking up her poetic narration, she described the love of a parent for a child and the love of a sister for a brother, and then focused her last lamenting breaths on Zaynab. Zaynab, who looked upon the mutilated corpses from the battle as though she were the sister of each, the mother of each, with all the horrific emotion of a grieving woman looking upon her martyred son or brother, a grief probably far too real for many in the room.

—Field notes, 10 April 2000

Ashura—as Lebanese metonymically refer to the first ten days of Muharram¹—is the Shi'i Muslim commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third Shi'i Imam. Husayn's death at Karbala in 680 [End Page 122] CE—along with all his companions except one sick son—marks a moment of increased fissure in the Muslim community, often pointed to by Shi'i Muslims today as the decisive root of their separate identity.² The rituals associated with Ashura commemorate both a battle of righteousness against corruption and a key moment in Shi'i history—a moment so powerful that subsequent moments were characterized by an "overriding paradigm of persecution, exclusion, and suffering."³ Indeed, both scholars and Shi'i Muslims themselves frequently understand Ashura to be an essential cultural paradigm for Shi'ism.⁴ The shared narratives, meanings, and practices associated with Ashura are crucial to the construction of collective Shi'i identity.⁵

In Lebanon, Ashura commemorations have undergone a transformation in recent decades, from a ritual focused on mourning to one highlighting Islamic activism. This transformation accompanied the Lebanese Shi'i Islamic mobilization that began in the late 1960s.⁶ Motivated in part by the marginalized position of many Shi'is in the Lebanese nation-state, this movement involved multiple strains and was continually catalyzed by a series of events, most notably the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon that ended in May 2000. One key aspect of the movement was an emphasis on religious reform, much of which was focused around Ashura, and especially the explicit linking of the Ashura history to a contemporary activist discourse. In what follows, I describe both the transformation of..

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This article is based primarily, though not exclusively, on field research conducted from October 1999 through July 2001 in a Lebanese Shi'i community located in a Hezbollah-dominated area of the southern suburbs of Beirut. This is a community where people are religiously active, praying, fasting, and tithing regularly, and where many explicitly embrace either "Shi'i" or "Muslim" as a part of their identity. My field research was made possible by a Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Field Research Fellowship, a National Science Foundation Dissertation Research Fellowship, a grant from Emory Uni-

versity's Internationalization Fund, and a PEO Scholar Award. The Center for Behavioral Research under Dr. Samir Khalaf provided an academic home in Beirut. I am grateful to Donald L. Donham, MaryElaine Hegland, Bruce Knauft, and Corinne Kratz for their valuable feedback. Finally, my greatest gratitude is reserved for the many women and men in Lebanon who shared such an important part of their lives with me and who continue to do so.

1. *Ashura* (from the Arabic root that means "ten") is technically the term for the tenth of the month, the day on which the battle

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122



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