

CRAZY IN LOVE WITH HUSSEIN



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No, you are not on the set of Game of Thrones or The Walking Dead. You are in Iran and the men in chainmail wandering through the streets or those covered with mud and walking like zombies are actually celebrating Ashura.

Ashura is famous for the people practising self-flagellation but Ashura is more than that. For the Shia people, the Day of Ashura is the tenth day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar) and commemorates the killing of Imam Hussein and his 72 relatives and friends by the Umayyad caliphate in Karbala, Iraq.

In Iran, this is the time for unique celebrations all over the country. Very few foreigners dare to attend them as they are afraid of the atmosphere, which may seem gloomy or even hostile for those who do not understand the meaning of the event. In fact, people are happy to share their culture and everyone is welcome.



Mr. Tooraj is painting Hussein's brother Abbas, who was famous for his extraordinary beauty, on the hood of a Peugeot car in the streets of Khorramabad. It is a tradition during Muharram.



Some people also paint Hussein on their cars but his face is always blurred. Some cars are also covered with mud, a symbol of mourning in Iran.



Two colors are ubiquitous during the celebrations: green – the color of islam – and red.



Red symbolises the blood shed by Hussein and the martyrs. During Muharram, the water at the Shah-e-Cheragh mausoleum basin in Shiraz is dyed red.



In the streets, stalls have been set up and offer unlimited tea or milk to passers-by. This is the Nazr.



The tradition of Nazr: if you have something to ask God, you do charity work by distributing free meals (Narzi). This trader from Kashan gives out 2,000 meals a day during the 10 days of Muharram. Anyone who asks will be fed for free, whether they are Muslim or not. Once your wish has been granted, it is your turn to do charity.



In Gorgan, these men have gathered to share the Narzi in a specially decorated room, the Takiyeh. In some places, women also have their separate private room. Clerics are invited to deliver sermons. The elderly believe that the Narzi also has healing powers.



Every evening, after the Nazir meal, around 9pm, the men meet at a Hosseinieh, the "House of Hussein," where they listen to the life of Hussein, sing while beating their chest or flagellate themselves with chains.



A few hours before the first processions, Mr. Fooladgar finishes an Alam in his workshop in Tehran. The Alams represent Hussein's flag during the battle of Karbala. Only a few masters are still able to create these pieces of art. He uses recycled auto parts and various metals.



The Alam can weigh up to 300kg. Serious physical training is necessary to help carry it, like the practice of traditional Zurkhaneh and the yielding of clubs weighing 25kg each.



On the day of the procession, men take turns to carry the Alam for a few meters. It is decorated with feathers, flags and verses of the Quran engraved on the metal. The steel blades are flexible, so when the Alam halts in front of a mosque, it prostrates itself three times in sign of respect.



The Alam belongs to a community. Some cost more than 10,000 euros. The quality of an Alam is judged by its size and finishing details. Purists swear by handmade fabric and embroideries. There are countless symbols on an Alam, all of which recall Hussein's tragic fate.



Women tie to the Alam pieces of green cloth which they purchased specially for this purpose and make a wish in Khorramabad on Tasua day, the eve of Ashura.



Large theatrical performances called Tazieh are staged outdoors for free. They depict Hussein's tragic end in front of a stunned audience.



At the end of the play, the body of Qasim ibn Hasan, a 14-year-old warrior who lost his life in Kearnbala, is shown to the crowd, who covers him with roses.



Muharram is an opportunity for Shia children to dress up as Hussein warriors.



Politics are always around, even during Muharram. In the streets of Yazd, a billboard shows a photoshopped Obama as the traitor Hurmala, who killed Hussein's son, the young Ali Asghar, with an arrow – bearing the colours of Israel on the poster.



The ceremony of Chehel Manbar (the 40 Pulpits) takes place on Tasua day (the ninth day and eve of Ashura) in Khorramabad only. Women and some men light 40 candles and throw 40 pieces of sugar in 40 different locations to make a wish.



On this day only, faces are covered with a veil – something unusual in Iran, where the scarf usually only covers women's hair. People hide their faces not to be recognized.



The veil hiding the face can be more or less opaque depending on the degree of intimacy that one wants to retain during the 40 Pulpits ceremony.



Men making wishes or accompanying their wives also veil their face to remain anonymous.



The most religious people make a vow of silence for the whole day. To avoid getting lost, they have tied their chadors together. They also walk without wearing any shoes.



Along the 40 stops, houses called Sagha Khaneh have been decorated to receive the visit of the mourners. This woman is walking around while carrying a baby doll representing Ali Asghar (Hussein's young son who was killed in Karbala) because she does not have any children yet. She made the wish to have one soon.



At the 40th stop, after making a wish, people take a candle that was already put there by someone else to make sure that their wish will be granted. They call this the insurance.



It is also possible to take a sugar cube already placed on the pulpit and replace it with a new one. As the first sugar cube was blessed by the spirit of Hussein, if you bring it back to your home, use it with your food and eat it, you will have good health or heal the sick.



A boy is giving out the address of one of the 40 houses where women go to light candles. If the wish is granted, the person will return there next year to bring what she promised in exchange for her wish.



For this foreigner, these women have agreed to break their vow of silence. One said that she wished for success in her studies while the other wished for a careful husband in the year to come. Health-related wishes are rarely acknowledged explicitly as doing so may bring misfortune.



5am, before sunrise and the first prayer in Khorramabad, on the day of Ashura. In the Iranian culture, people cover themselves in mud for the burial of a person they were very close to. Repeating this gesture for Hussein is a way to show him their devotion.



Clay is mixed with rosewater and hot water to prevent thermal shock.



After bathing in the mud, the men gather in silence around a wood fire for long minutes while they dry.



The ceremony is taking place during winter, when the temperature stays under 10 degrees.



Some women join this ritual and coat their chador with mud before drying in front of the fire in the company of men. This is a rare moment of mixing for these men and women.



The women are chaperoned by a man who smears them with mud and accompanies them in front of the fire.



After bathing in the mud and drying, this old man is unable to repress his tears when evoking Hussein. Passers-by will stop to console him.



The Ashura ceremony has ended. Now, a mourning period of 40 days begins.

The bravest ones will take the road to Karbala on foot to arrive on the day of the festival of Arbaeen (the number 40 in Arabic).

They will meet millions of other Iranian Shia pilgrims under the protection of the Iranian police who have been sent to the Iraqi territory since the bloody attacks in 2013 and 2016.



Circles form. The rhythm slows down, then accelerates. The whole ceremony is filmed by a team of volunteers and then broadcast in the evening on all social networks.



The temperature exceeds 50 degrees. The humidity level reaches 100% but everybody is carried away by the trance. Bodies jump to the hypnotic rhythm of the "Hussein, Hussein" chants on a techno-like beat.



A Maddah recites religious poems (Roze) and celebrates Hussein with chants. The Maddah are real stars, wealthy, selling CDs, caught in scandals... Real rock stars with incredible smooth voices.



Mr. Haj Reza is the leader of the "Mad of Hussein" in Kashan. His face is swollen because he has spent two hours hitting himself to show his sadness. When he is not leading the mourners, he sells carpets and travels to Germany for business.

He covered his head with a scarf because he sliced his head open with a knife, and this ritual is forbidden in Iran...

He feels closer to Christians than Sunni.



In Bijar, in the Kurdish province of Iran, Ashura day is celebrated with a giant procession during which men and some women smear their heads with mud and wander in the streets while carrying the symbolic coffin of Hussein, who was beheaded in Karbala.



To encourage the men participating in the procession that lasts until sunset, women give out dates by putting them respectfully in their mouth.



Throughout the day, men self-flagellate in rhythm using zanjirs to share Hussein's suffering. The weather is extremely hot but no one drinks during the day out of solidarity with Hussein, who was deprived of water by his enemies during the battle of Karbala.



In Iran, it is forbidden to whip until one bleeds in public. Multiple layers of clothing protect the skin. Rare are those with wounds on their back, like this man.



On this occasion, small safe zanjirs are sold so children may mimic the adults.



During Muharram, children are dressed up as Hussein's deceased son. An Iranian charitable organisation has been donating these clothes for more than 15 years.



The hand symbol is ubiquitous during Muharram. It is not the hand of Fatma but the hand of Abbas. He was Hussein's flag-bearer during the battle of Karbala. He broke through the enemy lines to collect water for his family but was captured and his hands were cut off.



A man must be strong and not cry in the Iranian culture. But during Muharram, no one holds their tears back.



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