THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE CONCEPT OF "MARTYRDOM" IN IRANIAN SHI'ITE KEY

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Abstract: This article analyzes the concept of "martyrdom" in the Shi'ite Islamic key, originally built on the opposition of the Shi'a partisans to the Sunni political factor, then reinterpreted in the work of ᶜAlī Šarīᶜatī, the ideologist of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, in a political and ideological key. Thus, by operating the distinction between muğāhid (the warrior capable of the supreme sacrifice in the name of Islam) and the šahīd (a martyr who, through his physical sacrifice, inspires others to fight against the unjust order), ᶜAlī Šarīᶜatī outlines a new interpretation of martyrdom as a symbol of galvanizing the energies of the people in favor of social justice, and Ḥusayn's martyrdom, the third imam of Imamite Shi'ism, becomes a mobilizer of oppressed Muslim consciousness, a space of self-realization, in the conditions of a hopeless future. However, it should also be noted that this article is based on the research hypothesis that martyrdom in the Iranian Shi'ite was revived with the Islamic Revolution, which succeeded to imprint a new militant soul to the Iranian society and which, in the Iranian-Iraq war, constituted a source of ideological motivation of the Iranian soldiers. Associated with the political protest, Shi'ism brings to the forefront the sacrificial death of Karbalā', which has strong emotional springs and transcends the temporal and spatial boundaries, since any death in the name of justice and truth is transposed into the referential universe at Karbalā'.In the context of the Islamic Revolution, wrapped in a revolutionary coat, martyrdom becomes a pivotal notion of the political rhetoric, through which Shi'ites can build a society of true rationality and religion, dominated by virtue and freed from the exploitation of mustakbarīn-s (oppressors).

Keywords: martyrdom; Imamite Shi'ism; religion; ideological key; sacrificial death

1. INTRODUCTION

The destiny of the Middle East is dominated by violence and persecution, concepts such as martyrdom and *ğihād*, marking definitively the Islamic confessional space, which, by excellence, has the vocation of distress. The analysis of the interpretation of martyrdom in Shi'ite Islamic sources calls for an initial analysis of the etymology and its evolution in the religious sphere, as it designates the persecuted person for a religious cause. Subsequently, the term penetrated the political area, including, equally, those who sacrificed their lives in the name of political beliefs. By having a wide range of perspectives, from sociological, theological, cultural to psychological, the martyrdom is essentially related to sufferance, injustice and, ultimately, to death in the name of a belief or principle. In the Iranian area, people have been inspired many times by Ḥusayn's devotion to defend the own homeland.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide, doubled by the theory of Edwin Shneidman (1999), according to which suicide is the consequence of unsustainable psychological suffering, provides the frame of self-sacrifice understanding. Thus, each culture and society has the predilection of providing a suicidal pantheon (Durkheim, 1897:16), suicide being treated as a social phenomenon, driven by a series of behaviors and motivations.

Starting with the definition of suicide understood as

> any death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act done by the victim himself (Durkheim, 1897:3)

Durkheim appeals to a suicidal typology dictated by the level of social integration and moral regulation. Thus, there are four types of suicide: egoistic, anomic, fatalistic, and altruistic. By defining egoism as a state in which the person self prevails in the face of social self, Durkheim claims that egoistic suicide results from "an excessive individualization" (Durkheim, 1897:223), whereas altruistic suicide is the consequence of detachment of man from society (Durkheim, 1897:233). On

the other hand, anomic suicide occurs in the face of crises or "collective disturbances", because any rift of equilibrium entails a voluntary death (Durkheim, 1897:271), while fatalist suicide opposes anomic suicide, being the result of a the excess of regulation and the privilege of those whose passions are violently repressed by oppressive discipline (Durkheim, 1897:311).

Drawing attention to the altruistic suicide, specific to the primitive peoples (Durkheim, 1897:235), Durkheim's analysis of this particular suicide indicates three types: obligatory, optional and acute altruistic suicide (Durkheim, 1897:240-245). Thus, the altruistic suicide refers to the voluntary death of an individual perceived as an organic part of the social group, profoundly dependent on the social codes and the community to which it belongs. In this case, suicide is "a duty", society being the one that forces it to sacrifice its self from a sense of identification with collective values (Durkheim, 1897:236). This type of suicide illustrates the role of society, which does not hold of much account on the human being and his life, and who does not hesitate, in fact, to ask him to die because the self belongs to the membership group (Durkheim, 1897:238).

Claiming that suicide in the name of an intense altruism is "a virtue of excellence", Durkheim points out that this type of suicide is socially rewarded, and therefore, since childhood, the human being is encouraged to give up himself without a particular reason. Being induced by this state of impersonalism, the human being places the interests of society above physical survival, in which case death becomes a symbol of honor (Durkheim, 1897:240) and of social solidarity among members of a given society. This category includes the intense altruistic suicide that corresponds to mystical suicide, where the human being, conjuring the divinity, carries out the self-sacrifice, the memory of a so-called martyr being "in deep reverence" (Durkheim, 1897:242-243). But such religious conceptions are the product of his social environment, the individual being animated in this case by a purpose, even if he is outside his life (Durkheim, 1897:243-245).

Product of a society in which the human being is worthless, the mystic suicide urges the denial of any incipient form of individualism, the individual ultimately being the product of a social group that provides a particular picture of the world itself (Durkheim, 1897:245). Privilege of the primitive societies, altruistic suicide is also encountered in such civilizations that have developed the cult of religious martyrs, who in turn sacrificed themselves in the name of an idea and perceived truth as the only meaning of life (Durkheim, 1897:246) Subsequently, in the modern age, under the pressure of collective solidarity and under revolutionary, patriotic or resistance standards, the ultimate sacrificial act embraced fanatic forms under the slogan "to die for the homeland", where the individual, prepared to sacrifice his life for a cause, shows no respect for the lives of others (Durkheim, 1897:263).

In his turn, Edwin Shneidman, the father of the modern suicidology, focuses his research on the psychological needs of the individual, claiming that suicide is ultimately caused by a psychological suffering called "psymal" (psychache). Stressing that "the enemy of life is the pain", Shneidman (1999:124) believes that psymal is a condition in all cases of suicide, and people appeal to the fatal gestures because of "pain, anguish, regret, suffering, misery that tortures the spirit" (Shneidman, 1999:157).

However, martyrdom calls for an audience, in front of which the death is dramatized, and the author becomes a mythical figure, and the audience is the one who creates his aura of hero and propagates the narrative of the ultimate sacrifice. In this context, David Cook argues that martyrdom is conditioned by historical memory, which contributes to the dramatic dissemination of that sacrificial form among subsequent generations. The narrative is modeled in such a way that the martyr takes on the outline of a national hero who sacrifices himself for a just cause, under these conditions the public assuming the obligation to build and perpetuate a tradition (Cook, 2007:3-5).

The personal sacrifice for the benefit of the community requires the activation of the tragic-heroic register in the Iranian Shiite cultural area, the martyr becoming the subject of taᶜzīeh, that is, of that type of popular theatre that is commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn. The auditor of such theatre is an initiate, knower of the Shi'ite mythology, "familiar with all the rituals and the epic thread" and living the drama with pathos, and with the whole conviction that, by the death of Ḥusayn, the justice triumphs (Taqiyān, 1370/1991:2).

3. RELATION *ŠAHĀDAT - ĞIHĀD* IN ISLAMIC CLASSICAL SOURCES

The manner in which Islam deals with the martyrdom has become the subject of multiple researches, given that this concept goes beyond the boundaries of the spiritual and temporal

dimensions, because, in its construction, the ideological, identitary and symbolic factions are involved. A complex and polysemic notion in Islamic eschatology, the martyrdom involves a dimension of sacredness, because a *šahīd* sacralizes the struggle in which he has engaged, Muḥammad himself recommending that the dead people in the name of Islam be buried in the place where they have fallen into battle.

Analyzed from an etymological point of view, the term *šahīd* comes from *šahida* the first verbal form, which has the meaning of "seeing, being witness; to testify, to certify, to confirm." The dictionary article *šahīd* designates "witness; martyr, a person killed in the battle with infidels" (Wehr, 1980: 488-489), in other words, is the person who dies in the testimony of God (Dizboni, 2005:71). The *šahādat,* or martyrdom, also comes from the same triconsonantic Arabian root - *š-h-d*, which has the first meaning of the word "testimony" and which, in the religious lexical register, means "the profession of faith", that is the first pillar of Islam.

Given that the Islam gave the war waged in the name of the spread of the Word of God a transcendental interpretation, the martyrdom, in Sunni key, is associated with the *ǧihād* concept, the first martyrs being companions of the Prophet whose sacrifice in faith brings the promise of eternal life to Paradise. The martyrdom and the *ǧihād* have their origin in the Qur'an, the source of all teachings, al-Baqara Surah (2:154) and Āl ꜥImrān Surah (3:169), highlighting the promise of bringing all those "killed in the way of God".

The Islamic tradition of war brings to the fore the concept of *ǧihād*, which, however, has a particular interpretation. From the etymological point of view, the term comes from the Arabic triconsonantic root *ǧ-h-d* which means "to strive, to endeavor, to take pains" (Wehr, 1980:142) and does not have a military connotation. In the theoretical interpretation level, the verbal name *ǧihād* means "fighting with himself", and not at all "holy war," but the meaning of "battle" with which it is used in the Qur'an gave rise to multifaceted interpretations of its significance. *Ǧihād* means, above all, the believer's struggle to fight with the inner evil, but also with the one spread in society, without abandoning the path of truth at any time (Heck, 2004:95-96).

In the Islam's debut age, in the equation *dāru l-islām - dāru l-ḥarb* (the house of peace - the house of war), triumphed Islam precisely because the fight against the occupation of the infidels has become a sort of "personal obligation" for any Muslim to struggle in the name of the liberation of the territories, otherwise, the Muslim who refuses to trigger the *ǧihād* being Hell reserved (Bar, 2004). It is worth noting, however, that this form of *ǧihād* is a defensive one, because enlistment became obligatory only in the situation where *dāru l-islām* was subjected to an unexpected attack by the unbelievers. On the other hand, in Ḥadīṯ, the *ǧihād* has the meaning of armed action, most classical Islamic theologians treating this form of *ǧihād* as one offensive, serving to Islamic hegemony and conquering of new territories (Streusand, 1997:3).

A concept with multiple interpretations, the *ǧihād* has a violent and a non-violent side, in this respect Muḥammad himself, after his returning from the battlefield, distinguishing between the small *ǧihād* and the great *ǧihād*, where the first refers to the army implication, while the second is the most difficult to achieve because it is a struggle with the ego (Esposito, 2007).

The most important function of the little *ǧihād* doctrine is to mobilize the masses of believers in the wars against unbelievers, and the active participle *muǧāhid* designates the combatant, or the participant to *ǧihād*, while the one who dies for the cause of faith becomes *šahīd*.

4. MARTYROLOGY IN IRANIAN SHI'ITE KEY

Outperfoming the political doctrines, the Shiite theological doctrine is a sophisticated one, due to its interaction with the mysticism and religions of pre-Islamic Persia, the Qur'anic precepts being storage of hidden and esoteric meanings that can only be deciphered by the most worthy of the believers. Thus, the Shi'ism enlarges the concept of martyr and gets the size of death for a desperate cause, where the death becomes a place of self-realization, because the future is blocked. Built on opposition to the oppressive Sunni power of the day, martyrdom in this key of understanding has a particular ritualistic, political and ideological specificity, given that all twelve imams of Duodeciman religion are persecuted or killed by the Sunni caliphs.

According to Khosrokhavar, Ḥusayn's martyrdom becomes the emblem of Iranian Shi'ism (Khosrokhavar, 2003: 35), by his supreme sacrifice in the name of truth. A symbol of the ordinary Muslim, Ḥusayn embodies the ideal of the Muslim believer and becomes a symbol of mobilizing the masses against any form of injustice. Thus, the Karbalā's sacrificial death goes

beyond spatial and temporal boundaries, leading to the politicization of martyrdom and the sacralization of the leading character, which also acquires the aura of a hero and a saint.

Shifting the emphasis on the tragedy of the Karbalā' narrative, the Iranian Shi'ites managed to "transform the historical tragedy into a myth" (Armstrong, 2000: 47), and the struggle is endless until the final battle with Mahdī's return to Earth. ᶜAli's supporters set the rules of a life in the service of devotion and piety, built around the cult of suffering and mystery, the Shi'ite literature being dominated by

> the theme of passion and martyrdom (...), the expression of mercy for all defuncts, the idea of sacrifice for the final cause and the reason of spending of the life as a preparation for finale salvation (Tartler, 2014: 68).

The Karbalā' tragedy and Ḥusayn's martyrdom symbolize the struggle for justice and truth, Ḥomeynī's speeches consolidating this belief:

> The uprising and the movement which you imam Hussein (…) initiated and the battle in which he himself was martyred but overthrew Umayyad concepts, the protection of this battle, movement and uprising is necessary. If we want to make our state and its freedom permanent then we have to protect this secret (...). From this, oppressed will get energy and oppressor will be disgraced. Like karbala we have also given young sons. We have to keep this point in front of us (Khossa).

Engaged in a total struggle to establish a righteous world and against the aggression of the "arrogant" forces of the world, the Iranian Shi'ites perceive martyrdom as a form of self-defense against the other (Vahdat, 2003: 602), which, in Persian, is designated by the term *istišhād*. Thus, amid the domination of imperialism and the Western decadence, martyrdom, which has acquired social and symbolic values, has revived and has succeeded in impressing Iranian society with a new breath with political consequences, given that the *istišhād* has become a subject to encourage Iranian soldiers in the conflict with Iraq. The revolutionary discourse of the charismatic Rūḥollah Ḥomeynī is built on the writings of ᶜAlī Šarīᶜatī and Morteża Moṭahharī, who have developed a particular reflection on the status of the human being in society. According to Morteża Moṭahharī, the martyr is compared to a society's candle, which has the pivotal role of emanating light on the darkness of despotism and repression,

its motivation and logic being different from an ordinary citizen, the reason for which the martyr is which is "surrounded by an aura of Holiness "(Muṭahharī, 1980: 3-14). On the other hand, ᶜAlī Šarīᶜatī, the ideologist of the Islamic Revolution, deals with the martyrdom as a result of the trauma experienced by the Shi'ites as victims of Sunni usurpers. Thus, Šarīᶜatī operates the distinction between the martyr and the *šahīd*, where the first has Latin roots and means "death," i.e. "the one who dies for a cause", while a *shahīd* "is always alive and present", "he embodies the connotation of sacredness", and

> the blood of the *shahīd* is a candle light which gives vision and [serves as] the radiant light of guidance for the misguided who wander amidst the homeless caravan, on mountains, in deserts, along by ways, and in ditches (Shariati, 1997).

Thus, accordind to Šarīᶜatī, *šahīd* is immortal, Ḥusayn's sacrifice bringing to him the sacredness, especially as he "encounters death in a conscious manner", testifying to the innocent and oppressed victims who opposed the usurper Yazīd. Putting the martyrdom over the *ğihād*, Šarīᶜatī claims that the *muğahid* is the combatant who goes to battle to defeat the enemy, his act being an individual one, while the act of the *shahīd* is a collective one, being understood as a mean of asserting what is denied, blocked or mutilated by the political system (Shariati, 1997).

On the other hand, Benazir Bhutto points out that

> the Karbalā tragedy is, for the Shi'a Muslims, the lesson has taught the history about the price to pay if you want to follow the path of truth and do not interfere with the tyranny. It is said that each generation has its Karbalā' when people rise against an almighty tyrant, knowing that they are overcome numerically but incapable of remaining silent in front of oppression (Bhutto, 2008:58).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The classical Sunni sources have a particular perception of the martyr concept, while in the Islamic era, it is associated with the supreme sacrifice in the battles carried by the mass of young believers in the name of the new religion. Thus, Muḥammad himself glorifies the value of the supreme sacrifice in the wars waged for the restoration of order, but, after the Prophet's time, the term has gained a number of meanings over the centuries, "probably facilitated the transition

between (...) the so-called lesser jihad and the greater jihad", given that a martyr is also the one who does not fall on the battlefield but who remains faithful to the cause for which he fights and receives, according to the Qur'anic text, a privileged place in Paradise (Cook, 2015: 27).

The martyrdom, in Shi'a view, has a particular significance, given that it contributes to maintaining the unity of the Shi'ite community in front of the persecution of temporal foreign powers. The remembrance of the tragic death of the first descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad, namely ᶜAlī 'ibn 'Abī Ṭālib, the fourth and last of the Ḥulafā'u r-Rāšidūn (Rightly Guided Caliphs) and for Shi'a Muslims seen as the firts imām and the first lawful caliph, assassinated while he was doing a prayer service at Kūfa, and then the assassination of his little son, Ḥusayn, plays a crucial role in the history of Shi'ism, being considered two living symbols that are at the center of Shi'ite identity formation. According to Mahmoud Ayoub,

> The martyrdom of Imam Hussein has been regarded by the Shi'a community as a cosmic event around which the entire history of the world, prior as well as subsequent to it, revolves (Ayoub, 1978: 141).

In Iran of the twentieth century, the martyrdom is reactivated amid the start of the Islamic Revolution and then the Iranian-Iraqi war, both events favoring the feeding of the cult of martyrdom. In this context, Ḥusayn's sacrifice has gained strong emotional springs, becoming a mobilizing pivot of the masses, and an instrument for perpetuating the Shi'ite religious ideology.

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