

Ashoura in Kerbala

Annual Season Of Sadness

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Kerbala, located 102 km to the south of the capital Baghdad, where Imam Hussein is buried with his brother, Al-Abbass, and 72 members of his family and close followers, is a town of sadness. Every year the Shias commemorate the martyrdom of Al-Hussein and his relations. The ceremonies are steeped in tradition and have a long history.



A march in the city of Musayab near Kerbala

موكب عزاء في مدينة المسيب قرب كربلاء

Historical Background

The first mourning ceremony related to Al-Hussein's martyrdom was organized in Kerbala, 40 days after his death, (20th of Safar of the year 61 of Hegira) at the time his family

was returning from Sham (Syria) to Mecca. Attawaboun (The Repented), led by the Companion Salman Ben Sard Al-Khozai, organized a large mourning ceremony as they traveled past Kerbala, in the year 65 A.H. Since

then, ceremonies followed one another and extended to all the cities of central and southern Iraq. However, these ceremonies are especially poignant in the religious cities: Kerbala, Najaf and Kadhimiya in Baghdad. ➔



الزوار يستمعون إلى قصة مقتل الإمام الحسين (ع) داخل الصحن الحسيني الشريف صبيحة يوم عاشوراء
Visitors listening to the story of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein on Ashoura day



زوار يزدهمون على باب الإمام الحسين (ع) ظهيرة يوم ١٠ محرم
Visitors crowded in front of Imam Hussein's shrine

Mourning Ceremonies Today

The preparations for these ceremonies start on the first day of Moharram: the mosques are covered in black and black banners glorifying this ceremony are on the large boulevards. The majority of women, as well as men, wear black,

especially in rural areas, whereas the majority of townsmen only wear a black shirt. Tents are set up to receive visitors and provide them with meals. Loud speakers, tape recorders and video tapes, which narrate sad stories and songs to commemorate the tragedy of Ahlu Al-Bayt (The family of the Prophet), are

everywhere.

The women mourners meet in the houses of rich families or those of high religious and social status.

In each of the three religious cities mourners from a certain district or groups of professionals have their own convoys of mourners.

Each has its flag and a box, named "Alam Zenki", (a corruption of the Persian word "Alam Jenki" - flag of war). The box is tastefully decorated with swords and shields vertically and horizontally arranged. It weighs between 110 and 500 kg and is carried by only one strong man in front of the convoy. These convoys march, in an orderly way, through the streets of most cities during the first ten days of Moharram and often finish their circuit close to a holy place.

The 9th Of Moharram

On the day before the battle hundreds of thousands of people converge on Kerbala to celebrate the night preceding the 10th and stay up until morning. Some recite specific prayers reading from books they find in the holy places or those they brought with them. Others read the Quran in the mausoleum. The children and the old men and women, are happy to follow the ceremonies and long convoys of mourners which pass through the narrow lanes. They ➤



Visitors walking towards Kerbala

مجاميع من الزوار تتجه مشياً على الأقدام إلى كربلاء

observe the convoys of "Zanjil" (whips), of two parallel lines, with the front group, made up of young people carrying green, red and white standards. They use the metal Zanjil to whip their backs while making a half turn and repeating the invocations relating to Al-Hussein's mourning.

The convoys have people banging large drums, accompanied by others who bang copper dishes which produce very strong sounds. There are also groups of people sitting in huts built at the edges of the streets with lamps and coloured instruments of glass and crystal, giving a fantastic image of homogeneity which extends from the glass containers illuminated by reddish lamps up to the ceiling of the huts covered with black fabric.

As the visitors move with great difficulty through the narrow, crowded streets young people with cans of water help to make the climate more bearable. Others prepare meals. Tea and cakes are also distributed along the streets and boulevards.

As the night advances, the number of visitors rises and the luminosity of the mausoleums increases. Whole families, sleep on the pavement in front of the shops, which often close to make room for the visitors to get some

rest. The women follow the funeral convoy beating their chest. Each convoy is composed of three groups. In each group, a young man lifts a banner on which part of a poem is written. The members of the group look at it and recite it loudly. As soon as they arrive at a certain agreed upon destination they stop to let the following group sing. At each end of stanza their hands fall down on their chests. Hundreds of convoys pass through the streets of Kerbala until the morning of the 10th of Moharram. It feels as if the city did not sleep.

The Day Of Ashoura

The crowds reach their peak on the morning of Ashoura when visitors rush from every street and alleyway towards the ten doors of the mausoleum of Imam Hussein. The largest crowd stands at the door called "Al-Kibla Door" (The door facing Mecca), where visitors repeat: "We will never forget Hussein". They are joined by people who arrive on foot from Baghdad and nearby provinces. Their journey takes two days, they are welcomed by the people of the towns they pass through and are offered, a place to rest and, sometimes, lodging.

The inhabitants of the city and nearby areas, tour the area surrounding the mausoleum of

Imam Hussein and his brother Al-Abbas, especially the area between these two shrines, approximately 350 m².

The ceremonies assume a particular significance on 10th Moharram, when the visitors in the esplanade of the mausoleum gather to listen to the history of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein which, is recited by a professional storyteller and lasts nearly two and a half hours. The inhabitants of the city prepare "Harisah" breakfast the famous meal of southern Iraq - a mixture of corn and meat, which is cooked the whole night before Ashoura. This meal requires the co-operation of large numbers of people to keep stirring the mixture. They also prepare the special Ashoura meal: a mixture of meat (lambs, calves or camels which are fattened for a year) and chickpeas.

The World's Most Significant Marathon

The most significant ceremony organized on the day of Ashoura, only in Kerbala, is called "Rakdat Touirij" (The Run of Touirij). Touirij is a district close to Kerbala, where the people of the area gather for noon prayers in a place called "Kantarat Assalam" (Bridge of ➤



A march

موكب العزاء



Sound to organize the march

إيقاع يضبط حركة المسيرة



Preparation for the march

استعداد مسيرة الزناجيل

Peace), some two kilometers from the mausoleum of Imam Hussein. A prayer leader (Imam), a descendant of the prophet, rides a horse and starts the march. The people in this procession strike their heads and shout various slogans. The procession enters the mausoleum of Imam Abbas, and continues towards "Al Mokhayyam" (The Tent Camp), a place where the family of Imam Hussein and their companions camped on the 10th of Moharram, located 150m from the mausoleum of Imam Hussein. A man plays the part of Shamr Ben Dhi Al-Jawshan, who was one of the leaders of the army of Amr Ben Sa'D. They burned the tents of Hussein and his companions. The play is called "Attashabih" (Re-enactment).

The people in the front of the procession rush towards the tents to extinguish the fire. The mood is one of deep sadness and the cries of the women gathered in the neighbourhoods are heard. Some try to collect bits of these tents as a memento and a blessing.

More than two million people took part in this commemoration last year. Gigantic crowds converged for more than four hours in an area which hardly exceeds 350 sq. m.

The Night Before The 10th Day

After this ceremony and with night falling, the lights of the city are extinguished as a sign mourning on Al-Hussein's martyrdom. Candles are lit and people carry them in processions around the city.

The Third Day Of The Burial Of The Imam

The ceremony finishes on the 12th day of Moharram, known in Iraq as the "3rd day of Imam", i.e. the 3rd day after his martyrdom. The tribe of Banu Assad, whose ancestors buried Imam Hussein and his followers in 61 A. H, and who have always lived in this area, comes on this day, with their old men, women and children, in a lamentable state, afflicted by what happened to Imam Hussein. They shout: "O Abbas tell us where you would be buried?"

In 2005 more than five million Iraqis visited Kerbala during the 9th and 10th Moharram. How many visitors from Arab and Muslim countries will converge on the holy city in more peaceful times when there are no security concerns? ■