

# Living traditions of Muharram in northern Iran



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In many parts of Gilan, Mazandaran, and Golestan provinces in northern Iran, Muharram, marking the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (PBUH) and his companions, is not merely a religious observance; it is an integral part of the social calendar of villages. Families who may have few opportunities to gather throughout the year come together again during Muharram. Migrants return to their hometowns, and village neighborhoods come back to life. In these regions, Ashura rituals are still based on collective participation. Each household takes on a role: some prepare the Takyeh (local mourning hall), others cook ritual foods, some help set up ceremonial standards, and others take responsibility for organizing the mourning gatherings. It is this broad participation that has allowed many Muharram tradi-

tions in northern Iran to continue uninterrupted across generations, according to chn.ir.

If the Husseinieh is considered the central symbol of Muharram in central Iran, and the Madhif in parts of the south, then the Takyeh is undoubtedly the most important architectural and cultural element of Ashura practice in northern Iran. In many villages of Gilan and Mazandaran provinces, Takyehs are among the oldest public buildings. These spaces are not limited to mourning ceremonies; throughout the year, they serve as venues for community gatherings, social discussions, and various local rituals.

Many traditional Takyehs in the north are built of wood, a material suited to the region's humid climate. Gabled roofs, open verandas, wooden columns, and spacious courtyards distinguish these structures from religious spaces in other parts of Iran. During Muharram, the Takyeh becomes the

beating heart of the village.

One of the most striking images of Muharram in northern Iran is the procession of ceremonial standards (Alam) through rural paths. In the early days of Muharram, the ritual of Alam-Bandi (standard decoration) is held in many areas. People decorate the standards with black and green cloths, preparing them for participation in mourning ceremonies.

In northern Ashura culture, the Alam is not only a religious symbol but also an emblem of neighborhood and village identity. Each community has its own standard, and residents feel a collective responsibility for its preservation and upkeep.

In many parts of Iran, Ta'zieh (religious passion play) has gradually moved away from everyday life. However, in northern regions, there are still villages where Ta'zieh remains an inseparable part of Muharram traditions. Village squares, Takyeh courtyards,

or open spaces beside mosques are transformed into performance stages, where crowds gather for hours to watch the reenactment of the events of Karbala.

A key feature of Ta'zieh in northern Iran is its deep connection with local communities. Performers are often selected from among villagers, and many roles are passed down through generations within families. In some areas, children are introduced to Ta'zieh from an early age, helping preserve this ritual art form. For cultural tourists, attending a Ta'zieh performance in a northern village offers a rare opportunity to witness the continuity of a tradition with few parallels elsewhere in the world.

One of the lesser-known aspects of northern Iran's Ashura heritage is the recitation of elegies (Nowheh) in local languages and dialects. In many parts of Gilan, these lamentations are interwoven with the Gilaki language. In Mazandaran,

local poetry is recited alongside conventional elegies, while in parts of Golestan, regional dialects are also present in mourning rituals.

In northern Iran, offerings (Nazri) are not only religious acts but also part of the region's culinary culture. Many foods prepared during Muharram are rooted in local cuisine. The use of local ingredients, traditional cooking methods, and widespread community participation give this aspect of the rituals a distinctive identity.

For visitors, these offerings provide an opportunity to engage with the culinary culture of the region — where spirituality and hospitality come together. Although villages are the primary guardians of northern Ashura traditions, cities in the region also play an important role in sustaining this heritage, hosting large-scale mourning ceremonies during Muharram.

Northern Iran is unique in that

many of its Ashura rituals take place in proximity to the ancient Hyrcanian forests — millions of years old. During Muharram, processions moving along rural paths through tall trees, mist, and humidity create a distinctive atmosphere of mourning.

Many visitors are unaware of the dozens of local Muharram traditions that exist in this region, some of which date back several centuries and are still practiced in their original form. Introducing these cultural assets could open new horizons for cultural and anthropological tourism in northern Iran.

Muharram in northern Iran thus holds significant potential for the development of cultural and heritage tourism. However, utilizing this potential requires preserving the authenticity of the rituals, as their true value lies in their organic nature and deep connection with the everyday lives of the people.

## Reading Room

### Ashura; timeless narrative of justice, sacrifice, human values

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The event of Ashura, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (PBUH) and his companions in Karbala, is among the few occurrences in human history whose influence has not diminished after more than fourteen centuries. On the contrary, its presence and impact across cultural, social, political, artistic, and spiritual spheres have continued to expand over time.

Thousands of books, articles, lectures, and academic studies have been dedicated to Ashura, with each generation attempting to understand this profound event from a particular perspective.

Some researchers have examined Ashura through a historical lens, seeking to reconstruct the events that took place in the year 61 AH. Others have analyzed the social conditions that shaped the movement from a sociological viewpoint. Many have explored it through psychological, cultural, educational, ethical, or political approaches. All of these perspectives are valuable and necessary, but a fundamental question remains: Can the full potential of Ashura be understood within these frameworks alone, or are there broader horizons for studying this historic movement?

Many scholars argue that Ashura possesses such depth and breadth that it cannot be viewed merely as a historical episode. From this perspective, two new approaches can be proposed: Examining Ashura at a civilizational level and studying its mythological dimensions. In the humanities, there is a distinction between "perspective" and "level of analysis." Perspective refers to the lens through which a phenomenon is studied — whether historical, sociological, psychological, or cultural.

The level of analysis, however, concerns the scale at which a subject is examined. A phenomenon may be studied at an individual, family, social, national, regional, global, or civilizational level.

Many studies of Ashura have remained focused on the level of the event itself — examining it as a historical incident that took place at a specific time and location. Within this framework, key questions revolve around what happened, who participated, what circumstances led to the event, and what consequences followed. This approach is essential, but it may not be sufficient.

A civilizational perspective refers to the broadest and most complex level of human relations. Civilization is not merely a collection of political or economic structures; rather, it includes a network of values, ideals, lifestyles, cultural patterns,



systems of meaning, and visions for the future.

A civilizational approach studies a phenomenon in relation to both distant history and future generations. At this level, the question is not only what impact an event had in its own era, but also what capacities it contains to shape humanity's historical path.

From this viewpoint, Ashura is not limited to the year 61 AH. Over centuries, it has inspired movements for freedom, justice, cultural transformation, and spiritual renewal. In this sense, Ashura can be described as having a "civilizational character" — containing capacities usually associated with civilizations themselves.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Ashura is the way it appears to concentrate major themes of human history within a single event: the struggle between truth and falsehood,

justice and oppression, freedom and tyranny, loyalty and betrayal, and moral conviction and personal interest.

On one side, Imam Hussein (PBUH) and his companions represent the highest human ideals; on the other, the opposing force symbolizes moral decline and human degradation. From this perspective, Ashura is not merely the story of a battle, but a condensed reflection of humanity's ongoing struggle between good and evil.

Alongside the civilizational level of analysis, another perspective can be considered: what may be called the "mythological dimension" of Ashura. In everyday language, the word "myth" is sometimes understood as a fictional story. However, in modern mythology studies, myths have a much broader meaning. They are narratives that represent humanity's deepest values, hopes, fears, aspirations, and

experiences through symbols and characters.

Therefore, describing the mythological dimension of Ashura does not mean treating it as a legend or fiction. Ashura is a historical reality, and its historical nature must be emphasized. At the same time, the greatness of its figures and the depth of its values have given it many qualities associated with the great myths of humanity.

Human beings have always needed meaning, identity, and role models. Myths respond to these needs by providing symbols and narratives that help societies understand themselves. As traditional myths declined in modern societies, new forms of symbolic heroes emerged — from fictional characters in cinema to influential cultural and political figures.

Myths often develop around heroes: individuals who move beyond ordinary limitations and represent values greater than personal interests. Ashura presents a powerful collection of such figures. The level of sacrifice, devotion, loyalty, and commitment to truth demonstrated by them has made Ashura one of the richest sources of human ideals.

Meanwhile, one of the most important roles of myths is their influence on art. Many of the world's greatest literary and artistic works have been inspired by mythological narratives.

A mythological understanding of

Ashura can also open new horizons for artistic creation. Literature, poetry, cinema, theater, painting, music, and performing arts can draw upon its themes and create new interpretations of Ashura's meanings.

Many significant artistic works related to Ashura have emerged from precisely this approach — works that go beyond historical description to explore the deeper human and spiritual dimensions of the event.

From a mythological perspective, rituals are not merely repeated actions; they are ways of recreating meaning and reconnecting individuals with fundamental values. Ashura-related mourning ceremonies and traditions, when understood in this context, become more than reminders of a historical tragedy. They become spaces where values such as sacrifice, resistance, loyalty, and dignity are renewed.

In this view, religious gatherings and mourning assemblies are not only places of grief, but also arenas for experiencing and reaffirming these ideals. Ashura holds a unique capacity in this regard. Within the culture shaped around Imam Hussein's (PBUH) legacy, death is not viewed as the end of existence but as a passage toward a higher form of life. This understanding has allowed Ashura's legacy to inspire generations of seekers of justice, sacrifice, and freedom throughout history.

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