

## FROM MYSTICAL QUEST TO POLITICAL MOVEMENT: A LACANIAN ANALYSIS OF SHIA ISLAM

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**ABSTRACT:** After the Occultation, the moment when the shiites' messiah disappeared, Shiism broke into two tendencies: the *traditional-quietist* and the *rationalist-political*. These two tendencies coexisted for centuries; only quite recently has their balance tilted towards the rationalist-political side, which brought about (principally) the Khomeini revolution in Iran. This article seeks to explore the mode of the social ties in Shia Islam from a psychoanalytic perspective, in terms of its original mystical practices as well as of the political and religious consequences of the decline of traditionalist discourse and the political emergence of "jurist-theologian" with its corollary, the Adversary.

**Keywords:** shiism; civilization; social link; other; drive.

**Resumo:** Da busca mística ao movimento político: uma análise lacaniana do Islã xiita. Depois da Ocultação, aquele momento em que o messias xiita desapareceu, o xiismo se dividiu em duas tendências: a tradicional-quietista e a racionalista-política. Essas duas tendências coexistiram durante séculos; só muito recentemente seu equilíbrio foi inclinado para o lado racionalista-político, o que provocou (principalmente) a revolução Khomeinista no Irã. Este artigo procura explorar o modo do vínculo social no Islã xiita a partir de uma perspectiva psicanalítica, em termos de suas práticas místicas originais, bem como das consequências políticas e religiosas do declínio do discurso tradicionalista e da emergência política da figura do "jurista-teólogo", com seu corolário, o Adversário.

**Palavras-chave:** xiismo; civilização; vínculo social; outro; pulsão.

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## WAS THE SAQIFAH ISLAM'S PRIMAL SCENE?

At the time of the Prophet Muhammad's death in the year 11 of Hegira (632 CE), a gathering of his companions and of important members of other Meccan tribes was convened in the *Saqifah*, a roofed building belonging to the Bani Sa'ida tribe (AMIR-MOEZZI, 2011, p. 15-61). As was the custom, the group designated a member of the Quraysh tribe, to which Muhammad belonged, to choose the Prophet's successor. This is how Abu Bakr, Muhammad's Sahabi and father-in-law, became the first Caliph of Islam. However, this choice was not without controversy, and the makeshift alliance of diverging, heterogeneous concerns that composed the fledgling community of Muslims, and which only Muhammad's living presence held together (AMIR-MOEZZI, 2011, p. 18), soon split into two main groups: the supporters of the Abu Bakr caliphate from whom the Sunni branch of Islam descends, and the partisans of Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 27-28), with whom the Shiite branch originated. This essay seeks to examine the continuing effects of this primary division on Islamic society and its views of the sacred, with reference to the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the social tie or bond. The authors find that this theoretical approach is particularly helpful in providing new ways of understanding these sensitive issues of great geopolitical concern.

In a well-known passage from *Civilization and its discontents*, Freud epitomizes the central thesis of his text: "[...] civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct [...]" (FREUD, 1930, p. 97). The "decisive step" of civilization occurs, he states, when community power replaces that of the individual, when "brute force" cedes to communal "right" (FREUD, 1930, p. 95). In Lacanian terms, civilization emerges in an operation of knotting in which there is a subtraction of *jouissance*, which then is attributed to the social link. This thesis was already present in *Totem and taboo* (1913); is it not by abandoning their respective claims to possess all the women that the brothers of the primal horde could come together through their compact, which serves as the foundation of civilization? In what follows, the term "civilization" will be used in the Enlightenment sense, to mean, as Freud puts it, "[...] the process of civilization which mankind undergoes [...]" (FREUD, 1930, p. 139) and which founds communal life on a libidinal sacrifice. "Culture" and "civilization" will not, however, be considered to be coextensive. Each culture, involved in the framework of the civilizational process, can be understood as an original manner, specific to a time and place, of dealing collectively with the loss of what Lacan called *jouissance*, by weaving a tissue of sanctioned drive satisfactions. Freud attributes the discontents of civilization to this founding loss, and to the hostility it cannot avoid provoking.

However, this is not where the real originality of Freud's position is to be found. As McGowan (2013) rightly notes, this lies in Freud's analysis of the antagonism inherent in the social tie itself. Unlike the liberal, free-market theories described by McGowan – which analyze "discontents" as passing conflicts that can be resolved by politics –, the Lacanian approach, which remains faithful to Freud, considers these conflicts as the product of an irreducible Real.<sup>1</sup> Freud called this the "aggressive instinct" (FREUD, 1930, p. 62-63, 117, 129 etc.), "death instincts," or drives (FREUD, 1920, p. 44, 47, 49 etc.); *structurally*, these instincts prevent communities from forming a Whole [*Tout*]. Could it not be said that the different ontologies that have always accompanied humans come to dwell in this antagonism, which is intrinsic to social "substance"? At the very place where communities are in peril of falling apart, an idealized authority is set up to uphold and defend the group's identifications. This is how the brothers of the primal horde come to form a clan: by erecting an Other represented by, or even incarnated in, the totem, which acts as a guarantee of their compact and of the taboos against murder and incest the latter contained (FREUD, 1913, p. 126-161). If this share were not paid to the Other, the social bond would tend to break into an infinity of drive demands and requirements, rendering communal life impossible. Here we can identify a process made up of three overlapping moments: civilization is built on a sacrifice of *jouissance*, which each culture, in setting up an Other that has the function of maintaining the illusion of the group's unity, tries to redistribute in the form of permissible drive satisfactions.

In this context, Islam is not at all a homogeneous cultural space but rather contains a multitude of cultures. This same diversity has an impact on each branch of Islam. Even Shiism, with its canon of sacred writings, its poetry and its body of philosophical and juridical scholarship, proves to be as manifold as are the cultures in which it has grown. Yet, in each instance, it is possible to distinguish two fundamental tendencies: the *traditional-quietist* and the *rationalist-political*<sup>2</sup>. These currents have coexisted for many centuries in a state of

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<sup>1</sup> The real is one of the three dimensions (symbolic, imaginary, real) of subjective experience, in Lacanian theory: the symbolic concerns the register of language; the imaginary is the register of the specular, the image, the ego and the alter-ego; the real is that which resists to the symbolic, that which does not pass through the word. The real is what disturbs the image and speech.

<sup>2</sup> The traditional-quietist current advocates a withdrawal from political life to focus on the spiritual dimension of Shiism. The rationalist-political current defends, on the contrary, a reading of religious texts stripped of their mystical meaning in order to draw from them legal arguments in favor of a political commitment of the members of the community (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 207-239).

relative balance, gently swinging from one side to the other on occasion. It is only of late that this equilibrium has broken down in favor of the rationalist-political view, suddenly bringing about the Iranian revolution and the emergence of Hezbollah, a new political-religious group, in Lebanon.

On the basis of an exploration of Shiite mysticism as it has been transmitted in both esoteric teachings and the initiation rites of imams<sup>3</sup>, we propose to elucidate not only the mode of social bond that these original practices organized but also the political and religious consequences of their decline and of the “jurist-theologian” government’s rise to power. First the specificity of the two trends, and in particular of the solutions they each arrived upon to deal with the antagonism inherent to all social groups, will be addressed. This will allow us to grasp some of the dangers for Shiism associated with its recent political shift and with its corollary: the advent of the polymorphous figure of the “Adversary.”

### **The traditional Shiite Guide: where the exoteric and the esoteric meet**

In response to the nomination of Abu Bakr, the advocates of Ali dissented, claiming that only the descendants of the Prophet had the right to lead the community. They held, on more than one occasion, that Muhammad had clearly appointed Ali to be his successor and that, furthermore, the traditional means that had been used to choose Abu Bakr were a “betrayal of the divine text” (AMIR-MOEZZI, 1992, p. 87). Because the caliph was chosen by Allah, his election could not be conducted according to established human traditions. Not only was Ali the Prophet’s first cousin, a family relation that is sacred in Islam, but he was also married to Fatima, Muhammad’s daughter. Because of this dual kinship, both symbolic (cousinhood) and genesic (Ali’s sons by Fatima, Hasan and Husayn, were of the same bloodline as Muhammad), Ali was *de facto* the only legitimate caliph.

Ali’s partisans, for whom this question of legitimacy would become a guiding principle, formed the first “faction” of the nascent Islamic religion. They rejected the Abu Bakr caliphate in favor of Ali, the heir appointed because of his close links to Muhammad; they considered Ali to be not their first “caliph” but rather their first “imam,” a signifier of great import in Shiite thought. This primal dispute concerning the legitimacy of the leader became a point of conflict touching the very heart of the Islamic notion of the sacred: faith (“*iman*”), which resists the symbolic order, cannot be taught but is instead called forth. This is why it involves initiation, which necessitates a Guide with special abilities, a Guide through which ‘*aqal*’ – the capacity for apprehending cosmic intelligence – is expressed. The death of the Prophet, which could not be worked through using the symbolic tools available to the first followers, revealed the insistence of a Real at the very heart of Islamic sacrality, a Real that eventually led the doctrinal apparatus to the central concept of “*ilm*,” or “initiatory science”: the exceptional ability to fathom and transmit the hidden dimension of divine revelation.

For Sunni Islam, the majority branch, this quality, necessary for guiding Muslims, involves the Guide’s recognized and *manifest qualities*, which is how he could come to be chosen by traditional election. The minority branch of Shia Islam held the contrary view that, as chosen by Allah, this Guide could only be elected on the basis of certain *non-manifest qualities* transmitted through the genealogical ties with the Prophet and, for this reason, incompatible with the sort of election by which a tribe chooses its chief. In other terms, the “proto-Sunnites” wanted to hand over the social bond to the temporal power of a master figure (the caliph), whereas the “proto-Shiites” were calling on the knowledge (the “initiatory science”) of a figure who would mediate between two worlds: the Imam. This being, divided between a manifest aspect which is present in worldly space, and a hidden aspect which has a direct link with the source of the sacred, would become the touchstone of the Shia *Weltanschauung*; the latter is fundamentally dual and marked throughout by the conviction that all reality is divided between the manifest, visible and “exoteric” (*zahir*) on the one hand and the secret, hidden, concealed and “esoteric” (*batin*) on the other. The latter itself is only the superficial envelope of other levels, which are even more hidden (*batin al-batin*), and none of these can be attained through ordinary ways of knowing.

Shia theology further holds that Allah himself is dual, with a hidden, unknowable and esoteric dimension and a revealed, exoteric dimension, which He brought about within His being by His goodness, so that all could enter into communication with Him. This is the level of the “Names and Attributes through which He reveals Himself and makes Himself known” (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 132). These divine Names and Attributes appear in privileged settings: they are at work in both the creation and the theophanies by which humans gain access to His mysteries. One of the divine Organs is a “metaphysical entity” traditionally referred to as the “Cosmic

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<sup>3</sup> According to the *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales* (CNRTL), the word “imam” has two main meanings: 1) “Title given in Sunni Islam to the caliph chosen not necessarily among the descendants of the Prophet, but among the members of his tribe, while in Shia Islam the line of Imams can only be that of the descendants of Ali”; 2) “Muslim capable of leading community prayer in a mosque”. Cf. The internet site of the CNRTL (consulted on September 11, 2020): <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/imam>.

Imam". This Imam is the archetype of every incarnation of the imam role, the absolute and eternal model of the dynamic principle of the Imamate. This principle makes "knowledge of its reality equivalent [...] to knowing all that can be known of Allah, because the true revealed God, which manifests all of God that can be made manifest, is the Cosmic Imam" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 32). This Imam also has two dimensions: one that is secret, hidden, unknowable and esoteric (his "in the sky" aspect) and one that is manifest, knowable, exoteric and represented by actual, historical imams.

Shiite thought thus holds that *knowledge* (about the divine) is deeply connected with the imam. Given the imam's preeminent role, it is easy to see how Shiism has been described as an "imamology": each of the historical imams is a "site of manifestation" of the "Imam of Light," a site that provides access to everything that can be known of Allah; it is thus the royal road to the divine mysteries. This is why tradition holds that from the dawn of creation, each prophet has been accompanied by at least one imam, beginning with Adam with his imam Seth and continuing to Muhammad with his imam Ali. History is reduced to cycles in which divine Revelation is transmitted by "[...] the great messengers and their imams [...] who are linked together in an uninterrupted chain of prophets, imams and 'minor' saints, who together form the large family of 'Allah's Helpers' (*wali*, plural *awliyā*), those who bear and transmit the divine guardianship (*walayah*)" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 33). In mythology, the link between prophet and imam is sustained by a singularly complex cosmological and anthropogenic structure based, once again, on the two fundamental registers of Shia thought, the exoteric and the esoteric. Since the exoteric register is found in many Muslim traditions, we will focus here on the specifically Shiite esoteric register, which is organized in terms of different levels of the world, from the least to the most material and from the least to the most manifest (*batin al-batin / batin / zahir*).

#### **"Infallibles" and "Adversaries": the two polarities of Shia Sacrality**

As related and classified by Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, a first series of myths concerns the three phases of the "creation of worlds and of their inhabitants" (2004, p. 105). Here, well before creating the perceptible world, Allah began by bringing forth from His Light "both the First World [...] and its 'occupant,' the unique and dual Light of Muhammad [...] and of Ali [...]" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 105). This light can be thought of as a pre-existential entity comprised of the Prophet and his imam merged into a single, luminous figure named the "Cosmic Man (or Imam)". Figures designated by tradition as the "five people under the cloak" or the "Fourteen Infallibles" radiate from this light.

Then another, less immaterial world was created. It is composed firstly of the "First World of Particles," in which the luminous entities of the Infallibles, which have become "silhouettes of light" made of particles in human form, gravitate around the divine Throne, while "pre-existential entities of future angels, prophets, imams and 'believers' [...], that is, the future initiates of all time" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 106) come into being, also in the form of particles. Allah thus enters into a compact with these "pure creatures" (the First World of Particles is also called the "World of the Pact") based on oaths of loyalty that lead to the Primal Initiation. After the Pact and the oaths, "the luminous entities of the Infallibles (masters of initiation) teach the pre-existential 'shadows' of 'pure creatures' (initiated disciples) the secret sciences of Bearing Witness to Unicity and Glorification" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 107). The Second World of Particles succeeds the first, and in keeping with Shiite thought – where there is always a progression from the hidden to the manifest and from the subtle to the obvious – is more material. It originates in Earth and Water and is inhabited by the particles of the future descendants of Adam.

The final world is our tangible world, the world of Adam, which has the Dual Light – of the prophet and the imam – in the fiber of its being. This Light, the "vehicle of initiatory knowledge and spiritual power," circulates through history, passing from Adam to his descendants and to the great initiates by means of two modes of transmission: "the teachings of sacred knowledge [*connaissance*] and [...] seminal substance" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 107). The spiritual and natural initiatory sciences (*ilm*) become conjoined when they reach the "quintessential predestined vehicles" of the ternary "Muhammad, Ali and Fatima" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 48). Muhammad's daughter, one of whose traditional names is the "Confluence of the Two Lights" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 48), reunites within herself the dual natural/spiritual genealogy of that which is sacred. She is pure – like the Virgin Mary, she never had a menstrual period (AMIR-MOEZZI, 1992, p. 57) – and the "dual Light of Muhammad and Ali" comes back together within her, making her the source of the line of imams and their spiritual and physical descendants.

This series of myths – which traces the genealogy of the Wise initiates and their followers and reveals the infinite journey of the *Dual Light* – extends from the genesis of the world to the advent of the Fourteen Infallibles. This "immortal" vital principle flows unaltered from incarnation to incarnation across the millennia and seems,

somewhat paradoxically, to manifest the insistent palpitation of the death drive, that most fundamental drive, at the very heart of Shia thought. Here it is useful to call upon Kant's concept of "indefinite judgment".<sup>4</sup> When the Infallibles continue to exist in Paradise after their lives on Earth, it is not because they are "not dead" (as Ali erroneously claimed (AMIR-MOEZZI, 1992, p. 73), which would be a negative judgment. To be rigorous, they are, instead, "not-dead" or "undead" (indefinite judgment). They are neither dead nor alive because something subsists beyond their earthly deaths. They are dead, but are supplemented by something else (the "not"): a "monstrous" vital excess akin to the "not-mortal" Kantian soul, which "[...] is one of the infinite number of things which remain over when I take away all that is mortal" (KANT, 1781, p. 108). This "excess" is reminiscent of Lacan's myth of the lamella, found in *Position of the Unconscious* (LACAN, 1966, p. 717-721) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (LACAN, 1973, p. 197-198). Lacan describes how this lamella is the product of the deathly operation of language on the living thing. It designates a surplus, the materialization of lost, naked life and of the inextinguishable drive that results from the signifier's action of draining jouissance from the body.

The lamella is Lacan's name for the effect of the inexorable Real, which divides not only groups but also every subject, preventing each speaking being from coinciding with itself. Could it not be said that the "Infallibles" occupy the very place where Lacan's mythical lamella is to be found? Does Shia doctrine not thus reveal its own attempt to name this consequence of the Real? Put another way, could Shia mythology be read as an effort to assuage the uncontrollable and frightening aspects of the Lacanian lamella: the [...] horrible palpitation of the 'acephalic' drive which persists beyond ordinary death [...] (ŽIŽEK, 2006, p. 118), and which is frightening because of its power to divide? It symbolizes this power with the Infallibles and their spectral pre- and postmortem existence. The effort fails, of course, because something of the Real always eludes such symbolic operations, only to reappear elsewhere. In this case, it is found right at the heart of Shia doctrine and practices, in two forms and with two intermingled concatenations of consequences, which we will discuss in what follows.

First, there is a symbolic emergence of the figure of the persecuting Other, the obscene underside of the "undead" substance – the "dual Light" embodied by the Infallibles – which will serve to polarize the believers' hatred. This is why another series of myths comes to structure the Shia dual worldview. These myths tell the story of the cosmic struggle that, since the dawn of creation (and until the end of times, when the Mahdi, the imam of the Resurrection, will appear), has pitted "[...] beings of light and knowledge [*connaissance*] (imams and their followers throughout time) [...]" against "[...] those of obscurity and ignorance (always adversaries of the initiates) [...]" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 49). The Other, in short, embodies the cause of disharmony and disorder. This tension, which divides the community and renders it incomplete, will not only take on a firm consistency in its opposition to the figure of the Enemy; it will also irrigate the initiatory process itself.

For the Shia, Muhammad is only the medium or bearer of divine Revelation. The prophetic text, as revealed to him, remains enigmatic as long as only its manifest dimension, its *letter* is taken into account. To produce the set of significations underlying prophetic speech, its letter must be infused with the *spirit* it lacks: it must call for the imam's interpretation (*tawil*). Only the imam's deep knowledge [*connaissance*] of the sacred acquired through *walaya* – the divine Light dwelling within him – authorizes him to bring forth esoteric meaning – the only meaning that offers access to the divine – from the prophetic Revelation. The imam's interpretation, the spirit that animates the letter's sacred meanings, does not include the entirety of the divine text. The ultimate meaning (*batin al-batin*) of the divine is missing. Therefore a void persists in the very heart of initiation, an absence that the imam's teachings can only serve to revive in his adepts by placing revelation at the next step of the initiatory process. This can be viewed as a sort of asymptotic flight of the always-already absent object of mystical initiation; the disciple never fully coincides with the object of his quest, and this sustains and spurs on the believers' desire throughout their initiations. This "cavity," which is home to the desire of the faithful and provides a basis for their living together, also distinguishes the religion of Islam from the sort of seamless and disciple-free personal belief system of someone like Daniel Paul Schreber, whose autobiography allowed

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<sup>4</sup> A judgment is made up of a subject and a predicate. In the proposition "this car is white", "car" is the subject, "white" the predicate. If, faced with a corpse, we say "this corpse is dead", we carry what Kant calls an "analytical judgment": an analytical judgment does not extend our knowledge, it only makes explicit the (implicit) content of a concept we already know about (corpse = death). If, in the absence of a corpse, we are told "such a person is alive", or "such a person is dead", this is a synthetic judgment: a synthetic judgment, unlike the analytical judgment, improves our knowledge, introduces an element which is not contained in any of the proposed concepts. When we say "such a person is not dead", we produce a negative judgment, since a negation relates to the predicate (dead). Kant's "indefinite judgment" does not allow us to decide between two propositions. To the alternative "this is alive" or "this is dead", the proposition "this is non-dead" introduces something undefined, a middle way which carries within it a little of the two opposite predicates (living vs dead): what is judged "undead" is neither alive nor dead; or more accurately both of them – that would be death with a little extra life.

Freud (1911) to develop his theory of psychosis.

Here again we encounter the two recurring manifestations of the Real that vitalize Shia Islam. On the one hand, it exists in the missing object of which the imam is the support and which orients mystical initiation. On the other, and as we shall see in what follows, the Real returns in the form of the Adversary of the *awliya*. Initially, these two manifestations had a dialectical relation with each other, but over time they gradually became more isolated, to the point of giving rise to two divergent readings of doctrine as well as two antagonistic approaches to the role of the Guide: one that is quietist (non-political) and another that is political. As regards the first of these, the imam's role is to support a mode of initiation in which the essential void of the unknowable nature of Allah allows for *jouissance* to be handled (by default, because it is sacrificed to the social) in a very particular way: one that encourages the establishment of a collective life that is organized around the ascetic practices of a variety of esoteric and initiatory approaches. During the period traditionally known as the "Major Occultation"<sup>5</sup>, however, another version of the imam's role emerged, that of the political Islamic "jurist-theologian" who is accompanied by a sensualist Other [*Autre jouisseur*], the Adversary. These two versions of the imam can be differentiated in terms of two standard readings of the founding act of Shia Islam's social link: the martyrdom of Husayn.

### **The mystical interpretation of the martyrdom of Husayn: a founding principle of Twelver quietism**

Husayn ibn Ali, the son of Ali and Fatima, is Shiism's third historical imam. His elder brother Hasan, the second imam, was chosen to be caliph by his supporters but then was forced to abdicate by Ali's old Umayyad foe, Muawiyah. When Hasan died, Husayn refused to swear allegiance to Yazid I, Muawiyah's son and successor to the caliphate. Husayn traveled to Kufa to garner support, taking with him a group of men, women and children, but was apprehended *en route* by Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad, the Umayyad governor of the city. The negotiations with Ubayd Allah soon reached a stalemate, and Husayn, along with his ambushed people, began to run out of water. Despite these terrible conditions, the third imam refused to obey and to suffer such humiliation (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 52); remaining staunchly opposed to any compromise, he rejected the caliphate's authority on moral rather than legal grounds ("No to humiliation!"). In other words, his position of refusal was not based on pragmatic concerns, "utilitarian" calculation (the greatest good for the greatest number<sup>6</sup>), or on anything akin to what Kant called "pathological" interest (well-being, honor etc.). His opposition was based only upon his own act of speaking [*acte d'énonciation*], without founding itself on the Other of tradition. It is just this quality of being wrested from all determinations that allows us to consider Husayn's obstinacy as an *ethical act*, in Lacan's sense of the term<sup>7</sup>. This astonishing act, liberated from the limits imposed by the law, without forgoing the safety net of tradition, involved a momentary suspension of the circuit of discourse, thereby revealing the enigmatic abyss of the Other's desire. This enigma can be phrased as follows: how was it possible that, less than fifty years after the death of the Prophet, his favorite grandson, the sacred bearer of the "dual Light," was killed by Muslims who were Muhammad's own former companions? The violent death of Husayn would then introduce a traumatic kernel into the Shia faith, one that served as the source of its ethical and religious shift to imamism. However, to weave this trauma back into the fabric of Shiitic social and religious life, the hard work of turning it into signifiers – which is carried out through religious tradition – is required. This involves the two planes of the Shia worldview: *zahir* (exoteric) and *barin* (esoteric).

Its esoteric aspect derives from mystical interpretation as expressed by the eighth imam, Ali al-Rida. In his teaching, the tragedy of Husayn is transformed into a "[...] 'Grandiose Sacrifice' (*al-dhibh al-azim*) of messianic dimensions" (AMIR-MOEZZI, 1992, p. 67). The death of the third imam and his people becomes thereby the

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<sup>5</sup> In the Shiite current, the imams descend from Ali, cousin of the Prophet. The 1st Imam, named al-Mahdi (the Rightly Guided), is considered by the Shiites as the Messiah, the Savior to come. According to tradition, in the year 260 AH, on the death of his father, at the age of 4 or 5, he entered the Minor Occultation: he disappeared for 70 lunar years. Becoming the hidden imam, he communicated with his faithful through 4 successive Representatives. At the end of these 70 years, he entered the Major Occultation, disappearing completely. His return will mark the End of Times, a moment of a grandiose struggle against the forces of injustice and ignorance.

<sup>6</sup> Remember that Husayn and his compatriots were massacred by soldiers during the battle of Karbala. Only Zaynab and her son Ali survived.

<sup>7</sup> The ethical act, according to Lacan (1992), is an act that escapes all social and biological determination. The one who accomplishes it does not aim for his own interest; it is not driven by conformism or by submission to an authority. The ethical act consists, for the one who accomplishes it, in relying only on his desire. Desire is directly linked to lack: it is one of the effects of castration. The ethical act does not therefore aim to be supplemented by an additional pleasure, on the contrary, since it is paid for with a "pound of flesh" (LACAN, 1992): it is produced by a kind of necessity which the subject cannot explain.



deed of a man of exceptional dignity and kindness: a man who was aware of what his fate would be because it had been written in the sealed Book, which he, like the other twelve imams, had read (AMIR-MOEZZI, 1992, p. 67). This man did not give up on his desire to fulfill the divine will. This transformation of Husayn's ethical/tragic act (his *acceptance of the inevitable*) into the heroic act of "[...] a Friend of God (*wali*) fulfilling his destiny according to the will of the Beloved (*mawla*)" (AMIR-MOEZZI, 1992, p. 66) had two major consequences. First, it effected an immediate transubstantiation at the very heart of Shia sacrality and theology, which helped revitalize a faith that had, however briefly, been shaken to its core. This logic of sacrifice suddenly turned what might have appeared to be the tangible proof of Allah's powerlessness (He could not even protect the grandson of the Prophet himself) into a masterful demonstration of His omnipotence. Second, it provided the basis for Twelver "quietism." In traditional texts, Husayn does not appear as a courageous, if impotent, victim of Umayyad oppression, but instead as a martyr who was not only trying to realize his destiny but also to unmask the enemies of the Prophet and of the true believers (the Shiites). These enemies were to be "[...] revealed, abhorred, and forever damned" (AMIR-MOEZZI, 1992, p. 67), although this purging was to be postponed until the end of days, when the Mahdi, the eschatological Savior, would appear triumphantly and build the Ideal City.

It is therefore not very surprising that this tragedy, and in particular its quasi-Christic mystical interpretation, led the imams (up to the eleventh) to keep themselves in the background as regards temporal power. Fundamentally apolitical, "[...] they took the title of *al-qâ'id* ('sitting imam'), in contradistinction to the Savior who was called *al-qâ'im* ('standing imam,' meaning, among other things, that he stands up to injustice)" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 56). Imams in this traditionalist-quietist tendency continually channeled the possibility of political action into an indefinite future, by embellishing the enigmatic void of the Other's designs and by sustaining the non-knowledge that is inherent in the divine. Their teaching had the effect of putting off indefinitely the moment when justice would be established again; this simultaneously neutralized all desire for vengeance, which was subsumed in the mystical quest. Over the course of time, however, another reading of these events gained in force. Inheriting the "rationalist" tendency of imamism, this tradition relied upon the figure of Husayn to "[...] present Shiism as a fundamentally political and dissenting religious movement" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 50). This rationalist shift occurred at the intersection of several historical factors, the most decisive of which was the end of the line of historical imams.

### **The Major Occultation and the political turn of Shiism**

When Hasan al-Askari, the eleventh imam, died in 260 AH (874 CE), the community of the faithful was fragmented by more than a dozen schisms. Some believers held that he had left no male descendant, but tradition ordained that he did have a son named Muhammad, who was four or five years old at the time of Hasan al-Askari's death. The Imamites believed this son was their Messiah, and this became a principal article of faith in Twelver Shiism. On the death of his father, the twelfth imam nonetheless entered immediately into what has come to be known as the "Minor Occultation": for seventy lunar years, this "hidden imam" would only communicate with the believers by means of four successive representatives, who alone knew where the imam had concealed himself. In 329 AH (940-941 CE), shortly before the death of the fourth intermediary, the imam sent a letter stating that there would not be any additional representatives and that he would not appear again before everyone until the end of time. The twelfth imam thereby, and as of that date, entered into the "Major Occultation," which is still in effect. Since Shia Islam is entirely organized around the figure of the imam, this dramatic loss of the physical presence of the leader gave rise to a particularly chaotic period of its history. This is why, starting from the fourth or fifth century AH, and under the double influence of the gradual infiltration of ancient Greek thought into Muslim culture and the Buyid dynasty's assumption of power, Shia doctrine underwent a sweeping shift towards "rationalization." The epoch's important thinkers came from the theological-juridical-rationalist or Usuliyya tradition and also from the *mujtahid* school, which practiced *ijtihad* or "personal interpretation." They proceeded to reinterpret the traditional texts to remove their esoteric and mystical excesses, gradually putting doctrine, and the community, under the aegis of the Law and its doctors. These religious rationalists (*mujtahid Usuli*) went on to deem themselves, first, to be the "representatives of the hidden imam," and then to be his strict counterparts. As of the nineteenth century, all the necessary doctrinal elements were in place for the emergence, in the twentieth century, of the "jurist-theological government" (*Walaya al-Faqih*) and the Khomeini revolution in Iran in 1979, which revealed the deepest ambitions of the Usuli movement: "[...] to bring Shiism into the political sphere, have it be practiced as a collective religion, reinforce it as an ideology of power" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 207). However, to attain this goal, a whole "process of substitution" was required. The doctrine had to be reworked comprehensively, so that "the doctor of the Law replaced the imam and law took the place of the imams' teaching; the imams' mystical love was transformed into a morbid and dolorific sect, the violent collective manifestations of which were tacitly approved" (AMIR-MOEZZI; JAMBET, 2004, p. 207). This is the context in which the ideological transposition of Husayn's ethical

act was reformulated into a simple political rebellion based on “his right to the caliphate” (SAMAAN, 2007, p. 136); for his part, Yazid became the paradigm of the Adversary, the first in a long line of these.

This interpretation implies that Husayn’s sacrifice was no longer addressed to the God of the mystical tradition (the Beloved), but rather to what Lacan, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, calls the “dark God”: the Other who “gets off” [*Autre jouisseur*]<sup>8</sup> (LACAN, 1973, p. 121). This point can be restated as follows: if the traditional interpretation united believers around a lack that was propitious to political quietism, the rational interpretation mobilizes them around something that is full; this is the figure of the Enemy, whose *jouissance* can serve as the basis of a political platform, once it has been unmasked by the “rational” knowledge [*savoir*] of the jurist-theologian. Here we are quite far from a culture in which institutions bring different desires together and direct them towards mystical union; instead, this culture tends to interrogate the drive dynamic for the sake of segregational self-protection. The fundamental antagonism has thus been displaced: instead of being located inside the group and each of its members, it has slid to the periphery, and is to be found between the community of “true believers” and the mass of others. As a result, each subject is no longer divided within itself; the community, taken as a Whole [*Tout*] is irreducibly separated from other communities. The two antagonistic vectors of Shia society—the group of true believers versus their Adversary (or Adversaries) – are joined together, through doctrine, into a single bloc: one cannot exist without the other. There are no *awliya* (“friends of Allah”) without their Adversary. The contemporary success of Shia Islam most certainly derives from this mode of joining people together, in a way that (intends to) obliterate(s) the division within a group and within each subject, replacing it with the scission of the polar opposites that structure the Shiite social order. Doctrine thus offers the subject who adopts it an alibi for getting rid of his or her own *division* (the crucible of lack where desire is nurtured) in favor of this *scission* (the Community versus the malevolent Other). It operates in the same way as the capitalist discourse, which, as Pierre Bruno puts it, acts as “[...] an orthopedic prosthesis that screens out the division of the subject” (BRUNO, 2010, p. 278).

It is difficult to deny that this theological-juridical discourse has a certain efficiency and effectiveness; the twentieth century saw stable Shiite political powers emerge on the international scene. Nevertheless, a question remains: is there not a risk that communities born of the rationalist-political current will be unable to do without an Adversary who is thought to dispossess the group of its *jouissance*? That is, is the Shiite community not condemned to a perpetual search for a suitable Enemy who, by embodying the “accursed share” of Shia sacredness, assumes the responsibility of maintaining and strengthening the social link? What would happen to the group without this Other? It would split apart into a proliferation of uncoordinated groupuscules, all disconnected from one another. As intransigent as it may be, Shia doctrine in both its mystical orientation and its “rational” reformulation essentially ensures that the movement inherited from the partisans of Ali is not exhausted by the fundamentalism that touches many sects that are also found in other monotheistic religions.

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<sup>8</sup>This term designates a polymorphic entity: a disturbing Other who threatens to attack someone at any time, to use him against his will. It is generally spotted in the speech of the paranoiac; but it is also found in the doctrines of some religious or political groups, to which it can serve as a glue.



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