Pre-Islamic Iranian Elements in the Ta‘ziya Texts

Another important feature of the ta‘ziya texts is the way Shiite Arab traditions are linked to Iran. The ta‘ziya composers give the events of Karbalā an Iranian flavour by employing words and expressions that are integral to Iranian life today. They also make plot links to Iran, so that the events of Karbalā seem more familiar to the audience. The most important of these is the presence of Šahrbānū, an Iranian princess, at Karbalā. She is the daughter of Yazdgerd III (r. 632-651), the last Sassanid (224-651) king of Iran before the Arab invasion. According to popular Shiite tradition, before the Arabs invaded Persia, Šahrbānū dreamt that Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet, told her that she would go to Medina and marry Fāṭima’s son, Ḥuseyn, and a line of Imāms would stem from this marriage (44). The day after her dream, she was arrested and taken to Medina, where she married Imām Ḥuseyn, and so is present at the battle of Karbalā. According to the ta‘ziya texts, Imām Ḥuseyn told her that if he should be killed on the battlefield, she had to take his horse and escape because the enemy must not arrest her. After the death of Imām Ḥuseyn, Šahrbānū first asks permission from Zeynab and then says farewell to other members of the family and leaves them. From the texts of the ta‘ziya, one learns that Sakina, Fāṭima and Imām Zeyn al-‘Ābedin are the children of Šahrbānū (43-45). Therefore, the line of Imāms is almost Iranian. So naturally, Iranians are responsible for continuing the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn and other members of the Prophet’s family.

In the above episode, Šahrbānū’s brother ‘Abd al-Allāh has been expecting Imām Ḥuseyn, who does not arrive. ‘Abd al-Allāh sends a messenger to him, but the messenger does not return for two weeks. When he does return, he explains to ‘Abd al-Allāh the miserable situation of Imām Ḥuseyn and his companions on the plain of Karbalā (37-38). ‘Abd al-Allāh’s camp is in the desert, and his sister Šahrbānū comes to him there (48-49). In these texts, Yazdgerd’s son is named ‘Abd al-Allāh, whereas his real name was Pirūz. The transformation of the name encourages Iranians to adopt Ara-
bic names and choose them for their children. Yazdgerd’s supposed acceptance of this name is a sign of his respect for Arab customs.

Another important feature that makes the ta’ziya seem more familiar for Iranians is its suffusion with motifs drawn from the Persian ethic of kingship. Hereditary kingship has very ancient roots in Iran. Terms such as king (Shah), crown prince (vali’ahd), and prince (Shahzāda) are associated with social rank in Persian. Iranians respect the idea of social rank; those who bear one of these titles are entitled to at least a presumption of dignity. In the ta’ziya texts, Imâm Ḥuseyn is several times called the King of the Day of Judgement (pādešah-e rūz-e ma‘ād) (16), the King of Religion (Shah-e din) (33), the headless king (Shah-e bi sar) and the thirsting king (Shah-e tešna lab) (182). In the ta’ziya texts, the members of Imâm Ḥuseyn’s family identify themselves with a lineage that can be traced back to royalty. For example, Ruqeya, Imâm Ḥuseyn’s daughter, says to the daughter of Yazid, ‘our lineage traces back to kings, we are among the nobility of the world’ (mā az šahānim ze khūbān-e jahānim) (149).

The ta’ziya texts sometimes name Persian kings. In the ta’ziya on ‘the mourning of Dorra Ṣadaf’ (ta’ziya Dorra Ṣadaf), Dorra and her companions are setting out to fight Ibn al-Sa’d and so free Imâm Ḥuseyn’s household (she is able to see Zeynab and offer her a headscarf (95-108)). On the way, she meets a man named Šabān, who is also going to take revenge on the enemies of Imâm Ḥuseyn. He says to Dorra Ṣadaf that the legendary kings Jamšid and Dārā are mere slaves compared to her (101). This image and several other Iranian names mentioned in this ta’ziya assembly, such as Muṣṭary, Šabān and Sanān, make the events of Karbalā seem more familiar to Iranians.

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