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# The Tradition of the Maddāh in Iran: Ritual, Social Memory and Political Discourse

## *İran'da Maddāh Geleneği: Ritüel, Toplumsal Hafıza ve Siyasal Söylem*

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## Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive examination of the maddāh tradition in Iran, considering its historical significance, ritual context, and the socio-political roles it has assumed in the modern era. The narrative of Karbalā, which holds a central position in the theological, cultural, and social fabric of the Shia Islamic world, has, through the maddāhs, developed from a simple religious commemoration into a dynamic arena where social memory and political discourse are continually recreated. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, and Michel Foucault's theories of power, the study analyses the crucial role of maddāh performances in mass mobilisation, the generation of social consent, and the construction of ideological legitimacy. Historically, it traces the tradition's origins in pre-Islamic Iranian epic culture (the Siyavush myth), through the Safavid, Qajar, and Pahlavi periods, focusing especially on the transformations following the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. The research also highlights the significant role played by maddāhs in mobilisation during the Iran-Iraq War, leadership crises, and succession processes, as well as their global reach through digitalisation in contemporary times. The aim is to clarify, from a qualitative perspective, how maddāh performance has shifted from a traditional mourning ritual to a modern tool for political mobilisation. Through the performances of leading contemporary maddāhs such as Nādir Javādī, Mahdī Rasūlī, Meysam Moṭī'i, and Maḥmūd Karīmī, this article examines the ontological significance of the maddāh's voice, the aesthetics of the performance, and the emotional atmosphere it engenders in the construction of social identity. The article contends that the maddāh tradition is not merely a mourning ritual but also a vital institution for understanding Iran's social and political framework.

**Keywords:** Iran, Maddāh Tradition, Karbala, Social Memory, Political Discourse

## Öz

Bu çalışma, İran'daki maddāhlık geleneğini tarihsel derinliği, ritüel bağlamı ve modern dönemde kazandığı sosyo-politik işlevler çerçevesinde derinlemesine incelemektedir. Şii İslam dünyasının teolojik, kültürel ve toplumsal dokusunda merkezi bir yer tutan Kerbelâ anlatısı, maddāhlar aracılığıyla yalnızca dini bir anma pratiği olmaktan çıkarak toplumsal hafızanın ve siyasal söylemin her an yeniden üretildiği dinamik bir alana dönüşmüştür. Çalışmada, Maurice Halbwachs'ın kolektif hafıza, Jan Assmann'ın kültürel bellek, Pierre Bourdieu'nun habitus ve Michel Foucault'nun iktidar kuramları temel alınarak, maddāh performanslarının kitle mobilizasyonu, toplumsal rıza üretimi ve ideolojik meşruiyet inşasındaki hayati rolü analiz edilmektedir. Tarihsel bir perspektifle, geleneğin İslam öncesi İran yas kültüründeki (Siyavuş miti) kökenlerinden başlayarak Safevî, Kaçar, Pehlevi dönemleri ve özellikle 1979 İran İslam Cumhuriyeti sonrasındaki dönüşümü ele alınmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, İran-İrak Savaşı'ndaki seferberlik işlevi, liderlik krizleri ve halef atama süreçlerinde maddāhların oynadığı kritik rol ile günümüzde dijitalleşme ile kazandığı küresel boyut mercek altına alınmaktadır. Çalışma, maddāhlığın geleneksel bir yas pratiğinden modern bir siyasal seferberlik aracına evrilme sürecini nitel bir perspektifle ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Nadir Cevadi, Mehdi Resuli, Meysem Mutii ve Maḥmūd Karīmī gibi günümüzün önde gelen maddāhlarının performansları üzerinden, maddāhın sesi, performansın estetiği ve yarattığı duygusal atmosferin toplumsal kimliğin inşasındaki ontolojik yeri tartışılmaktadır. Makale, maddāhlığın sadece bir yas ritüeli

değil, aynı zamanda İran'ın toplumsal ve siyasal yapısını anlamak için anahtar bir kurum olduğunu savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İran, Maddāhlık, Kerbelâ, Toplumsal Hafıza, Siyasal Söylem

### **Introduction: The Ontological and Sociological Foundations of the Karbalâ Narrative**

Within the socio-cultural and theological fabric of the Shia Islamic world, the Karbalâ event holds a central place in collective memory, not merely as a chronological historical event but as a symbolic and emotional narrative. This tragedy, which culminated in the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions in 680 CE, has become a key element of the collective memory of Shia communities. The continuity of this memory has been actively preserved through various ritual practices throughout history. Framed by Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, the Karbalâ narrative serves as a vital source continually reconstructed and updated within Iranian society, thereby strengthening social identity (Halbwachs, 1992, 38). To emphasise the spatial nature of memory and its "memory sites," Pierre Nora's concept of "places of memory" (*lieu de mémoire*) should be incorporated into this understanding; for Karbalâ transforms into a symbolic space that transcends physical boundaries and is recreated in every ritual setting (Nora, 1989, 7). In his work on collective remembrance, Paul Connerton underscores the crucial role of bodily practices and rituals in transmitting collective memory, re-emphasising the importance of the maddâh tradition (Connerton, 1989, 72).

This study examines the historical development, ritual context, and the social and political functions attributed to the tradition of maddâh storytelling in Iran during the modern era from a qualitative perspective. In his comprehensive analysis of the maddâh tradition in Iran, Adem Yılmaz highlights the connection between this tradition and the state from the Buyid period to the present day and details the role of maddâhs in shaping Shiite identity (Yılmaz, 2021, 303-304). The most significant element in keeping the Karbalâ narrative alive in social memory and passing it down through generations is the maddâh tradition. Through the elegies and poems they recite, maddâhs preserve this ancient narrative at the core of social memory and amplify its emotional impact in every performance. As Jan Assmann emphasises in his studies on cultural memory, such ritualistic transmissions do not cause society's connection to the past to stagnate but rather reconfigure it to meet current needs (Assmann, 2011, 121). In his work exploring the relationship between memory and history, Paul Ricoeur stresses the fundamental role of narratives in shaping identity, thereby indirectly highlighting the importance of the Karbalâ narrative for Shi'i identity (Ricoeur, 2004, 85).

This transmission process is not just a transfer of information; it is an aesthetic act that stirs deep emotional responses in listeners through poetic narration and rhythmic repetitions. Theoretical perspectives in the literature highlight that these performances are vital cultural practices that link ritual and social communication, going beyond simple religious stories. In Iranian society, the art of the maddâh is more than an art form; it is a social institution. The maddâh serves as a "spokesperson" expressing the community's sorrows, hopes, and quest for justice. Yann Richard, in studying the political and social change of Shi'i Islam in Iran, emphasises the authority of religious rituals and their performers in the eyes of the people (Richard, 1995, 124). This role as a spokesperson has historically raised the maddâh to a respected position within the social hierarchy. Today, maddâhs such as Nâdir Javâdî, Mahdî Rasûlî, Meysam Moṭṭî, and Maḥmûd

Karīmī, as the leading figures of this tradition, have become influential in shaping the emotions of the masses not only during religious ceremonies but also in times of political crises and succession struggles.

When viewed through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," the role of the maddāḥ illustrates how the Karbalā narrative is embedded in individuals as a social predisposition and an internalised worldview (Bourdieu, 1977, 72). The maddāḥ's performance invites the listener to witness a historical moment. This invitation is less about a rational transfer of knowledge and more about sharing a heartfelt experience. Through the storyteller's voice, the listener is taken to the Karbalā desert, personally feeling the thirst, pain, and heroism there. This emotional journey helps individuals understand hardships and injustices in their own lives through the metaphor of Karbalā. In this context, maddāḥ performance functions as a powerful link connecting individual psychology with social sociology. This link is essential in healing societal traumas and establishing a collective mechanism of resistance. The maddāḥ's voice serves as both a societal cry and a beacon of hope.

The central question of this study is how the maddāḥ tradition evolved from a traditional mourning practice into a contemporary tool of political mobilisation. This evolutionary process reflects not only a religious transformation but also key moments in Iran's political history, leadership crises, succession processes, technological advances, and social change. Within the framework of Michel Foucault's "power/knowledge" concept, the storyteller's voice functions as a technology of power that subjects the bodies and minds of the masses to a specific ideological discipline (Foucault, 1977, 194). The maddāḥ's voice and narrative create a shared memory by enabling listeners to establish a profound, emotionally charged connection with historical events that extends beyond rational understanding. In his theory of social systems, Niklas Luhmann, while explaining how communication constructs social structure, emphasises the distinctive role of ritual communication in this process (Luhmann, 1995, 163).

This emotional atmosphere reinforces collective identity by integrating individuals into the community and lays the foundation for mobilising the masses towards specific ideological goals. Especially in the modern era, the professionalisation of maddāḥ performance and its development into a mass communication tool have further complicated its sociological influence on tradition. Storytellers are no longer merely narrators of religious ceremonies; they also act strategically by shaping public opinion, setting political agendas, and building social consent. By framing the state's ideological messages in religious terms, these actors have become the most influential bearers of political legitimacy. In his study of the relationship between media and modernity, John B. Thompson emphasises the importance of symbolic power in generating social consent, highlighting how maddāḥs utilise it (Thompson, 1995, 214).

## **1. Methodology**

This study is a qualitative investigation aimed at analysing the tradition of maddāḥ performance in Iran within the context of its historical continuity, ritual framework, and political functions. The research primarily employs the historical and descriptive analysis method among qualitative research designs. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the origins, historical development, and current social context of the maddāḥ phenomenon.

### *Data Collection Techniques:*

Document review and secondary source analysis were used as data collection methods in this study. Specifically:

1. Academic literature (books, theses, articles) in Persian, English, and Turkish related to the topic was reviewed. Moojan Momen's comprehensive work, serving as an introduction to Shi'i Islam, provided important background by detailing the role of the Karbalā event in Shi'i theology (Momen, 1985, 28-33).
2. Travelogues containing observations of Western travellers regarding mourning rituals in Iran were examined.
3. To understand the political role of the maddāḥ tradition, official speech transcripts featuring statements by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the current leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, concerning maddāḥs were analysed.
4. To gather current data on contemporary maddāḥ practices, video recordings of performances by renowned maddāḥs such as Nādir Javādī, Mahdī Rasūlī, Meysam Moṭī'ī, and Maḥmūd Karīmī, held at the Office of the Supreme Leader (*Bayt-i Rahbarī*)<sup>1</sup> and during public ceremonies, were reviewed through news agencies and social media platforms. The poems recited and speeches delivered during these performances were analysed discursively. Yılmaz provides particularly detailed data on the Iran-Iraq War period and contemporary maddāḥ practices (Yılmaz, 2021, 318-320).

#### *Data Analysis:*

The collected data were examined using descriptive and discourse analysis techniques. Descriptive analysis was employed to systematically elucidate how the maddāḥ tradition has developed and transformed across different historical periods. Discourse analysis was used to explore how language utilised by religious authorities and storytellers links the Karbalā narrative to current political events (such as the death of a leader, the appointment of a new religious figure, and foreign policy crises) and the emotional responses it elicits from the public. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism provides a theoretical framework for understanding how Western observers interpret religious and cultural practices in Eastern societies. In this study, it has aided in elucidating the local dynamics of the maddāḥ tradition (Said, 1978, 42).

#### *Limitations of the Study:*

This study does not investigate the maddāḥ tradition in Iran through primary sources, such as direct interviews with maddāḥs or field observations. Instead, it depends on accessible secondary materials, travelogues, official discourse texts, news archives, and video recordings of maddāḥ

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<sup>1</sup> The office of "Leadership" (*Rahbar*) in the Iranian political system represents the supreme religious and political authority of the state, having gained constitutional status following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Based on the doctrine of *Vilāyat-i Faqīh* (Guardianship of the Jurist) in Shiite jurisprudence, this office holds extensive constitutional powers, including the command of the armed forces, the appointment of the head of the judiciary, and the determination of general state policies. For detailed information, see: Hakkı Uygur & Abdulla Rexhepi (Eds.), *İran düşünce tarihi* [History of Iranian thought], (Ankara: İRAM Yayınları, 2019); İsmail Safa Üstün, "Vilāyat-i faqīh", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Vol. 43, (Istanbul: TDV İslâm Araştırmaları Merkezi, 2013), pp. 19-22. [1] The act of striking the chest as a symbolic manifestation of mourning is referred to as *sinah-zanī*.

performances. Consequently, the findings are constrained by the scope and depth of the available data.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Collective Memory, Ritual, and Social Communication**

Collective memory is an interdisciplinary field that examines how societies remember their past and how this remembrance influences contemporary identity. Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is shaped within a social context rather than being solely an individual process. He suggests that when individuals recall the past, they draw on the values, beliefs, and symbols of their community. Memory is not a static archive but a dynamic process that is continuously reorganised to meet present needs. In Iran's context, the narrative of Karbalā functions as a vast "memory space" (*lieu de mémoire*), symbolising shared community sorrows, the pursuit of justice, and a spirit of resistance against oppression. These spaces, as conceptualised by Pierre Nora, include not only physical locations but also symbolic worlds of meaning (Nora, 1989, 12). Storytellers play a vital role in maintaining this memory space, reconstructing it each year and circulating it within society. Through the storyteller's voice, memory is revived annually, reconnecting the past with the present. Paul Ricoeur highlights the essential role of narrative in reconstructing memory (Ricoeur, 2004, 93).

When considered within Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," the maddāḥ exemplifies how the Karbalā narrative becomes embedded in individuals as a social disposition and an internalised worldview (Bourdieu, 1977, 72). The maddāḥ's performance, through constantly reproducing this religious habitus, effectively "naturalises" the individual's way of perceiving the world, their worldview, and their political preferences. In this context, maddāḥ performance mediates and influences a process of internalisation in which the Karbalā/Ashura narrative is inscribed into individuals' bodies and minds as a social predisposition.

Jan Assmann, on the other hand, explains how societies maintain their connections to the past through rituals, texts, and monuments by employing the concept of cultural memory. According to Assmann, cultural memory functions through "figures of remembrance" and strengthens the society's self-image. Unlike daily memory, cultural memory demonstrates long-term continuity and embodies the society's core values. In this context, the tradition of maddāḥ storytelling transforms the Karbalā/Ashurā narrative from static historical knowledge into a lively cultural memory practice that is reenacted annually during Muharram. The poetic language, rhythmic repetitions, and bodily movements (*sine-zanī*) used during the ritual aid in the individual's integration into a collective mindset. This process serves as the clearest example of what Assmann describes as the "connective structure," the mechanism that links society to its past and to one another. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, through the idea of the "invention of tradition," explain how new traditions are formed in modern societies by referencing the past, while also highlighting the reinterpretation of the Karbalā/Ashurā narrative across different eras (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, 6). This connective structure acts as a safeguard against social disintegration.

Within Michel Foucault's "power/knowledge" framework, the storyteller's voice functions as a technology of power that subjects the bodies and minds of the masses to a specific ideological discipline (Foucault, 1977, 194). In the context of ritual theories, Victor Turner's concepts of "liminality" and "communitas" are vital for interpreting maddāḥ performances. According to Turner, rituals are "threshold" (liminal) moments when individuals step outside the rules of everyday life (Turner, 1969, 95). During these moments, the individual has left their old status

behind and has not yet gained a new one; this creates a state of uncertainty and, at the same time, great potential. The intense emotional atmosphere generated during the maddāḥ's performance transports participants beyond everyday hierarchies and statuses. The "communitas," which is the strong sense of emotional unity and equality that arises in these moments, elevates social belonging to its highest level. As the steward of this liminal realm, the maddāḥ directs the emotions of the crowd and unites them into a shared identity. David Cannadine, in examining the role of rituals in legitimising power, highlights a similar mechanism (Cannadine, 1987, 4).

Peter Chelkowski, meanwhile, emphasises the dramatic structure of mourning rituals in Iran, arguing that these performances are the most effective spaces for producing and reinforcing social consent (Chelkowski, 1979, 15). The ritual is a "factory" that generates social consent in a profound way. In his work on the interpretation of culture, Clifford Geertz explains how religious symbols and rituals construct social reality, while also providing a theoretical framework for understanding the power of the Karbalā/Ashura symbolism (Geertz, 1973, 90). Émile Durkheim, in his classic work examining the primitive forms of religious life, emphasises the role of rituals in reinforcing social solidarity and notes that mourning rituals strengthen collective consciousness (Durkheim, 2005, 312).

### **3. The Historical Development of Maddāḥ Performance in Iran: From Origins to Institutionalisation**

Throughout Iran's long history, maddāḥ performance is seen not just as an art form but also as a vital socio-cultural pillar that unites society (Chelkowski, 1979, 8). To understand the origins of maddāḥ performance, one must examine pre-Islamic Iranian mourning traditions. In ancient Iran, mourning ceremonies following the death of heroes, especially the "Sūg-i Siyāvush" (Siyāvush Lamentations), were rooted in a tradition that explored themes of victimhood and justice. Siyāvush symbolises innocence and unjust killing in Iranian mythology. The mourning after his death was a ritual of social purification and the pursuit of justice. With the advent of Islam and particularly the establishment of Shiism in Iran, this ancient mourning culture merged with the narrative of Karbalā, evolving into a new form. Moojan Momen, while analysing the spread of Shiism in Iran, highlights the significance of such cultural syntheses (Momen, 1985, 94).

This synthesis of history and mythology mirrors the drama of spiritual ascent described by Henry Corbin (1994, 11-12) as "escaping the floods that drown the spiritual senses and turning toward the pole of light (the dawn)." According to Corbin, this process is the effort of the soul, exiled to the world of darkness, to reach its own original light, that is, its "spiritual dawn" (Mystic Orient). In this context, every testimony narrated by the storyteller represents a step towards this eternal dawn for the listener.

This historical continuity forms the core foundation for the maddāḥ's enduring position in Iranian society. The process exemplifies cultural syncretism, in which the ancient Iranian spirit is revitalised by an Islamic essence. Within Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," this situation illustrates how mourning practices, passed down through centuries, have become a lasting disposition within Iranian social life (Bourdieu, 1977, 72). Therefore, mourning is not just an action but a reflection of a cultural habitus transmitted across generations. Indeed, the maddāḥ tradition, as a historical nexus of pre-Islamic Iranian culture and Shi'i rituals, demonstrates continuity in which ancient traditions are integrated into Islamic identity (Yılmaz, 2021, 308).

The Safavid State's (1501-1736) adoption of Shiism as the official sect marks (Kartaloğlu, 2019, 26; 2022, 93-103) the most significant turning point for the maddāh tradition. During this period, maddāhlik evolved from a practice primarily among the people into an institutionalised tradition supported by the state and spread across society. Hamid Dabashi and Peter Chelkowski, while examining the link between religious rituals and state policy during the Safavid era, highlight the political roles that maddāhi acquired during this period (Dabashi & Chelkowski, 2018, 42). Shah Ismail and his successors used Shi'i identity as a tool for defence and identity building against the Ottomans and other Sunni powers. For example, one such influential narrative, which made a lasting impression on the masses as a national-sectarian maddāh story during and after the Safavid period, is the epic titled Hüseyin Kürd-i Şebüsteri. The protagonist's struggles against the Ottomans in the west and the Uzbek Shaybanids and Mughals in the east served as a propaganda story against the Ottoman and Sunni worlds, rooted in the Shiite worldview (Başçı, 2025, 424). To develop Shiite identity, mourning ceremonies were encouraged, and storytellers and elegy reciters were employed within the palace. Poems about Karbalā, written by poets such as Muhteşem-i Kaşani (d. 1588), formed the core of storytellers' repertoires.<sup>2</sup> The Safavid period was when storytelling became both an artistic and a political force. During this era, storytellers acted as spiritual guardians who defined the ideological boundaries of the state and kept the people within them. Moreover, in the Safavid era, storytelling interacted with various Sufi orders and circles, acquiring a rich mystical texture. This mystical element endowed the storyteller's voice with divine authority. Michel Foucault's "power/knowledge" concept applies here; the storyteller's voice evolved into a tool of power that, by controlling sacred knowledge, disciplined the social body to align with the state's strategic goals (Foucault, 1977, 194). Yann Richard considers this transformation during the Safavid era as foundational to the development of the modern Iranian state (Richard, 1995, 45).

During the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925), maddāh performances became even more enriched through their integration with dramatic forms known as "Ta'ziye or Şebihhanī." Ta'ziye is the epic theatrical re-enactment of the Karbalā incident, usually performed in public spaces, with maddāhs serving as both narrators and key figures shaping the emotional tone of these performances (Āshūrpūr, 1389, 24). Over time, theatrical texts rooted in this tradition appeared in Iran and were also called Ta'ziye-nāme (passion play) (Mirsadikī, 1385, 95). In his detailed study of the Taziye tradition, Peter Chelkowski describes the religious and social roles of these dramatic performances (Chelkowski, 1979, 67). The Qajar shahs, especially Nasreddin Shah (d. 1896), placed great importance on Taziye performances and commissioned the building of a large theatre in Tehran known as "Tekye-ye Dovlat." During this era, maddāh performances deeply influenced all aspects of social life through neighbourhood committees (hey'et-i mezhebi/mahelle). Each neighbourhood developed its own maddāh, its own committee called a "deste," and its own mourning custom. This localisation further strengthened the tradition of storytelling within the social fabric and made it a vital part of everyday life (Āshūrpūr, 1389, 119). The storyteller became both the community's religious guide and its social conscience.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the influence of Muḥarram and Āshūrā on Persian poetry during the Safavid period (1501–1736), see Yeşil, A. (2019a). "Bāztāb-e qiyām-e Āşūrā va vāqe'e-ye Karbalā dar aš'ār-e fārsi qabl az qodrat-yābī-ye Şafaviyye." *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 17, 536–549. <https://doi.org/10.29000/rumelide.657935>; Yeşil, A. (2019b). "Bāztāb-e vāqe'e-ye Āşūrā va qiyām-e Emām Ḥoseyn ('a) dar aš'ār-e fārsi: Az qodrat-yābī-ye Şafaviyye tā dōwrān-e mo'āşer." *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 16, 677–692. <https://doi.org/10.29000/rumelide.619690>

During the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), however, alongside efforts at modernisation and secularisation, these traditional practices were occasionally restricted, and attempts were made to exclude them from the public sphere. Ervand Abrahamian provides a detailed analysis of the modernisation policies of the Pahlavi era and their social repercussions (Abrahamian, 1982, 153).

During Reza Shah's reign, mourning ceremonies were banned, and the activities of the maddāhs went underground. However, these repressions did not diminish the maddāh tradition's influence among the people; instead, they led it to adopt a dissident and resistant character. Although restrictions eased somewhat during Mohammad Reza Shah's rule (1941-1979), the storytelling tradition continued to evolve as a form of dissent against the regime. In her study of modern Iranian history, Nikki R. Keddie highlights the resistance of religious institutions and traditions to Pahlavi modernisation (Keddie, 2006, 178). Mary Elaine Hegland, while emphasising the political functions of rituals during this period, also illuminates the oppositional language of maddāh performance (Hegland, 1983, 145).

In the lead-up to the 1979 Revolution, maddāhs mobilised public anger against the Shah's regime through the elegies they recited in mosques and at secret gatherings, serving as the spiritual driving force of the revolution. In his sociological analysis of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Said Amir Arjomand (1988) details the role of religious rituals and those who perform them in the revolution (Arjomand, 1988, 98). Revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini affirmed the vital role of storytelling and mourning rituals in the revolution by stating, "Whatever we have, we owe to the months of Muharram and Safar."<sup>3</sup> Michael M. J. Fischer, while examining the process leading from religious debates in Iran to the revolution, emphasises the power of mourning rituals in political mobilisation (Fischer, 1980, 212). In the post-revolutionary period, however, maddāh tradition entered a new phase, transforming from a language of opposition into the state's official and institutional language. In this new phase, maddāh tradition became the most powerful of the state's ideological apparatuses and began to play a central role in constructing social consent. Maddāhs have now become the "voice" of the state. From its pre-Islamic origins to its localisation during the Qajar period and its post-revolutionary institutionalisation, maddāhi has served as a fundamental backbone linking Iran's political and social memory. This historical process reveals that maddāh performance is not merely a mourning ritual but also a dynamic cultural mechanism that constructs and preserves Iran's socio-political identity (Yılmaz, 2021, 303-309; Khoshk Jan, 2023).

#### **4. The Aesthetics and Psychology of Ritual Performance: The Depth of Emotional Interaction**

The social impact of the maddāh tradition derives not only from the content of the stories told but also from the way these stories are presented, namely through the aesthetic and psychological aspects of the performance. Through the elegies and poems they recite, maddāhs keep the Karbalā narrative at the centre of collective memory and heighten its emotional impact in every performance. As Jan Assmann emphasises in his studies on cultural memory, such ritualistic

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<sup>3</sup> The transformations of the Kerbala and Ashura rituals in the modern period within the Shia world, the construction of sectarian identity, and the theological-political discussions surrounding these practices (especially applications such as *tatbir/zanjir-zani*) are subjects of detailed analysis and other scholars' views. For more information, see, Oliver Scharbrodt, "Contesting ritual practices in Twelver Shiism: Modernism, Sectarianism, and the Politics of Self-flagellation (*taṭbīr*)," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 50/5, (2023), 1082-1085.

transmissions do not freeze a society's link to the past but rather reshape it to meet current needs (Assmann, 2011, 121). This process of transmission is not simply a transfer of information; it is an aesthetic act that evokes strong emotional responses from the audience through poetic narration and rhythmic repetition, supported by music and rhythm. This aesthetic act bypasses the listener's rational defences to directly engage their emotions, immersing them in a collective trance. In her work on ritual theory, Catherine Bell highlights the power of such performances while analysing the physical and emotional effects of ritual practices on individuals (Bell, 2009, 118).

At this point, Erving Goffman's theory of "the presentation of self" offers a crucial framework for understanding the maddāh's performance; the storyteller constructs a "front" (vitrin) and, with the finesse of a performing artist, controls his voice, gestures, and facial expressions to meet the audience's expectations and the sacredness of the ritual (Goffman, 1959, 22).

The performances of prominent contemporary *maddāhs* such as Nādir Javādī, Mahdī Rasūlī, Meysam Moṭī'ī, and Maḥmūd Karīmī provide striking examples of this 'front' management. In particular, the *maddāh* performances staged during traditional gatherings at the Office of the Supreme Leader (*Bayt-i Rahbarī*) function as 'fronts' skillfully managed in the sense Goffman describes, where religious ritual and political messaging are intertwined.

Eulogies and the art of poetry form the most aesthetic aspect of this tradition; the poetic language and rhythmic repetitions used create a hypnotic effect on the audience, allowing them to experience the tragedy being narrated personally. These rhythmic repetitions (such as "sine-zenī") enable the listener to emotionally connect with the narrative, thus helping to keep social memory alive. The storyteller's voice and narrative cultivate a shared memory by allowing listeners to forge an internal, profound connection with the historical event that transcends mere rational understanding. This emotional atmosphere transforms individuals into part of the community, strengthening collective belonging and transferring personal sorrows into a shared realm of significance. In her study on Shiite mourning rituals in Lebanon and Syria, Sabrina Mervin analyses the social functions of crying and mourning practices, noting similar mechanisms (Mervin, 2006, 158).

Within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," this aesthetic experience is not just a fleeting emotional state but an expression of embodied cultural capital. The participant's rhythmic movements and tears ensure that Shiite identity, as a habitus embedded in the body, is reproduced in each performance (Bourdieu, 1977, 72). The Maddāh's performance transforms the participant from a mere spectator into an active participant in the ritual. This active engagement enables the individual to re-experience their social identity during the ritual. This experience makes the individual feel a sense of social belonging at the "flesh and bone" level.

The psychological impact of the Maddāh's performance lies in its ability to foster a powerful connection between the listener and the narrated events of Karbalā that transcends rational boundaries. This connection enables the individual to identify their own suffering and victimisation with the tragedy of Imam Hussein. This process of identification transforms personal suffering into a collective realm of meaning and gives the individual a sense of social belonging. The maddāh's charismatic authority, manifested through his tone of voice, oratory, and eye contact with the audience, plays a crucial role in the success of this emotional transmission. Roy Mottahedeh, in his examination of concepts of religious leadership and authority in Iran, emphasises the social impact of charismatic figures (Mottahedeh, 1985, 178).

Within the framework of Michel Foucault's concepts of "power/knowledge" and "discipline," the maddāḥ's charismatic authority functions as a technology of power that governs the individual's emotions and body within a specific ideological setting (Foucault, 1977, 194). The atmosphere of the venue where the performance takes place (tekyes, mosques, neighbourhood committees, the Guidance Office), along with elements such as incense, black flags, and dim lighting, enhances this emotional intensity. This spatial arrangement separates the participant from daily life, immersing them in a sense of sacred time and space. This perception provides the basis for the participant to reinterpret social reality through the Karbalā metaphor. Juan Cole, in analysing the ideas of sacred space and holy war in Shi'i Islam, emphasises the importance of ritual spaces (Cole, 2002, 67).

### **5. Political Rhetoric and Ideological Legitimacy: The Politicisation of Karbalā**

In the modern era, especially following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, storytelling has taken on a new dimension. Hamid Dabashi, defining Shiism as a "religion of protest," emphasises the power of Karbalā metaphors in political mobilisation (Dabashi, 2011, 23). In this post-revolutionary era, maddāḥs have surpassed their traditional roles to become active agents within the state's mechanisms for producing ideological discourse. As a space for political discourse, the maddāḥ performance shapes the political consciousness of the masses by directly connecting Karbalā metaphors to contemporary political events. Maddāḥs are no longer merely religious narrators; they are also strategic communication experts who transmit the state's official ideology to the public. This transformation has also resulted in the professionalisation and institutionalisation of maddāḥ performance.

Storytelling is the most "organic" of the state's ideological apparatuses. Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "organic intellectual" is quite illuminating for understanding this new role of the maddāḥs; they act as organic intellectuals who articulate the state's ideology in the language of the people and foster social consent (Gramsci, 1971, 12).

The elegies performed at funeral ceremonies transform a religious narrative into a form of social and political communication, thereby reinforcing the religious legitimacy of the prevailing political discourse. In this process, the maddāḥ serves as a strategic communicator, directing the emotions of the masses toward the state's ideological objectives. Hamid Enayat, in his examination of modern Islamic political thought, highlights the role played by Karbalā in Shi'i political theory (Enayat, 1982, 187). Through the intense emotional atmosphere, they create during their performances, the maddāḥs establish an unbreakable bond with their audience. This emotional foundation allows political and ideological messages to be internalised through heartfelt acceptance rather than rational scrutiny. In particular, they use the Karbalā incident not merely as a historical event but as a symbolic narrative upon which contemporary political messages are built. This metaphorical language ensures that complex political issues are easily understood and embraced by the public. This situation represents one of the most successful examples of "emotional framing," a highly effective method of political communication. In his work on the transformation of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas, while questioning the role of emotional discourse in public communication, provides theoretical tools for analysing such practices (Habermas, 1989, 45). In line with this theoretical framework, the storyteller publicises the social and political message by wrapping it in the rhetoric of "sacred sorrow." Thus, the storyteller's narrative transcends mere information transfer and becomes a shared emotional ground with the audience.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was a period when the power of the maddāḥ in political mobilisation was most clearly evident. Throughout this eight-year conflict, known as the “Holy Defence” (*Difāʿ-ı Muqaddes*), storytellers played a vital role in bolstering soldiers’ morale at the front lines and behind the scenes, as well as rallying public support for the war effort. In his study analysing the political functions of Karbalā symbols and rituals in modern Iran, Kamran Aghaie/Aḡaī pays significant attention to maddāḥ performances during the Iran-Iraq War (Aghaie, 2004, 89; Isaloo, 2017). In the maddāḥ performances staged amid this wartime atmosphere, Saddam Hussein was portrayed as “Yazid,” whilst Iranian soldiers were depicted as “Hussein’s companions.” This metaphorical pairing cast the war as a religious duty and positioned maddāḥs as key actors in shaping social consensus. Even after the conflict, storytellers continued to embed the state’s official ideology in the masses through the culture of martyrdom and the rhetoric of resistance. The grief of the families of the martyrs was sanctified by merging it with the suffering of the Ahl al-Bayt in Karbalā, and this was utilised to reinforce the state’s social foundation. It is also noted that maddāḥ performances during this period served as tools of psychological warfare (Yilmaz, 2021, 334).

A concrete example of this theoretical framework can be observed in the following poem, recited by the renowned Iranian storyteller Nādir Javādī during a traditional public gathering at the Office of the Supreme Leader (Bayt-i Rahbarī). In this poem, where Persian and Azerbaijani Turkish intertwine, Javādī merges religious and ethnic identity with political rhetoric through the following lines:

*“I am of Iranian descent and of noble Azerbaijani origin,  
I have come to the guide’s tomb to express my respect.  
I say, O Beloved of Ali, let Zeynep be your aide...  
Let us renew our allegiance with the praise of love,  
We have come on the day of your birth, let us congratulate you on your birthday...”*

In the continuation of his poem, Javādī directly connects the metaphors of Karbalā to modern political foes, turning a traditional maddāḥ performance into a political warning.

*Open your eyes, O Shi’a, and observe the chaos in the world,  
Now there’s Shimr, Senem, and Hermele too.  
Let the ignorant know that a violent earthquake is imminent...  
Ali’s allies are prepared to take revenge,  
They will strike the infidels with an international blow...*

In these verses, figures like Shimr and Hermele from Yazid’s army are associated with modern enemies, and the term “senem” (meaning “idol”) alludes to the Baal idol. Furthermore, the phrase “beynelmillel sille” constructs a language of threat against global powers. The subsequent lines in the poem clearly illustrate the maddāḥ’s role within political discourse:

*“With this motto, we will destroy the Jewish day,  
The nails of sedition will one day pierce your own hearts.  
If the leader orders, a missile will come to your capital.”*

In another performance, Javādī directly addressed news reports suggesting that the U.S. was considering an attack on Iran, delivering a passionate counter-narrative: “We will overturn your table and your options.” Through this rhetoric, he combined the hard power of foreign policy with religious fervour and presented it to the masses. In addition to this foreign policy rhetoric, bards play vital roles in domestic politics, especially during leadership crises and the appointment processes of new religious leaders. The renowned bard Maḥdī Rasūlī, known as “The Leader’s Bard,” expressed the emotional bond he had formed with the leadership figure at a public ceremony held following the passing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei with these words:

“Go, Aga, you mean so much to me. The entire burden of this journey rested on your shoulders. Go and rest! God willing, you will return with Imam Zaman. Aga! Do not worry about this revolution, do not worry about this flag. I swear by your mother (Ḥaḍrat-i Fāṭimah) that we will remain followers and supporters of this flag until the very end.”

These words show that the maddāḥ is not just a lamenter but also a figure who guides social feelings during a crisis and creates an emotional link between the leader and the people. Rasūlī’s address, while saying farewell to the deceased leader, also acts as a pledge of loyalty to the revolution, helping to ease fears of a possible power vacuum.

The appointment of Ayatollah Seyyid Mujtaba Khamenei as the new religious leader by the Assembly of Experts in 2026 marked one of the most significant turning points in Iran’s recent political history. Indeed, the maddāḥs played a strategic role in the announcement of this appointment to the public. On the night of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan, which is recognised in the Shia Islamic tradition as the first Night of Power and the occasion when Imam ‘Alī was wounded at the miḥrāb, maddāḥs took to the streets to announce the appointment of the new leader and chanted slogans in support of this selection. In this context, the poem recited by the famous maddāḥ Meysam Moṭīrī clearly demonstrates the active role of the maddāḥs in the process of appointing the new religious leader.

*“Our banner of vengeance and blood has been raised,  
The Guardian of this moment has become our Veli-yi Emr.  
We are under our son’s command to avenge his father.  
Khamenei will avenge his father like a lion.”*

The most important element in these verses is that the new leader’s legitimacy is built through the motif of “taking his father’s revenge.” This adapts the “taking Imam Hussein’s revenge” narrative from the Karbalā account to modern politics. Leadership passing from father to son is metaphorically connected to the chain of imamate in Karbalā, thus grounding the process of appointing a religious or political successor on a religious basis of legitimacy.

The speech given by the renowned storyteller Maḥmūd Karīmī during the passing of Ayatollah Khamenei and the appointment of Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei as his successor offers a compelling example of how storytellers influence public sentiment during times of crisis.

“We spent eight nights with our hearts bleeding from the longing we felt for our Master. Then the Almighty Allah bestowed His grace upon us from His unseen treasure. Take an oath of loyalty, take a manly oath of loyalty, do not lag behind this caravan. A vow of loyalty is like a missed prayer; it’s too late afterwards. We will slow down, we will understand, Allah will show us His grace; we will slow down, we will understand how to slow down.”

Three critical elements stand out in Karīmī's remarks:

1. The emphasis on the "treasure of the Hidden Imam": The new leader is sanctified by reference to the concept of the "Hidden Imam" in Shi'ite theology, and his arrival is presented as a divine blessing.
2. The comparison of the oath of allegiance to prayer: The oath of allegiance (biat), a political act, is sanctified by being equated with prayer, a religious act; those who do not take the oath are likened to sinners who neglect their prayers.
3. The phrase "We will understand little by little": By emphasising that the new leader's as-yet-unknown value will emerge over time, potential doubts and questions are preempted, and a call for patience and submission is made.

All these examples clearly demonstrate how the storyteller's voice is transformed into a language of power within Michel Foucault's "power/knowledge" equation. Specifically, the active role that storytellers assume in the succession process shows that they are not merely ritual performers but also key actors in the reproduction of the political system. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" is also relevant here in explaining the maddāḥ's discursive power; the maddāḥ exercises symbolic power by presenting the state's ideological messages with religious reverence, thereby securing their unquestioned acceptance (Bourdieu, 1977, 190). Today, the maddāḥ performance functions as a discursive field continually updated alongside developments in Iran's domestic and foreign policies. Regional policies, the "axis of resistance" (Miḥvar-i Muqāwamat), and anti-Western discourses are recurring themes in the maddāḥs' elegies. By transforming religious ceremonies into political rallies, maddāḥs shape the public's perception of current events. This illustrates that maddāḥ performance serves not only as a religious practice but also as a mechanism of the state's soft power and social control. Benedict Anderson, in discussing how a nation is constructed through the concept of "imagined communities," has noted that maddāḥs similarly construct an imagined Shi'i community (Anderson, 2006, 35).

In accordance with Michel Foucault's discourse on "disciplinary power," the central role of storytellers in political discourse has elevated their social status and made them influential figures in Iranian politics. Notably, renowned storytellers in major cities have gained millions of followers and wield indirect influence over political decisions. In his study of Iran's political elite, Marvin Zonis, while questioning the position of traditional authority figures in modern politics, also provides insights into understanding the Maddāḥs' new status (Zonis, 1971, 215). The institution of Maddāḥs has become one of the most effective and widespread among the state's ideological apparatuses. This development has also strengthened the bond between Maddāḥs and the political elite, making Maddāḥs an integral part of the political system. Maddāḥs are no longer merely the voice of the state but also global ambassadors of its "soft power."

The functions of maddāḥs in political discourse can be summarised under the following headings:

1. Emotional Legitimacy: Through the intense emotional atmosphere they create, storytellers ensure that political messages are exempt from rational scrutiny. The warning phrase "it will be as inevitable as prayer" used by Maḥmūd Karīmī in his call for allegiance is a concrete example of this function.

2. Mass Mobilisation: They mobilise the masses toward a common goal by utilising the Karbalā narrative. Nādir Javādī's line, "If the Guide commands, you will come to the capital," is a clear expression of this call to mobilisation.
3. Ideological Bridge Function: By integrating religious values with political discourse, they reach broad segments of society. Meysam Moṭī'ī's motif of "avenging the father" is an example of the bridge that connects Karbalā to current politics.
4. Generation of Social Consent: They reinforce social support by legitimising state policies through religious language. The presentation of the new leader as the "treasure of the occultation" indicates this function.
5. Construction of the Enemy: By equating current political rivals with the negative figures of Karbalā (Yazid, Shimr), they create a focal point for societal hatred. Nādir Javādī's references to "Shimr and Senem" and "Hemhele" are concrete examples of this construction of the enemy.
6. Construction of Collective Identity: By blending Shia identity with a political stance, they foster unity among the masses around a common goal. Javādī's verse, "I am of Iran, and my honour is Azerbaijani," is a discourse that unites ethnic and national identities.
7. Crisis Management: During times of social crisis (such as the death of a leader or the process of selecting a successor), they maintain stability by urging the public to exercise patience, resilience, and loyalty through religious narratives. Mahdī Rasūlī's farewell to the deceased leader and Maḥmūd Karīmī's words, "We will understand little by little," are examples of this crisis management function.
8. Use of Soft Power: By establishing a cultural and religious sphere of influence over regional Shia communities, they serve Iran's foreign policy objectives.
9. Social Control: They use ritual spaces as platforms where social behaviours and thoughts are monitored and guided.
10. Connections with Political Elites: Through close ties established with the upper echelons of the state, they ensure that political decisions are disseminated to the social base. The performances of maddāḥs at the Office of the Supreme Leader are the most concrete manifestation of this connection.

## **6. Modern Era: Digitalisation and Global Shia Identity - Rituals in the Network Society**

Technological transformation has expanded the worldwide reach of maddāḥ performances. Television broadcasts and digital platforms enable maddāḥ performances to transcend local boundaries and reach millions of people. In this new landscape, called the "network society" by Manuel Castells, identities are now recreated globally through digital media (Castells, 2010, 21). The Karbalā narrative is reinterpreted daily via digital platforms, helping to modernise Shiite ritual culture. The echo effects and professional sound systems provided by technology enhance the ritual's emotional atmosphere, aiding younger generations in reconnecting with the narrative through digital language (Ali, 2022, 127). The performances of renowned storytellers such as Nādir Javādī, Mahdī Rasūlī, Meysam Moṭī'ī, and Maḥmūd Karīmī reach millions of viewers on digital platforms, transcending the limits of traditional ritual.

This technological transformation has turned maddāḥ performance from a local tradition into a global mass communication tool. This has expanded the social impact of maddāḥ performance

beyond physical spaces, making the ritual “timeless and placeless.” When Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” is reinterpreted within the context of digitalisation, it can be argued that the aesthetic and visual language presented by storytellers via social media shapes the “digital Shiite habitus” of younger generations (Bourdieu, 1977, 72). The ritual has now become a component of habitus that can be experienced at any moment, not only in physical tekkes but also on smartphone screens.

In the modern era, the influence of maddāḥs has not been restricted to physical spaces; thanks to television broadcasts and digital platforms, this political discourse has reached millions of people. This technological integration has allowed the global dissemination of the Karbalā narrative and its associated political messages, thereby expanding the mobilisation beyond local boundaries to an international level. John B. Thompson, in his examination of the relationship between media and modernity, analyses the social impacts of the worldwide circulation of symbolic forms (Thompson, 1995, 180). This process illustrates that the Karbalā narrative helps build a global Shiite identity, not only in physical spaces but also within a digital realm. Maddāḥ performances, especially with the opportunities afforded by modern communication technologies, have transformed from a local religious custom into a key element in the construction of a global Shia identity. This situation fosters a shared sense of emotion and unity among communities across the Shia world. Furthermore, this global network serves as soft power, enhancing Iran’s regional influence. Digital maddāḥ performances also serve as a vital point of reference for identity within the Shia diaspora. Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” remains pertinent for understanding this global Shia community created through digital platforms (Anderson, 2006, 141).

This situation can be connected to Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopower”; power regulates not only physical spaces but also individuals’ emotional and cognitive processes in the digital realm through online networks and the performative voice of the storyteller (Foucault, 1977, 194).

The process of digitalisation has led to the rise of a group known as the “new generation of storytellers” (maddāḥ-ī nōvin) within the maddāḥ tradition. These storytellers have successfully captured the younger generation’s interest by blending traditional elegy forms with modern musical tones, melodic structures, and rhythmic arrangements. Platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube allow storytellers to share their performances in real time and engage with Shia communities worldwide. This facilitates the redefinition of Shia identity across national borders through global networks.

However, this process of modernisation occasionally sparks debates between traditional storytellers and religious authorities. While traditionalists argue that modern melodies and techniques undermine the ritual’s sanctity, innovators contend that this transformation is essential for the tradition’s survival. This debate is, in fact, a reflection of the broader conflict between tradition and modernity within Iranian society. This conflict is one of the key dynamics shaping the future form of maddāḥ performance. The new generation of maddāḥs also faces the risk of transforming the ritual into an element of “popular culture.” Catherine Darmagnac sheds light on the origins of such debates while examining the modern transformation of the Ta’ziyeh tradition (Darmagnac, 2008, 132).

During the regional conflicts of 2026, the importance of digitalisation in mass mobilisation became clear. During the US and Israeli military operations against Iran, the narrative performance known as ‘sine-zenī’, performed by Hossein Sotoudeh, reached a wide audience via

digital platforms. This meddah performance, performed by Hossein Sotoudeh and receiving international recognition, is based on a work attributed to Ali Akbar ibn Husayn that resembles the classical recitative (challenge) form.

Notable for its rhythmic structure, this work extends beyond serving merely as a socially motivational tool focused on defence; it stands as a potent challenge, voiced through the storyteller's tongue, against the threats posed by the US and Israel to Iran. The following verses from this performance, which highlight the link between religious symbolism and contemporary political processes, clearly illustrate this interaction:

*The sound is the sound of the adhan (Call to prayer). The adhan is Ali's adhan.*

*Seb'ul Mesânî (Surah Al-Fatiha), how great a hero you are.*

*What the adhan, Your name is a universal recitation!*

*Ali, Ali, Ali, Ali.*

*Innā fataḥnā (surely, we have given you a clear victory).*

*O helping hand, O seeing eye.*

*Ali, Ali, Ali, Ali.*

References in the poem, such as "Surah Al-Fath" and "the voice of Ali", elevate the existing military process to a theological legitimacy. This performance has transcended the traditional lamentation form, gaining prominence as a political symbol circulating via digital media. Such examples and similar storyteller performances bolster Iran's official narrative on digital platforms, helping extend it beyond national borders. This technological integration affirms the strategic importance of storytelling as a 'soft power' instrument by facilitating the global dissemination of the narrative of Karbala.

### **Conclusion: Upholding Tradition and Exploring Future Directions**

The practice of maddāḥ in Iran stands as one of the most influential sociological tools that unites society through both religious and political solidarity, thanks to its historical significance, poetic-literary power, political roles, and adaptation to digital media. This strong emotional connection, built through the ritualisation of the Karbalā narrative, continues to bring society together around a shared memory and a collective vision for the future via the storyteller's voice and the atmosphere they create. Storytelling is not just a religious act of remembrance; it functions as a vibrant space where social memory, cultural identity, and political dialogue are continuously reproduced. The success of this tradition lies in its ability to merge an ancient mourning culture with contemporary communication technologies and political ambitions. maddāḥī is one of the most central institutions that both reflects and influences the spirit of Iranian society. It acts as a safety valve during periods of social crisis, such as the death of a leader or the selection of a successor, and as a catalyst during times of political mobilisation.

Consequently, maddāḥī is one of the most effective sociological mechanisms in Iranian society that, by harnessing the power of poetry, rhythm, and ritual, both refreshes collective memory and embeds the prevailing political discourse into the masses with religious legitimacy. Maddāḥs are strategic actors who manage the emotions of the masses, build social consent, and communicate ideological messages with heartfelt acceptance. In light of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "symbolic capital" and "habitus," maddāḥs are the architects who inscribe this capital into the social body.

Their voice is the strongest link connecting Iran's past and present. Parallel to Michel Foucault's analyses of power, maddāḥ performance offers a "micro-power" sphere that disciplines the individual, both spiritually and physically, within the system's values. This link serves as a refuge during social crises and as a catalyst during moments of political mobilisation. Maddāḥ performance plays a vital role in maintaining Iran's political and social stability. This role has elevated maddāḥ performance beyond that of a mere religious figure, transforming it into a foundational element of the political system.

In the future, maddāḥī will continue to play a central role in shaping identity and social mobilisation within the Shia world. However, how this tradition will evolve alongside digitalisation and globalisation, the extent to which it can preserve its local character, and how it will respond to the expectations of new generations will remain key areas of academic research. As Adem Yılmaz (2021) demonstrates in his study, the organic connection between maddāḥs and the state, along with the new identity they have adopted, will determine the delicate balance between political pragmatism and sacredness within the tradition. The deep link between maddāḥ tradition and political discourse transforms it into both an instrument of power and a mechanism of social control. This dynamic structure offers an essential field of study for researchers seeking to understand Iran's socio-political future. The performances of contemporary maddāḥs such as Nādir Javādī, Mahdī Rasūlī, Meysam Moṭī'ī, and Maḥmūd Karīmī reveal the vitality and evolving nature of this tradition. Maddāḥ performance remains a living institution that continuously renews itself by preserving tradition while utilising the tools of modernity. The future of this institution will be closely connected to Iran's political and social transformation. Maddāḥ performance will continue to be an inseparable part of Iran's cultural and political DNA. The voice of the maddāḥ will also be the most important witness and actor in Iran's future social changes. In his work on practices of coexistence, Richard Sennett emphasises the role of rituals in social cooperation; it is reasonable to expect that maddāḥ traditions will also maintain their significance in this context (Sennett, 2012, 267).

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