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Tasua and Ashura Ceremonies as Tourist Attractions in Iran: A Case Study of the Town of Taft*

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In the tourism industry, a variety of factors underlie the attraction of tourists. The staging of events, festivals, rituals, and traditions may be viewed as one of these factors. Events and festivals have played an important part in human life since the days of Adam. Hence, Muharram ceremonies (Tasua and Ashura), as religious events, can be highlighted to familiarize domestic and foreign tourists with the religious and cultural features of Iranian society. Iran is a historical country, and its present religion is mainly Shia Islam, which is held by most people. Tasua and Ashura ceremonies are cherished in most parts of this country through different shows. One of these shows is performed in the town of Taft located in Yazd province. This research explores ways of optimizing the use of Tasua and Ashura religious ceremonies in order to develop the town further and to remove barriers in the way of its religious tourism using the SWOT model. Application of this model, which evaluates strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, is considered as one of the best strategies for tourism planning. Methods of data collection and analysis of the required data mostly involved documentary analysis as well as survey research. The results indicate that proximity to population centers and urban centers, such as the city of Yazd, and a funeral style that is distinctive from other parts of the province, are the best strengths for this town's religious tourism. Short duration of tourist stay and lack of tourists' economic outputs in the town are the weaknesses. Finally, considering the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities, competitive - aggressive, variation, revision, and defensive strategy types are suggested.

Keywords: religious tourism, religious event and festival, Muharram, Taft, SWOT.

Introduction

Traditionally, tourism is closely linked to religion, which has served as a powerful motive for travelling to sacred places from early pilgrimages to contemporary journeys (Jackowski and Smith, 1992). Religious buildings, rituals, festivals, and ceremonial events are important tourist attractions for those with a casual interest as well as those who more devotedly follow particular systems of belief (Henderson, 2003; Montazeri, 2011).

In urban tourism, different factors can lead to the attraction of tourists. The existence of customs is one

of these factors (Papoli Yazdy and Saqaei, 2006). Due to its specific situation and being Muslim, Iran is a country that can be very active in religious travel to attract large numbers of eager tourists (Mousavi and Baghery, 2013). Tasua and Ashura ceremonies are an example of Shia-Muslim cultural-religious ceremonies, held every year in the form of mass folk flow and movement (Ghaderi *et al.*, 2009) (See Figure 1). Tasua and Ashura ceremonies as phenomena that reflect the culture and religion of Shia Muslims, can be

* Tasua and Ashura are the 9th and 10th days respectively of the Muharram (technically, the first month of the Islamic calendar - but also a 10 day Shia festival which is held at the beginning of this month.)

Figure 1. Two scenes of Tasua and Ashura ceremonies in the town of Taft, December, 2012.

Retrieved in 2013 from the Mehr news website: <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/1751994>.

introduced in the form of a series of events appealing to tourists. The most important aim of this research is to identify the positive points of Tasua and Ashura ceremonies in Taft and to identify and resolve the corresponding factors that stand as obstacles in the way of tourism development in the town. The basic questions in the research are

- what is the touristic potential of the Tasua and Ashura ceremonies? and
- what role do they play in the development of the tourism industry in Taft?

So far, little attention has been paid to religious events and festivals, and most studies in this regard have been carried out in a small number of areas. Some general texts about the relationship of religious events and tourism are those by Getz (2008), Mills and Rosentraub (2013), Lamont *et al.* (2012), del Barrio *et al.* (2012), Haq and Wong (2010), Collins-Kreiner (2010b; 2010a), Felsenstein and Fleischer (2003), Lee *et al.* (2012) and Henderson (2003).

Theoretical Basis

Religious journeys are not a new phenomenon. Traditionally, religion has been an integral motive for journeys that are considered as the earliest form of non-economical and non-financial trips. In 2000, Jackowski (2000) estimated that approximately 240 million people, including Christians, Muslims and Hindus, travelled every year for religious purposes (Rojo, 2007). Lately, the number of worldwide pilgrims and religious tourists has increased significantly (Blackwell, 2007; Collins-Kreiner, 2010a). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2011) has estimated the number of religious tourists in the world at 600 million,

of which 50% are in Asia and the Pacific and 40% are in Europe (Egresi *et al.*, 2012). Generally, a religious tourist possesses five characteristics:

- First, he or she is travelling voluntarily, temporarily, and without any wages;
- Second, they have a religious motive;
- Third, the person is also inspired by other motives;
- Fourth, the destination is a religious place and;
- Finally, travelling to the destination is a religious obligation (Santos, 2003).

Raj and Morpeth, in considering how the 'intensity' of each of these characteristics influences an individual, classified visitors to holy places into five categories as outlined in Figure 2. Reflecting on these various classifications, religious tourists may be more pilgrims than tourists or, on the other hand, they may be more tourists than pilgrims (Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005).

Focusing on the destinations visited by such religious tourists, Shackley (2003) has classified a classification of attractions based on religion as follows:

- Natural phenomena (lakes, mountains, islands, gardens, etc.);
- Buildings and places that are originally made for religious purposes;
- Buildings with religious contents;
- Special events of religious importance that are held in non-religious places ;
- Places built on secular thoughts that are relevant with tragic stories or those events that are particularly political. For example, Nelson Mandela's prison on Robben Island

Fig. 2 : Classification of Visitors of Holy Places

Source: Raj and Morpeth, 2007

Thus, one of the attractors for such visitors is an interest in visiting cultural and religious events, festivals, and ceremonies and many visitors plan their itineraries so as to attend and experience them. Events and festivals have played an important part in human life since the earliest of times (Raj & Morpeth, 2007), with religious and cultural festivals / events motivating tourists to leave their own country / region to gain experience from the religion and heritage of others. With regard to this paper, religious ceremonies can be classified, from an attraction point of view, as special events of religious importance (in this instance - held in non-religious places) and, from the visitor point of view, as religious festivals and events held by certain participants. Muharram ceremonies (i.e. Tasua and Ashura), as religious events, can be, thus, introduced as a tourist attraction.

Tasua and Ashura occur on the ninth and tenth days of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim year. The word 'Tasua' means ninth, and 'Ashura' means tenth in Arabic. Tasua and Ashura commemorate the murder of Imam Husayn and certain members of his family in the year 680AD in Karbala. Virtually, all Muslims respect Imam Husayn as the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Shia Muslims, however, also venerate him as one of the early 12 imams, or supreme Muslim spiritual leaders. The story of Imam Husayn's martyrdom is central to Shia Islam and has inspired Shia Muslims to stand up against injustice. Its influence is felt far beyond the month of Muharram. This story has been so powerful in forming the Shia

religious outlook that some scholars have described Shia Islam as a religion of lamentation.

Muharram ceremonies are honored in many different countries, especially those with high concentrations of Shia Muslims. Widespread ceremonies take place in Iraq, Iran, India, and Trinidad. In other countries, such as Turkey, more subdued holiday observations take place. Muslims in Iran, the vast majority of whom are Shias, celebrate the first ten days of the month of Muharram as a time of grief and lamentation for the killing of Imam Husayn. Many pious adherents wear black during this period to signify the depth of their mourning. Religious processions may occur before Ashura, but the largest and most elaborate ones take place on the tenth of Muharram (Gulevich, 2005) (See additional photos at end of this article).

Research Area

The location of this research is the town of Taft in Yazd province, Central Iran. Taft is located in a valley bounded by mountains on three sides. The area of this town is about 15 square kilometers, and most of the spaces in it are occupied by old neighborhoods and gardens. Generally, the town is formed by two sections, the northern part and the southern part that are respectively named 'Garmsir' (i.e. hot area) and 'Sardsir' (i.e. cold area). The current town has 24 large and small neighborhoods. The people of the town tended toward Zoroastrianism before the arrival of Islam in Iran, but today most of the people are Muslims. Nevertheless, Zoroastrians are seen in some parts of the town (AFGO, 2002). The most prominent religious ceremony of Taft is the Nakhlbardari ceremony held on Ashura day. In its common use, the word 'Nakhl' means palm tree, but in mourning ceremonies, Nakhl refers to something like a big coffin that people carry around (See photos at end of article). Of course, Nakhlbardari is not specific to the mourning ceremonies held on Tasua night and Ashura morning.

Methodology and Findings

From the viewpoint of purpose, this research is an applied and developmental study, and the research method is descriptive and analytical. The methods of data collection are documentation and field studies such as interview. Accordingly, surveys in Taft city identified lists of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Then, through detailed interviews with tourists and city officials, weight was given to each of the internal and external factors and finally a SWOT Matrix was produced.

Table 1: Analysis of Opportunities (O)	Weight*	Score*	Weighted Score
Contribution to the town's economic dynamism	0/2	4	0/8
Employment and income generation	0/3	4	1/2
Growth of tourism industries in the town of Taft, Taft county, and Yazd	0/1	3	0/3
Attraction of local and non-local investors	0/1	3	
Improvement of infrastructures and facilities of the town	0/075	3	0/225
Proper geographical location of Yazd province	0/1	2	0/2
Increased rate of absorbed provincial funding in Taft county	0/075	2	0/15
Introduction of Taft as an example of tourist cities and enhancement of its prestige	0/05	2	0/1
Reduction in the migration of indigenous people to the provincial capital	0/5	1	0/05
Enhanced sense of belonging and citizens' participation in the town's	0/025	1	0/025
Appropriate opportunity for introducing other productions of Taft	0/025	1	
Sum	1		3.375

Table 2 : Analysis of Threats (T)	Weight*	Score*	Weighted Score
Influx of population and disrupting the performance of ceremonies	0/2	2	0/4
Creating conflicts with indigenous people due to interfering with tourists of different cultures	0/1	3	0/3
Destruction of gardens and green areas in the town	0/1	2	0/2
Reduction in the presence of indigenous people in the ceremonies	0/05	3	0/15
Environmental pollution			0/1
Changing the nature of ceremonies from a spiritual performance to a folk	0/1	1	
General increase in prices particularly in land prices	0/05	2	
Destruction of the town's infrastructures and facilities	0/1	1	
Destruction and exhaustion of mosques and religious sites	0/05	1	0/05
Sum	1		1/5

* Weights and Scores were derived from the Delphi method - we selected experts to assist in weighting this SWOT. Naturally some points will be more controversial than others. So we weighted the factors.

To each factor we assigned an A weighting factor between zero (no importance) and one (very important). Assigned aggregate weighting coefficients must equal one.

To each score we assigned a value between zero and four (according to the Compliance system with the opportunities and threats). This score demonstrates the effectiveness of the current response strategies. Number four means that the response has been excellent and number one means that the response has been weak.

- 1= Threat (very bad reaction) 1 point
- 2 = notable threat (bad reaction and negative) two points
- 3 = Opportunities notable (good response) three points
- 4 = Golden Opportunities (excellent response) four points

Effective external factors of religious tourism in Taft and the method of their valuation

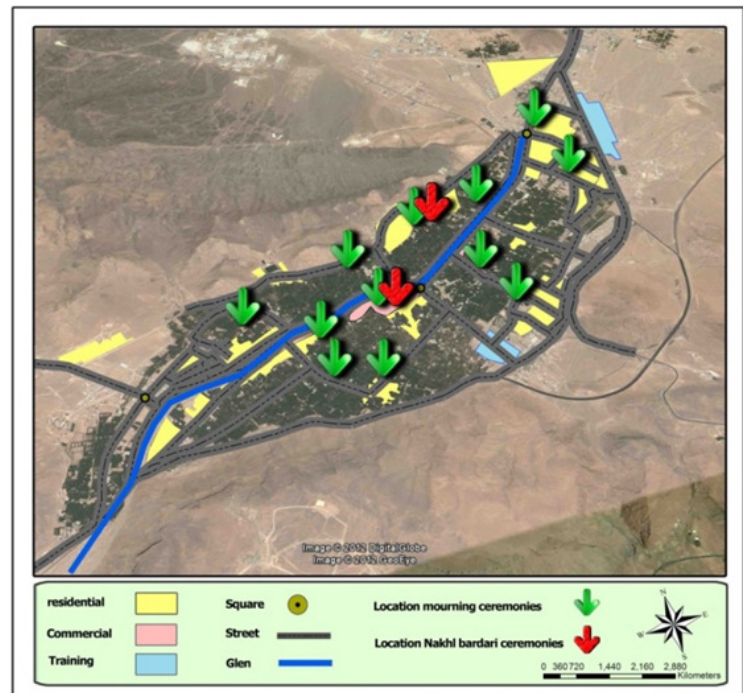
The purpose of this phase of research is to survey the effect of external circumstances on the study area in order to identify the opportunities and threats that the town faces in relation to tourism development. Based on the conducted studies and surveys of the peripheral area, the identified collection of opportunities and threats that have an effect on tourism in the town, are presented in Table 1.

According to Table 1, the most important opportunities that religious tourism in Taft is faced with are as follows:

- contribution to the town's economic dynamism with the weighted score of 0/8 as the first opportunity,
- employment and income generation with the weighted score of 1/2 as the second opportunity,
- attraction of local and non-local investors, and, the growth of tourism industries in Taft, Taft county and Yazd province, both, with the weighted score of 0/3 as the third opportunity,
- improvement of infrastructures and facilities with the weighted score of 0/225 as the fourth opportunity,
- proper geographical location of Yazd province with the weighted score of 0/2 as the fifth opportunity,
- increased rate of the absorbed provincial funding in Taft county with the weighted score of 0/15 as the sixth opportunity,
- Introduction of Taft as an example of tourist cities and enhancement of its prestige as the seventh opportunity
- reduction in the migration of the indigenous people to the provincial capital with the weighted score of 0/05 as the eight opportunity, and
- opportunities for an enhanced sense of belonging and citizens' participation in the town's affairs, along with appropriate opportunities for introducing productions of Taft, both as the ninth opportunity.

On the other hand, according to Table 2, there are certain factors that threaten Taft's religious tourism with regard to Tasua and Ashura mourning ceremonies. These factors are as follows:

Figure 3 : Aerial Photos of Taft and the location of mourning ceremonies



Source : Map by author using Google Satellite image as base

- Influx of population and disturbing the performance of ceremonies with the weighted score of 0/4 as the first threat,
- creating conflicts with the indigenous people due to interfering with tourists of different cultures with the weighted score of 0/3 as the second threat,
- destruction of gardens and green area with the weighted score of 0/2 as the third threat,
- reduction in the presence of the indigenous people in the ceremonies with the weighted score of 0/15 as the fourth threat,
- environmental pollution, changing the nature of the ceremonies from a spiritual performance to a folkloric show, a general increase in prices particularly in land prices and destruction of the infrastructures and facilities of the town with the weighted score of 0/1 as the fifth threat, and
- destruction and exhausting of mosques and religious sites with the weighted score of 0/05 as the sixth threat.

Table 3 : Analysis of Strengths (S)	Weight	Score	Weighted Score
Proximity of Taft to urban centers such as Yazd city	0/2	4	0/8
Performance of the ceremonies with different styles and forms in the other towns and cities of Yazd province	0/2	4	
Existence of beautiful and unique views with green areas and gardens in the town	0/1	3	0/3
Existence of considerable devotion for serving	0/1	3	
Existence of proper space for parking cars	0/05	3	0/15
High capacity of Taft for attraction of tourists	0/07	2	0/14
Ability of Taft to invest in tourism planning	0/07	2	
Performance of the ceremonies in different hours in other surrounding towns and cities	0/06	2	0/12
Attention of authorities to the ceremonies and putting them in the list of Iranian national heritage	0/05	2	0/1
Sum	1		3.05

Table 4 : Analysis of Weakness (W)	Weight	Score	Weighted Score
Short staying time of tourists in the town	0/15	4	0/6
Lack of tourists' economic returns	0/15	4	
Weakness of infrastructures related to tourism in the town	0/15	3	0/45
Existence of heavy traffic at early and late hours of the ceremonies	0/15	2	0/3
Imposition of financial burdens on the town's organizations such as municipality	0/125	2	0/25
Pollution and making garbage	0/75	2	0/15
Poor informatics on the ceremonies in the country	0/15	1	
Making disorders in the ceremonies by tourists	0/05	2	0/1
Sum	1		2/6

Internal factors affecting the religious tourism and the method of evaluation

The purpose of this step is to survey the internal circumstances of the study area to identify its strengths and weaknesses. The aspects considered are those that have conductive or obstructive contents in achieving the plan goals. Hence, in this part, three existing strategic categories, functions, and resources are investigated. They are presented in Tables 2a and 2b as a framework of dimensions for the religious tourism in the town of Taft.

According to Table 3, the most important strengths are

- proximity to urban centers like Yazd city and performing this ceremony in a different style from other cities with the weighted score of 0/8 as the first strength,
- existence of beautiful scenes with green areas and

gardens in the town and considerable devotion to serving tourists with the weighted score of 0/3 as the second strength, and

- existence of proper space for car parking with the weighted score of 0/15 as the third strength.

In addition, there are other advantages such as

- the proper space and capacity in the town to attract tourists and making it able to invest on tourism planning and introducing the town as an important pole for tourism with the weighted score of 0/14 as the fourth strength ,
- performing the ceremonies in different hours from surrounding cities, as the fifth strength and, finally
- Attention of authorities to the ceremonies and putting them in the list of Iranian national heritage

As the section of weaknesses in Table 4 suggests, the weaknesses that gain the rather high weighted scores are

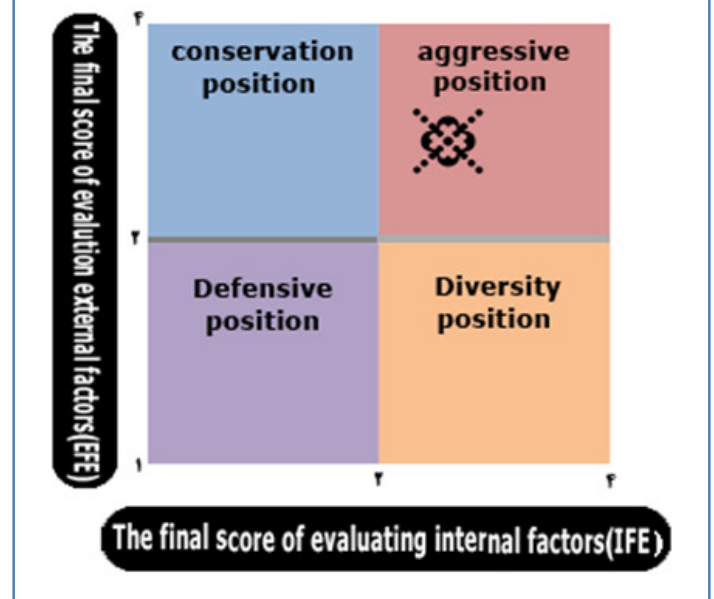
- the short staying of tourists in the town as well as the lack of tourism economic returns with the weighted score of 0/6,
- infrastructures related to tourism with the weighted score of 0/45,
- existence of heavy traffic at early and late hours of ceremonies with the weighted score of 0/3,
- a financial burden imposed on the town's organizations, e.g. municipality, with the weighted score of 0/25,
- pollution and garbage and lack of full informatics on the ceremonies in the country with the weighted score of 0/15, and
- disorder in performing these ceremonies by tourists with the weighted score of 0/1.

Discussion of Results

In order to offer strategies and guidelines for the development of tourism capacity, this paper has specified the tourism limitations in the town and presented practical ways of expanding tourism there. These results are presented in both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The qualitative results suggest a number of points. Firstly, vulnerability is high from the viewpoint of tourism development in the town. Secondly, the town has certain needs that have to be met for tourism development. A review of the quantitative aspects shows that, among the strong points are proximity to population centers and other urban centers like Yazd, as well as performance of the mourning ceremonies in styles different from other cities of Yazd province. Additionally, the existence of beautiful and unique scenery of green areas and gardens in the town, and, the provision of many facilities for serving visitors are important potentials for the development of religious tourism in the town of Taft.

As for the results on the weak points, one may refer to the short stay of tourists in the town, the lack of tourism economic returns, weakness of infrastructures related to tourism in the town, and heavy traffic at early and late hours of ceremonies. These factors, considered as barriers to development of tourism, should be tackled. Among the external opportunities are, employment and income generation contributing to the town's economic dynamism and attraction of local

Figure 4: Internal and External Matrix (IE) of religious tourism in the town of Taft



and non-local investors. However, among external threatening factors, one may refer to influx of population and disputes over the ways and wherefores of performing ceremonies. Conflicts with indigenous people who interfere with tourists of different cultures as well as damaging of gardens and green areas are the most important external threats.

Conclusion / Future Plans

In general, it can be said that if Taft is to develop and have a role in tourism, its potentials and capacities should be first identified and worked out through codified planning. As a first stage in this process, this project developed an IE Matrix, analyzing the SWOT analysis, as demonstrated in Figure 4. The outputs of this process are presented in Figure 5.

The town already has high potential, and this invisible export (tourism) can offer considerable help to its growth. Tasua and Ashura ceremonies are one of these tourism potentials. Proposals should be made for preparing comprehensive and detailed tourism plans and raising sufficient funds to create a tourism data bank, and research marketing for tourist attractions. It is also necessary to maintain and restore Mosques and Husaniyes and develop and improve the town's facilities and infrastructure to a higher standard. Coordinating responsible organizations through creating an integrated management process and doing extensive advertisement in the country and the

		Strengths	Weakness
		<p>Figure 5 : Internal and External Matrix Illustrating Possible Development Ideas for Religious Tourism In the Town of Taft</p>	
SO Strategy	WO Strategy		
Opportunities	Contribution to the town's economic dynamism Employment and income generation Growth of tourism industries in the town of Taft, Taft county, and Yazd province Attraction of local and non-local investors Improvement of infrastructures and facilities of the town Proper geographical location of Yazd province Increased rate of absorbed provincial funding in Taft county Introduction of Taft as an example of tourist cities and enhancement of its prestige Reduction in the migration of indigenous people to the provincial capital Enhanced sense of belonging and citizens' participation in the town's affairs Appropriate opportunity for introducing other productions of Taft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Recognition and utilization of other tourist attractions of town ceremonies o Drawing the authorities' attention to increased investment and employment in the town o Drawing attention of investigators to Taft's tourism sector o Attraction of local and non-local experts from other parts of the province and the country o Attraction of tourists in other seasons of the year o Using people's donations to improve infrastructure and Municipal utilities o Development of tourism infrastructure like building hotels and restaurants and using Taft's beautiful and pristine nature to attract tourists and create new jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Development and improvement of communication systems o Consultation and interaction among the town's authorities and organizations re-tourism development plans o Public participation in all level of tourism planning o Attraction of local and non-local investors to improve economic returns
	Threats	Influx of population and disrupting the performance of ceremonies Creating conflicts with indigenous people due to interfering with tourists of different cultures Destruction of gardens and green areas in the town Reduction in the presence of indigenous people in the ceremonies Environmental pollution Changing the nature of ceremonies from a spiritual performance to a folk show General increase in prices particularly in land prices Destruction of the town's infrastructures and facilities Destruction and exhaustion of mosques and religious sites	WT Strategy
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Coordination among organizations to decrease environmental pollution o Attraction of public investment to reconstruct mosques and religious site o Increase indigenous involvement in the ceremonies o Using Yazd city as the nearest and biggest city to Taft for attracting more visitors o Strengthening advertisement in the media about Taft's tourism capabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Increase public participation in the conservation of natural and human resources o Holding meetings with the elders of society and adopting measures about the peace and order of performing the ceremonies o Consultation of the town's authorities and government officials about receiving a budget for those expenses that tourists impose

neighboring countries for acquainting more tourists, particularly Shias, with these ceremonies, seems to be another necessity. Furthermore, traditional jobs, such as handicrafts, should be revived, marketplaces for selling handicrafts should be created, and livestock as well as agricultural production should be encouraged for job creation and earnings in the town. Active participation in foreign and domestic tourism exhibitions and establishment of different exhibitions in the town will lead the place to be publicly recognized and to gain useful experience in tourism.

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Additional Photos of Ashura and Tazie



Figure 6 : The ceremony of Nakhl Crying in Ashura afternoon



Figure 7 : The ceremony of Nakhl Crying in Ashura afternoon.



Figure 8 : Tazie Ceremony as a folk show.



Figure 9 : Tazie Ceremony as a folk show, Emam Housein as a main and positive character.



Figure 10 : Tazie Ceremony as a folk show, Shamr as a negative character in the show.



Figure 11 : Tazie Ceremony as a folk show, Shamr as a negative character in the show.



Figure 12 : A scene from Ashura noon.



Figure 13 : A scene from Ashura afternoon