

ASHURA IN DARESSALAAM



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: August 2020*

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It is the 10th of Muharram, the day of ASHURA. 'Assalaumu alaika Ya HUSAIN - Our salute salute to HUSAIN (AS) who sacrificed his life and those of his kith and kin for the sake of Islam. Despite the worldwide Covid-19 TANZANIA seems lucky to have almost cleared itself of this pandemic. While most of the countries resorted to their 'online' schedules Daressalaam observed Muharram as usual. It is understood that a large number of devotees from various parts of the world descended on Daressalaam to participate in the Muharram 'azadari'. The road stretching from the Ithnashri mosque/imambara to Mehfile Abbas has been transformed into a glitter. At night that passage of the road is spectacularly illuminated with bright red-light bulbs and tube lights, a replica of 'HARMAIN' in Karbala (the passage stretching from the mausoleum of Hazrat Abbas to that of Imam Husain). Also, the open space, the site of the demolished structure beside Ibrahim Haji Hospital, has been converted into a counter that day and night distributes 'sabeel' and 'nyaz' in memory of the martyred Imam.

Daressalaam has all along been at the forefront of Muharram 'azadari'. Here is sharing with you my last year's post of Daressalaam's Muharram of the 90s when the present Mehfile Abbas and Mehfile Asghari were yet to be built and the 'julus' route not as of now. Also, a large number among us who were there remain no more (RIP) but the Muharram fervour one and the same:-

'It is Muharram and everywhere it is black.

When the Shias dress in black they herald Muharram, the month of mourning for Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Mohamed, and his family and friends who were martyred in the battle of Karbala some 1400 years ago. They await Muharram feelingly and fervently. It is a period of tears and mourning, a time to remember the sacrifices that Imam Husain, his kith, and kin underwent to defend Islam. Come Muharram and the Shia world returns ritually to life.

Daressalaam city, stretching from Mehfile Asgari at Libya street to the 'imambara' on Indira Gandhi street revives hectically at this time of the commemoration. As if touched by a magic wand they awake flocking the 'imambara' and 'mehfils' which are drawn black with curtains and installed with 'alams' (standards) insignia that Imam Husain carried in the battle of Karbala. The story of Karbala resounds on microphones in 'imambara', mehfiles and 'kabrastan' (cemetery). The epic tragedy is reenacted with words, tears, 'shabihs' and processions.

As a child I had imbibed it all in the sacred Zanzibar of yore and adhered to it in the years I was away. Here the place is different but not a changed Muharram, the same scenario. It is black all over - men in black shirts and trousers, ladies garbed in black 'shalwar kameez', frock, 'dupatta' and 'hijaab' while children discover the awareness of Muharram. In fact, children are spontaneous in their beliefs and rush to Mehfiles to listen to the narrative of the episodic Karbala events and to obtain 'nyaz'.

The mansion at Asia street that has been landmark in the history of Daressalaam's Khoja Ithnashris as Mehfile Abbas since the days of colonial Tanganyika remains intact, somber, sacred and fervent. The community now is larger and the 'mehfil' packed with the believers. It houses the replica of Hazrat Abbas' mausoleum. Abbas was the brother of Imam Husain and his 'alamdar' (Commander In Chief) who held the forces in the battle.

Another such mansion is Mehfile Asgari located at Libya street. It houses the replica of Hazrat Ali Asgar's mausoleum. Asgar was the six-month-old baby boy of Imam Husain whose thirst for water remained unquenched and instead had his throat pierced by the arrow of the enemy. This afternoon will witness a hive of activities at Mehfile Asgari. The devotees will be busy directing preparations for the 'julus' (mourning procession) at night. It is the scene of applying scent and threading loads of roses and jasmine into 'sehras' to be tied on flags, 'alams', 'tabuts', 'mehmils' and 'shabihs' that are taking shape.

The 'tabuts' are placed outside the 'mehfil' and there in the evening the devotional activities are evident. Even Non-Muslims pay their respect and make offerings signifying the universality of this event. The youthful volunteers clear the dust on the roads. Also, the framework of the events of Ashura day at Karbala is laid upon the open ground by the side of the Asia Street Police station opposite Chic King.

Tonight's procession ('julus') is one sacred event that the city of Daressalaam awaits annually. All roads lead to Mehfile Asgari where the 'julus' commences passing through Jamhuri street and terminating at the 'imambara'. Hundreds of Daressalaam's cosmopolitan public line up the route for a glimpse of the 'julus'. The atmosphere is awash with doleful 'nauha' chants and the devotees

replying the elegies in unison as the public watches in respectful silence. The 'julus' reaches a crescendo when it arrives at the 'imambara' where the preacher briefs the public on the significance of the event.

It was in Karbala, Iraq, where Husain fought this battle along the waters of Euphrates against the army of the tyrant Yazid. Husain, his family and friends numbered only 72 but fought with valour against thousands before attaining 'shahadat' (martyrdom) to save Islam. There is 'sabil of sharbat' then and everyone offered to drink it in memory of Karbala that had denied water to the children of Husain. At around midnight the aura is reinforced with 'zanjeer' ritual. It is the beating of the chest with a chain of blades as the devotees recite elegies and bleed profusely.

The climax is reached at the 'imambara' tomorrow on Ashura day, the 10th Muharram, during 'asar' time when Imam Husain was martyred. The recounting of Imam bidding an emotional farewell to the ladies and the final parting from his sister Bibi Zainab and daughter Bibi Sakina is heartrending. The Imam then rides his horse into the face of thousands of enemies and becomes 'shaheed'. The devotees erupt hysterically crying their heart out 'Ya Husain'. There is almost a stampede as they rush to get hold of Imam's 'shabeeh' that is being brought in and taken around within the 'imambara'.

In the evening the devotees gather at 'kabrastan' (cemetery) for a 'majlis' and sit on the graves of their dear ones reciting holy verses. The drooping sun and gradual spread of the evening then proclaiming the eve of 'Shame Gariba'. At the 'imambara' at night it is 'Majlise Shame Gariba' when lights are dimmed adding to the poignancy of the situation. The 'majlis' is short and tears flow abundantly as the 'Zakir' (preacher) recounts the cruelty inflicted upon the ladies and children of the Imam after his martyrdom.

I had first heard the story of Karbala in the Kiswahili 'majlises' by Sayed Abbas at Mehfile Abbas that I had attended as a small boy in Zanzibar. Generations of children have grown up hearing the same story through the years. Each repetition freshens and enhances its truth and larger meaning. One loses ones dear and near one, a fortune or even a kingdom but its memory fades as does its pain. But the memory of Husain and his unique sacrifice never fades. It is a pain that goes beyond any individual pain and returns afresh every year as rightly put by the great Urdu poet Iqbal, "Katle Husain asal me margaye Yazid tha, Islam zinda hota hai har Karbala ke baad".'

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