

Psychology of Tyranny

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A Study of the Sadism of al-Hajjaj al-Thaqafi

Introduction

The history of al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi represents not merely an era of political conflict in the Umayyad period; rather, it constitutes an early historical model for the institutionalization of violence and the transformation of cruelty and intimidation into a systematic strategy of governance.

While some traditional historical narratives have often tended to justify al-Hajjaj's atrocities under the guise of "political necessity" and maintaining security, the human rights and humanitarian perspective views this experience as a stark embodiment of how state institutions and laws can be harnessed to serve sadistic impulses and confiscate people's fundamental rights, foremost among them the right to life and to physical and psychological safety.

Reading al-Hajjaj's behavior through contemporary human rights literature reveals that inflicting pain on others was not merely a random reaction to revolts; rather, it was an organized and meticulously engineered behavior, reflecting clear psychopathic traits manifested in the death of conscience, the absolute assumption of the right to crush the "other," and the absence of human empathy.

The paper examines how the psychological motives of a self-made personality obsessed with control and proving blind loyalty to authority transformed into an instrument of torture and repression that affected an entire generation of subjects.

This analysis proceeds from a central hypothesis: al-Hajjaj al-Thaqafi's sadism was not an exceptional response to security threats, but rather an expression of an extreme psychological structure that took pleasure in subjugating human dignity and inflicting pain.

The Psychological Structure of al-Hajjaj

The sadistic behavior of al-Hajjaj cannot be understood in isolation from a study of his early environment and the psychological coping mechanisms he developed during his political rise.

Dissecting this personality involves three principal psychological dimensions. The first is the psychology of "paternal authoritarianism" associated with his early teaching profession. Al-Hajjaj began his professional life as a boys' teacher in Ta'if, a profession that in that era relied on strict rote instruction and the imposition of blind obedience through corporal punishment.



According to psychological theories, early immersion in the role of the "dominant figure who is obeyed" establishes in the consciousness a defensive mechanism known as authoritarian paternal projection. He came to view the subjects as minors or boys who could not be disciplined or have their behavior controlled except through pain and the rod. Thus, the desire for strict guidance was transformed into a political doctrine that viewed violence as a legitimate educational tool for re-engineering and shaping society.

As for the second dimension, according to the theory of individual psychology of **Alfred Adler**, al-Hajjaj resorted to a mechanism of **overcompensation**, whereby his sense of political insecurity amid the aristocratic Umayyad elites was transformed into an overwhelming desire for absolute control, using excessive violence as a psychological tool to prove his worth. Identification and alignment with the aggressor relieved him of his sense of guilt, and when he saw in the eyes of the authority figure that authority's satisfaction with him, this intensified his persistence in violence.

The third dimension emerges when his behavior is measured against modern psychological standards. Al-Hajjaj represents a clear example of what psychology calls the dark triad of personality, which consists of three overlapping disorders:

First: Psychopathy: This is manifested in the complete disappearance of his feelings of human empathy and his ability to shed blood with astonishing composure. In addition, he possessed great linguistic skill and eloquence, which he used as a psychological tool to spread terror and paralyze the will of his opponents.

Second: Machiavellianism: This is embodied in his extreme political opportunism. He believed that the end—which was preserving the ruling order—justified any means, no matter how extreme or violative of human dignity and sanctities.

Third: Sadism: According to the psychologist Erich Fromm, sadism is not merely the infliction of fleeting physical pain; rather, it is the overwhelming desire for absolute control over a human being and the stripping away of their will.

Al-Hajjaj found great psychological gratification in depriving people of security, turning them into mere numbers in prisons or heads awaiting their harvest, and taking pleasure in the sight of their complete submission.

Verbal Intimidation (The Kufa Sermon as a Psychological Shock)

His famous sermon to the people of Kufa is considered a clear example of official rhetoric of terror. Instead of presenting a political program or a plan to administer the country, he deliberately delivered a sermon filled with verbal threats and menaces. In it, he used extremely violent and cruel linguistic metaphors when he said: "I can see heads that have ripened and whose harvest is due, and I am the one to harvest them."

From a psychological perspective, this speech did not aim to persuade; rather, it aimed to paralyze people's thinking and minds by instilling sudden and intense terror. Al-Hajjaj deliberately employed his body language and his prolonged silence before speaking to raise the level of tension and panic among those present.

Here, al-Hajjaj employed sadistic body language through his veil and prolonged silence before speaking to increase the tension among those present, psychologically stripping them of the ability to think collectively or resist, transforming society into a terrified mass seeking individual salvation through absolute obedience. This constitutes a grave human rights violation that deprives people of the right to psychological security and freedom of expression.

The Institutionalization of Torture

The gratification of the sadistic impulse does not stop at verbal intimidation; it is embodied in the spatial structure that al-Hajjaj designed to punish his opponents. "Wasit Prison" is evidence of the engineering of psychological and physical torture.

This architectural design of the prison in al-Hajjaj's era expresses an extreme sadistic impulse based on a strategy of dehumanization. The aim here was not to imprison the political dissident, but to shatter his human pride and turn his body and soul into a stage for continuous pain.

Exposing victims to slow death and systematic psychological and physical mutilation reflects the sadist's desire to exercise absolute divine authority over the lives and destinies of others. In modern human rights conventions, this is classified as a systematic crime of torture against humanity that is not subject to a statute of limitations.

The Psychology of the Tyrant Facing Moral Resilience

Political sadism reaches its peak when confronting figures who refuse psychological submission. The execution of Sa'id ibn Jubayr represents a clash between the psychology of a tyrant obsessed with subjugation and the victim's moral and rights-based resilience.

When Sa'id ibn Jubayr confronted al-Hajjaj with steadfastness and conviction, his trial turned into a psychological predicament for al-Hajjaj. The sadist derives his power and gratification from seeing the victim collapse, plead, or weep, whereas Sa'id ibn Jubayr demonstrated intellectual and psychological composure. This resilience disrupted al-Hajjaj's psychological equilibrium, and he regarded it as a direct threat to his authority, prompting him to swiftly issue a death sentence in a vengeful manner marked by extreme cruelty.

Psychologically noteworthy is the "rebound anxiety" that afflicted al-Hajjaj after the crime, as the nightmares of Sa'id ibn Jubayr pursued him during his final illness. Psychology explains this as the neurotic collapse of despotism, in which the crime ultimately devours the perpetrator's psychological security after he loses the ability to control his mental projections and repressed guilt.



Conclusion

No matter how cruel and meticulously engineered its torture, tyranny remains internally fragile. It is consumed by rebound anxiety and haunted by the blood of the innocent, leaving human and moral justice as the ultimate victor in the consciousness of history.

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