State violence and death politics in post-revolutionary Iran¹

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From 9 January to 19 July 2012, the Iranian daily *Gooya News*, one of the Iranian diaspora's main information sites, published a series of forty-one articles, entitled 'Interviews with a torture and rape witness'. The tortures and rapes in question were from the period of violent state repression that gripped the Islamic Republic throughout the 1980s. The interviews give voice to the anonymous testimony of an official involved in the penitentiary and judicial sphere of that period. In this respect, they constitute a rare document, though secrecy still surrounds the administrative practices and chains of command that organized state violence in Iran, which remain in place and in effect in some cases. Interview number 19 is entitled 'The cadavers from the mass graves from the 1981 massacre in the riverbed'.³ The interviewee, an official at the Ministry of Justice in the city of Shiraz, recounts being summoned to appear before the revolutionary tribunal during the summer of 1981. Majid Torabpour, the director of Shiraz city prison, is waiting for him there, joined by about fifteen members of the prison's administrative staff, and asks him to approach the Islamic judge (*hakeme sha'r*⁴) about managing the 'thirty-six cadavers remaining' on their hands. The story continues like this:

I went into the office of the Islamic judge Qorbani ... he was talking out loud to himself: 'It's no longer clear who to turn to: you write to the office of the Imam [Khomeini], no answer; Mr Montazeri's office doesn't reply either, the same goes for Ardebili.'⁵ Then he took three

sheets of paper on his desk and handed them to me, and only then did I understand the scope of the disaster. Due to heavy rains, the river, which flowed from the Derāk mountains⁶ and passed behind the villages of Hassan Abad and Ahmad Abad, had overflowed and stirred up several communal pits where bodies had been buried in bulk just under the surface. The flood had strewn the bodies all along the river's course. When people saw the bodies, they immediately informed the Sepāh [militias that are part of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution]. Local members of the Sepāh and of the Basij [volunteer militia corps] were mobilized to collect the bodies. Thirty-six had been gathered up to the present moment; they had put them in two trucks and had brought them to the prison. The Islamic judge continued explaining to me how he was completely in the dark about this matter, and did not know whose cadavers they were, how they had been killed, or how they had been buried. He had seen the bodies, and the murders [*sic*] were just one or two weeks old.

Astonished, I asked: 'Do you mean that there has been no legal judgement?' 'That's impossible', the judge told me: 'I told you that I am completely in the dark about this, and whenever I try to get explanations, I'm told what I have the habit of telling people [who ask for news about their family and friends]. Try to see *Haj-gha*⁷ on your own.' Given the situation, I suggested that he begin by authorizing burial of the bodies, since the bodies would be a cause for concern if they stayed the way they were: then I suggested that the investigation of the case continue after they were put in the ground. At first, he was not won over and replied: 'Sir, I have a responsibility; what answer will I give the officials? What answer will I give God? They [the penitentiary administration] don't want to listen to reason and keep claiming that these people died during combat between opposition groups.' In reply, I told the judge that it was useless to be naïve about this; it was well known who and what institutions were behind this work, and I convinced him to authorize burying the bodies on the condition that they be identified beforehand and provided that, for my part, I would be conducting the investigation.

They were all gathered in Hamid Baneshi's⁸ office, calmly smoking with sangfroid, and talking among themselves.... We set off for the courtyard at the rear of the prison ... where there was room for manoeuvring and transport: a blue, tarp-covered Nissan and a small red lorry were parked there. There they had piled the bodies which the rainwater had washed up. I asked that they be unloaded. Hamid whistled and they all gathered together; they lined up the bodies on the ground. Most of the faces were in the process of decomposing; there were visible whip marks and wounds on several people's faces and bodies. I asked for a cigarette. Jahfar Ebrahimi was beside me; he was an *akhound* [mullah] in civilian clothing who was responsible for collecting the bodies. I said: 'I believe there are more here than indicated.' Jahfar replied: 'Shahrokh knows more about it than I do. That said, water carried off the majority; we were only able to gather up

the ones over there. And don't bother with the *Haj-gha* identification. Shahrokh knows who they all are; he has lists.' We went to see Shahrokh, who ended up talking: 'Those bodies there, we got them in the collective houses or in the street, and some went away under *ta'zir*.⁹ I'm the one who had the responsibility of burying them and I have their names; we know the number of common graves, 25–26 of them, and their location, too.' I was in disbelief. I counted the cadavers; there were 48. They separated the men and women and left to bury them.

I worked two weeks on this question. The number of pits that the flood had moved was 28, and the total number of bodies was at least 485.

When this affair came to light, there were changes in posts among the officials: Seyyed Reza Mir'emad was named prosecutor in Tehran, and Mohamad Reza Ramezani became his replacement. As for the Islamic judge Qorbani, he became a representative in the National Assembly (I no longer remember if this is in Samnan or in Daghehman)!¹⁰

In this testimony, the handling of cadavers raises various issues involving state violence and the organization of death in the case of Iran.¹¹ The violence described in this story is a complex violence, in tension between the juridical and administrative order, which possesses an internal coherence anchored in a theological ideology, and the unleashing of a destructive undertaking. Thus, the dialogue between the Islamic judge and the narrator, an official from the Ministry of Justice, hinges on the fact that the cadavers were allegedly produced without a legal judgement, without a preliminary death sentence, which is judged unthinkable. A majority of the documented cases of the suppression of Iranian citizens in the 1980s are indeed the product of the judicial and penitentiary systems, as we will see below. What is at issue, moreover, in this dialogue is the production of the judge's written authorization to rebury the cadavers unearthed by the flooding river. The handling of these unwieldy bodies unleashes a crisis that allows us to glimpse a second type of organization that is grafted on and connected to the administrative order: orders circulate orally and mark an economy of silence, which not only passes between repressive organs and society but also inside the apparatus of repression. The crisis of the cadavers illustrates how this economy of secrecy is also interconnected with moral universes. The Islamic judge complains, 'whenever I try to get explanations, I'm told what I have the habit of telling people'. He initially refuses to give the written order for reburial, invoking his deontological responsibility before his hierarchical superiors, and his moral one before God. On the one hand, the Islamic judge, who is in charge of prison

sentences and execution in the revolutionary tribunal, sketches the ideological and moral horizon that organizes the administration of death. On the other, this 'moral economy'¹² is limited to the interior of the repressive apparatus: the judge complains about the arbitrariness and secrecy that he reproduces on a daily basis on the outside, since he has the habit of not giving a response 'to the people' who have come to ask for news about their deceased relations. Indeed, revolutionary tribunal hearings – and often their very location – are secret, without a barrister or other protagonists aside from the judge, the prosecutor, and the accused.

An initial picture suggested by the crisis is one of a violent mechanism characterized by a rupture between inside and outside: it functions around an internal organizational and discursive-logical coherence, but operates behind closed doors, showing a discreet face to the social enemy located outside. But the confusion to which the judge is exposed suggests a second tableau superimposed over the first. The internal organization is itself binary and traversed by an economy of secrecy that brings two value systems into opposition with one another. Indeed, the bodies that are spit out along the river make visible a violence that parallels the violence of the repressive apparatus organized around the revolutionary tribunal, detention centres, and execution squads. The story of this crisis is constructed around an opposition between those in office – between men possessing a certain sensibility (the narrator asks for a cigarette, the judge talks out loud to himself all alone) and morality – and those unpolished people out in the field. Juxtaposed with the ordered violence that the one group oversees – cadavers stretched out in the courtyard of the prison – is the disorder of hasty, shallow graves dug by the others. The condemnation and the confusion of officials stem from the work being poorly executed: it imperils the economy of silence essential for the functioning of the repressive mechanism, and causes a resurgence of the nightmarish texture of violence – potentially troubling for some of the repression's actors – by way of a pile of women and men's bodies mixed together, washed by the rain, in the process of decomposing.

The bodies are those of men and women killed 'in collective houses or in the street', or while being tortured, entailing forms of violence that indicate a situation of civil war¹³ or of politicicide.¹⁴ These actions are conducted and supervised (lists are drawn up, accounts are made) by members of the militia, who form a command structure with informal boundaries: a religious man in civilian clothing in charge of 'gathering the bodies', who next

introduces the narrator to the operations official: 'Shahrokh knows who they all are, he has the lists'. These two faces of state violence – a non-explicit duality, albeit one of which actors are aware ('useless to be naïve about this; it was well known who and what institutions were behind this work') – are re-articulated with each other as a result of the handling of the cadavers crisis. This crisis introduces us to the different strata of the state's discretion and violence at the same time that it illustrates the manner in which the administrative and juridical order of the new republican Islamic state absorbed, codified, and legalized the violent practices of Islamist militias.

This narrative poses several challenges that delineate the analysis that we offer here: What became of the victims' bodies? What does this handling of bodies teach us about the simultaneously concrete and ideological organization of death that marked the establishment of the Islamic Republic? What are the effects of these violent practices on the social body, and in what way are the living governed via management of the dead (of *their* dead) in post-revolutionary society?

The organization of death

State violence targeted those with more or less clearly established links with political organizations opposing the Islamic Republic.¹⁵ On 29 June 1981, waves of collective executions began of prisoners who were arrested during demonstrations. It is probable that other, lesser-known, collective executions took place in 1984. Finally, in the summer of 1988, shortly after the peace treaty with Iraq was signed, members of the opposition still in prison were liquidated in a massacre that claimed thousands of victims. As in the majority of the episodes of state violence, the number of victims is difficult to assess, and access to figures and evidence is difficult because the administrations and actors who led those crackdowns are still in place. The historian Ervand Abrahamian concluded in 1999 that more than 7,900 dissidents had been eliminated between 1981 and 1985. In 2012, the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), based at Yale, estimated 20,000 to be the number of documented executions and political deaths in the period through to 1988. The initiative International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88) has published a list of 15,116 people executed between 1981 and 1988, including 4,677 between July and October 1988.¹⁶

The suppression of dissidents was administered through a juridical and ideological apparatus organized around revolutionary tribunals. Though officially recognized when they were instituted in 1979, these courts did not enjoy legal status until the beginning of 1983, but remained even then in contradiction with certain constitutional articles concerning the public character of judicial hearings, the right to a defence, and the right to appeal.¹⁷ These hearings, at the margin of the judicial system, took place in prisons and typically lasted only five to twenty minutes. These were held in secret, albeit they did have legal status. Likewise, the 'religious ordinance' (the *fatwa*) giving the order for the 1988 massacre was kept secret, but it was legally authorized. The 'special commission' responsible for carrying out this command had no official existence or legal basis, but was composed of officials from the Ministry of Justice. Thus the organization of death arose at different scales of a juridical and administrative system with two faces, one public and the other secret. The passing of a sentence was not, however, the only cause of death: different militias that were part of the Sepāh (the Revolutionary Guard), of Hezbollah, of VEVAK (the Ministry of Intelligence and Security) conducted extra-judicial executions, especially between 1979 and 1984.¹⁸ Death could also come under torture, or as a disciplinary sanction in prison.¹⁹

To come now to this chapter's main question: what was done with the executed prisoners' bodies? What relations can we establish, to the extent permitted by our knowledge of the facts, between this treatment and the logics of overseeing death? Beyond the physical suppression of dissidents, what functions did this treatment of bodies play in the relationship between state and society?

The management of the dead has been an essential process in making state violence invisible and normal, by virtue of rendering any overall assessment of this violence impossible, and by creating silence and amnesia in the social body. With different testimonials juxtaposed together, this management of bodies can be understood according to two challenges: firstly, the respect of rules about separating Muslims and non-Muslims (*najes*) during burial; and secondly, the visibility of state violence to family and friends, and more widely in society. The treatment of bodies of executed prisoners thus indicates an organization of social space and an organization of symbolic space. This analysis brings out the connections between burial practices and the methods used to suppress dissidents, which are of two orders: ideological and socio-political.

Najes

As Khosrokhavar has indicated, the management of the dead in this period of Iran's history must, before anything else, be resituated in the religious and cultural context of the Shi'ism that was redefined by the Islamic Republic.²⁰ This observation makes it possible to grasp how, in practice, the respect for Islamic rules concerning purity and impurity (*najes*) is at the core of an ideological mechanism that categorizes victims as 'others', killable with impunity.

Shi'ite funerary rites require that bodies, which are washed according to a specific procedure, be wrapped in a white shroud and placed directly in the ground, with the head pointing towards Mecca. Incineration is not practised. The separation of the pure and the impure is a fundamental principle in daily practice, and it occurs in mortuary rites as well. Contact with what is considered impure (*najes*) thus contaminates practising Muslims, who must guard against this or purify themselves through ablutions. The list of what is taken to be impure is precise and explicit (it includes, for example, pork and alcohol). In the Shi'ite tradition, there are two supplementary elements that are important in our analysis: non-believers and dead bodies. So, in theory, and to a certain extent in practice, those who are in charge of the administration of the dead must not transgress the rules of *najes* or contaminate themselves. It is in the name of this prohibition that daily life is organized inside prisons in such a way that contact with prisoners defined as *kāfer*, that is to say non-Muslim (a category including Marxists, Baha'i minorities, etc.), does not soil the penitentiary personnel. The prison stories emphasize, however, the fact that this prohibition, which plays an important role in daily interactions and in the organization of prison space, falls away in the torture room.²¹ Other rules are more directly concerned with the administration of death. It is thus forbidden to kill a pregnant woman or a virgin woman; these prohibitions were not systematically respected as we will see, however. Several testimonials report the practice of raping unmarried female prisoners before their execution.²² Burying Muslims and non-Muslims in the same space is forbidden as well. This rule seems to have been particularly important in the management of human remains, all the more so because cemeteries, major political sites since the 1978 insurrections, had been constituted as a public space overinvested by state propaganda during the war, due to the cult of martyrdom that developed.²³ Therefore, those executed prisoners who were categorized as

non-Muslims ('at war against God', a crime punishable by death) were supposed to be buried separately, in non-Muslim sections of cemeteries. In certain cases, the leadership saw to it that families respected this rule; in other cases, it buried the executed prisoners itself in distinct spaces and would later inform their relatives.

These different rules organized the administration of death, but they did not constitute a fixed and rigorous system. To give an idea of the manner in which this complex mechanism functioned in practice, one can refer to a testimonial, which to my knowledge is the only one produced by an eye witness of the 1988 massacre, in the province of Khuzestan in the south-west of the country. It is the story of Mohammad-Reza Ashooq, a prisoner who succeeded in escaping the bus that would take a group of *mojahedin* in August 1988 to the site of the shooting, where trenches had been dug.

'[Once we arrived] at the [military] base [in Kharileh], they forced us into the communal showers. The walls and the doors were covered with photos of [martyred] Basijis who had been there before us. They gave us a shroud and some camphor. They ordered us to remove our clothes and to put on the shroud [the narrator refuses and is beaten, finally led away fully clothed with his fists tied together]. They made us get in the minibus. They led me off to the vehicle and made me sit down in a seat in the back. All the others who got in the minibus were dressed in white, wearing blindfolds, with their hands tied together. I believe that the bindings on my fists were loosened when I was beaten; I was able to free my hands. It was around 3:30 in the morning then, and everyone was tired, including the revolutionary guards [the *Sepāh militiamen*], who seemed frightened themselves. Everyone was yelling. The prisoners were shouting insults at Khomeini.' The narrator manages to escape by jumping through the minibus's window. He goes on: 'I must have run about a kilometre towards the river when I heard gunfire. At first, there were machine guns, then individual gunshots. The shots came from a corner far away, close to the shacks, where there was light.'²⁴

According to this testimony, the funeral rites (the washing of bodies anointed with camphor and placed in a white shroud) are, so to speak, subcontracted out to the prisoners themselves. The prisoners are taken to and shot at the burial site itself. Several survivors of Tehran's prisons, where the massacres began at the end of July 1988, report that the method used in the first weeks was hanging. It must be said that, beginning in 1983, hanging seems to have been given systematic preference over shooting in Iranian prisons. This is the same period when national newspapers stopped publishing lists of the names of executed prisoners. It is possible that the authorities began to practise more discretion at that time,

and that execution methods were adapted to this imperative. Still, the testimonials agree that in 1988 recourse to hanging was abandoned after several weeks in Tehran, and firing squads were brought back into use²⁵ by an administration that had less time at its disposal to complete the massacres. It seems to me that, in light of a comparative reading of the various sources of available information, between the first wave of hangings at the beginning of August 1988, in Evin Prison in Tehran, and the scene reported by Mohammad-Reza Ashooq in Khuzestan, a sort of method had been clarified (judging from what is currently known, it is not clear whether this happened locally or more widely), finding a balance between the requirements of discretion, efficiency, and respect for the ideological frameworks that justified administering death.

As shown by the categorizations that preside over the massacre and the management of bodies during and after it, state violence and terror – and the passage from one to the other – conform to an economy and organization. The latter two simultaneously make possible and frame instinctual, violent release, putting it in the service of a precise government objective, which is the domination of the social body by the state apparatus. On the one hand, they produce conditions favouring violence, firstly through mental operations producing dangerous ‘others’, now well known in the contexts of extreme violence,²⁶ and which one finds in the work of revolutionary tribunals and special commissions, and secondly through an administrative and judicial apparatus which rewards brutality by offering social advancement to those who know how to demonstrate it and by excluding moderates and those who are reluctant, as illustrated by the fate of the Ayatollah Montazeri, eliminated from succession to the role of Supreme Guide and placed under house arrest after protesting against the 1988 massacres. On the other hand, they ideologically frame this violence by grasping it in a series of symbolic, religious, and political representations that justify it and render its exercise acceptable in the systematic, reasoned context of a chain of command. The management of cadavers shows the implementation and the function, in this ideological framework, of justifying and regularizing the situation with regard to the religious laws.

***La'nat ābād* (the quarter of the damned)**

And the effect of this treatment of bodies was not limited to the universe of the actors of violence. I wish to show, rather, that it

assumed broader social functions.²⁷ This can seem paradoxical with regard to the secrecy that surrounds the practices of repression and elimination, as has just been seen. It appears, however, as has been shown elsewhere by studies devoted to the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, that the process of rendering violence invisible is not solely a negative operation of stifling discretionary practices, but itself produces effects that are useful for the objective of social control. If one re-examines the prohibitions that regulate burial practices, it appears, through interviews with close family and friends and the testimonials gathered, that the burial of the executed did not exclusively target their spatial separation from the community of Muslims with which the state wished to make the social body coincide. Indeed, the question was not only where the authorities buried these bodies – but how. Several testimonials and some photographs indicate that the victims were buried without a shroud, in their clothes, and even in their shoes, which seems even more blasphemous in relation to rules concerning burial. They were laid to rest as a group in shallow, mass graves, while tradition requires a tomb more than a metre and a half deep. Thus these practices run counter to traditional burials, and to the usual rites and traditions that hold the community together; more than just separation and exclusion, they represent instances of blasphemy and profanation.

To understand the specific significance of blasphemy and the political use made of it by the authorities, it is useful to revisit the social functions of sepulchral rites as they were analysed by the anthropologist Robert Hertz at the beginning of the twentieth century. He identified across different types of societies a constant that one could call the second life of dead bodies, that is to say, the treatment reserved for them: the material transformations, the spatial movements that they undergo, and the temporality and specific steps of this processing, which can go on for several months. In the following way, he emphasizes the function, simultaneously social and psychological, that is assumed by the treatment of bodies after death:

Because it has faith in itself, a healthy society cannot admit that an individual who is part of its own substance, on which it has imprinted its mark, could be gone forever; life must have the last word: in various ways, the deceased will emerge from the throes of death to return to the peace of human communion.... [It is] the promise that every religious Society implicitly makes to its members ... exclusion gives way to a new integration.²⁸

It is this reintegration that is attacked by profane burial, by putting religious taboos in motion that render it impossible. Beyond the physical elimination of those who are identified as outside of post-revolutionary society, the apparatus of repression aimed for their symbolic and enduring removal from the social world. Islamic ideology, fabricated ad hoc by the protagonists of violence, and the manner in which this ideology took control of religious rules, thus offer a privileged view of the symbolic orders through which social cohesion and inclusion were defined. The treatment reserved for the bodies of the dead – their being rendered invisible, their profanation, their exclusion – did not merely follow, reinterpret, or subvert the rules that symbolically and socially ordered public space: it mobilized them in favour of a drive to maintain the order of the Islamic society dreamt of by the state. Or, rather, to produce and maintain a disorder whose simultaneously social and psychological effects, echoed in the private and public spheres, served a government objective: controlling the population.

An economy of silence

As Robert Hertz underscores in his analysis of funerary rites,²⁹ the management of the dead thus connects back to two essential dimensions, which are the position of the deceased in a family and community network, and the maintenance of the symbolic order through the respect of funerary rites. These involve, as we have mentioned, a treatment of the body and a temporality through which the work of mourning for close friends and family develops, along with a resorption of the disorder caused by the intrusion of death into the symbolic order and the social body. The ‘double and painful work of disaggregation and mental syntheses’³⁰ that is carried out through this mourning, that is to say the work of separating members of the community and family from a deceased person, ‘who is too big a part of themselves’ (*‘fait trop partie d’(eux-)mêmes’*) (disaggregation), and reintegrating the deceased member in a symbolic order and a continuity (synthesis), are a condition of the order and continuity of society itself. It is at this sensitive pivot – where affects, symbolic representations, and the social order develop – that the practices of sepulchre-confiscation attack: through them, as Antonius Robben has analysed in the case of Argentina,³¹ the violence deployed on executed prisoners reverberates in concentric circles or produces new effects of

constraint and control over the surviving close family and friends, as well as wider (activist, neighbourhood) social networks. This is what is shown by the testimony of Aziz Zarei, father of a female Mujahed prisoner³² executed in October 1982:

With my body empty, back bent, knees shaking, and mouth dry, I went into the sentencing office and introduced myself. The official handed me an envelope that was already ready and said to me: 'Go to the morgue to retrieve the body, you can move it where you wish.' At that moment, I felt so weak, so powerless, that I couldn't say a word, not even: 'But that poor woman was pregnant!'

... My wife and I went to the forensic doctor's office, ... I told him: 'We've come to ask you to keep our daughter, entrusting her to you while we telephone Shiraz so that one or two people can come help us move the body since the two of us, an old man and an old woman, don't have the means or the strength to do it.'

[He replied] 'Before coming here, I contacted the Sepāh so that they would come and remove the body, which is the only one we have here, since the morgue's generator is broken.'

It was such an oppressive situation for me that I didn't know what to do: I didn't have the strength to move and did not know anyone who could help me. I couldn't even speak. Everything turned dark in front of me: my body shook. My wife sat in a corner like a madwoman, indifferent and shedding tears. I had no other choice but to bury her there in Bandar-Abbas.

... Out of compassion, that man decided to help me. He requested an ambulance, and, with help from the driver, we removed my child's bloodied corpse from the morgue drawer, a sight that left me speechless.... With help from the driver, we loaded the body in the ambulance and set off ... we arrived at the cemetery. The official in charge of preparing bodies asked us to go sit down somewhere: 'We are going to wrap her in a shroud and put her in the ground.' Despite her mother's and her mother-in-law's insistence that they be permitted in the preparation room so they could see their child for the last time, they refused, adding that if the women were insistent, they would not even touch the remains to administer the final preparations since the preparers had not been ordered to do so. As time was short, we gave up our request. Her mother's goal was to find out if her daughter had been killed while she was still pregnant, or if, in one way or another, they had made her abort beforehand. Alas, she could not see her child this final time.³³

Two distinct, albeit interconnected, challenges arose around the treatment of the remains of the executed: keeping certain aspects of state violence secret; and imposing silence on direct witnesses who were the close friends and family of the deceased. In this perspective, the management of bodies was generally organized

according to two factors which determined the location and the manner of burial: on one hand, the option of whether or not to return the remains to the families; on the other hand, the option of whether or not to make the execution visible in the form of a tomb.

Thus, the remains of executed prisoners could be returned to their families: a sum could be requested in order to get reimbursement for the bullets used for the execution.³⁴ The families sometimes had the right to bury their relative in a cemetery section reserved for non-Muslims, as is attested by the story cited above; in other cases, more rarely, they were forbidden to do so, and the remains were then put in the ground by family and friends, on their own, in the garden or out in nature.³⁵

Not only that, the administration could also refuse to return remains to families, as was systematically the case after the 1988 massacre. In some cities, there were administrative efforts to bury the dead individually in cemeteries.³⁶ But in the majority of cases, the evidence of the massacres was erased by refusing to make the executions visible with tombs: the victims were buried in common graves whose location still remains unknown, except for the most significant one in Khavaran.³⁷ This vast, non-Muslim cemetery is separated into different sections allotted to religious minorities – Christians, Baha'i, Jews, and Buddhists – and sits on the side of the road 15 km north of the capital. After the first massacres over the course of the summer of 1981, the prisoners affiliated with the Marxist left were secretly buried in a vast wasteland bordering the Baha'i section at the far end of Khavaran cemetery. They were among the victims whose remains were not given back to their families, and whose death was not marked with the presence of a tomb either. The news concerning the existence of a mass grave in Khavaran gradually spread among the families searching for their deceased imprisoned relatives at the court building. In 1988, this would also serve as the execution site for a large number of leftist prisoners. The bodies were summarily laid to rest there in shallow pits, with their clothing and shoes on. The penitentiary authorities, when they told relatives where to find the deceased, called this place *kāferestan*, the country of non-Muslims, or *la'nat ābād*, the quarter of the damned. As the daughter of a dead woman probably interred there remembered:

We went to Khavaran, but that was not a cemetery there. Everyone knows what a cemetery looks like: there it was clods of soil turned over, mothers in tears sitting on the ground who poured earth over their faces.... We came from Kermanshah, and each time we reached

Khavarán, we saw a woman seated on my mother's tomb. She was from Tehran proper, and was permanently sitting in the same spot. It was customary for families to visit various tombs out of solidarity; later it was gathered that she thought it was her own daughter who was buried at this very spot. One time when we were in Khavarán, this woman showed a piece of navy blue clothing to my grandmother and asked her if her daughter Sousan (my mother) had a garment that colour. It turned out that she had dug in the ground, she had excavated the tomb because she was looking for her daughter's cadaver, and she had found a body that had been decomposing for a year and which was unrecognizable, wearing clothing with this fabric. And no one would ever figure that out.³⁸

Thus, the four cases that we have been able to distinguish (whether the remains are returned or not, whether marking a tomb is permitted or refused) are articulated around an essential issue, the issue of the visibility of state violence. The tomb is tangible and enduring proof of violence. But beyond this trace, whose erasure is at stake, violence's invisibility is secured by also forbidding a network of practices. These prohibitions and confiscations participate in what one could call an economy of silence. In this way, the treatment of bodies demarcates circles of silence around the closed world of detention centres. A part of what goes on there must not filter out, to the families: this is why the bodies of prisoners executed while undergoing torture are not returned to the families.³⁹ Likewise, what families know must not filter out to broader social networks: commemorative ceremonies at home are suppressed and their participants arrested;⁴⁰ those close to the deceased also continue to be kept under surveillance by *komitehs*, to which they are regularly summoned for routine interrogation. These different practices, which coexisted through the 1980s, are connected to the question of the governance of the living by way of the dead. From this perspective, the economy of silence does not rest uniquely on the intimidation of families by force and their psychological weakening through the production of open mourning. It also creates the conditions for a marginalization that results from both the exclusion and the withdrawal of families facing a reality that differs from the social reality shared by the majority: a reality organized around denial, in which the massacres did not take place and the eliminated individuals did not exist.

And so, in the current context, it is of this violent story's very nature to be partly written by rumours and oral testimony. Several of these sources agree that a flood took place at the Khavarán site in 2001. A flood, caused by heavy rains, unearthed several bodies that

had been interred close to the surface. The bodies were reportedly carried by the current all the way to the Buddhist section of the cemetery, whose guardians supposedly claimed that those were gifts from nature there and allegedly took the opportunity to give them decent burials in individual tombs. Neither the Khavaran flood nor the one near Shiraz in 1981, reported in the introduction to this chapter, can be verified today. But these stories tell a truth that matters to us: it is perhaps a matter of hope – promise, dressed in that messianic dimension that makes up the texture of history for Walter Benjamin.⁴¹ It may quite simply consist of a shared fable that sutures the symbolic order upset by confiscation and desecration, and thus recreates the possibility of the continuity of the social: the story of an unleashing of elements, nature's rage, under whose impact the earth itself ends up spitting up the state's secrets, which are – in every sense of the word – poorly buried.

Notes

- 1 The text of this chapter was translated from the author's French by Cadenza Academic Translations.
- 2 My field research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, which I thank for its support.
- 3 M. Noqrekar, 'The cadavers from the communal graves from the 1981 massacre in the riverbed', *Gooya News*, 18 April 2012, available at <http://news.gooya.com/columnists/archives/139248.php> (accessed 20 January 2013). *Gooya News* is a Persian-language paper, and all translations here are the author's own.
- 4 A Sharia judge, the title given to judges of the revolutionary tribunals.
- 5 High-ranking ayatollahs: Mousavi Ardebili headed the Supreme Court, and Montazeri was Khomeini's presumed successor for the office of Supreme Guide.
- 6 Situated north-west of the city of Shiraz.
- 7 A respectful way to address a person who possesses a certain influence.
- 8 Actors in the carceral world would generally use pseudonyms.
- 9 The victims were killed when they were arrested or while being tortured. *Ta'zir* is an Arabic term present in the Koranic source of the law, which means administering strong corporal punishment: the word is used to designate torture in the prison system.
- 10 Noqrekar, 'The cadavers from the communal graves'. Extract reproduced with the permission of Massoud Noqrekar at *Gooya News*.
- 11 It is not possible to attest to the veracity of this story, although it has gained a certain notoriety in the public sphere. See for instance I. Mestaghi, 'A look at the erroneous interpretations of a Ministry of Justice agent in the Islamic regime', *Gooya News*, 10 July 2012, available at <http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2012/07/143359.php>

(accessed 20 January 2013). This is the only detailed testimony gathered from an actor of state violence: the precise view that he offers of the organization of the mechanism of repression and the conditions of collecting testimony leaves little doubt on the position of the witness, a former member of the judicial and security apparatus. With regard to our topic, the question is not the veracity of the testimony, nor that of the figures that it gives, but its verisimilitude, and the mental representations, the cultural institution, and the range of concrete practices that it sets in motion. The latter practices consistently correspond to what the testimonials and scientific works published on this period say. Indeed, these representations and these practices offer us (this is why I have chosen to begin with this story) useful and heuristic angles for approaching the material in the remainder of this chapter, which relies on a field investigation and an archival search that has been underway since 2009. Thus, this testimony is not the basis that I use to draw the analysis that I derive from it; rather, I use it to introduce in a synthetic fashion, around the questions connected to this chapter, a series of observations that have taken shape over the course of the research process.

- 12 See D. Fassin, 'Les économies morales revisitées', *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 6 (2009), 1237–66.
- 13 M.-D. Demelas-Bohy, 'La notion de guerre civile en question', *CLIO: Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés* (online) 5 (1997), at <http://clio.revues.org/412> (accessed 2 January 2013); N. Sambanis, 'Resort to arms: international and civil war, 1816–1980. Conceptual and empirical complexities of an operational definition', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (2004), 814–56; M. Small & J. D. Singer, *What Is Civil War?* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982). There are several factors constantly found in the definitions of civil war discussed in these works: the framework of the nation state, the number of deaths, and the existence of an effective resistance.
- 14 This notion, forged in reference to forms of mass violence in which numerous people are eliminated due to their ideology or political opinion, was discussed in W. H. Moore, 'Repression and dissent: substitution, context, and timing', *American Journal of Political Science*, 42:3 (1998), 851–73; G. Sjoberg, E. Gill, N. Williams & K. E. Kuhn, 'Ethics, human rights and sociological inquiry: genocide, politicide and other issues of organizational power', *American Sociologist*, 26:1 (spring 1995), 8–19.
- 15 This theme has been treated in several analytical works: E. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); S. A. Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); M. Behrooz, 'Reflections on Iran's prison system during the Montazeri years (1985–1988)', *Iran Analysis Quarterly*, 2:3 (2005), 11–24; H. Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005); K. Katzman, *The Warriors of Islam:*

- Iran's Revolutionary Guard* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993); A. Matin-Asgari, 'Twentieth century Iran's political prisoners', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:5 (2006), 689–707; D. M. Rejali, *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); K. Shahrooz, 'With revolutionary rage and rancor: a preliminary report on the 1988 massacre of Iran's political prisoners', *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 20 (2007), 227–61; H. Sorg (C. Makaremi), 'Le massacre des prisonniers politiques de 1988 en Iran: une mobilisation forclosée?', *Raisons Politiques*, 30:2 (2008), 59–87. It is also the subject of a series of testimonials: A. Agah, S. Mehr & S. Parsi, *We Lived to Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women* (Toronto: McGilligan Books, 2007); Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (henceforth IHRDC), *Deadly Fatwa: Iran's 1988 Massacre* (New Haven: IHRDC, 2009); IHRDC, *Speaking for the Dead: Survivor Accounts of Iran's 1988 Massacre* (New Haven: IHRDC, 2010); International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88), *Findings of the Truths Commission held 18th–22nd June, 2012* (Farsta, Sweden: Iran Tribunal Press, 2012); C. Makaremi, *Le Cahier d'Aziz* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011); I. Mesdaghi, *Neither Life nor Death, Volume 3: Restless Raspberries*, 2nd edition (Kista, Sweden: Alfabet Maxima Publishing, 2006); N. Mohajer (ed.), *The Book of Prison: An Ontology of Prison Life in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Berkeley: Noghteh Books, 1998); H.-A. Montazeri, *Khaterat-e Hossein-Ali Montazeri (Memoirs of Hossein-Ali Montazeri)* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2001); G. Robertson, *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran, 1988: Report of an Inquiry* (Washington, DC: Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, 2010); S. Talebi, *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).
- 16 Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, p. 135; IHRDC, *Deadly Fatwa*; International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88), 'List of political mass executions in 1980s', at www.irantribunal.com/index.php/en/resourses/documents/27-list-of-political-mass-executions-in-1980s (accessed 20 January 2013).
 - 17 See articles 32, 34, and 35 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted in 1979 (amended in 1989).
 - 18 The database of the Boroumand Foundation (ABF) documents 138 extra-judicial executions between February 1979 and January 1989.
 - 19 See Agah *et al.*, *We Lived to Tell*.
 - 20 F. Khosrokhavar, *L'Islamisme et la mort: le martyre révolutionnaire en Iran* (Paris: Harmattan, 1995), p. 212.
 - 21 Mesdaghi, *Neither Life nor Death*; Agah *et al.*, *We Lived to Tell*.
 - 22 IHRDC, *Surviving Rape in Iran's Prisons* (New Haven: IHRDC, 2011); Justice for Iran (JFI), *Crimes and Impunity: A Pioneering Report on Sexual Torture in Iranian Prisons* (London: JFI, 2012).
 - 23 The ideological and political construction of the Islamic Republic around a reinvestment of the figure of the martyr, inherited from Shi'ism, took place during the insurrectionary period of 1978–79 as

- much as it did during the post-revolutionary period and the war with Iraq (1980–88), as shown by: M. J. Fischer, 'Islam and the revolt of the petit bourgeoisie', *Daedalus*, 111:1 (winter 1982), 101–25; P. Chelkowski, 'Iran: mourning becomes revolution', *Asia*, 3 (1980), 30–45; J. D. Swenson, 'Martyrdom, mytho-cathexis and the mobilization of the masses in the Iranian revolution', *Ethos*, 3 (summer 1985), 121–49; Khosrokhavar, *L'Islamisme et la mort*; P. Khosronejad (ed.), *Unburied Memories: The Politics of Bodies, and the Material Culture of Sacred Defense Martyrs in Iran*, special issue of the *Journal of Visual Anthropology*, 25:1 (2012), 1–20.
- 24 Testimony from Mohammad-Reza Ashooq, in IHRDC, *Deadly Fatwa*, p. 41, and Robertson, *The Massacre of Political Prisoners*, p. 51. This instance of escape and the name of the fugitive were also mentioned in the memoirs of Ayatollah Montazeri, *Khaterat-e Hossein-Ali Montazeri*.
 - 25 IHRDC, *Deadly Fatwa*, pp. 37, 38, 44; Robertson, *The Massacre of Political Prisoners*, p. 59.
 - 26 H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963); H. G. Kelman, 'Violence without moral restraint: reflections on the dehumanization of victims and victimizers', *Journal of Social Issues*, 29:4 (1973), 25–61.
 - 27 D. Bigo, 'Disparitions, coercion et violence symbolique', *Cultures & Conflits*, 13–14 (1994), 3–16; D. Hermant, 'L'espace ambigu des disparitions politiques', *Cultures & Conflits*, 14 (1994), 118–89; A. C. G. M. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), pp. 339–51; A. C. G. M. Robben & M. M. Suárez-Orozco (eds), *Cultures Under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 48–101.
 - 28 R. Hertz, *Sociologie religieuse et folklore* (1928) (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), p. 71.
 - 29 Ibid.
 - 30 Ibid., p. 79.
 - 31 A. C. G. M. Robben, 'State terror in the netherworld', in A. C. G. M. Robben (ed.), *Death, Mourning and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 135.
 - 32 The organization Mujahedin-e Khalq was the Islamic Republic's principal opposition party. It began an armed struggle in June 1981.
 - 33 Makaremi, *Le Cahier d'Aziz*, pp. 46–9.
 - 34 Testimony from Roya Sadeghi, at the International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88), *Findings of the Truths Commission*, p. 219.
 - 35 Testimony from Esmat Vatanparast, *ibid.*, p. 250. *Le Colonel*, a novel by M. Dowlatbadi (London: Haus Publishing, 2009) (the original version is in Persian, but it did not secure the right to be published), recounts the burial of a young female dissident by her father in the family garden. The story, which unfolds on the night of the burial, excavates this situation as a symbolic representation of the experience of post-revolutionary violence.

- 36 Makaremi, *Le Cahier d'Aziz*, pp. 98–106.
- 37 These facts are drawn from six ethnographic interviews with those close to deceased people buried in Khavaran, twenty testimonials written and entered in the database of the Boroumand Foundation, and forty-three hearings of witnesses before the investigation commissions of the International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88), *Findings of the Truths Commission*, at Amnesty International, London (18–22 June 2012) and the Court of International Justice, the Hague (25–27 October 2012).
- 38 Testimony of Sahar Mohammadi at the International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88), *Findings of the Truths Commission*, p. 295.
- 39 Makaremi, *Le Cahier d'Aziz*, pp. 78–9; testimony from Roya Rezaei Jahromi, at the International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88), *Findings of the Truths Commission*, p. 136.
- 40 The daughter of a female militant executed in 1984 gives this report: 'The first year we organized a memorial ceremony for my mother, they showed up wearing masks and took all the young people gathered there away for an interrogation. For fear of putting young people in danger, there were no more ceremonies organized.' Testimony of Sahar Mohammadi at the International People's Tribunal on the Abuse and Mass Killings of Political Prisoners in Iran (1981–88), *Findings of the Truths Commission*, p. 295.
- 41 W. Benjamin, 'Sur le concept d'histoire', in *Œuvres III* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 427–43.

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