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## Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala

*Religion That Matters*



*Edited by*

Fouad Gehad Marei

Yafa Shanneik

Christian Funke

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## Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters

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*To M., the kindest person I know.*



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# Foreword

*Katja Rakow*

Materiality is an integral part of culture, which is shaped by humans and in turn shapes humans and their experience. “Material culture is part and parcel of human culture in general,” writes Christopher Tilley (2006, 4), an anthropologist and archaeologist by training and one of the foremost material culture scholars of our time. If we follow his argument, then material culture is a constitutive part of religious cultures and life-worlds as well. Consequently, material religion scholars view materiality as fundamental for the expression and experience of religion and thereby as foundational for the study of religion. Understanding the religious worlds people create, inhabit, and experience means exploring how these are materially mediated and how they are embodied and materialized. Anthropologist Matthew Engelke (2012, 9) pointed out that “all religion must be understood in relation to the media of its materiality.” Quite obviously, it includes material *things*, but also less thing-like materialities such as actions, words, sounds, or smells “which are material no matter how quickly they pass from sight or sound or dissipate into the air” (Engelke 2012, 9). All religion is material because it depends on material media – such as images, objects, clothes, food, incense, liquids, spaces, and sounds – but also on the acting, sensing, and experiencing human body engaging the material world the religious actors inhabit. All these materialities – we material religion scholars call them ‘media’ broadly understood – are used to render the sacred tangible to the human senses. Without these materialities that mediate and materialize the more-than-human that various religious traditions refer to as ‘the Sacred,’ it would be impossible to “make the invisible visible” as religious studies scholar Robert Orsi (2012, 147) has put it. The beauty of an icon, the skillful recitation of Quranic verses, the rhythmic drums of a ritual, the smell of burning incense, the gnawing hunger during fasting periods, the exertion during an extraneous pilgrimage, the darkness of a prayer cave or the imposing glory of a cathedral – all these have different material qualities. Space, objects, bodies, and practices work together in mediating divine presence and shaping religious subjects, sensibilities, and convictions.

The re-evaluation of the material dimension of religion happened in the context of a broader paradigmatic shift within the humanities and social sciences often referred to as “the material turn” (Joyce and Bennet 2010, 7). With it came the realization that material things are neither just illustrations of

social facts and relations nor secondary expressions of ideas and doctrines. Developments such as material culture studies, visual culture studies, the anthropology of the senses, and new materialism had a lasting impact on how we study religion. They stimulated new approaches in which material culture, everyday practices, and the body became much more central, such as the study of lived religion and material religion. Similar developments can also be observed in other disciplines and area studies. Islamic studies like religious studies have a strong philological expertise and orientation, but recent publications and volumes – the present volume *Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters* prominently among them – show an active engagement with material approaches and the corporeal and sensual dimension of Islam, in this case Shi'i practices and materialities.<sup>1</sup> The editors and authors of *Religion That Matters* engage various aspects of Shi'i materialities ranging from the visual to the sonic dimension, looking at religious things and corporeal regimes, and how affect and emotion play out in the encounter and engagement of religious materialities in devotional, ritual, and memorial practices. This broad interrogation and analysis of Shi'i materialities places the volume squarely in the field of material religion studies. In this regard, the present volume differs from other edited works that focus on specific material aspects of Islam or the more thing-like quality of materiality – for example the (devotional) object (e. g., McGregor 2020; Bigelow 2021). The volume covers a much broader terrain of materiality, what religious actors do with material things, and which effects such “human-thing entanglements” (Hodder 2011) have on the religious actors, their communities, or the social contexts in which they happen. The contributions address different religious materialities (grave soil of more-than-human figures, holy water, foodstuff, religious images, statues, etc.) and how these mediate *praesentia* – as the editors have put it in their introduction; but they also discuss how religious materiality is entwined in processes of boundary making and identity politics *vis-à-vis* a dominant religious or political other. Other chapters tackle how certain materialities and related practices are contested or how materiality plays into contestations of memory cultures, officially sanctified and authorized narratives of events, and commemoration practices, and how such configurations play out in processes of heritagization. In their breadth and diversity, the contributions show what

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1 For example, see the special issue on *Sensory History of the Islamic World* (ed. by Lange 2022), the edited volumes *Islam Through Objects* (ed. by Bigelow 2021) and *Islam and the Devotional Object: Seeing Religion in Egypt and Syria* (ed. by McGregor 2020), or Natalia Suits' (2020) *Qur'anic Matters* to mention a few recent contributions in the intersecting fields of material religion and Islamic studies.

a material approach to Shi'i Islam has to offer if broadly understood and not narrowly confined to the religious object. With such an approach, the editors connect to recent works in the field of material religion which emphasize the role of religious materiality in the political arena – may it be the formation of heritage, the politics of authentication, identity, or persuasion (van de Port and Meyer 2018).

From the outset, the field of material religion was an interdisciplinary one, in which scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds were brought together by a shared interest in the material aspects of religion (Meyer et al. 2014, 105). With its rich and diverse compilation, the present volume continues the interdisciplinary tradition of material religion studies. Among the contributors we find scholars from Islamic studies, Iranian studies, art historians specialized in Islamic art or architecture, and anthropologists working in different Shi'i communities. The title of the volume – *Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters* – is programmatic, as it includes diverse geographical contexts beyond the Arab world and ritual repertoires and practices including but also going beyond Muharram rituals. A focus on materialities tallies well with such a program, as it allows the editors and authors to explore and highlight the diversity and richness of Shi'i religious life worlds and practices across various regions. It was the editors' intention to probe "into the real, material world of Shi'ism in order to understand how Shi'i Islam appears and becomes tangible in the world and how it is lived and experienced through material cultures and forms of religious expressivity" (Marei and Shanneik this volume). The contributors were invited to "investigate the somatic, corporeal, and visceral experiences instantiated by material things" and to not just simply ask "what things *mean* or *symbolize* but also what they *do* in and to their socio-political ecosystems" (Marei and Shanneik this volume). The volume does not intend to present a uniform picture of Shi'i Islam nor what kind of materiality Shi'ism might share in all its historical instantiations and localities. The volume takes materiality in its complexity and diversity as the central entry point to Shi'i religious life worlds, practices, and experiences without claiming to provide a complete and full representation of everything that could be said about Shi'i materialities – how could that ever be accomplished in one single volume given the multiplicity of materiality and its centrality to human culture and experience in general? The programmatic introduction and the twelve chapters provide a rich landscape for the reader to traverse and demonstrate that Shi'i materiality is neither incidental nor something solely belonging to "folklore" or "popular religion." Rather, each chapter is a material witness to the fact that materiality rests at the heart of Shi'i Islam due to its "capacity to (inter) mediate between human and more-than-human beings" as the editors state in

their introduction (Marei and Shanneik this volume). With such a vision, the editors point to the heart of the matter of what the material religion approach stands for, namely taking materiality serious as the *sine qua non* of not just of Shi'i Islam, but religion and religious practice in general.

All contributions clearly demonstrate the centrality of materiality in its diverse and varied forms and expressions in Shi'i Islam, and by that, they demonstrate the centrality of materiality for religious cultures more generally. In the future, there is still more ground to be gained by studying the use of non-religious materialities in religious contexts, and some of the contributions are already moving into that direction (e. g., the chapter on religious statues in Kuwait and the repurposing of Halloween hands in those statues; or the chapter on the uniforms of fallen soldiers, which acquire a religious meaning). Such a future direction would mean not solely focusing on clearly marked religious or sacred objects and spaces but also the mundane or profane materialities that are used, re-used, or introduced in religious settings. Another future avenue in material religion studies will be the study of complex material assemblages and the (profane) infrastructures that make religious practices possible (e. g., Burchardt 2019). That means again moving beyond the study of discrete religious objects towards analyzing complex "aesthetic formations" (van de Port and Meyer 2018, 22) and the creation and transformation of religious spaces and atmospheres and the rather mundane techniques and technologies that might involve (e. g., Rakow 2020). Finally, material approaches mean not just studying the outside material world of objects, but also the sensing human body situated in that material world who encounters and engages that world in social and religious practices. A material analysis should ideally include all three aspects.

The present volume on Shi'i materialities brings together interdisciplinary scholarship on Shi'ism studied through the lens of its material, visual and sensual aspects, which makes it a rich conversation partner and meeting ground for researchers working on the intersection of religious studies, Islamic studies, anthropology, and material culture studies.

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## Note on Transliteration

In this volume, scholars and experts from various disciplines investigate the manifestations and transformations of Shi'i materiality in diverse geographical contexts ranging from Norway and Turkey to Albania, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kashmir, Kuwait, and Lebanon. Different chapters use non-English words from several languages, such as Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Albanian, and Turkish. In some cases, the same chapter includes romanizations from multiple languages of origin in the text.

For the readers' ease, a simplified romanization without diacritics for names of people, places, and common terms (e. g., Ali, Muhammad, Muharram, Ramadan, or Quran) is used. Except proper nouns, romanized non-English words are *italicized*.

To allow the reader to correctly identify and research concepts and technical terms specific to certain fields, geographies, or liturgical or theological issues (e. g., *haram* vs. *ḥarām*), diacritics are employed where necessary. We also allowed and encouraged authors to use local spellings or romanizations based on local vernaculars wherever they differ from the standard. For example, chapters from Albania speak about Hysejn and Ehli Beit and not Husayn or Ahl al-Bayt. We encouraged privileging the vernacular, asking the authors to clarify this in a footnote at the first occurrence in their respective chapters.

Finally, we provide dates according to the Gregorian, Lunar Hijri (*qamari*) and Solar Hijri (*shamsi* or *khoshidi*) calendars, as deemed necessary by the authors. Respectively, these year notations are indicated by CE for the Common (or Current) Era, AH for Anno Hegirae, and AHsh for Anno Hegirae-Shamsi.

# Religion That Matters: Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala

*Fouad Gehad Marei and Yafa Shanneik*

This volume aims to expand the study of the visual cultures, aesthetic dimensions, and materiality of religion by exploring the various ways material objects and somatic and sensorial experiences are represented, lived, and embodied among diverse Shi'i communities. The volume brings together scholars and experts from various disciplines concerned with the material and aesthetic expressions of Shi'i religiosity in the contemporary world. We investigate the manifestations and transformations of Shi'i materiality in the life-worlds of Twelver (Imāmī), Alawī-Nuṣayrī (hereafter referred to as Alawi-Nusayri), Alevi, and Bektashi communities in diverse geographical contexts ranging from Norway and Turkey to Albania, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kashmir, Kuwait, and Lebanon.

Taking as its empirical focus these subbranches of Shi'i Islam, this volume investigates the relationship between religion and material things and less thing-like materialities. Therefore, *Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters* parts with limiting binary oppositions and adopts a vantage point from which to explore a broader array of the articulations of Shi'ism in the contemporary world (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007) instead. It takes as its starting point that "religion [is] irreducibly corporeal and physical" (Meyer 2019, 620) and that its experiences are instantiated through images, bodies and bodily fluids, sounds, smells, shapes, colors, touches, and words; all of which are inextricable from religion itself.

Shi'ism is one of the two main branches of Islam, with about 15 to 20 percent of Muslims worldwide adhering to its various subbranches (Pew Research Center 2009; Amir-Moezzi and Jambet 2018). A defining tenet of Shi'ism is the

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1 Unless otherwise stated, the chapters of this volume use Shi'i, the adjective form derived from Arabic, to denote an attribute of a proper or common noun. For example, this book examines how Shi'i materiality affects Shi'i individuals and communities. We intentionally avoid using (the) Shi'a, a commonplace expression used in English-language scholarship both as a noun and an adjective. Derived from the Arabic noun al-Shi'a, we only use the term, singularized, and capitalized with a definite article, as a reference to the (Shi'i) community, a constructed social category with a particular sociopolitical implication. We use Shi'ism as a noun formation referring to the religious tradition.

doctrinal devotion to the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and his descendants, or Ahl al-Bayt. This devotion informs a Shi'i cosmology which perceives human and world history as one of injustice, embodied and epitomized in the plight of Ahl al-Bayt, especially after the killing of Muhammad's grandson, Husayn, in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. This resulted in a schism between what would become Sunnism and Shi'ism, with the two main branches of Islam disagreeing not only on who would succeed Muhammad after his death, but also on conceptions of religious authority and interpretations of the meaning and function of successorship. While Sunnis understand successorship, or *khalāfa* (caliphate), as the secular and administrative leadership of the Muslim community, Shi'is insist in their conception of successorship, or *imāma* (imamate), that the imam be the best qualified Muslim to interpret esoteric knowledge, limiting this prerogative to the male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad from his daughter Fatima and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Therefore, Shi'is recognize Ali as the first imam and rightful successor of the Prophet Muhammad, followed by his two sons, Hassan and Husayn, and his grandson, Ali (Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn). Referencing various sources and theological-philosophical arguments, intra-Shi'a disagreements over successorship resulted in further divisions, culminating in what would become its three main subbranches: Zaydis (Fivers), who uphold the *imāma* of Ali Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn's son, Zayd (698–740 CE), as their fifth imam, Isma'ilis (Seveners), who uphold the *imāma* of Jafar al-Sadiq's eldest son, Ismail (722–762 CE), as their seventh imam, and Imāmīs (Twelvers), who uphold the *imāma* of Ismail's younger brother, Musa al-Kadhīm (745–799 CE), and his descendants, down to the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi (b. 868 CE).<sup>2</sup>

2 This volume does not examine Shi'i materiality in Zaydi or Isma'ili contexts. This shortcoming can be explained by the fact that most of the contributions presented in this volume are the outcome of panels organized at academic conferences in Germany in 2017 (Akkerman et al. 2018). The authors' research focus reflects the priorities of European scholarship on Shi'ism, which is itself a reflection of the sociopolitical priorities that inform scholarly and public interest in Shi'ism – namely, the demographics of Shi'ism globally and especially in Europe. In other words, considering that the vast majority of the world's Shi'i population adheres to Twelver Shi'ism (which is also the state religion in Iran, the most populous and only Shi'i-identifying nation-state in the world) and that an overwhelming majority of the Shi'i diaspora in continental Europe hails from Middle Eastern and Anatolian backgrounds, European research on Shi'ism has focused on Twelver Shi'ism and the minority Alawi-Nusayri, Alevi, and Bektashi sects. By contrast, a quick review of Shi'i Studies in the United Kingdom demonstrates a noticeable interest in Isma'ili Shi'ism, many of whose adherents hail from South Asian and East African backgrounds and whose spiritual leaderships, community organizations, and educational institutions have had historical ties to colonial Great Britain (Clarke 1976; 1978; Van Grondelle 2009).

While Shi'is recognize and fully accept the unity of God, the Quran as the word of God and Muhammad as His last messenger, they also consider their imams as divinely ordained and infallible, and thus accept their words and deeds as a divine reference point and source of emulation. There is also a strong messianic element in Twelver Shi'ism, which, although shared with Sunni Muslims, forms a much more central tenet of the Shi'i religious tradition. For Twelver Shi'ism, the largest subbranch of Shi'i Islam, with an estimated 85 % of all Shi'is adhering to it (Pew Research Center 2009), this involves a belief that the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, did not die, but that he lives in a Major Occultation, which started in 941 CE, and which will end with his reappearance at the End of Time. In addition to mainstream Twelver Shi'is, "several tens of millions" adhere to its offshoot Alawi-Nusayri, Alevi, and Bektashi subsects (Amir-Moezzi and Jambet 2018, 36), all of which accept the religious authority of the twelve imams but differ in their historical origins and theological-philosophical viewpoints.

Condemned as *ghulāt* (Arabic for extreme or 'heterodox') by both Sunni and mainstream Twelver Shi'i Muslims, the Alawi-Nusayris are a mystical ethnoreligious sect that originated in Iraq and settled in Syria and Hatay Province in southwestern Turkey. The religious group is associated with Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Namiri (d. 883), the eponymous founder of the sect who was not only privy to the inherited esoteric knowledge of the last two visible imams of the Twelver lineage, Ali al-Hadi (d. 868) and al-Hasan al-Askari (d. 874), but also claimed to be the conduit of their esoteric knowledge to future generations (Gallagher, this volume). However, as the term Nusayri came to hold negative connotations in modern times and became synonymous with sectarian and ethnoreligious violence against the community that accounts for an estimated twelve percent of Syria's total population, the community self-identifies with the appellation "Alawi," emphasizing their followership of Ali himself.

Likewise, Alevis and the Alevi-Bektashi order, who share the same appellation – Alawi/Alevi, are considered heterodox, syncretic sects that accept the authority of the Twelve Imams, but which are constituted almost exclusively by the indigenous populations of Anatolia, the Balkans, and their diasporas. While the two terms are often used interchangeably in literature as well as in everyday practice in modern Turkey, it is important to note that Alevis, who constitute an estimated 15% of Turkey's population (Dressler 2008, 281), have a strong tradition of endogamy, making the group an ethnoreligious community. Bektashism on the other hand is a Sufi order dating back to the thirteenth century CE and that it is, in principle, open to converts from other branches of Islam and beyond. Moreover, while Bektashis are a largely urban-ite community, the vast majority of Alevis hail from the Anatolian countryside

(Mélíhoff 2001, 37–44). Both groups share a similar, syncretic belief system, centered around the teachings of Haji Bektash Veli (1209–1271 CE), and both draw extensively and openly on the various religious traditions that the Turkish tribes of Central Asia and Anatolia have encountered over the centuries, including Buddhism, Shamanism and Zoroastrianism (Norris 1993, 98–99; Kaya 2016). In terms of communal organization and religious authority, Alevi remain a largely de-centralized group, with *babas* (elders) initiated from within the community itself. The community is also known for its secular tendencies and allegiance to Kemalist and secular-republican nationalist ideologies following the foundation of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923 (Dressler 2008). By contrast, the Bektashi order adopts a canonized set of ritual practices and a discernible lineage of religious and spiritual leadership of *babas* led by the *dedebaba*, a World Leader (Kryegjysh), of the global community of Bektashis. Unlike the Alevi, the Bektashis decried restrictions imposed upon freedom of worship by the Turkish state, eventually moving their headquarters to Albania in 1925 (Kaya 2016; Kuehn, this volume).

Significant research has been done on Shi'i ritual practices (Aghaie 2004; 2005; D'Souza 2014), their transnational dimensions (Scharbrodt 2018; Shanneik 2022), and their political functions and aesthetic representations (Shanneik 2015; Funke 2017; Marei 2020). This volume expands this scholarly interest in at least three ways.

Firstly, it decidedly focuses not only on Shi'ism in Iran and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, but also in diverse geographies beyond the Middle East and Muslim-majority contexts. It thereby makes an important contribution to the study of Shi'ism in less explored demographical and geographical contexts and contributes to the study of Shi'i communities in the diaspora (Flaskerud 2014; Dupret et al. 2016; Shanneik 2017; Esposti 2018; Scharbrodt and Shanneik 2020; Marei and Shanneik 2021). In doing so, we shift the focus of Shi'i studies beyond the scope of area (e. g., Iranian and Middle Eastern) studies, and we identify new conceptual and empirical issues. Moreover, we position the study of Shi'i materiality in conversation with broader debates in the interdisciplinary fields of material religion, cultural memory, Islamic studies, religious studies, and the anthropology and sociology of religion.

Secondly, the contributions in this volume examine Shi'i religious experiences beyond the Muharram<sup>3</sup> period of ritual mourning. By (over-)emphasizing

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3 Muharram is the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar. The Tenth of Muharram, or Ashura (*āshūrā*), marks the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn, in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. For Sunni Muslims, Ashura also marks the Crossing of the Red Sea and the Exodus of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt.

Muharram rituals, which commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in the Battle of Karbala, scholarship has largely overlooked Shi'ism's much richer repertoire of ritual practices and cultures. In addition to Muharram, Shi'is observe rituals shared by Muslims across the sectarian divide, including the holy fasting month of Ramadan, Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Power), which marks the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad, and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, to name but a few. Shi'is also commemorate several religious occasions associated with the hagiographies of Ahl al-Bayt. For example, during the Fatimid Nights (al-Layālī al-Faṭīmiya), Shi'is mourn the death of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, in 632 CE, and recount what they believe to be an injustice done to her by her husband's antagonists in the struggle for succession. Also punctuating the Shi'i liturgical calendar are festive celebrations of the birthdays of the Prophet (Mawlid an-Nabī) and his descendants, mournful commemorations of their deaths, pilgrimages to their shrines (*ziyāra*),<sup>4</sup> as well as Eid al-Ghadir, the feast commemorating Muhammad appointing Ali as his successor. Twelver Shi'is also observe rituals associated with al-Mahdi, the twelfth and final imam and awaited messiah, whom they believe went into a Major Occultation in 941 CE. These include the night of Nisf Sha'ban (Niṣf Sha'bān), which marks the birth of al-Mahdi, in addition to rituals specific to places and relics associated with his life, Occultation, purported apparitions, and his awaited reappearance at the End of Time. Shi'i mosques and community centers also host weekly rituals of sung prayer and supplication as well as socioreligious rituals, such as weddings and funerals.

In addressing this lacuna, the chapters of this volume analyze the materiality of several non-Muharram rituals, including ritual *ziyāra*, (Gallagher; Gruber), the Mawlid an-Nabī (Weinrich), Nisf Sha'ban (Hamdani), and talismanic *tabarruk* (seeking blessing) from the grave soil of Imam Husayn (Gerami and Syed). We also examine rituals not directly related to the veneration of Ahl al-Bayt, such as the ritual washing of the fallen soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and veneration at war memorials dedicated to the martyrs (Chavoshian), eulogies honoring their martyrdom (Aras), practices and attitudes towards dowry (*mahr*) among diasporic Shi'is (Bøe), and the *zur-khane*, an Iranian male athletic activity guided by the recitation of prayers and supplications (Flaskerud).

4 Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca include the Hajj (*hajj*), which is performed on specific days of the year, and which constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam, as well as the *umra*, which can be performed year-round. In addition, Muslims undertake other 'lesser' pilgrimages, known as *ziyāra*, or visitation, to a great number of shrines. *Ziyāra* also refers to special prayers recited as a form of supplication to revered saintly figures. For more on non-Hajj pilgrimages, see Surinder Bhardwaj (1998), Sylvia Chiffolleau and Anna Madœuf (2005), and Babak Rahimi and Peyman Eshagi (2019).

By examining these diverse aesthetic and multi-sensorial expressions of Shi'i materiality, this volume offers a rich exploration of a broad range of Shi'i and human religious experience and forms of religious expressivity.

Thirdly, while we deliberately de-center Muharram rituals, we recognize the significance of 'the Karbala paradigm' in the much broader repertoire of festive and mournful Shi'i ritual practices. This paradigm refers to a creedal "master narrative" (Connerton 1991) that conjures the hagiographic memory of the Battle of Karbala to "provide models for living and a mnemonic for thinking about how to live" (Fischer 1980, 21). However, this volume transcends (over-emphasized) dualisms such as quietism and activism or accommodation and revolution (Keddie 1983) – dualisms which have guided (but also limited) the scholarly study of Shi'i politics and religion since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Instead, *Religion That Matters* complicates our understanding of the entanglements between Shi'is' perception of injustice and persecution as epitomized by Husayn's martyrdom in Karbala and their broader array of religious life-worlds and worldviews. For example, it is not uncommon for Shi'is observing the Fatimid Nights to imaginatively 'recount' how Fatima (would have) lamented her son's martyrdom in Karbala even though her death predated that of Husayn by almost half a century (Marei 2020). Shi'is will also conjure the tragedy of Husayn in their festive celebrations of Eid al-Ghadir and Nisf Sha'ban, linking thereby Husayn's killing with the promise of salvation and redemption. Essentially, by conjuring Karbala in such a versatile manner, Shi'is articulate a creedal master narrative that is transformed into a lived, performed, and embodied experience through its deconstruction and thus the (re) construction of several contextually and culturally constituted sub-narratives (Marei and Shanneik 2021). This blurs the boundary between hagiographic pasts and eschatological futures, and emplots Shi'is in a preordained human and world history (Marei 2020; Aras, this volume) through processes that are instantiated by material things and less thing-like materialities.

## 1 Religion and Materiality

Religion and materiality, however, have been locked in a puzzling antagonism. Modern religion has tended to "privilege belief over objects and practices, and spirit over matter" (Meyer 2009, 10), relocating thereby the sacred to the self (van der Veer 2008; Aupers and Houtman 2010). This echoes a modernist dualism between outward cultural form and inner self, according to which form is inferior to substance and meaning (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2001; Engelke and

Tomlinson 2006). Despite their widely differing motives and methods, religious modernists and staunch atheists converged over this antagonistic duality. On the one hand, atheists upheld that “matter is all there is” and mobilized materialism in a crusade on religion (Houtman and Meyer 2012, 1). On the other hand, modern religious movements emphasized belief, meaning, and reason and demoted the material and aesthetic dimensions of religion (Chidester 2000; Keane 2007; Meyer 2009). Outward-oriented and ritualistic expressions of religiosity were considered “aberrational behavior” (Styers 2004, 70) or branded as “inferior, superficial, or even insincere” (Houtman and Meyer 2012, 1).

This binary resonated especially well with transcendentalist and monotheistic religious traditions and movements that seek to uphold apophaticism (*tanzīh*) by “tugging the nature of the Divine as far away from our normal concept of a person as it is possible to get” (Strathern 2019, 49). By ‘spiritualizing’ religion, these movements interiorized religion, inadvertently making it more compatible with a secularized and increasingly disenchanted public sphere. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (2012, 2) argue that this “makes us blind to how religion appears and becomes tangible in the world” around us.

Emphasizing the shortcomings of this binary viewpoint and demonstrating that “*a priori* separations between humans and nonhumans [are] difficult to sustain” (Hazard 2019, 629), the material-cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences invites us to inquire into the power of things and less thing-like materialities, examine what religious actors do with material things, and understand how “human-thing entanglements” (Hodder 2011) shape religious experience and life-worlds. The consequent development of a semiotically oriented interest in material culture coincided with an epistemological shift triggered by the tribulations of the modern era and a crisis of faith in the “ideological quasi-religious project” of secular modernity (Kyrlezhev 2008, 25). Marking the advent of a reenchanting, re-mystified post-secular age,<sup>5</sup> this transformation entailed an intellectual recognition that nonhuman and not-quite-human bodies, forces, and forms are not passive objects but that they wield generative powers and agential capacities (Bennett 2010). Proponents of this new-materialist viewpoint argued for an understanding of ‘things’ as actants with trajectories, propensities, and volitions of their own, and demonstrated that they can impede or block the designs of humans and that their agency is irreducible to human actions and relations alone (Gell 1998; Latour 1999; 2005; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010).

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5 On post-secularism, see A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (2005), Jürgen Habermas (2005), and Aleksandr Morozov (2008).



By interrogating and bracketing the assumed uniqueness of man in the eyes of God (Bennett 2010, ix), new materialists emphasize the vitality of things. Instead, they map out an intellectual space where sociopolitical ecologies are redefined from a post-/ non-secular and post-/ non-anthropocentric perspective (Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Bubandt 2018). This embeds humans in what David Abram calls a 'more-than-human world' (Abram 1997) and takes non-human presences and actors more seriously. From the methodological point of view, this behooves us to break with the figurative sociology stance that privileges the symbolic above other modes of experience (Latour 2005, 54; Meyer 2009, 6). Thus, we ask not only what things *mean* or *symbolize* but also what they *do* in and to their sociopolitical ecosystems. Empirically, we understand this as an invitation to investigate the somatic, corporeal, and visceral experiences instantiated by material things and less thing-like materialities.

In pursuit of this, *Religion That Matters* probes into the real, material world of Shi'ism to understand how Shi'i Islam appears and becomes tangible in the world and how it is lived and experienced through material cultures and tangible forms of religious expressivity. In other words, this volume is not only a rich and diverse exploration of materially mediated Shi'i religious practice and piety, but also a meeting ground for researchers at the intersection of religious studies, Islamic studies, anthropology, and material culture and heritage studies. It takes as its starting point an understanding that the things and less thing-like materialities examined in the following chapters are not only a manifestation and expression of Shi'i Islam, but as ways with which Shi'i Muslims render the Sacred tangible to the human senses, and "make the invisible visible" (Orsi 2012, 147).

Therefore, we present this introduction as a programmatic intervention which capitalizes on the various resonances and dissonances between the contributions presented in this volume to sketch an intellectual space for the material study of Shi'ism, Islam, and religion more broadly. More specifically, we locate our scholarship at the intersection of three intellectual trends: material religion, new materialism, and post-anthropocentrism. We take on board Birgit Meyer's (2019) invitation to explore the synergies between the study of material religion and new materialism. We also share Amira Mittermeier's feeling that "there is too little Islam" in Islamic studies and anthropology of Islam (Mittermeier 2012, 250) and that, by focusing on modern piety movements and tropes of self-cultivation, scholars and students of Islam have neglected other modes of Muslim religiosity. *Religion That Matters* therefore contributes to a scholarship intent on exploring a broader array of religious experience while also answering Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to "account for

the involvement of gods, spirits and supernatural agents as actors alongside humans” (Chakrabarty 2008, 11) in religious life-worlds.

## 2 Towards a Shi‘i Materiality

Key to the constitution and experience of Shi‘i life-worlds are processes of heritage-making, or heritagization, whereby Shi‘is engage in socioreligious practices aimed at reviving the heritage of Ahl al-Bayt (*iḥyā’ turāth Ahl al-Bayt*). These processes of heritagization pervade various aspects of the religious and cultural lives of Shi‘i Muslims, who represent, reenact, and embody the hagiographies of Muhammad’s household. This is achieved through emotive and somatic expressions of devotion and veneration, which assume various tangible and intangible manifestations. These forms of religious expressivity are articulated and experienced in private, semi-private, public, and digital settings and spaces, the boundaries between which are immensely porous.

Birgit Meyer and Mattijs van de Port argue that “what makes heritage stand out, is the self-conscious attempt of heritage makers to canonize culture [and] to single out, fix and define particular historical legacies as ‘essential’ and constitutive of the collective” (Meyer and van de Port 2018, 1). The materiality of this heritage manifests itself in various *Erinnerungsorte* (Nora 1989), such as the shrines and sacred places associated with the lives and deaths of the imams, material objects (e. g. relics, artefacts, paintings, statues), liturgy, poetry, theatre, fiction, photography, music, sound, oral histories and narratives, and socioreligious rituals. These tangible and intangible manifestations and the material things and less thing-like materialities that constitute them contribute to the construction and canonization of a collective Shi‘i heritage. Our understanding of heritage here is not limited to physical sites and objects but also to the “affective-sensorial relations” (Rassool 2018, 310) and emotive states associated with them. This “affective heritage” (Waterton 2014, 823–824) allows us to understand how Shi‘is collectively memorialize their hagiographic and historical pasts, expressed through feelings, senses, and aesthetics that materialize Shi‘ism and make it tangible in the world.

The materialization of Shi‘ism is shaped by and shapes the myriad local, translocal, national, and transnational aesthetic expressions and cultural forms. In other words, Shi‘i materiality – or indeed, materialities – are reconfigured by processes of ideation that reinterpret hagiography, eschatology, and theology. Shi‘i materialities are also constantly transformed and reconstituted through processes of localization, globalization, and digitalization. Therefore,

it must be understood as historically situated and thus examined in relation to its historical, political, geographical, and demographical contexts. Moreover, it is important to consider the impact of globalization and new information technologies on Shi'i materiality. These processes and technologies have increased social interconnectedness in unimaginable ways, which in turn has "delocalized [people] from their original cultural milieus for immediate reception and creative re-articulation in new geographical and social contexts" (Gruber and Haugbolle 2013, 11).

Pursuing this, the contributions presented in this volume re-materialize the focus on the real and material world of Shi'i things and less thing-like materialities. Moreover, we open new comparative perspectives on Shi'i materiality across various geographies and subbranches of Shi'i Islam, offering thereby a wider perspective on the development and articulation of global notions and shared expressions that emerge from and are embedded in diverse social and political contexts. Concurring with new materialists, we understand material things and less thing-like materialities in Shi'i life-worlds not only as representations of Ahl al-Bayt and repositories of the meanings and values for which they stand, but also as ways to cultivate intimate connections and experience affective and embodied relations with the *awliyā'*,<sup>6</sup> or the more-than-human beings, that coinhabit Shi'i socioreligious ecologies and ecosystems (Williamson Fa 2022; Shanneik 2023). This requires that we expand on two interrelated characteristics of material things and less thing-like materialities in Shi'i life-worlds – namely, their sacralizing contagiousness and (inter) mediatic potentials.

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6 *Awliyā'* (sg. *walī*), or *awliyā' Allah*, literally meaning 'the friends of God,' refers to Islamic personages who are believed to be exceptionally close to or intimate with God or guided on the mystical path by divine grace (Radtke et al. 2012 [1993]). The term indicates the quality of possessing or being connected to *walāya*, which is understood as "the actual living spiritual power" of "initiation and guidance" (Nasr and Jahanbegloo 2010, 286) or the "ability to interpret the inner meaning of God's revelation to humankind" (Esposito 2016, 334). The quality of *walāya* is therefore considered to be an ongoing link between humankind and the Divine. Muslims believe that it emanates from God Himself and is transmitted to humankind through a series of prophets, culminating in the full and complete *walāya* of the Prophet Muhammad as the Seal of Prophethood. The idea of the *walī* as an heir of the Prophet is a post-Quranic development (Buehler 2016, 1239) with particular resonance among Sufi and Shi'i Muslims. According to this understanding, Muhammad is believed to have transmitted *walāya* to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and certain other companions, from whom it has been transmitted from one *walī* to another, forming a chain of transmission known as the Golden Chain (Shi'i) or Chain of Light (Sufi). Some Muslims also believe that *walāya* and the *baraka* (blessing) associated with it have a sacralizing contagiousness and that they can be transmitted through physical proximity to the relics and objects associated with a *walī*.

### 3 *Tabarruk* and the Sacralizing Contagiousness of Shi'i Things

Many Muslims believe that coming into direct physical contact with sacrosanct objects (e. g., grave soil, holy water, textiles, and relics) has the potential to transfer sacrosanctity and talismanic qualities to the devotee. This is demonstrated in various rituals where devotees seek blessing (*tabarruk*) through corporeal engagements with sacred things; for example, by touching, kissing, or rubbing one's body against them, by circumambulating around them, or by ingestion (see, for example, Meri 1999, 2010; Shanneik 2022).

S.M. Hadi Gerami and Ali Imran Syed (this volume) trace the venerative history of the grave soil (*turba*) of Imam Husayn. In addition to using the *turba* to make prayer beads and clay tablets for prostration, Gerami and Syed discuss other rituals of talismanic *tabarruk*, such as ingesting small quantities of *turba* for curative purposes or to break the fast at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, placing it in the palate of a newborn for blessing, or placing it in the bier or shroud of a deceased to facilitate purgatory. Christiane Gruber (this volume) shows how Alevi pilgrims in southern Turkey also venerate the grave soil of saintly figures. She cites Cemal Şener (1991, 45–46) who describes rituals of *tabarruk* at the shrine of the fourteenth-century Alevi Pir Abdal Musa:

[Pilgrims] stick their arms into a hole located at the foot end of the cenotaph of Abdal Musa and, after making a wish, they remove a bit of sacred soil (*côher*), place it in a handkerchief, and tie it up. The sacred substance can be eaten and is considered effective against aches and pains.

Similar practices can be observed throughout much of the Muslim world and across the Sunni-Shi'i divide. Fouad Gehad Marei has observed pilgrims and visitors engaging in similar rituals of grave-soil veneration in the necropolises of Cairo in Egypt, Qairaouan in Tunisia, and Fez in Morocco, as well as the Bab al-Saghir (Bâb al-Şaghîr) and Wadi al-Salam (Wâdî al-Salâm) cemeteries in Damascus, Syria, and Najaf, Iraq, respectively. For example, he observed pilgrims at the graves of renowned medieval jurist-theologians, Sufi saints, and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad in al-Qarafa al-Kubra, the famous necropolis of Cairo, placing their arms into a hole in the catafalque and, after making a votive wish, remove a bit of the soil to take home to faraway lands for talismanic *tabarruk* (figure 0.1).

Sunni and Shi'i Muslims also venerate holy waters and foodstuffs associated with sacred places or brought back from ritual pilgrimage. A demonstrative example is the water from Zamzam [figure 0.2], a well located 20 meters from the Kaaba in Mecca, which is believed to have sprung miraculously thousands of



FIGURE 0.1 French pilgrims perform grave visitation and grave-soil veneration at the grave of the fourteenth-century Shafī'i scholar and hagiographer Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (1372–1449) in al-Qarafa al-Kubra, Cairo, Egypt  
© FOUAD GEHAD MAREI (2009)

years ago when Abraham left his son Ismail with his mother Hagar in the desert of western Arabia. Zamzam water is believed to have a host of talismanic and curative qualities and is perhaps the most coveted souvenir a pilgrim will bring home from the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Showcasing the capacity of material objects to carry and transfer the sacred through trans-local flows of sacralized material objects (Appadurai 1996), Marjo Buitelaar notes that returnees from the Hajj will customarily throw elaborate homecoming parties upon their return. The returnees will typically invite friends and family to “share in the sacredness brought home in the form of water from the Zamzam well in Mecca and dates from Medina” (Buitelaar 2015, 11). Seán McLoughlin further demonstrates how British Muslims believe in and use Zamzam water not only as a souvenir from the Hajj but also for its purported curative qualities (McLoughlin 2015, 57–58).

In a similar vein, Olly Akkerman shows that the *baraka* of sacred manuscripts containing religious and esoteric knowledge can be transferred through ingestion. In her examination of the treasury of Quranic and sacred



FIGURE 0.2 Zamzam water sold in an Arabic grocery store in Falls Church, VA

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manuscripts of the Bohra Isma‘ili community in Gujarat, India, she notes that the guardians of the Bohra treasury (*khizāna*) believe that the most respectful way to dispose of handwritten manuscripts of sacred and esoteric knowledge “would be to pulverize them and dissolve the ‘sacred dust’ in the water tank of the mosque” (Akkerman 2022, 224–225). Effectively, this means that the material circulation of sacred texts and ancient manuscripts ends with their ingestion by the community of believers, who are thought to receive the blessing and healing qualities of the sacred knowledge stored in these manuscripts and share in the handwork and deeds of the Bohra Dā‘īs<sup>7</sup> who have copied sacred manuscripts by hand for centuries. Similar practices can be observed also among Sunni Muslims in Eastern and Sudanic Africa, where a shaykh or *ḥakīm* (Quranic physician) will instruct patients to drink water mixed with paper with Quranic verses or a *t’awīz* (talisman) written on it, or drink the ink itself, which is washed from a clay or wooden tablet used for Quranic inscription

7 Literally meaning preacher or missionary, the term *dā‘ī* refers to a senior spiritual rank and office in the Tayyibi subbranch of Isma‘ili Shi‘ism. According to the Tayyibi Isma‘ili tradition, the Dā‘ī al-Mutlaq (the Supreme or Unrestricted Dā‘ī) is the highest religious authority in the Imam’s absence.

and learning (Mackenrodt 2011; Nieber 2019). Akkerman posits that the idea behind the practice of ingesting Quranic manuscripts, sacred texts, and talismans is that their blessings and curative powers “will reach the heart of the believer directly, instead of going through the ear [or eye] to reach the brain” (Akkerman 2022, 294). This demonstrates how ingestion elevates the corporeal qualities of religious things over meaning and ideational qualities, which are accessed through recitation and reading.

The sacralizing contagiousness of material things in Shi‘i life-worlds is not limited to touching and ingesting. The transfer of sacredness through corporeal engagement can also extend to include acts of *doing*, thereby rendering the devotional preparation and circulation of sacralized material things a sacralizing act itself. For example, cooking *harīsa* is a commonplace ritual of atonement and *tabarruk* among Lebanese Shi‘is. In the early hours of the morning on the Tenth of Muharram, or the Day of Ashura, Lebanese Shi‘is will customarily cook a pungent porridge of coarsely ground soaked wheat and boned chicken stewed in huge cauldrons. The culinary ritual, which takes place before the mourning ceremonies and public processions, is especially prominent in southern Lebanon, the historical Shi‘i region of Jabal Amil, where even the clergy endorses it as an integral element in Muharram commemorations.<sup>8</sup> Fouad Gehad Marei observed the ritual several times in Nabatieh and the surrounding villages in the period from 2008 to 2016. There, women and children would competitively take turns at stirring the cauldron. Several participants in the ritual explicitly told him they believe they will be rewarded with “the *baraka* of Imam Husayn” for “every stir of the cauldron.” Therefore, like the Bohra Dā‘īs of Gujarat, Lebanese women and children believe that they gain *baraka* by virtue of their handwork – i. e., by making and stirring the porridge. This *baraka* is then shared with their male co-religionists who, by mid-afternoon, will have shed a lot of blood in self-flagellation rituals of *taṭbīr* (figure 0.3). This gendered division of labor and the sharing of *baraka* is especially important as women in Nabatieh are generally discouraged from participating in self-flagellation rituals. In other words, while women and children gain *baraka* by *doing* the porridge, their male relatives receive its sacredness through ingestion. This allows the women to share in on the sacredness of *taṭbīr* by providing sustenance for the menfolk and, later, also by scrubbing the bloodstained stairs of the town’s main *ḥusayniyā* (figure 0.4).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Shaykh Abdel Hussein Sadek, imam of Nabatieh’s main mosque and *ḥusayniyā* by Fouad Gehad Marei (October 17, 2010), Nabatieh, Lebanon.



FIGURE 0.3 Young men receive *harisa* after performing *tatbir* in Mayfadoun, southern Lebanon  
© FOUAD GEHAD MAREI (2009)



FIGURE 0.4 Women scrubbing the bloodstained stairs of the main *husayniya* in Nabatieh, southern Lebanon  
© FOUAD GEHAD MAREI (2015)



In Bahrain, Yafa Shanneik observed how women whose sons or husbands were detained by the authorities during the popular uprising in 2011 mobilized *tabarruk* in the hope of securing their menfolk's release from government prisons. Shanneik's interlocutors said that they believe their menfolk would be released by the intercessory power of Ahl al-Bayt, which they invoked by preparing the elaborate *Sufrat Umm al-Banin*, a meal prepared and offered to conjure the blessings of Fatima bint Husam al-Kulabiyya (Faṭīma bint Ḥusām al-Kulābiyya), Imam Ali's second wife and the mother of al-Abbas, Husayn's half-brother and flagbearer in the Battle of Karbala. Women whose sons or husbands were indeed released are then socially obliged to host another *sufra* as an act of thanksgiving. This series of *sufra*-making is a social activity that generates a communal feeling of togetherness and sociality in the face of perceived injustices inflicted upon Bahraini Shi'is by the government. The *sufra* thus allows women to partake in the resistance against this injustice. Moreover, the *baraka* received by preparing and hosting the *sufra* allows women to reposition themselves vis-à-vis existing political power structures in Bahrain, while also emboldening the women by virtue of their unique access to the intercessory powers of Ahl al-Bayt and their ability to change the course of this-worldly events (Shanneik 2022).

As these examples demonstrate, various Shi'i rituals involve corporeal engagements with material things and less thing-like materialities that are both sacralized and sacralizing. These may include the shrines of the imams, the grave soil of Husayn, relics associated with the life and death of the Prophet Muhammad and Ahl al-Bayt, textiles that have come into physical contact with their shrines and relics, holy water and foodstuffs from pilgrimage sites, as well as mass-produced souvenirs, such as prayer rugs and beads, plastic lanterns, incense, and Islamic clothes. What these materialities share is the affective power and capacity to transfer sacredness from one place to another and from person to person. Considering globalization and mass tourism (including religious tourism), this 'contagious magic' (Frazer 1933 [1922]) explains the expansive flow and circulation of everyday sacrosanct objects that bring home the sounds, scents, colors, tastes, and memories of sacred places and holy days and transfer their *baraka* to families and friends. This sacralizing contagiousness can also permeate the boundary between the this- and otherworldly and the human and more-than-human realms as demonstrated, for example, in rites related especially to death and burial. In such rites, sacrosanct objects will accompany the deceased to the grave or material things will be done in the this-world to conjure Divine redemption, encourage saintly intercession, and facilitate the deceased's passage into the Otherworld and the Afterlife.



FIGURE 0.5  
*Sufra* in Tehran, Iran  
© YAFA SHANNEIK (2016)

#### 4 Intermediation and Imaginal Engagements with the Elsewhere

Such material experiences of religion collapse the distinction between the living and the dead and blur the boundary between human and more-than-human beings. Yousef Meri explores this in his extensive study of the Islamic cult of saints, demonstrating that Muslims do not venerate graves, shrines, and relics as *representations* or *symbols* of saintly women and men, but as hierophanies

and metonymies that *embody* the ‘presence’ of the Sacred (Meri 1999; 2010, 99). Similarly, Richard McGregor posits that Muslims in medieval Egypt and Syria venerated corporeal relics and shrines, believing that “the departed spirit would continue a watchful presence over its body.” Consequently, “the gaze of the pilgrim would reach beyond the physical confines of simple visual observation,” allowing them to ‘witness’ the presence of the saintly being by visually, somatically, and viscerally engaging with the catafalque, shrine, or relic (McGregor 2020, 120–121).

In a similar vein, Mikkel Rytter noted in his ethnographic study of a Sufi relic associated with the Prophet Muhammad in modern-day Denmark, that “obviously a single hair is not identical with the Prophet, [...] it is also not-not the Prophet” (Rytter 2017, 2). This points to what Peter Brown has called the *praesentia* of the sacred, a consequence of the “carefully maintained tension between distance and proximity.” *Praesentia* helps explain why “devotees who flock ... to the shrine of [a saint], to ask for his favor or to place their dead near his grave, are not merely going to a place; they were going to a place to meet a person” (Brown 2015, 88). In other words, material objects such as shrines and relics are the manifestation of this encounter and the metonymy of the Sacred, thus making possible the metaphysical presence of an otherwise absent or invisible sacred.

A quick glance at the rich lexicon and etymology of the Islamic terms used to refer to the shrines of venerated saintly figures exemplifies this. For example, terms like *al-muwājaha*, (literally meaning confrontation with or meeting someone face to face), *mashhad* (place of witnessing), and *maqṣūra*<sup>9</sup> suggest that a Muslim pilgrim *faces* and *witnesses* the (meta) physical *presence* (*ḥaḍra* or *ḥuḍūr*) of the *walī* when they are facing, touching, kissing, or circumambulating around a grave or relic. This blurring of boundaries also applies to the distinction between the Earthly or Thisworldly and the Heavenly or Otherworldly, whereby a specific place or time is considered to belong and

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9 Muslims refer to the golden fence that separates pilgrims from the grave of the Prophet Muhammad in the Great Mosque of Medina as *al-Muwājaha*, an Arabic term deriving from the root *wājaha*, or ‘to face’, alluding to a face-to-face confrontation or encounter between the visitor and the visited. Enclosures made of wood or metal erected around the catafalque of a *walī* are referred to as *maqṣūra* (Arabic for ‘restricted area’). On the other hand, *mashhad* (Arabic for ‘a place or experience of witnessing’, deriving from the root *shahida*, or ‘to witness’) is a more general term used to indicate a site (e. g. mosque or sanctuary) which includes a shrine, grave, or relic of a *walī* or the site where an important event from Islamic hagiography is believed to have taken place (on Islamic cemeteries and funerary architecture, see Ruggles 2020).

exist simultaneously in both realms<sup>10</sup> or is deemed to be a material gateway and bridge between the two.<sup>11</sup>

This recognition that nonhuman material things can act as tangible links between human and more-than-human beings calls for an inquiry that transcends the representational and symbolic qualities of Islamic materialities, probing instead into the “(meta) physics of vibrant materiality” (Bennett 2010, 94). Several of the chapters in this volume explore the (inter) mediatic functions of material things and less thing-like materialities in Shi’i life-worlds, highlighting the possibilities of imaginal and dialogical engagements with the Elsewhere through various material expressions of Shi’ism. For example, Nada Al-Hudaid examines religious statue art in Kuwait. In her chapter (this volume), she argues that not only is statue art considered a form of *khidma* (service or servitude) to Ahl al-Bayt, but that the statues Shi’i artists make are “not just lifeless statues, they become the this-worldly, material hierophanies of Ahl al-Bayt.” In other words, the religiously motivated artforms created by Shi’i women in Kuwait serve as a formula of experience and emotion, allowing devotees to *experience and feel the presence* of Ahl al-Bayt. Chavoshian’s contribution shows that the veneration and fetishization of the bloodstained uniforms of the fallen soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War by washwomen amounts to an “affective consanguinity.” She posits that the uniforms become the material objects that connect the washwomen to the martyrs and the bloodstains become a communicating vessel to the Heavenly realm inhabited by the martyrs (see Chavoshian, this volume).

Complicating this materially realized *praesentia* is the *potentia* associated with material things and less thing-like materialities. Here, *potentia* refers to the affective power and agency of, for example, a shrine, relic, photograph or image, an artwork, or the bloodstained uniforms of the martyrs. According to Brown, *potentia* can assume a “vertical model of dependence,” whereby a devotee is held in a tight and affective bond of devotion and obligation by a material object that acts as a hierophany of a saint (Brown 2015, 118). This

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10 For example, according to a prophetic tradition (*hadīth*), the space between the Prophet’s grave and his pulpit in the Grand Mosque of Medina is considered ‘an [Earthly] paradise that belongs to Heaven’ (*rawḍa min riḡāḍ al djanna*). Pilgrims customarily scramble and squabble to worship in this space, known as al-Rawḍa al-Sharifa (the Noble Paradise), where they believe that they are on Earth *and* in Heaven simultaneously.

11 For example, Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock is built over a rock that is believed to connect the Earthly and Heavenly worlds. It is revered for its connection to Islamic creation and End of Time mythologies as well as for being the starting point of the Prophet Muhammad’s Ascension to Heaven (*al-Mi’rāj*). Therefore, it is considered a tangible, material gateway between Earth and Heaven.

*potentia* can lock human and more-than-human beings in intimate relations that transcend the logics of belief and emulation. For example, an interlocutor of Ingvild Flaskerud's said that she "could connect metaphysically with Imam Ali" through his portrait and that the motif made her feel guided by the Imam in her personal and professional life. Flaskerud argues that, while *potentia* was not believed to be an attribute of the portrait itself, "the motif served to *connect* the viewer with Imam Ali" (Flaskerud 2010, 8). In other words, the motif does not only represent Imam Ali, but it also *embodies* his spirit and fortitude and could thus lock the devotee in an intimate, affective relationship with the Imam. Moreover, far from being a passive object, the portrait in this example wielded an agential capacity allowing it to *act* in such a way that influenced the behavior of other members of its ecosystem, including humans.

The *praesentia* and *potentia* of more-than-human beings in Shi'ism is most compelling in relations of devotion that connect Twelver Shi'is with Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam and awaited messiah. Among the demonstrative manifestations of these relations are the rituals associated with the Saheb al-Zaman (Şāḥeb al-Zamān)<sup>12</sup> Mosque in Jamkaran, on the outskirts of the seminary city of Qom in Iran. The mosque, which dominates the newly expanding village-turned-suburban area, marks the site of a purported apparition of the awaited messiah. In addition to the sacredness of the shrine, a Well of Requests (Persian: *Chāh-e arīzeh*) at the rear of the mosque is popularly believed to mark the precise spot of the apparition. On Tuesday nights, the night of the purported apparition, visitors flock to the Saheb al-Zaman Mosque, pleading to God and asking that He immanentize or hasten the messianic reappearance of al-Mahdi. Some pilgrims will tie supplicatory strings to the bars of the metal grid covering the mouthpiece of the Well of Requests or drop letters with petitions to their awaited redeemer. These acts of votive devotion render the Well of Requests a material gateway and a means of communication between devotees inhabiting the Thisworldly realm and al-Mahdi, who inhabits the realm of the Occult and whose *praesentia* and *potentia* are materially realized at shrines such as the one in Jamkaran (figures 0.6a–b).

The Well of Requests in Jamkaran is a demonstrative example of how time and place co-angularulate with Shi'i materiality to produce imaginal and dialogical engagements with pendant notions of the Occult and the Elsewhere – i. e., the

12 'Şāḥeb al-Zamān,' or 'Lord of [Our] Time,' is a devotional epithet of Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi (b. 255 AH [868 CE]), recognizing him as the final and incumbent imam. Twelver Shi'is uphold the belief that communication between al-Mahdi and the faithful has been severed with the start of his Major Occultation in 329 AH (641 CE), but that he roams the Earth and is sustained by God until his messianic reappearance at the End of Time.



FIGURES 0.6A–B Votive devotion at the at the Well of Requests at Şāḥeb al-Zamān Mosque.  
Jamkaran, Iran

© HADI ALOUSH (YOUTUBE VIDEO [NOVEMBER 24, 2017]. AUTHORS' SCREENSHOT)

realms of *al-Ghayb* (the Concealed or Unseen) and the Otherworldly or, at least, the not-Thisworldly. It is therefore important to note that these material expressions of devotion are not a rare aberration of popular religion, superstition, or folklore, but “regular verbs in a stable grammar of the impingement of the supernatural” (Brown 2015, 108) in human society. Shi’i materiality should thus be recognized for its capacity to (inter) mediate between human and more-than-human beings. As demonstrated by the various chapters in this volume, material things and less thing-like materialities form an integral part of complex Shi’i rituals and devotional aesthetics that realize and materialize the (meta) physical presence of Ahl al-Bayt and establish their agency and affective power in Shi’i ecologies. These include shrines and relics (Gruber; Gallagher), statues (Al-Hudaid), devotional poetry and eulogies and their aural

and sonic dimensions (Aras; Flaskerud; Williamson Fa; also, Marei 2020, and Williamson Fa 2022), photographs and imagery (Flaskerud 2010), and their aesthetic formation (Gallagher; Kuehn; also, Shanneik 2022).

## 5 Ritual Communities and the Politics of Shi'i Materiality

The sacralizing contagiousness and intermediatic potentials of Shi'i materiality have social and political consequences beyond devotion. Tangible and intangible materiality bestows on ritually patterned socioreligious interactions a multidimensionality and bequeath to them an edifying power and profound emotional legitimacy. This makes it possible for pious subjects and publics to hone their "affective-volitional dispositions" or "ways of the heart" (Hirschkind 2006, 9) and attune their "visceral modes of appraisal" (Connolly 1999, 27). Recognizing that, over time, they can produce transposable and lasting dispositions, a wide range of actors in Shi'i life-worlds adeptly enlist material things and less thing-like materialities and their immaterial affects for the spiritual entrainment of the pious Shi'i self and the cultivation of community-oriented values. Moreover, powerful as they are, materially realized engagements with the Elsewhere impel pious subjects into identification with the social group, immerse them in their life-worlds, and mobilize them into social and political action (Marei 2020, 143–144). This is achieved not just by 'assigning meaning' to objects, but also by the various somatic, corporeal, and visceral interactions which emplot pious subjects in the religious meta-narrative and bind them to its – and their – specific time and place.

Several chapters in this volume examine the role of Shi'i materiality in processes of boundary making and cultural differentiation. For example, Amelia Gallagher's contribution demonstrates how the Alawi-Nusayri community in Turkey territorially 'grounds' itself in its geographical and ecological environment. Gallagher examines Alawi-Nusayri devotional visitation, or *ziyāra*, in a small village recently annexed to the town of Samandağ in the Hatay Province in southern Turkey. She shows how the performance of devotional *ziyāra* bonds Alawi-Nusayris to their environment and discusses the role of elements of nature harvested from the surrounding area for healing purposes. These material elements act as identity markers that express the community's shared identity as well as its connectedness to a specific geography and environment. Hatay has witnessed a considerable increase in the construction of Alawi-Nusayri shrines and a noticeable popularity of devotional visitation in the last decade, allowing the community to articulate and claim a right to the ancestral province. In pursuing this, material objects from Alawi shrine culture

are mobilized to distinguish the community vis-à-vis the Turkish state, Turkish ethno-nationalism, and normative Sunni practice.

Similarly, Christiane Gruber's chapter deals with the materiality of Alevi devotion at the grave of Abdal Musa, where Alevis make votive offerings to the elements of nature. Gruber argues that this "represents the rooting and dispersal of saintly presence and power on Earth" and constitutes a form of geopiety with "deep roots in the soil, bespeaking to an age-old, earth-oriented form of spirituality." The dendrological materialities of Alevi devotional *ziyāra* as described by Gruber constitutes a 'deep ecology,' or an ethical-religious attitude that "values nature for its own sake and sees it as ... spiritually vital" (Barnhill and Gottlieb 2001, 1). Informed by this deep-ecological mode of religiosity, Alevis mobilize in opposition against the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and its controversial megaprojects, equating discrimination against Alevis with environmental decimation in the country. Gruber concludes by suggesting that this opens the way for reconfigurations of the Muslim faith in ways that are more attuned to both environmental protection and pluralistic democracy.

Also focusing on the role of material things as identity markers, Sara Kuehn demonstrates how Shi'i materiality is central to processes of boundary making for Bektashis in Albania. She argues that "the symbolic use of material culture" in Albanian Bektashism "speaks to the informed viewer [with] an already existing acquaintance with the ... Bektashi frame of reference." Bektashi materiality is therefore enlisted in a "careful balancing act ... to protect and preserve his community in times of difficulty." The materiality of identity markets allows Bektashis to bond over material things that are intelligible to its members and, often, only to them. Likewise, Gerami and Syed show how the grave soil of Imam Husayn became a symbol of the collective identity of the nascent Shi'i community in its early formative decades.

The chapters in this volume therefore posit that material identity markers are inextricably interwoven with ritualized interactions that act as a medium for the cultivation of affective ties. A process of collective emotional entanglement with various tangible and intangible materialities makes it possible for Shi'is to recognize and identify with each other. By the same token, Shi'i materiality becomes crucial in 'boundary politics,' whereby semiotically discernable identity markers serve as a "particular cultural strategy of differentiation" (Bell 1992, 8) and an "aesthetic of belonging" (Maasri 2012). This conditions the distinction between in-groups and out-groups and the exaltation of 'Us' versus 'Them' – in this case, between followers of Ahl al-Bayt and their Other(s). Material manifestations of Shi'ism thus acquire an affective power, enabling the construction of enchanted publics akin to Abner Cohen's



(1969) “ritual communities” or Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s (2002) “communities of practice”; that is, communities where collective identity, political organization, and social relations are configured around religious narratives, values, and symbols that are captured by and performed in ritually patterned interactions.

This is particularly pertinent in contemporary Shi‘i contexts shaped by sectarianization processes that involve popular mobilization around hyper-politicized religious identity markers (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 4). The role of Shi‘i materiality in sectarianization processes is illustrated by Hakim Sameer Hamdani, whose chapter in this volume examines the Festival of Nisf Sha‘ban (Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban) in Kashmir. For Sunnis and Shi‘is alike, Nisf Sha‘ban commemorates the Night of Atonement (Shab-i Barat), but for Twelver Shi‘is it also marks the birth (*vilādat*) of the Twelfth Imam and awaited messianic redeemer. Hamdani traces the transformation of ritual practices, local traditions, and culinary customs associated with Nisf Sha‘ban in Kashmir. He argues that the influence on Kashmiri Shi‘is of clerics from or educated in the seminaries of post-1979 Iran has resulted in a redefinition of the festival, foregrounding *vilādat* at the expense of *barāt* (atonement). Meanwhile, Kashmiri Sunnis have come under the increasing influence of neo-Salafis, who question the authenticity of Shab-i Barat altogether. Through vivid ethnographic details and rich multi-generational oral-history interviews, Hamdani shows how the material manifestations of the festival – illumination, grave visitation, culinary rituals, and the exchange of foodstuffs and monetary gifts – have been transformed from trans-sectarian festivities into sectarian identity markers that distinguish Sunnis and Shi‘is in Kashmir.

## 6 Materiality and the Making of a Tangible and Intangible Shi‘i Heritage

A consequence of these complex politics of Shi‘i materiality is the construction and canonization of a Shi‘i heritage that can act as a coalescing backbone for the globally and trans-temporally imagined community. Heritage here is understood as “always constructed – invented, assembled, staged and performed – and yet always, in a myriad of ways, consequential in the real world and often experienced as really real” (Chidester 2018, 12). In other words, we understand heritage as an actor-driven *process* relying on assemblages of material and sensory engagements. This process is not only one of meaning-making but also sense-making, and a mechanism of expressing political and social positionalities in “multi-sensual sites” (Waterton 2014, 823–824).

Therefore, 'heritagization,' or the process of heritage making, entails two inter-related aspects: a "politics of authentication" and the "aesthetics of persuasion" (Meyer and van de Port 2018). Of course, authenticity here is not "an essence to be discovered in a particular form of cultural heritage but a quality produced in such a form." Heritagization is thus a process in which heritage "is authorized in specific power constellations" (Meyer and van de Port 2018, 6). We therefore understand Shi'i heritage as a material way of expressing the multi-layered identities of Shi'i communities, reflecting their complex and intersecting local, national, and transnational histories and geographies.

This understanding of heritage-making invites us to ask: What is (and, by extension, what is not) incorporated in Shi'i heritage (politics of authentication)? Who determines what is included and excluded, and what are the appropriate forms and practices to canonize and promulgate this heritage? And: What are the power relations latent in processes of heritage formation (aesthetics of persuasion)? This also invites us to investigate the relation between the various state and non-state, clerical and lay, local and transnational actors involved in Shi'i heritage-making. Furthermore, it calls for a robust inquiry into the impact of globalization, sectarianization, political and socioeconomic transformations, and new information and communication technologies on the construction and canonization of Shi'i heritage, as well as gendered and generational dynamics of heritage making.

For the first three quarters of the twentieth century, the publication of voluminous and seminal encyclopedias, providing a 'comprehensive' compilation of what is and is not Shi'i history and hagiography represented the epitome of Shi'i heritage-making on the transnational and global level. Many of these projects were overseen and realized by clerics acting either individually or under the patronage of the clerical establishment. With the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the consolidation of the Islamic Republic (and the contemporaneous politico-economic and geopolitical transformations that took place), the Iranian state assumed a growing and pertinent role in Shi'i heritage-making nationally and internationally. It sought to promote its activist and revisionist interpretation of Twelver Shi'ism intertwined with its construction of the "just-lived past" – a notion located in between 'history' and 'memory' (Deeb 2008). Pedram Khosronejad has demonstrated how remembering heroic figures has been part of the Iranian cultural landscape since antiquity and that, particularly after the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), war memorials and monuments have been an integral part of Iranian public remembrance culture and heritage formation (Khosronejad 2012). The inauguration of the Islamic Revolution and Holy Defense Museum (*Muze-ye enghelab-e eslami ve defa'-e moghadas*) in 2013 further illustrates how the Iranian state interweaves

the master narratives of the Shi'i faith with contemporary geo/politics, monumentalizing both religion and politics through aestheticized material cultures (Vanzan 2020) and forms of 'warmusement' (Melika 2018).

Moreover, the Iranian state has supported and patronized cultural productions that convey religio-political messages, especially in relation to the Holy Defense, a term used in reference to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and, more recently, the Syrian War (2011–). This entails international collaborations with artists and cultural producers in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, resulting, for example, in the production of films, TV shows, animation movies, and devotional music videos that depict the lives of Ahl al-Bayt as well as modern-era conflicts with Israel, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and anti-Shi'i militants in Syria. Bringing these religiously informed political narratives back to the mosque, influential ritual purveyors associated with the state have been instrumental in canonizing and promulgating liturgies that interweave Shi'i hagiography with the just-lived political pasts and presents of Shi'i communities in Iran and further afield (see Marei and Shanneik 2021, 63–64; Aras, in this volume). These activities are complimented with large-scale investments in the construction, renovation, and expansion of Shi'i shrines in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere (see, for example, Tabbaa 2007; Ababsa 2012; Rizvi 2015, 107–150).

For example, the entrance to the sanctuary of the Sayyida Khawla bint al-Husayn<sup>13</sup> mosque-shrine complex in Baalbek, Lebanon, underwent major reconstruction and expansion efforts in 1995 under the patronage of the Iranian government. The blue-ceramic slab above the entrance states that the renovation took place "with the blessing of *walī amr al-muslimīn* (the Supreme Leader of the Muslims), Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, under the auspices of his representative [in Lebanon], Shaykh Mohammad Yazbek," who dedicate the effort to "the martyrs of the Islamic Resistance and their righteous families" (figure 0.7). Similarly, the Sayyida Zaynab mosque-shrine complex in the southern suburbs of Damascus, Syria, was renovated and expanded in the 1990s with the financial support of the Iranian government and the generous patronage of clerics and devotees worldwide. With its new gold-leafed dome and expanded blue-ceramic courtyards, the complex resembles sixteenth-century Safavid architecture in form and decoration (figure 0.8). Since the outbreak of the Syrian War in 2011, the mosque-shrine complex has been at the center of Shi'i mobilizations against anti-government and sectarian insurgents in Syria.

Lebanon is a particularly interesting example of the dynamic processes of Shi'i heritage-making nationally and transnationally. The country is home to an

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13 Sayyida Khawla is a daughter of Imam Husayn. She purportedly died in Baalbek during the trip from Karbala to Damascus.



FIGURE 0.7 Sayyida Khawla mosque-shrine complex in Baalbek, Lebanon

© FOUAD GEHAD MAREI (2007)

influential Shi'i community, a coterie of activist clergymen with transnational reach, as well as to Hizbullah, arguably the most established Shi'i political movement and socio-cultural and geopolitical actor in the region. Hizbullah and Shi'i clerics in Lebanon have been heavily involved in the construction and canonization of Shi'i heritage, interweaving an 'authenticated' interpretation



FIGURE 0.8 Sayyida Zaynab mosque-shrine complex in Damascus, Syria  
© FOUAD GEHAD MAREI (2009)

of Shi'i Islam with the just-lived past of the Lebanese Shi'i community. This has involved the establishment of museums, amusement and 'warmusement' parks, leisure centers, and monuments that narrativize the 'heritage of the [Islamic] Resistance' (*thaqāfāt al-muqāwama*). Perhaps the most important site materializing this heritage is Mleeta, or the Museum of the Resistance.

Tucked away in the hills of southern Lebanon, Mleeta offers its visitors an opportunity to 'act out' and 'experience' the life of Hizbullah fighters on the frontline. With its tagline, "where the Earth speaks to the Heaven" (*ḥikāyat al-arḍ li-l-samā'*), the war museum employs multi-sensorial curatorial designs. For example, figure 0.9 shows a display featuring a mannequin of a fighter in supplication in a prayer niche carved out in a bunker. The visual display is accompanied by a vintage audio recording of *Du'ā' Ahl al-Thugūr* (Supplication for the People of the Frontline). The supplication, which appears in *as-Ṣaḥīfa as-Sajjādiyya*, a book of supplications attributed to Imam Ali Zayn al-'Abidin, is customarily recited as a prayer and plea for the victory of Muslims on the frontline. The visitor also smells burning incense and hears sounds of gunshots and rocket grenades in the distant background, offering a complete and compelling visual, aural, and olfactory experience. Mleeta is a popular field trip



FIGURE 0.9 Exhibition of a mannequin of a Hizbullah soldier in supplication  
 Mleeta Museum of the Resistance, southern Lebanon  
 © FOUAD GEHAD MAREI (2012)

destination for Lebanese schools, boy and girl scout associations, mosque fraternities, and other youth and civil society groups.

These investments in processes of heritage making are coupled with a carefully cultivated Shi'i ritual culture that employs a purposefully curated configuration of Shi'i materialities, sense-aesthetics, and modern socio-technologies, which coagulate to articulate and promote religio-political paradigms (Marei 2020). This is demonstrated by Ines Weinrich whose chapter shows how Mawlid an-Nabi celebrations organized by Hizbullah to mark the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad employ aesthetic, sonic, and lyrical techniques that articulate and promote a certain Shi'i heritage in line with the party's worldview, its identitarian and ecumenical political motives, and its efforts to sectarianize and de-sectarianize intra-Muslim relations. Moreover, Weinrich demonstrates how Shi'i heritage-makers consciously and skillfully elide religion, politics, and culture. Lara Deeb and Mona Harb argue that this elision reveals "the poverty of the categories of 'religion,' 'politics,' and 'culture' as separate entities in the Shi'i Lebanese context" (Deeb and Harb 2009, 204; also, Harb and Deeb 2011).



FIGURES 0.10A–B Digital screens in the Imam Ali mosque-shrine complex in Najaf, Iraq. Here, the screens are seen displaying the text of *Du'ā' Ahl al-Thugūr* and video footage of Shi'i paramilitaries in Iraq and Syria  
 © FOUAD GEHAD MAREI (2015)



FIGURE 0.11 The inauguration of a monument of *al-Ghadir* in Karbala, Iraq  
 The monument was commissioned by al-'Ataba al-Husayniyya (the Holy Shrine of Imam Husayn) and is dedicated to the orphans of security forces personnel and members of the Popular Mobilization Forces killed in battles against the Islamic State group and other anti-Shi'i insurgents in Iraq and Syria  
 © NON NEWS (YOUTUBE VIDEO [APRIL 29, 2021], AUTHORS' SCREENSHOT)

A similar dynamic can be observed in Iraq, where the clerical establishment, the Bureau of Shi'i Endowments, and the authorities overseeing the holiest Shi'i shrines in the country have expanded their involvement in processes of Shi'i heritagization since the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Monuments and audiovisual displays have been erected in Iraqi cities and shrines not only to venerate Ahl al-Bayt but also to honor the fighters of the predominantly Shi'i paramilitary forces spearheading Iraq's war against the Islamic State group and its affiliates (figures 0.10a–b and 0.11).

## 7 The Contested Materialities of Shi'i Islam

This should not suggest, however, that the state and the clerical establishment are the only or even the dominant actors in the construction and canonization of Shi'i heritage or that their role in processes of Shi'i heritage-making is uncontested. As Amelia Gallagher's and Christiane Gruber's chapters in this volume demonstrate, Shi'i materialities are also employed by Alevi and Alawi-Nusayri communities respectively in resistance to (or at least in dissociation from) the state and normative Sunni practice. Furthermore, Gruber argues that Alevi practices of ritual visitation have increased in the aftermath of the 1993 massacre of Alevi intellectuals in the Sivas province in Turkey and the mobilization of Alawi-Sunni (and by extension Arab-Turkish) tensions since the outbreak of the Syrian War in 2011. Similarly, Sara Kuehn's chapter illustrates how Shi'i materialities at the World Headquarters of the Bektashis in Albania serve as a "symbolic balancing act" to protect the community from erroneous or malicious representations by the Sunni majority and circumvent the restrictions imposed on religious freedom by the communist government.

Shi'i materiality and processes of heritage-making are also a site of contestation between competing modes of Shi'i piety. For example, Sana Chavoshian's chapter probes into the politics of heritage formation in Iran, examining the practices of women who had volunteered to wash and repair the uniforms of the martyrs during the Iran-Iraq War. These washwomen embodied the consequences of the war through not only the bloodstains they washed away but also by bearing the chronic illnesses caused by the chemically contaminated uniforms, including skin and lung diseases and cancers. As such, they view themselves as having actively contributed to the Holy Defense and demand recognition, not only socially but also politically, for their role in the making of Iranian and Shi'i history and heritage. This puts the washwomen and 'mothers of the martyrs' in contestation with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corpse and the Iranian state. Moreover, it questions who has a monopoly to



determine what constitutes ‘martyrdom’ and what should be canonized into the collective memory of the Iran-Iraq War, thereby undermining the domineering state-sponsored narrativization of the war. In other words, the Iranian state’s monopolistic claim over the aesthetics of persuasion is contested by the ‘mothers of the martyrs,’ who construct their own narrative of the war and constitute an alternative process of heritage formation. This act of contestation and even defiance takes place in and around sites erected to memorialize the Holy Defense and venerate its fallen soldiers, such as the mosque and cemetery in Howeyzeh.

The competition between state- and clergy-sponsored and laypersons’ Shi’i pieties in Iran is further exemplified by the various and competing practices that take place in and around the Saheb al-Zaman Mosque in Jamkaran. The messianic shrine has been transformed from an unassuming mosque in the 1970s to an expanded sanctuary by the mid-1990s (Amir-Moezzi 1996, 156–161; Rizvi 2015, 129–134). This reflects changes in the pieties of both state and society in Iran due, in part, to Khomeini’s distaste of the new wave of Shi’i millennialism that accompanied the Revolution (Calmard 2000). However, the shrine witnessed a renewed interest during the 1990s. Vali Nasr posits that it was in fact pious Iranians cynical of the Islamic Republic and disillusioned by its brand of Shi’ism who populated Jamkaran. He argues that the competing pieties practiced “so close to the Islamic Republic’s seat of power in Qom and even under the watchful eyes of Khomeini’s and Khamenei’s portraits” demonstrate that hostility to the Islamic Republic is drawing Iranians towards alternative versions of Shi’i piety rather than towards irreligiosity (Nasr 2006, 219–222).<sup>14</sup>

Further exploring the role of Shi’i materiality in competing modes of religiosity, Nada al-Hudaid’s contribution examines the gendered dynamics of piety in Kuwait, pointing to the role that women play in heritagization through devotional statue-making. Al-Hudaid emphasizes the multidimensionality and porosity of boundaries that determine what is heritage and what is not as well as the relationship between female Shi’i artists “in the service of Ahl al-Bayt” and the male clerical establishment. This gendered focus is further illustrated in Ingvild Flakerud’s contribution which turns to athletic practices interwoven with Shi’i devotional supplication, demonstrating how religious heritage

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14 By contrast, Rose Wellman demonstrates how local culinary traditions and pious acts of sharing food in rural Iran co-angulate with the grand rituals of state power. She argues that this creates convincing concordances between the intimacies of family life and state-sponsored maxims of religiosity and patriotism and infuses the blood of kinship with the blood and sacrifice of the Iran-Iraq War (Wellman 2021).

shapes the cultivation of the male social and ethical self. Contestations of Shi'i materiality is also the focus of Marianne Bøe, who probes into diasporic Iranians' negotiations of the dowry (*mahr*) and its relevance in Shi'i marriage practices in Norway. Here, the practice of *mahr* is regarded as a manifestation of Shi'i-Iranian heritage interwoven with memories and emotions that express a certain form of 'Iranian-ness' in the diaspora. Individual nostalgias and collective memories of the past are articulated in the preservation of an Iranian heritage expressed through *mahr*. At the same time, however, *mahr* is re-negotiated considering new gender relations and the influence of human-rights and gender-equality discourses.

## 8 Religion That Matters: New Approaches to Shi'i Materiality and Material Religion

As we have outlined at the beginning of this introduction, Shi'ism is a religion that emphasizes a human and cosmological history premised on a perception of injustice and persecution as epitomized by the martyrdom of Husayn in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE and the messianic promise of salvation and redemption at the hands of his descendant, al-Mahdi. This messianism, or Mahdism, promises to avenge the murder of Husayn, which is understood not merely as an event from a hagiographic past, but as an embodiment of injustice in its abstract sense.

The chapters presented in this volume demonstrate how Shi'i Muslims experience these cosmological worldviews through practices that are not severed from cultural form, and which do not abnegate materiality. Based on the rich empirical material this volume presents, we argue that material things and less thing-like materialities are necessary and constitutive in the pursuit and *experience* of religious 'meaning' and ethical values and norms. We push this claim further, arguing that the 'meanings' and values that bind co-religionists beyond blood ties and connect them to each other and to the more-than-Earthly are experienced not *despite of* but *because of* material things and less thing-like materialities.

*Religion That Matters* demonstrates that Shi'i materiality can have a sacralizing contagiousness and intermediatic potential, which are instrumental in instantiating somatic, visceral, and sensory experiences. In turn, these are constitutive of the affective ties that bind Shi'is with each other, with their environments, and with the realms of the Concealed and Otherworldly. This vitality behooves us to inquire into the politics and relations latent in material things and heritage-making processes.

In this programmatic introduction, we sought to explore connections between the twelve research chapters of this volume, sketching out new directions in the study of Shi'i materiality and material religion more broadly. In doing so, we proposed frameworks and conceptual tools, which may not necessarily reflect or correspond to the prepositions of each author, but which explore resonances and dissonances between them as well as in the broader disciplinary fields.

## 9 Organization of the Volume

This volume is organized in three parts. In the first part, contributions that examine the sensory experience of Shi'i materiality are presented, featuring chapters that evolve around the ocular/visual and aural/sonic expressions of Shi'i materiality: Sara Kuehn's chapter examines the display of religious objects at the World Headquarters of the Bektashi community in Tirana, Albania. She provides a rich insight into the semiotics of Bektashi materiality and the visual messages the community's leadership communicates through paintings and religious paraphernalia, and argues that the aesthetics of the ceremonial and ritual halls of the World Headquarters communicate various literal and hidden meanings targeting the out-groups and the initiated in-groups respectively. Stefan Williamson Fa's contribution examines the production, use, and function of audio recordings among Azeri-Turkish Twelver Shi'is in Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan. His study engages with debates on the use of new media technologies in religious devotional contexts and the new forms of sociability that have thus emerged. He argues that communities are produced through alternative spacio-temporal domains that transcend individualized devotional spaces. This allows for the multi-production of transnational aesthetic orality and the fusion of diverse devotional sounds, thereby creating sonically imagined communities that transcend the physical ritual space. Ines Weinrich focuses on the aesthetic forms articulated and staged audiovisually in the *mawlid* celebrations organized by Hizbullah in Lebanon. She argues that Hizbullah employs Islamic materiality and sensory affect to appeal to its supporters within and across the sectarian divide. She analyzes the lyrical and sonic repertoire presented during the celebration, revealing confluences with Sunni *mawlid* celebrations observed during the same timeframe in Syria and Lebanon, thereby feeding into the party's politics of de-sectarianization and Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement. She concludes that Hizbullah employs various aesthetic forms to present itself in its plurality: Lebanese, Shi'i, but also pan-Arab and pan-Islamic. Also focusing on lyrical and sonic form, Maryam

Aras examines wartime eulogies during the Iran-Iraq War. She focuses on the famous eulogy reciters of the 1980s, whose recordings served as soundtracks for state-sponsored documentaries aimed at promoting the war effort and the 'Culture of the Frontlines' (*farhang-e jebhe*). Aras contrasts the 'classical' forms employed by these reciters with more recent forms of commemoration rituals, which she describes as 'pop-panegyrics.' She argues that this new Shi'i soundscape is part of a new, hybrid sonic materiality aimed at the Iranian youth.

In the second part, the authors examine the relation between forms of Shi'i materiality and gender. Sana Chavoshian examines how washwomen during the Iran-Iraq War experienced 'unadmitted martyrdom' and cultivated a sense of intimate, motherly attachment to the martyrs, one that is not recognized nor revered by the Iranian state. She shows that – by revering the fetishized uniforms and the sites of the wartime washcenters in southwestern Iran – these women reclaim their contributions to the war effort. This puts the washwomen at odds with the government agencies that claim a monopoly over narrativizations of the war and memorializations of its martyrs. Ingvild Flakerud focuses on the *zūr-khāneh*, a ritualized athletic activity practiced by men in Iran. These exercises allow for the cultivation and entrainment of a male ethic guided by recitation of prayers and supplications. Flakerud observes four dimensions of material culture at the *zūr-khāneh*: corporeal practice, architecture, lyrical text, and image. Using a material approach to Islamic social ethics, she examines how these four dimensions co-angulate to shape the male social and ethical self. In her chapter, Nada Al-Hudaïd examines the production of devotional statue art by Shi'i women in Kuwait and the organization of workshops and art exhibitions as a form of *khidma*, or service to Ahl al-Bayt. She demonstrates how this practice allows female Shi'i artists to accumulate social capital and gain agency in a gendered practice of Shi'i piety. In the fourth chapter, Marianne Bøe examines the meaning, function, and usage of symbolic forms of *mahr*, or dowry, by diasporic Iranians in Norway to negotiate and reconcile their diasporic identity and nostalgia with tropes of gender equality and a distaste for patriarchal marriage practices.

The third part of this volume focuses on the role of sacred objects in Shi'i life-worlds. S.M. Hadi Gerami and Ali Imran Syed's chapter traces the origins of the talismanic veneration of the grave soil (*turba*) of Imam Husayn in the formative years of Shi'ism, linking it to the emergence of a collective Twelver Shi'i identity during the era of the fifth to the eighth imams. Focusing respectively on the Alawi-Nusayri and Alevi communities in southern Turkey, Amelia Gallagher and Christiane Gruber demonstrate how ritual grave visitation connects the two communities to their environments as well as their geographical 'homelands,' thereby distinguishing them from normative Sunni practice and

state policies in Turkey. Finally, Hakim Sameer Hamdani traces in his chapter the transformation of the material manifestations of the festival of Nisf Shaʿban among Kashmiri Muslims. He shows that ritual illumination, local foodstuffs, gift-giving practices, and even forms of greeting and salutation, which were once shared by Sunnis and Shiʿis in Kashmir, have been transformed into identity markers that distinguish Sunnis and Shiʿis in Kashmir. He posits that this reflects the broader Sunni-Shiʿi rift in Kashmir and beyond and the de-localization of Sunni and Shiʿi practices, guided by the transnational reach of Shiʿi clerics educated in Iran and Iraq and the global influence of neo-Salafi ideas and movements on Kashmiri Sunnis.

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**PART 1**

*The Visuality and Aurality of Shi'i Materiality*





# The Literal and the Hidden

## *Some Bektashi Religious Materialities*

*Sara Kuehn*

Since the gathering of Eternity, we are Shi'a.  
Here, making this confession yet again, we are Shi'a.

Unidentified Bektashi poet<sup>1</sup>



Driving uphill through a maze of narrow streets in the northeast of Tirana, Albania, the visitor reaches the imposing stone gate leading into the compound of the World Headquarters (Kryegjyshata)<sup>2</sup> of the Bektashis, an Albanian Sufi order.<sup>3</sup> Set against snow-capped mountains on the horizon, the central rectangular concrete building houses the main Sufi lodge (*teqe*; Turkish *tekke*), which includes the Bektashis' main ritual hall (*mejdani*). It is flanked on the one side by a guesthouse and on the other by the tombs (*tyrbes*; Turkish *türbes*) of charismatic Bektashi authorities.<sup>4</sup> On important Bektashi holidays, such as Sultan Nevruz on March 22 (a public holiday in Albania since 1996 commemorating the New Year and the birthday of Imam Ali) or the Day of Ashura, crowds of visitors from all over Albania and abroad come to pay their respects. These are days of intense diplomatic activity, and the Dede Baba Haxhi Edmond Brahimaj (b. 1959), world leader (*Kryegjysh*) of the Albanian Bektashis since 2011, receives dignitaries, foreign diplomats, and religious and political leaders from around the world.

1 See Hüseyin Abiva (n. d.); cf. John Kingsley Birge ([1937] 1994), 132.

2 Unless otherwise noted, transliterations and translations of non-English words in this chapter are from the modern Albanian.

3 On the Bektashi community in the Albanian-speaking world, see Nathalie Clayer (1990); Hasan Kaleshi (1980, 9–15); Albert Doja (2008); and Liliana Mašulović-Marsol (1995, 339–368).

4 In the Bektashi hierarchy, these comprise religious leaders, known as *babas* (Turkish, literally, 'father'; usually referring to the head of a *tekke*) and dervishes (fully initiated individuals who serve in a *tekke*).

While access to the *mejdán* is reserved for initiated members only, the space in which important visitors from outside the community are officially received offers an insight into Albanian Bektashi religious materiality (Rosler et al. 2013, 10–37)<sup>5</sup> and its symbolic meanings and ideas (Ortner 1973, 1338–1346).<sup>6</sup> Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo from 2011 to 2013 and in the summer of 2019, as well as material evidence collected in Albanian Bektashi communities, this chapter explores the ways in which Albanian Bektashis utilize material elements (including objects, illustrations, and costumes) to create complex and nuanced modes of religious expression. In doing so, I aim to shed light on their visual codes and aesthetic rhetoric. Like Webb Keane (1997, xiv; 8), I understand these representations as religious ‘practices’ situated “at the unstable boundary at which the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘material’ meet.” Drawing on recent methodological tendencies inspired by the ‘material turn,’<sup>7</sup> I consider “material things and practices as symbols to be interpreted for the religious meanings they carry” (Hazard 2016, 59; also, Geertz 1973). In this chapter, I ask: What type of symbolic ‘things’ does the visitor encounter in the carefully choreographed ‘public’ meeting space of the Kryegjyshata? What kinds of aesthetic forms – “the skin of religion,” to use the words of Brent S. Plate (2012) – of Bektashi Shi‘i belief and piety were selected to generate meaning here? And how are these contextually contingent material expressions conceived by visitors?

The pictured narratives displayed in the reception room in the Kryegjyshata provide an important resource for the material communication of contemporary Albanian Bektashis’ religious conceptualizations. The room is dominated by four large – hitherto unpublished – oil paintings that express fundamental ideas of Bektashism and signal past and present religio-political ‘alliances.’ This material ‘public engagement’ will be discussed in terms of a hermeneutic perspective that is central to Albanian Bektashi teachings, based on a distinction between exoteric and esoteric levels of thought. Appearances in the material world (*zahir*) have other meanings in the spiritual realm, which can be deciphered by reference to esoteric teachings (*batin*) that are revealed only to a closed circle of initiates. The organically interrelated discursive dimension between the visible and the hidden in the religious teachings allows us to

5 I read the terms ‘material culture’ and ‘materiality’ in a broad manner as referring to elements of culture – in this case objects – that are materially embodied.

6 Building on Sherry Ortner (1973), I refer to ‘symbols’ as instruments that assist us “to compound and synthesize a complex system of ideas,” serving as “vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas.”

7 On the concepts of ‘religion’ and the different kinds of ‘mediation’ in ‘the turn,’ see Matthew Engelke (2010, 371–379).



FIGURE 1.1 Reception room at the World Headquarters (Kryegjyshata) of the Bektashis.  
Tirana, Albania  
© SARA KUEHN (2011)

decipher some layers of the symbolic discourse apparent in Albanian Bektashi materiality. At the same time, we will see that the simultaneity of *zahir* and *batin* plays an important role in Bektashi religio-political engagements and disengagements and in their attempts to accommodate multiple interests and points of view.

By exploiting the ceremonial significance of this site of diplomatic rituals, the incumbent Dede Baba, commonly referred to as ‘Baba Mondi,’ creates intimacies or distances between himself and the official visitors, who include Albanian dignitaries, foreign ambassadors (and, by extension, the countries they represent), and members of the national and international press. Equally, the visitors’ interactions with the display and pictorial arrangements – a process that involves aesthetic perception, communication, and consumption – provides a convenient means by which to articulate the subtleties within diplomatic relationships in a less formal and more intimate manner that can be more impactful than verbal or written modes of communication.<sup>8</sup>

Upon entering the reception room (figure 1.1), the visitor is confronted with imposing silver-colored neo-baroque furniture. On the opposite side are three large armchairs, the central one reserved for the Dede Baba, with large sofas

<sup>8</sup> It was not possible to interview dignitaries and diplomats about their reactions to the complex and nuanced symbolic language in the visual narratives they encounter in Baba Mondi’s reception room.





FIGURE 1.2 Propped-up closed Quran with a silver cover next to a framed photograph of the late Dede Baba Reshat Bardhi  
© SARA KUEHN (2019)



FIGURE 1.3 Open copy of a Quran on a stand, a large white salt crystal, and a crystal bowl filled with sweets  
© SARA KUEHN (2019)

in the same style along the side walls. In one corner of the room the green Bektashi flag is displayed, with a central white twelve-fluted stone – the *teslim tash* (literally, ‘the stone of surrender’) – the points of which allude to the Bektashi cult of the twelve Shi‘i imams. On the opposite side of the same wall is the Albanian national flag. To the right of the central chair is a low table on which a closed Quran with a silver cover is propped up next to a framed photograph of the late Dede Baba Reshat Bardhi (1935–2011), the first *Kryegjysh* after the fall of the Communist dictatorship (figure 1.2). On another low table in the center of the reception room are a large open copy of the Quran, a large white salt crystal, and a crystal bowl filled with sweets (figure 1.3).

### 1 Devotion and Allegiance to the Family of the Prophet

Despite the striking furniture and the presence of items with strong symbolic resonance, the visitor’s gaze is immediately drawn to the large oil painting that hangs above the armchairs and dominates the room (figure 1.4). Framed under glass,<sup>9</sup> the reception-room painting depicts the five members of the Prophet Muhammed’s household or Ehli Beit:<sup>10</sup> the Prophet Muhammed, his daughter Fatima, his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and their two sons Hasan, and Hysejn. As the Prophet himself had no surviving sons, the sons of Fatima and Ali are considered to be the continuation of the Prophet’s family and the inheritors of his prophetic charisma and spiritual gift. While Sunnis include the Prophet’s wives and several branches of the Prophet’s tribe, Shi‘is are unanimous that Islam’s holiest family, Ehli Beit, includes only the pentad. Devotion to Ehli Beit, and especially to Ali, the first Shi‘i imam – as well as upholding the rights of the holy family to the religious and political leadership of the Muslim community – is therefore central to the Bektashi and Shi‘i creeds. Signed by one Ahmed Sultan, the painting is dated to the holy month of Muharram in the year 1123 AH (ca. February 19 to March 18, 1711).<sup>11</sup>

9 Since the oil painting is framed under glass, I could not examine this or any of the other oil paintings in the reception room. A detailed analysis of this unique group of Bektashi paintings awaits further research.

10 They are identified in the accompanying inscriptions in Ottoman Turkish (from left to right) as Hazret Imam Hasan, Rasul Akram Muhammed Mustafa, Hatun Fatima al-Zahra, Shah Vilayet Hazret Ali al-Murteza, and Hazret Imam Hüseyin Shah Shahid Kerbela.

11 Nothing is known about the painter or the provenance of this and the other paintings in the reception room. The painting does not seem to be indebted to the pictorial techniques of Christian icon painting, but the artist appears to have made use of a variety of borrowed aesthetic strategies found in other Albanian contexts, creating a uniquely Albanian Bektashi pictorial aesthetic.



FIGURE 1.4 Large oil painting depicting the five members of Ehli Beit  
 Made by Ahmed Sultan. Dated Muharram 1123 AH (ca. February 19 to  
 March 18, 1711)  
 © SARA KUEHN (2019)

The figural depiction of the holy five offers a glimpse not only into religious portraiture, but also into Bektashi conceptual imagination of the holy family. The painting features the haloed portraits of the pentad in the traditional frontal pose with their legs folded under them. The heads of the five figures are covered, but their faces, including that of the Prophet Muhammed, are clearly portrayed. Fatima is placed in the center, flanked by her father and her husband. At the next remove are her sons: Hasan, the second imam, and Hysejn, the third imam, who was martyred in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Fatima's central position in the painting alludes to the Bektashi emphasis on the equality of women in their rituals and structures (Elsie 2019, 2). In contrast to the dark green haloes that offset the heads of the male figures, a golden light emanates from above Fatima's head. She is flanked by a pair of garland-bearing flying figures, probably angels, framing the twelve-ridged white headdress of the Bektashi *babas* (called *Taxh Hysejni* in commemoration of Hysejn's martyrdom), which has a green turban wrapped around its base, from which a *teslim tash* is suspended. While both Muhammed and Ali hold prayer beads, young Hasan and Hysejn are rendered with their arms crossed over their chests and their hands pointing toward their shoulders, in the Bektashi position of humility and respect.

The prominent position of the painting brings to mind Baba Mondi's pilgrimages to Shi'i holy sites in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> The first official visit to these holy sites in the post-Communist era took place in 2011, just after Baba Mondi's election to the post, followed by a second visit in 2014 and a third in 2019 "to drink from the abundant resources of Ehli Beit"<sup>13</sup> (*të pijmë nga burimet e dlira të Ehli-Bejtit*) (unidentified *Urtësia* correspondent, April 2019, 22–25). The Bektashi delegation offered joint prayers with leading Iraqi dignitaries who included Sayyid Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai, the representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Iranian-born leader of the Iraqi Shi'i community, as well as Ayatollah Sayyid Husayn Ismail al-Sadr.<sup>14</sup>

These visits not only indicate a rapprochement between the Albanian Bektashis and the Shi'i clerical authorities in Iraq, but also reflect the identification of the Albanian Bektashi Sufi community with Shi'i teachings. This distinguishes them from Bektashi communities in Turkey who identify as Sunni.<sup>15</sup> As Baba Mondi recently confirmed,<sup>16</sup> the Albanian Bektashis identify themselves with the Alevi (Arabic 'Alawī),<sup>17</sup> a branch of Shi'ism practiced in Turkey and the Balkans. Alluding to the Bektashi assimilation of heterodox Shi'i currents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he associated the Albanian Bektashis with mystical, antinomian dervish groups characterized by 'extremist'

12 Alongside pilgrimages to the three principal Muslim holy sites: Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, see kryegjyshatabotero**rebektashiane.org/en/headfather-hajji-dede-edmond-brahimaj**.

13 Albanian equivalent to the Arabic *Ahl al-Bayt*, 'people of the House [of the Prophet].' For a discussion of the historical interpretations of the term *Ahl al-Bayt*, see Moshe Sharon (1986, 169–184), Ali Asani (2002), and Ignaz Goldziher, Cornelis van Arendonk, and Arthur Stanley Tritton (2012).

14 It is noteworthy that – until its destruction during World War I – there was a Bektashi lodge in the shrine complex of Imam Musa al-Kazim in Kazimiyya, headed by Selman Xhemali Baba of Elbasan (d. 1949), see Harry Thirlwall Norris (2006, 113–116). For the history of the Bektashi *tekkes* in Iraq and their earlier association with the Abdals of Rum (especially at the lodge located in the courtyard of the shrine complex of Imam Husayn in Karbala), see Ayfer Karakaya-Stump (2011, 1–24).

15 The confessional division between the Sunni and Shi'i realms of the Turkish and Albanian Bektashi communities still awaits scholarly investigation.

16 Author's interview (Kryegjyshata in Tirana, Albania, on August 31, 2019). I would like to thank Arben Sulejmani for his help with the translations. Focusing on the definitions and perceptions of the Bektashis themselves and the visitors to the reception room, I differentiate between emic ('insider') insights and etic (i.e., scholarly) analysis to assess the information from both subjective and objective perspectives; cf. Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota (2016, 317–336).

17 The name underscores their veneration of Ali b. Abi Talib (c.600–661), the common ancestor of all Shi'i factions.

Shi'i beliefs, singling out the Qalandars,<sup>18</sup> Jalalis,<sup>19</sup> and Nimatullahis.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, he emphasized the importance of the teachings of the Quran and the guidance of the Prophet Muhammed for the Bektashi community.

When asked about the central painting, Baba Mondi explained that “just as you keep photographs of your family in your room, I have pictures of my family, Ehli Beit, in my room.” He hastened to add that, “as a sign of respect,” no figural imagery is displayed in the *mejdán* of the Kryegjyshata, the congregational chamber reserved for the performance of intimate ritual gatherings called *muhabet* (‘conversation,’ from the Arabic *maḥabba*, meaning ‘love’ or ‘affection’), which, as noted above, is accessible only to initiates except on special occasions. Yet even though there are no figural representations in the *mejdán* of the Kryegjyshata in Tirana,<sup>21</sup> these are prominent features in all the other *mejdans* of the Bektashi *tekkes* I have visited in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Thus, while the attitude toward figural depictions in religious contexts is generally more supple in Shi'i spheres,<sup>22</sup> Baba Mondi's respectful position reflects a keen awareness of the varying approaches to this sensitive issue in the Sunni milieu.

By choosing to display the Ehli Beit painting in the reception room, the Albanian Bektashis not only express their devotional allegiance to the holy family, but also their affiliation with all those who love the holy family. By facilitating the creation of a common belief with the global Shi'i Muslim world and the formulation of a communal identity, the representation acquires both socio-religious and a political signification. Baba Mondi's pilgrimages to Iraq reflect the official Bektashi adherence to the Ja'fari Twelver-Shi'i school, named after the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq (702–765). Beyond the devotion to the holy family, the choice of the central painting in the reception room also alludes to

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18 For a detailed account of the Qalandars and related antinomian dervish groups associated with renunciatory piety, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa (2006, 3–4, 52–62, 65–67). Throughout this chapter, ‘Qalandar’ is used as a synonym for ‘antinomian dervish’ rather than in reference to a specific dervish group.

19 On the Jalalis, a deviant dervish group that developed in India during the fifteenth century, see Karamustafa (2006, 61).

20 For a historical overview of the Nimatullahis, one of the most important Sufi communities in the Persian mystical intellectual tradition, see Leonard Lewisohn (1998, 437–464).

21 I was able to observe this during the commemoration ceremony of the first anniversary of the death of former *Kryegjysh* Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi (April 3, 2012), which took place in the *mejdán* at the Bektashi Headquarters.

22 Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a widely followed clerical authority based in Najaf, Iraq, issued a religious ruling, or *fatwa*, declaring that depictions of “the Prophet Muhammad (s. a. w.), one of the past prophets, or the infallible Imams (a. s.), or other luminaries” are permissible if they are made with the due respect and reverence. See al-Sistani (n. d.).

the fact that in 1921, one year after the establishment of an Albanian state, the independence of the Bektashi order from the Sunni community was declared. After the headquarters of the Bektashi order (the Tekke of Haji Bektash Veli [*Pir Evi*] in Hacibektaş in central Anatolia) was closed by Republican Turkey in 1925, the then head of the order, Dede Baba Salih Niyazi (1876–1941), himself of Albanian origin, moved to Albania and established the Kryegjyshata in Tirana. The Albanian parliament approved the statute of the Albanian Bektashi community in 1930, and Albanian became the official language of the order.

Aside from such processes of religious and socio-political interaction, visitors' individual cognitive and experiential interaction with the Ehli Beit painting is not limited to its representational aspect (cf. Hall 2002, 16–17). Interviews with visitors to the Kryegjyshata<sup>23</sup> indicate that the painting evokes an understanding of the importance of the pentad in Bektashi teachings. More informed viewers know that the belief in Ehli Beit is a central tenet of the Bektashi creed, which views the painting as a conduit of salvific grace and even a place of “interaction with the divine.” When gazing at the painting, some visitors, including *ashiks* (literally, those ‘in love [with God]’; a reference to non-initiated members of the Bektashi community), recognize visual rhetorical tropes, such as the Bektashi *taxh*, the *teslim tash*, or the deferential posture of Hasan and Hysejn. It is understood that Fatima’s position in the center alludes to her pivotal role as the paradigmatic woman. The soft light she emits prompts some Albanian viewers to recall a line from Adem Wajhi Baba’s (1842–1927) *nefes* (poem or hymn of esoteric content), which says that Fatima “bears the light of prophethood.”<sup>24</sup> Looking at the luminaries that fill the interstices of the painting, some Albanian visitors are also reminded of the lines of Baba Melek Shëmbërdhenji’s *nefes*, which praise the holy family as bright light and as sun and moon:<sup>25</sup>

Fatima and Ali, from them this bright light appeared,  
In Hasan and our sweet Hysejn, a sun and moon revered.

23 The interviews cited in this chapter were conducted between August 24 and 31, 2019, at the Kryegjyshata in Tirana, Albania.

24 As cited in a *nefes* of Adem Wajhi (1842–1927), a *myxher baba* who opened a *tekke* in Prizren in Kosovo (Rexheb 2016, 396).

25 The *baba* seems to have survived the final days of Ottoman rule over Albania (Rexheb 2016, 412).

## 2 The Unification of Rival Dervish ‘World Models’ Under the Bektashi Banner

Next to the painting of Ehli Beit, on the long side of the rectangular room, the visitor encounters another large oil painting, dated 1270 AH (1853–54 CE) (figure 1.5). This painting depicts a figural narrative that has played a role of considerable importance in Bektashi religious experience across centuries and in different cultural contexts. This narrative relates to both diachronic and synchronic layers and aspects of historical and contemporary Bektashism. It presents the viewer with two rival Sufi ‘world models’ in binary opposition. On the left is the time-honored representation of the lion rider. On the right, facing the rider, two kneeling figures ‘mount’ a large rock. The inscriptions identify the lion rider as Karaxha Ahmed Sultan, the central figure on the rock as the thirteenth-century Haxhi Bektash Veli (1209–1270 AH)<sup>26</sup> and his companion as Sari Ismail Sultan (1260–1350 AH).<sup>27</sup>

The ‘lion rider with serpents’ on the left represents a Muslim mystic’s miraculous ‘power’ over animals, his ability to mount a dangerous feline while brandishing a venomous serpent as a whip, and sometimes as a bridle. This pivotal motif dates back to twelfth-century Islamic hagiographic accounts (Kuehn 2011, 201–202) and is frequently depicted in Islamic miniatures and drawings (Aksel 1964, 3519–3520; 1966, 4068–4072; Danik 2004, 101–119; Kuehn 2011, 2012; McInerney 2004, 87; Soudavar 1992, 219; Welch 1985, 224). It has an extremely wide geographic distribution (Johns 2015, 75–76; Kuehn 2011, 201–202; Slyomovics 1993, 84–85) and appears to have roots in the worlds of Iranian (Asatrian and Arakelova 2004, 234–242, 274; 2014, 58–59) and Indian (van Bruinessen 1991, 117–138; 2000, 271–294) art.

The two ‘rock riders’ are singled out by their tall, pointed felt hats with green turbans wrapped around the base. Distinguished by a long white beard, the larger central figure, identified as Haxhi Bektash Veli, holds prayer beads in his right hand and a staff of authority in his left. His senior position is underscored by the presence of an attendant, Sari Ismail Sultan, a smaller, beardless figure positioned deferentially behind him. Sari Ismail is rendered in a humble posture – just like Hasan and Hysejn in the Ehli Beit painting – and wears a red twelve-sided earring of a type we will encounter again below.

26 As evidenced by the dates recorded in two manuscripts preserved in the library of the *Pir Evi* at Hacibektaş, see “Introduction” to *Vilâyet-nâme* (1990, xxiii–xxiv).

27 For related depictions, see Frederick de Jong (1989, pl. 15). De Jong identifies Haxhi Bektash’s companion as Güvenç Abdal, one of his closest disciples (1992, fig. 11.8).



FIGURE 1.5 Large oil painting depicting Karaxha Ahmed Sultan as a lion rider flanked by two figures kneeling on a rock, Haxhi Bektash Veli and Sari Ismail Sultan  
Dated 1270 AH (1853–54 CE)  
© SARA KUEHN (2019)

By gazing at the painting, which depicts the miracles of riding a wild beast while handling poisonous serpents or riding and controlling inert substances such as walls or rocks, viewers can transcend literal approaches to viewing. Visitors versed in Bektashi teachings confirmed in interviews that their viewing of the painting offered valuable clues to a *batin* understanding of this Bektashi symbolism, allowing them to gain special knowledge. At the same time, the religious materiality itself served to unlock the potential of at least some viewers to understand the *batin* meaning. These interviewees explained that the visual codes intimated the riders' subjugation of their somatic selves and their mastery over their *nefs* ('soul' or 'self') (Panjwani 2014, 267–273), representing the consuming tendency of the *nefs* that always wants to get ahead and needs to be tamed and trained (Awn 1983, 64–69, 185; Kuehn 2018, 261, 278–279). Mounting, in this context, symbolizes mastery. Once harnessed, the *nefs* will help transport the riders as they continue their journey along the mystical path. The ultimate goal of this journey is to lose oneself in God (a state referred to as the 'fourth gate,' see below), that is, to attain spiritual death before physical death. This quest for death before dying is based on a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammed: "Die [to this world] before you die!" (Arabic *mūtū qabla an tamūtū*).



At first glance, the painting seems to depict the age-old miracle of mastering animals, surpassed by the even more impressive feat of giving life to an inanimate medium, a wall or a rock. On closer inspection, however, the painting is actually intended to *display harmony*. Stories of such miracles were particularly popular in the context of the socio-religious movements of deviant forms of mysticism that emerged throughout the Muslim world between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. These included the mendicant, itinerant, and often celibate Qalandars (van Bruinessen 1991, 55–69; 1995, 117–138; Crooke 1926; Digby 1994, 99–129; Rizvi 1970, 119–133),<sup>28</sup> whose antinomian asceticism rejected normative Islamic practice and with whom Baba Mondi explicitly associates the Bektashis. Karaxha Ahmed's challenge to his rival Haxhi Bektash to a miracle contest later found its way into Bektashi hagiographies (e.g., the late fifteenth-century *Vilayetname* – literally, 'Document of Sainthood' – of Haxhi Bektash, written by Uzun Firdusi between 1481 and 1501 CE). It goes without saying that the contest was won by Haxhi Bektash's ability to move a rock.

Miracle contests between leading mystics are a recurring feature in hagiographies and oral histories, yet the narrative depicted in the painting seems to go beyond this single dimension. This is alluded to by the image of the white dove above the two mystics. This visual trope reminds the informed viewer of another characteristic feature of Sufi hagiographic anecdotes, namely the story of the battle between a hawk and a dove (Digby 1990, 7–25). An allegorical interpretation of this story is found in the *Vilayetname*. Utilizing the potential for conveying 'truths' esoterically, the vita relates that a group of dervishes, led by Karaxha Ahmed, erected a gigantic wall to prevent Haxhi Bektash from coming to Anatolia because they feared that he would remove them from their positions. Haxhi Bektash took the form of a dove to fly over the wall and landed on a rock in the village of Suluca Karahöyük, near the central Anatolian town of Kırşehir (Birge 1994, 38; de Jong 1992, 234). One of Karaxha Ahmed's disciples, Haxhi Doğrul, was sent out in the shape of a hawk to catch the dove. As the hawk was about to seize the dove, Haxhi Bektash transformed back into a human being and grabbed the hawk by the throat. The subdued creature was then sent to invite Karaxha Ahmed's dervishes to come to Haxhi Bektash, which they did.<sup>29</sup>

28 The close association with Indian Sufism may be one of the reasons why Baba Mondi specifically alluded to the Indian Jalalis in the interview conducted on August 31, 2019.

29 Haxhi Bektash was later met by other competing mystics, such as Sayyid Mahmud Hayrani of Akshehir, accompanied by three hundred lion-riding Mevlevi dervishes who used serpents as whips. See Irène Mélikoff (1962, 40; 1998, 71–72).

The white dove in this painting, a representation of Haxhi Bektash, the victor in the battle, descends upon *both* protagonists. Emitting golden hues, the dove<sup>30</sup> soars above a pair of garland-bearing angels of the same type as those found in the Ehli Beit painting. This visual trope reminds the informed viewer that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, antinomian religious groups – most of them characterized by controversial Shi'i beliefs and symbolism<sup>31</sup> – sought refuge under the Bektashi banner in order to escape persecution by the Ottoman authorities (Ocak 1992, 199–209; 1989, 132–134). Drawing on related depictions, anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen links the rock, a structural element that can be used in architecture, to the settled and urban type of sainthood, thus associating the saint and his attendant with the more conventional, socially established forms of piety. Wild animals, by contrast, are a feature of the wandering libertine dervishes who lived with the animals. Van Bruinessen interprets the competitive demonstration of miracles as a sign of the syncretistic process by which the remaining deviant dervishes were gradually absorbed into the established canonical Sufi orders, especially the Bektashis.<sup>32</sup>

As important as this interpretation is, it must also be remembered that the painting in the reception room was created in the mid-nineteenth century, at least one hundred and fifty years after the dervish groups had merged with the Bektashi order. By this time, formerly rival dervishes, such as Karaxha Ahmed or Kaygusuz Abdal, had long since been 'naturalized' as Bektashis.<sup>33</sup> This is why the painter shows the two representatives of different 'world models' in harmony with each other and unified by Haxhi Bektash, who metonymically stands for the Bektashi community as a whole.

It should be remembered that Haxhi Bektash, in his hagiographic vita, champions 'extremist' Shi'i beliefs (both Ismaili and Twelver Shi'i). He is presented as a *seyyid* (Arabic *sayyid*) through the line of the seventh Twelver Shi'i imam, Musa al-Kazim (745–799), and described as the 'secret of Ali' who introduced the Shi'i doctrine of *tevela* (Arabic *tawallā*), or 'affiliation' with Ehli Beit, first to Anatolia and then on to the Balkans. In addition to his importance in the succession of leadership, Ali is understood by the Bektashis as the one who

30 The dove itself may probably also be seen as a symbol of the immortality of the soul; cf. Mélikoff (1962, 63).

31 On the various dervish groups that merged with the Bektashi order during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Karamustafa (1993, 121–129).

32 For a discussion of the complex relationship between the Ottoman authorities and the Bektashi order, see Suraiya Faroqhi (1995, 171–184).

33 The seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi (1611–c.1685) already refers to the relationship between Haxhi Bektash and Karaxha Ahmed as one of master and pupil; see Frederick Hasluck (1914, 120–122, esp. 121, n. 3).

brought a mystical understanding of the Quran to Islam. Thus, the *Vilayetname* tells us that both Muhammed and Ali miraculously taught the Quran to Haxhi Bektash: the former revealed its outer, literal meaning (*zahir*), and the latter introduced him to the mysteries of its hidden inner meaning, its spiritual significance (*batin*). This frame of reference is often associated with the prophetic saying, “I am the city of knowledge, and Ali is its gate.” Therefore, to understand what the Bektashis mean when they invoke Haxhi Bektash’s name, one must comprehend that this name simultaneously refers to the historical figure (*zahir*) of Haxhi Bektash and his mystical presence (*batin*).

The pictorial details show that the painter paid close attention to the narrative in the *Vilayetname*. This is also evident in the depiction of the unusual conical headgear of Haxhi Bektash and Sari Ismail. To emphasize their *batin* role, both are singled out in the text as bearers of a so-called *Elif taxh*,<sup>34</sup> which:

is, according to the *Vilayetname*, one of several articles given by Gabriel at God’s command to Muhammad who turned them over to Ali together with a knowledge of the mystical rites. From Ali they were passed down through certain of the [Shi’i] imams to Ahmet Yesevi<sup>35</sup> in whose convent they were preserved until at Haji Bektash Hünkar’s final investiture with authority, they were by spiritual powers moved from their places and put before Bektash, the [Elif taxh] being placed on his head by unseen hands.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike Haxhi Bektash and Sari Ismail, the lion-riding challenger, Karaxha Ahmed, does not wear the *Elif taxh*. Instead, he is shown wearing a Bektashi *Taxh Hysejni* of the type worn by Bektashi *babas*. His total commitment to the Bektashi creed is underscored by the green turban wrapped around the base of his *taxh*, identifying him as a celibate *baba*. Clad in a dark green cloak – a color usually reserved for a *dedebaba* and his *halife* (a term derived from the Arabic *khalifa* for ‘successor,’ referring to a cleric above the rank of a *baba* but below that of a *dede*) – and sporting a thick, long beard, his depiction exudes an aura of respectability. The crescent and star in the sky above him, a symbol often associated with Islam and officially adopted by some Muslim governments

34 The headdress in the shape of the letter *elif* (Arabic *alif*) was the headgear of the Janissaries. On the *Elif taxh*, see Birge (1994, 37–38, n. 3, 46–47, 50, 104, 217, ill. no. 26).

35 On the connection between Ahmed Yesevi, the eponym of the Yesevi order, and the Bektashi tradition as configured in classical Bektashi hagiography, see Karamustafa (2005, 61–88).

36 *Vilayetname*, manuscript copy in the private library of John Kingsley Birge (1888–1952), fols. 16 and 27 (Birge 1994, 37–38, no. 3).

in the nineteenth century, further alludes to the completion of the process of transformation of the formerly antinomian saint into a full-fledged Bektashi *baba*.

### 3 Kaygusuz Abdal and the Cycle of Creation

In the reception room of the Kryegjyshata in Tirana, a third painting, dated 1263 AH (1844 CE), is visible to the visitor just to the right of the door (figure 1.6). This painting shows a life-size depiction of a mystic in a landscape, flanked on either side by animals. The accompanying inscription identifies him as “Kaygusuz Sultan, the dervish of Abdal Musa Sultan, the son of the Shah of Egypt.”<sup>37</sup> Kaygusuz is known to have been an Abdal of Rum,<sup>38</sup> a dervish community of the Qalandars that developed in Ottoman Anatolia in the second half of the fourteenth century. His hagiography describes him as wearing a felt cloak with no sleeves or collar, practicing the ritual fourfold shave known later as *chahar darb* (literally, the ‘four blows,’ to the hair, beard, moustache, and eyebrows), and carrying a horn (Güzel 2004, 358–359). Contemporary Bektashis were similarly depicted with clean-shaven heads and faces (Kuehn 2024, fig. 1), implying their rejection of social status and the erasure of signs of civilization from their faces.<sup>39</sup>

Ahmet Yaşar Ocak (1989, 4) goes so far as to claim that it was the itinerant Abdals of Rum “who gave birth to the Bektashis,” which is to say that their teachings exerted an enduring influence on the Bektashi order long after they were incorporated into this mystical community. The close relationship between the Abdals of Rum and the Bektashi movement is reflected in stories that link Kaygusuz’s spiritual lineage to that of Haxhi Bektash, and may be one of the reasons why Kaygusuz is considered the first dervish to call

37 The depiction of Kaygusuz Abdal here differs from that in a nineteenth-century illustration preserved in the *Pir Evi* and found in many Turkish Bektashi contexts, which shows him with long hair, a long bushy moustache, arms crossed over his chest, and flanked by a snake winding around a tree trunk. This alludes to the need to be vigilant and to continue to train the *nefs*, as will be discussed below, but not to the idea of a ‘cycle of creation.’

38 On the Abdals of Rum, see Irène Beldiceanu (2012). This group of dervishes venerated the memory of Haxhi Bektash, which corresponded to their antinomian ideals, and opposed the framing of the saint’s legacy within the institutional context of the nascent Bektashi order. See Thierry Zarcone (2014).

39 *Menâqib-i Khvoca-i cihân ve netice-i cân*, composed in 1522 by an Ottoman Sufi observer known by the penname Vahidi, who, like most mainstream Sufis, was critical of the antinomian dervishes (Vahidi 1993, 156; Karamustafa 2006, 83–84).



FIGURE 1.6 Large oil painting depicting Kaygusuz Abdal surrounded by animals. Dated 1263 AH (1844 CE)  
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himself a Bektashi.<sup>40</sup> The painter portrays him with the twelve-pointed *teslim tash* around his neck and a twelve-ridged *taxh* on his head, for according to Bektashi tradition, Kaygusuz was the first to wear the *taxh*.<sup>41</sup> To his right is a large *teber* (ceremonial double-bladed axe),<sup>42</sup> a weapon carried by the

40 *Mesnevî-i Baba Kaygusuz* (2013, 172).

41 On the Qalandari cap, see Erdoğan Ağirdemir (2011, 365–378).

42 It is worth adding that in Bektashi initiation ceremonies, the guide who leads the candidate into the *mejdân* sometimes carries a *teber*. Perhaps the depiction of the *teber* in the painting should also be taken as an allusion to Kaygusuz's initiation into the Bektashi order (cf. de Jong 1989, 17, n. 79).

Bektashis and other dervishes on their wanderings, which also had symbolic meaning and later assumed ritual significance.

The reason why Kaygusuz is depicted with animals can be found in his poetry (he was the first Abdal to produce important literary works). Some of the thoughts expressed in his couplets were echoed by Baba Mondi when we discussed the painting, such as Kaygusuz's allusion to the theory of the 'Perfect Human Being' (Arabic *al-insān al-kāmil*) at the head of the saintly hierarchy,<sup>43</sup> an ideal espoused in Muslim esoteric mysticism. This notion goes back to the teachings of the influential gnostic Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240), who laid the foundation for the emanationist theory of the 'Oneness of Being' (Arabic *wahdat al-wujūd*), which had a significant impact on Sufi thought in the Ottoman milieu and beyond. For various Sufi orders, the Oneness of Being signifies the process of gradual expansion, the journey a Sufi takes toward his creator and his origins, which ultimately allows the (ordinary) limited human being to identify with the macrocosmic level of the universe.<sup>44</sup> This identification elevates the initiate to the rank of the 'Perfect Human Being.' The idea here is closely related to the Sufi elaboration of '[divine] emanation' (Arabic *tajallī*), which opens the pathway to gnosis (Chodkiewicz 2005, 97–120).<sup>45</sup> Kaygusuz emphasized the importance of knowing the difference between a Perfect Human Being and an ordinary human being, who is alluded to as an animal (Turkish *hayvān*, derived from a Semitic root, meaning 'to live').<sup>46</sup>

May your eyes open so that you see the sultan.

May you distinguish between animal and man.

This notion, which points towards the different degrees of spiritual development along the mystical path, recurs in Kaygusuz's work, often with reference to ontological differences between animals.<sup>47</sup> In another poem composed for a Sufi audience, Kaygusuz evokes the theory of the 'Oneness of Being' and the

43 On the doctrine of the Perfect Man in Kaygusuz Abdal's teachings, see Zeynep Oktay (2017, 89–92).

44 The 'Perfect Human Being' and the 'Oneness of Being' are controversial theological concepts in Islam. While various Sunni, Shi'i, and some Sufi orders reject them, citing anthropomorphist tendencies (e.g., the Naqshabandiyya Sufi order), Bektashis and other Sufi groups attach great importance to these concepts.

45 For a comprehensive overview, see William C. Chittick (1989).

46 *Mesnevî-i Baba Kaygusuz* (2013, 110).

47 E.g. the description of Abdal Musa turning into a deer or riding on one (Ergun 1936–1937, 166–169).

belief in divine manifestation by alluding to the cyclical journeys of the soul. He makes the following mystical confession:<sup>48</sup>

The Creator's command put me on time's revolving wheel and rotated me, like the mud of a potter. At times I became a human, at times an animal. At times I became a plant, at times a mineral. At times I became a leaf, at times the soil. At times old, at times young. At times a sultan, at times a beggar. At times a friend, at times a stranger.

By employing a genre known as the poetry of the cycle of creation (Turkish *devriyye*; Arabic *dawriyya*, from *dawr*, 'cycle' or 'rotation,' Kaygusuz, *Delil-i Budalā*, 59, cited after Oktay 2017, 82), Kaygusuz shows the intimate relationship between different modes of existence and in doing so, gives insight into his soul's ability to transmigrate, to be present everywhere, and to move from one being (animate or inanimate) to another.

When the Austrian journalist Kurt Selinger (1921–1999) visited the then *Kryegjysh* Ahmet Myftari (1916–1980) in Tirana in 1957, he asked him for an explanation of a painting in the *tekke* that depicted a holy man surrounded by various animals. This, we can surmise, must have been a similar picture to the one of Kaygusuz Abdal that now hangs in the reception room. Selinger was puzzled by Ahmet Myftari's enigmatic reply that

the meaning of this painting is that whoever requites evil with evil is a beast. Whoever requites good with evil is a serpent, whoever requites good with good is a good man, and whoever requites evil with good is a magnanimous man (cited in Seliger 1960, 131; transl. Elsie 2019, 110).

As perplexing as the answer may be, it reflects the fact that in Bektashi practice, the *batin* interpretation – corresponding to the less contingent nature of things – does not give way to the *zahir*, but in a sense subsumes it.

Another noteworthy aspect of the painting is that Kaygusuz is shown wearing an earring in the shape of a *teslim tash* in his right earlobe. In the second painting discussed above, Sari Ismail Sultan is portrayed with a similar earring. It designates both mystics as belonging to the special category of celibate dervishes called *myxher* (from the Turkish *mücerred*, literally 'a person tested by experience, pure'). The institutionalization of celibacy among Bektashi *babas*, a much revered practice in the Balkans (Bashir 2008, 144), is a development that has been ascribed to Balim Sultan (1457–1517) of Dimetoka, who is credited

48 On the Bektashi conceptualization of *devriyye*, see Baba Rexheb (2016, 181–185, 324–325).

with initiating the process of the formal institutionalization of the order and the codification of its beliefs and practices.<sup>49</sup> Salih Niyazi (1876–1941), who became the first *dedebaba* in Albania in 1929 after the 1925 ban on all dervish orders in Turkey, introduced special Bektashi rituals to Albania in which the dervishes pronounced their vows of celibacy (Elsie 2019, 308).<sup>50</sup> Until the ban in 1925, these rituals were performed in the *tekkes* of Merivenköy near Istanbul, in Dimetoka in Thrace, and in Kerbela in Iraq. In addition to the earring, the green turban wrapped around the headdress serves as a further indication that the wearer is a *myxher*.

#### 4 The Four-ridged *taxh* as a Symbol of “Disguise ... to Escape Destruction”

Turning to the fourth painting flanking that of Kaygusuz Abdal in the reception room, the visitor immediately realizes that the eminent figure shown here must be a *baba* (figure 1.7) and that the *baba* was not celibate, since the turban wrapped around the base of his cap is white. The inscription above the painting informs us that it “represents Asim Dede, the *pōst nishīn* (literally, the ‘one who sits on the animal skin’) of the *dergāh* (Persian for *tekke*) in Ergiri [present-day Gjirokastra].” It adds that “this picture was made by Selim Baba. The date of the painting is 1351 AH (1932 CE), the date of the [...] 1281 AH (1864 CE).”

Trained at the *Pir Evi* in Hacibektaş in central Anatolia, Seyyid Muhammed Asim Baba (d. 1796) was sent to the Balkans to spread Bektashism. The first Bektashi *baba* who was also a *seyyid* (a descendant of the Prophet Muhammed through his daughter Fatima’s marriage to Ali), Asim Baba arrived in Gjirokastra, southern Albania, in 1778. Two years later, he founded what became known as the Gravel Tekke (*Teqeja e Zallit*). At a time when there were no other functioning *tekkes* in Albania, the Gravel Tekke played a vital role in spreading Bektashism in the country (Kaleshi 1980, 10). Asim Dede’s immortality is symbolized by the two cypresses that frame his portrait (see Hasluck 1973, 226, n. 1), each surmounted by a white dove, again symbolizing Haxhi Bektash.

49 In the sixteenth century, the order split into two branches: one, called the Çelebi, led by the reputed descendants of Haxhi Bektash who controlled the *Pir Evi* and were recognized by the central government; the other, called the Babagan, headed by a class of unmarried Bektashi who claimed spiritual descent from Balim Sultan (Bashir 2008, 143–144; Zarcone 2014).

50 After 1925, the members of the Çelebi branch remained in Hacibektaş, Turkey, but outside the *Pir Evi*, which was turned into a museum.





FIGURE 1.7 Large oil painting of Asim Dede, the *pōst nishīn* of the *dergāh* in Ergiri (Gjirokastra). Made by Selim Baba. Dated 1351 AH (1932 CE)/1281 AH (1864 CE)  
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The main frame of reference implied by the painting, the Gravel Tekke, continued to play an important role in the history of the Albanian Bektashis. The scholar Margaret Hasluck (1885–1948), who visited the *tekke* around 1923, noted that:

they wear a four-ridged *taxh* outside the ordinary twelve-ridged Bektashi hat in souvenir of the disaster of 1826, when only by adopting such disguise could Bektashi escape destruction (cited in Elsie 2019, 194).

The Baba in the reception-room painting is crowned with such a four-ridged *taxh*. After a long period of complex and often ambiguous relations between Sufi communities, the Sunni Muslim Ottoman authorities, and representatives of local orthodoxies (Hodgson 1974, 192–194), the Bektashi order was banned by the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839) in 1826, accusing them of “neglect[ing] prayers and allow[ing] themselves to do things forbidden by the Šeriat [Arabic *sharīʿa*; Albanian *shariʿat*].”<sup>51</sup> Throughout the Ottoman realm, many Bektashi *tekkes* were subsequently transferred to more Sharia-compliant Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandiyya, or were sold on behalf of the state treasury and, for the most part, subsequently destroyed.<sup>52</sup>

Nearly forty-five years after this tragedy, the same misfortune befell the Gravel Tekke, which for a time was registered as a Naqshbandi *tekke* (Clayer 1990, 280–290).<sup>53</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the *tekke* reemerged as a center for Bektashi proselytizing and literary activity. Sunni Islam in Albania was aligned with Ottoman rule and the Arabic language, but the Bektashis were receptive to Albanian patriotic concerns and actively helped promote the Albanian language, contributing to the development of Albanian writing. This patriotic element, so central to Albanian Bektashism, is also reflected in the prominent display of the Albanian national flag in the reception room.<sup>54</sup>

The four ridges of the *taxh* worn by the dervishes of the Gravel Tekke as a “disguise ... to escape destruction” refer to the four ‘gates’ that mark the different stages of spiritual development. The first ridge stands for the gate of outer rituals and rules in religion, *shariʿat*, the exoteric path taught by Muhammed. Unlike Sunni Muslims, however, the Bektashi focus on the inner ‘meaning,’ disregarding conventional observances such as Friday congregational prayers, the

51 For an account of the destruction of Bektashi institutions in Albania, see Robert Elsie 2019, 7. For references to the edicts, see Butrus Abu-Manneh (2001, 69–71); Faroqhi (1981, 108). In his seminal study *Between Two Worlds*, Cemal Kafadar (2010, 76) questions the appropriateness of a strict Sunni/Shiʿi dichotomy, as well as the formulation of notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy along sectarian lines, when dealing with the complex religious history of Sufi communities, especially in the frontier regions of Anatolia and the Balkans between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. Instead, he conceptualizes the sectarian fluidity among these communities in terms of ‘metadoxy’ (cf. Yıldırım 2015, 287–307). As Marc Soileau (2014, 423–459) points out, the oscillation between ‘orthopraxy’ and ‘heteropraxy’ of Bektashism continues to this day.

52 For a description of these events, see Abu-Manneh (1982, 1–36, esp. 26–30; 2001, 69–71, esp. 71). On the abolition of the Bektashi *tekkes* after 1926, see Faroqhi (1981, 108–127).

53 For founding acts that present both the *shaykh* and the *tekke* as belonging to the Naqshbandiyya, see Clayer (1994, 197, fn. 52). On the role of the ‘Asim Baba Tekke’ in the nationalist movement, see Clayer (2007, 587–588).

54 For a discussion of the central role of patriotism and nationalism in Bektashism, see Clayer (1995, 271–300; and 2007).

five daily prayers, and the prohibition of alcohol. The second ridge relates to the mystical teachings formalized into training by the Bektashi *babas*, the gate of the spiritual path to God, *tarikāt* (Arabic *ṭarīqa*). The third ridge signifies mystical knowledge, the gate to the secrets of the saints, *marifat* (Arabic *maʿrifat*). The fourth ridge alludes to the final gate, the pinnacle symbolizing the encounter with the Divine Reality, *hakikat* (Arabic *ḥaqīqa*).<sup>55</sup> Hasluck informs us that the rules for the dervishes of the Gravel Tekke were exceptionally strict, and the drinking of alcohol was forbidden, which is to say that their lives were governed (at least to some extent) by the rules of the *shariʿat*. By following these rules, they pursued a time-honored strategy that allowed them to conceal true *batin* knowledge from profanation (*takiye*, Arabic *taqiyya*; permissible dissimulation) (Birge 1994, 78, 270; Amir-Moezzi 2012; Kohlberg 1995, 348–380; De Smet 2011, 148–161) in order to avoid persecution by the majority should the necessity arise. This is underscored by the injunction of Balim Sultan, who, according to tradition, asked his followers to keep certain “[Bektashi] mysteries hidden from the spiritually immature, for the revelation of such [*batin*] things could harm the masses and cause turmoil in society” (Rexheb 2016, 199; cf. Stoyanov 2016, 723–742).

A variety of visual tropes subtly woven into the images thus allow for a multi-layered approach to the viewer’s interpretation of the four paintings. For instance, the same mystic injunction is also reflected in a *baba*’s white-colored *taxh*, as some visitors have pointed out, for it represents the wearer’s tombstone. Once placed on a *baba*’s head, it is considered that he has died to this fleeting life, as instructed by the Prophet Muhammed. Another dimension of meaning alluded to by the painting involves the annual ceremony in which the Bektashis confess their sins, right their wrongs, and are granted absolution (Birge 1994, 170–171). This farewell to the old life, seen as a kind of salvation, is likewise referred to as “dying before death.”<sup>56</sup> Bektashis submit to God, but also to their *murshid* (spiritual master). By surrendering their body and soul to their *murshid*, they proverbially become a corpse in the hands of the undertaker. The symbolic language in the image’s rhetoric reminds viewers, as some visiting *ashiks* explained when asked, not only of Kaygusuz’ devotion to the Twelve Imams, but also of the twelve abnegations or abstinences, many of which serve

55 On the four gates in the context of the Turkish Bektashi community, see Soileau (2014, 451–454).

56 In the same vein, since the Bektashis are often glossed as “the beheaded dead” (Turkish *ser burīde murde*), the knob on the Bektashi headpiece is interpreted as symbolizing a ‘human head’ (cf. Karamustafa 1993, 124). On Bektashi initiation rites with ‘initiatory death’ and symbolic resurrection, see Zarccone (2016, 781–798).

to control the soul (*nefs*). It also serves as a constant reminder of the importance of subjugating the *nefs* while traveling on the mystical path.

## 5 A Bektashi Balancing Act

The visitor's gaze is eventually drawn to another display on the low table in the center of the reception room. The three 'objects' here include a large open copy of the Quran supported on a wooden stand and opened to display suras appropriate to the occasion, a large white salt crystal presented on a wooden stand, and a crystal bowl filled with colorful sweets (figure 1.3, above). Like the text of the Quran, which can be interpreted in both *zahir* and *batin* ways, salt communicates the close interrelationship between these two modes through its important meaning in Bektashi ritual contexts. Bektashi ritual meals begin and end with a small pinch of salt, which in a ritual context is referred to as 'Balim Sultan.' This terminology refers to the 'second Pir' of the Bektashis, who began the process of institutionalizing the order, a process which introduced structure and a sense of order to the community. The meaning that the Bektashis ascribe to salt is thus one of balance (Soileau 2012, 1–30). Bektashis also refer to the fact that both sodium and chlorine are poisonous in their pure state, but when they unite they become salt. Salt is thus the product and the equilibrium of the properties of its components. As one of the most ancient preservatives, salt signifies incorruptibility, perpetuity, and purification; it is seen as a symbol of the intention which gives significance to action.<sup>57</sup> The sweets, by contrast, serve as transmitters of Baba Mondi's *baraka*, and are presented to the visitors. Together, the display of an open copy of the Quran, salt rock, and sweets thus symbolizes the need for a balanced approach to the *zahir* and *batin* interpretive framework of the Bektashi community.

## 6 Albanian Bektashi Symbolic Language

The Bektashis' reliance on the use of allegory and symbolism to convey their teachings, and their predisposition to convey truths esoterically, must be understood in the context of the order's subjection to waves of persecution (Watenpaugh 2005, 535–565), especially during the early nineteenth century. This oppression led the Bektashis to foster a tradition of obscured or even hidden meaning in their art forms, and inspired the symbolic use of material

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57 Author's interview (Kryegjyshata in Tirana, Albania, August 31, 2019).

culture to ‘speak’ while the text is muted. As a result, the narratives depicted ‘speak’ only to the informed viewer. The paintings presuppose a general knowledge of the significant figures of the Bektashi milieu and of the overall narrative context and background depicted. Even when viewed on a *zahir* level of meaning, the visual content requires a pre-existing familiarity with the outline of the stories set within a Bektashi frame of reference.

As the symbol *par excellence* of all Shi‘is, only the Kryegjyshata painting of Ehli Beit presents an exception. For all Shi‘is, the figural representation of the holy five is imbued with a potency to empower and protect; it serves as a key symbol of solace and hope, and as a vehicle for intercession with the divine. Possessing an enormous capacity to mediate socio-religious identity, the painting visibly proclaims the Albanian Bektashi’s allegiance to the wider Shi‘i world. Its central position in the reception room underscores this bond. However, as with the other three paintings, the context-specific visual codes and the aesthetic rhetoric that convey *batin* meanings are only revealed to those who have eyes to see. This revelation is deliberately confined to those with a heightened awareness of both the explicit and implicit messaging involved in Albanian Bektashi pictorial forms of communication, those who have undergone ‘visual training’ that includes acquiring the ability to discern formative imagery grounded in an expanded repertoire of Ehli Beit symbolism. The paramount significance of the Kryegjyshata painting is further underscored by the fact that a copy is on display in the Albanian Teqe Bektashiane in Detroit, USA (founded by Baba Rexheb [d. 1995], former head of the Gravel Tekke in Gjirokastra), and that posters portraying the holy family in the same configuration are shown in all *mejdans* of *tekkes* in Macedonia and in Kosovo. However, it is only by balancing the apparent and hidden truths – the dichotomy so central to the Bektashi way of life – that one can discern the subtly interwoven messages in the paintings.

Like Albanian Bektashi leaders of the past, Baba Mondi has to balance Albanian Bektashi *batin* inspirations (indebted to controversial antinomian Shi‘i beliefs and symbolism incorporated into the Bektashi community from the sixteenth century onwards) with *zahir* Muslim teachings. To protect himself and his community from erroneous or malicious representations, his interactions with the public (such as the larger Muslim community, the Albanian state power and national Albanian secular culture, as well as with the press) bracket *batin* notions of truth (reserved for initiated members) that are incompatible with public discursive fields. Baba Mondi’s decision in August 2019 to install loudspeakers on the façade of the *tekke* at the Kryegjyshata, from which Quranic verses are recited throughout the day, has bewildered many of his followers. This, of course, does not mean that Albanian Bektashism can be placed

within an orthodox Sunni interpretation of Islam, but rather that it should be seen as one of Baba Mondi's careful balancing acts aimed at protecting and preserving his community in times of difficulty. In other words, it is yet another case of the Bektashis outwardly adopting a kind of 'Sunni identity' as a form of *takiye*. Baba Mondi's public interactions can thus often be understood as pragmatic attempts to ensure autonomous and uncompromised religious practice (that is *batin* practice) by engaging with the broader Muslim public sphere in what can be described as *zahir* terms. At the same time, it is this Albanian Bektashis practice of accommodation and apparent translocal solidarity and community that – throughout their history – has allowed them to cultivate a kind of pragmatic Islamic pluralism.

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## Mediated Devotion

### *Sound and Media in Transnational Azeri-Turkish Twelver Shi'ism*

*Stefan Williamson Fa*

Aurality and orality lie at the heart of Islam. The Quran, whose literal meaning is 'the recitation,' was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad not through vision, inspiration, or inscription but through sound (Frishkopf 2009; Nelson 2001). In text and print, Islamic ritual language appears to be standardized and widespread, yet sounded ritual practices and forms of religious expressive culture tend to vary more widely across time and space, evoking the diversity at the core of identity and faith. The soundscape that forms the backdrop to Muslim mundane and religious experience is produced not only by the conventional and all-pervasive presence of Quranic recitation but through a profusion of other devotional expressive traditions (Qureshi 1986; Schulz 2008). These devotional sounds not only have a theological or spiritual function but carry the capacity to promote affective unities and alliances, engendering collectivities – sonically imagined communities and articulating socio-spatial as well as temporal boundaries in and beyond the ritual sphere.

Despite the growing number of scholars from various disciplines who are engaging seriously with sounded forms of Islamic expression (Frishkopf and Spinetti 2018; Eisenlohr 2018; Harris 2015; Hirschkind 2006), the acoustic worlds of Shi'i Muslims have received far less attention.<sup>1</sup> Devotion to the Family of the Prophet – the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the Twelve Imams, collectively known as Ahl al-Bayt – is central to Shi'ism. Within Shi'i communities, the central and shared sounds of the recitation of

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1 The broad range of historical and contemporary practices of recitation, eulogizing, and vocalized lament of both trained professionals and amateurs around the Shi'i world has been relatively overlooked. Regula Qureshi's (1981) analysis of South Asian *majlis* is a rare exception. Here, she systematically deals with the 'musical' forms of Shi'i mourning gatherings, examining the distinct features of the different genres of recitation featured in such rituals. Thomas Reckord's (1987) unpublished doctoral thesis also uses musicological methods to examine 'Chant in Popular Iranian Shi'ism' and highlights the connections between recitation and Persian Classical music. More recently, Richard Wolf's (2000, 2007, 2014) work on drumming during Muharram reveals the range of sounded expression in South Asian commemorations of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn as well as the significance of sound and emotion in such ritual commemorations.

the Quran exist amongst a range of other vocalized supplications, laments, and chants of joy and celebration, which generally focus on the remembrance of the figures of Ahl al-Bayt. Within Twelver Shi'ism there is a surprising consistency in content and form of these genres worldwide. Yet, a huge diversity in style correlates with the wide geographic distributions of these communities.

The annual rituals of mourning and celebration which mark a distinct Shi'i ritual calendar across the globe are occasions in which individuals come together in a shared physical space to co-create sonic, material, and sensory atmospheres. The experience of these bodies, often squeezed into small rooms, crammed on the floor, excited by the aromas of delicious food and sweets, conversation, and the intensity of amplified live recitation is, in theory, far removed from the apparently individual experience of listening to audio recordings of lamentation or praise hymns on cassettes, compact discs, or online. As apparently individualized forms of listening, these media may appear to represent a radical departure from 'traditional' modes of listening and reciting and face-to-face sociality at ritual gatherings. Yet, upon closer observation they clearly build on, and supplement, existing practices in multiple ways. The use of recording technology and new media has afforded alternative and supplementary forms of devotion and sociability, making them more popular and ubiquitous.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how audio recordings of specialized reciters, known as *meddah* in Turkish (from the Arabic *maddāh*),<sup>2</sup> have extended and transformed forms of listening and recitation hitherto restricted to the face-to-face ritual gatherings called *majlis*. Based on ethnographic research carried out with Azeri-Turkish Twelver Shi'i communities in Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan, I argue that practices of listening and sharing audio and videos of devotional recitation aim towards the cultivation of love and attachment to Ahl al-Bayt.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this chapter contributes to recent understandings of transnational Shi'ism (Leichtman 2015; Mervin 2011; Scharbrodt 2019; Shaery-Eisenlohr 2008; Shanneik, Heinhold and Ali 2017; Ridgeon 2012) by demonstrating how the circulation of audio and video recordings have contributed significantly to the development of transnational networks and ties across a wider Azeri-Turkish speaking geography.

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2 The transliteration of non-English words in this chapter follows the use of the respective terms as I encountered them in my fieldwork; additional notes to the Arabic terms may also be provided.

3 This research draws on 12 months of doctoral fieldwork carried out primarily in Turkey and additional shorter visits to Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

By analyzing audio recordings, their production, and the ways they are listened to and incorporated into everyday life, I build upon wider scholarship on the adoption and adaption of new media technologies and their relation to existing modes of religious mediation. Amongst Shi'i Muslims, new media technologies have generated debate and discussion and attracted criticism as they have been included into devotional contexts. While some of my interlocutors see these recordings as a welcome extension to pre-existing everyday practices of devotion to Ahl al-Bayt, others are indignant at the adjudged blurring of the boundaries between devotion and entertainment.

Rather than seeing these technologies as individualizing devotion, I explore the ways by which flows and circulation of media – first through cassettes and now online and through mobile technologies – offer new forms of sociability. This circulation gives an indication of the possibilities afforded by media technologies and the consciousness of connections that they may provide. The physical and digital circulation of audio recordings does not simply reflect pre-existing communities but, in itself, creates a spacio-temporal domain through which communities are produced. As will be seen in this chapter, media technologies allow for communities to extend far beyond their immediate physical, social, and political surroundings.

## 1 Mediation and Mediatization

Religion and media have, on occasion, been portrayed as two irreconcilable and distinct spheres. Religion was represented as under threat from modern technological development and mass media in the proclaimed move towards secularization (De Vries and Weber 2001). With the subsequent critique of secularization theory, scholars dismissed such an idea and focused instead on depicting the diverse ways in which religion, mass media, and technology have been entangled in the past and present. Far from being irreconcilable, the adoption of new media has been shown to be a key feature of global 're-enchantment' and the increasingly public character of religion (Meyer and Moors 2005). A number of studies have long highlighted the importance of media in the Muslim world. According to the work of scholars, such as Michael Gilsenan (1973) on Egypt and Sheriff Mardin (1989) on Turkey, Islamic religious movements and revivals have not developed in reaction to modernity and mass-mediation but have themselves employed mass media in their expansion, development, and success. In countries like Turkey, the spread of media technologies and state liberalization have provided a platform for religious voices to destabilize the association of modernity and modern technologies.

The growing interest in the social uses of media in religious life has reaffirmed the perceived links between technologies and secularization. Scholars have investigated the changes stemming from the adoption of new technologies and analyzed the implication of media on both the content of religion as well as on the social relations through which community is organized. Media technologies are generally considered to have enabled new forms of spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic participation, and, thus, of community (Stokes 2016, 53). The development and incorporation of media technologies into religious life have been shown to provide the conditions for new and diverse forms of religious experience. One such example of this is Paolo Apolito's (2005) work on *The Internet and the Madonna*. Apolito has argued that media technology, the internet in particular, was central to the growth of the Catholic visionary movement in the last decades of the twentieth century as a site of witnessing and affirmation of religious visions and miracles. The movement proliferated through countless websites and electronic communications which "profoundly altered the very perception of religion among a substantial number of Catholics" (Apolito 2005, 2). According to Apolito, technology is used not just to report or investigate visions and miracles but actually to produce them. Significantly, the power to control, channel, and regulate the visionary experience and relationships between Heaven and Earth is shown to have passed from the ecclesiastical to the technical dimension, with technology becoming the site of people's experience and the measure of 'truth.' The Internet becomes a place where relationships are established and contacts multiplied with other devotees and, for worshippers, a place where Heaven is directly seen and heard. Moreover, he makes the important point that the entanglement of technology and religion is far from new. Various media are said to provide templates that structure religious experience, such as Marian apparitions, over different time periods. Conversely, the internet has been significant in the promotion of clerical authority in Shi'i Islam in recent decades. Since the late 1990s many of the highest-ranking Shi'i clerics opened virtual offices in multiple languages on the Internet where they, and their staff, answered the questions of ordinary people. The internet has been used by leading clerics to establish contact with believers, canvass donations, and distribute their books (Masserat 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Studying religion itself as a form of mediation de-exceptionalizes the rise of new media technologies. Arguing that religions, by definition, mediate

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4 In the context of Iran, Masserat (2008) and Rahimi (2003, 2014; Faris and Rahimi 2015) have shown how the internet and social media have been adopted in diverse ways which also contest clerical rule.



between the transcendental, spiritual, or supernatural – making these accessible for believers – implies that religion “cannot be analyzed outside the forms and practices of mediation that define it” (Meyer and Moors 2005, 8). As such, the recent adoption of electronic and digital media needs to be understood in terms of the continuities and changes with established forms of mediation within religious traditions. Following this line of argument, I take the adoption of audio technology in Shi‘i devotional settings as representing a transition from one form of sonic mediation to another, tracing the continuity and ruptures entailed by this transition. The adoption of media technologies reconfigures particular practices of religious mediation. The transition from the *majlis* to the mobile is, therefore, not a radical break, but an extension and development of certain aspects of pre-existing ideas and practices, though with new possibilities and problems. Attention to the dynamic and creative appropriation of new media technologies in diverse religious contexts thoroughly shatters the view that the ‘spiritual’ and ‘technological’ are ontologically distinct spheres. Instead, it has become clear that religion’s continued relevance is due to its ability to adopt new media over the ages as can be seen in the prevalence and popularity of religious and devotional audio recordings.

## 2 *Meddah* on Tape

Devotion to the imams and Ahl al-Bayt has always transcended the physical and emotional space of the *majlis* through utterances, texts, and material culture in everyday practices. Diverse media forms long enabled people to engage in devotion of Ahl al-Bayt no matter where they were, these include the habitual repetition of phrases honoring them, such as the *salawat* (salutations upon the Prophet and his progeny), vocatives directed at members of Ahl al-Bayt or invoking their succor (for example, “*Ya Ali*” or “*medet, ya Ali!*”), or prostration on clay tablets from Karbala during daily prayers. However, advances in media technology and sound reproduction have generated new practices as elements of acoustic devotion, once restricted temporally and spatially to the *majlis*, have now made their way into everyday life. The availability of devotional genres on diverse media formats adds a new dimension to domestic religious lives, as they can be listened to at any time of day and the domestic space can also be easily transformed sonically into devotional space. A number of scholars have already highlighted the significance of audio and video media in creating spaces of ethical formation and discipline (Boylston 2018; Eisenlohr 2009, 2018; Hirschkind 2006; Oosterbaan 2008; Schulz 2008) and shown that one of the most consequential features of such media is its transportability. Through

audio recording technology practices and experiences related to the aural perception of spiritual presence and experience once restricted to the immediate sphere of ritual action enter into daily life in new ways.

The first available recordings of *meddah* in Iran date back to the pre-revolutionary period, where a number of professional reciters were recorded live on radio in Tehran during the month of Muharram. Amongst these, the best known was Seyed Javad Zabihi who recited the Quran and recorded several versions of the call to prayer, supplications during the fasting month of Ramadan, and lamentations for Radio Tehran during the mourning month of Muharram.<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s, recordings of Shi'i vocal genres were pressed and distributed on phonograph and vinyl records in Iran and South Asia (figures 2.1 and 2.2).

The rise of the cassette, however, allowed for the proliferation of recordings of such genres across a wide geographical area. The low cost and mobility of cassettes fostered the development of the production, distribution, and reception of music across the globe with the ease of duplication, ending specialists' monopoly of sound recording and production. The cassette is often considered to have marked a fairly radical change in audio technology production and consumption. In contrast to the vinyl records that preceded it, the specific materialities of cassette – durability, portability, and affordability – helped spawn a proliferation of diverse recordings and made it ubiquitous across the globe (Bohlman and McMurray 2017).

The rise of cassettes in Turkey is said to have challenged state control and censorship of the media; this is particularly noted in studies of Kurdish language music in the country. Kurdish language music and recordings faced successive bans between the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the successive military coups. The mass production of blank cassette tapes and introduction of pre-recorded cassettes began in Germany in the 1960s, but it was not until the mid-1970s that Kurdish music cassettes became widely available in Turkey (Kuruoğlu 2015; Reigle 2013). In contrast to the phonograph records, which were easily censored and controlled as they had to be recorded in studios and manufactured in factories, anybody could now record cassettes and make copies of existing tapes at a low cost. While no Kurdish language vinyl records were ever produced in Turkey, the introduction of the cassette allowed Kurdish language artists to reach a wide audience. Later, exiled Kurdish musicians were able to produce major works in their adopted countries and impact listeners

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5 Zabihi started his career as a singer of Persian classical music before specializing in devotional recitation. His association with the Pahlavi regime earned him the label of the singer of the Shah [*khanandeh-ye shah*] but led to his immediate arrest and execution following the Islamic Revolution, whose courts charged him for treason and “weak moral fiber.”



FIGURE 2.1 A seven-inch vinyl record of Seyed Javad Zabihi released by the Iranian record label *Royal* in the mid-1970s

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in Turkey via the circulation of illegal cassettes and broadcasts. The status of media containing religious material or undertones followed a similar pattern – severe restrictions early on, looser control with the spread of cassettes and, eventually, taking on multiple forms with the privatization of media and lifting of certain restrictions in 1990s Turkey (Stokes 2016).

The introduction of recordings of Shi'i *meddah* in Turkey was similar and relied on the private and discreet circulation of cassettes, unsupervised by the state. Without a recording industry to support the production of such devotional genres, cassettes were duplicated and circulated among informal networks. Several cassette collectors in Kars and Istanbul explained to me in interviews that the portability and cost of cassettes meant that students or

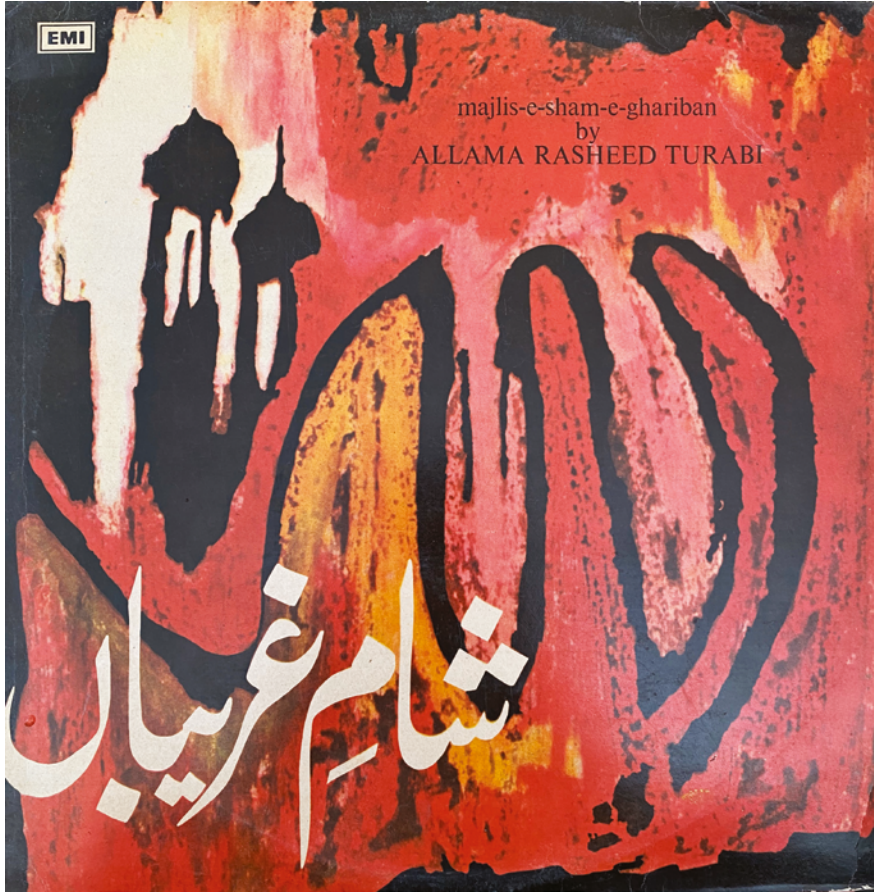


FIGURE 2.2 *Majlis-e-Sham-e-Ghariban* vinyl LP recording by Allama Rasheed Turabi released by EMI (Pakistan) and distributed by The Gramophone Company of India in 1974  
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pilgrims travelling to and from Iran could purchase them there, where their production grew exponentially in the 1980s, and bring them back to Turkey where they would be copied and shared amongst friends and family, or by small-scale entrepreneurs. It was not until the mid-1990s, that studio recordings of Shi'i *ilahi* – hymns and laments – began to be produced in urban centers such as Istanbul, where many Azeri-Turkish Shi'a had migrated to from the provinces of Kars and Iğdır.

Due to the status of such recordings within Turkey and the lack of an established tradition of specialist reciters, Iran has, and continues to be, the most important source of devotional recordings. With the introduction of cassettes, *meddah* and poets from Iranian Azerbaijan became hugely popular

amongst Twelver Shi'is in Turkey and Azerbaijan. The city of Ardabil, in the northwestern Azeri-Turkish speaking region of Iran, has long been a center for Turkish-language poetry and recitation in praise of Ahl al-Bayt. Some local historians put this down to the fact that Ardabil was the first capital of the Safavid Empire. The Safavids had their origins in an Alid-centric Sufi order in the region and their first shah, Ismail I (1487–1524 CE), is known to have composed mystical poetry in honor of Ali and the imams in Turkish under the pen name *Hatai* (Gallagher 2018). Over the subsequent centuries, a relatively distinct tradition of Turkish language poetry praising and mourning Ahl al-Bayt and melodic mourning and elegiac recitation emerged in the urban center of Ardabil. Tohid Ghavom, a historian whom I interviewed in Ardabil, explained this tradition, claiming that the city of Ardabil has a supernatural connection with Karbala. “Even before the Safavids it has been reported in travel literature (*safarnameh*) that the people of Ardabil were lovers of Imam Husayn” he said.<sup>6</sup> “The perspective of Ardabil is different from the rest, rooted in Islamic mysticism (*irfan*) ... it has a divine source. These roots in *irfan* have changed the way poetry, literature and recitation developed here.”<sup>7</sup>

Following the Iranian Revolution, existing traditions of *meddah* recitation found new platforms with the development of audio recording combined with the implicit and explicit support of the Iranian State. *Meddah* in Ardabil, like in other parts of Iran, are mostly supported by informal networks of religious groups or associations (*hey'at mazhabī*) that organize various gatherings and religious activities throughout the year. These gatherings are local phenomena, open to the public but usually attended by people from the neighborhood or by workers of the specific trade guild connected to the organizers. While *majlis* mourning gatherings peak during the Islamic months of Muharram and Safar, Ardabil is particularly known in Iran for its year-round and for the huge number of professional and amateur *meddah* who participate in them. During the short period I spent in Ardabil carrying out fieldwork between May and June 2016, around the beginning of Ramadan, I was surprised to find that every

6 Author's Interview with Tohid Ghavom (Ardabil, Iran, May 31, 2015).

7 Ghavom claims that the growth of the *meddah* tradition began in the early days of Safavid rule. The Safavids' aim of making Shi'i Islam the official state religion meant that previous poetic traditions used for praising the rulers and kings were transformed for the purpose of praising the imams and Ahl al-Bayt under their rule: “The Safavids did not give permission to the poets to praise them [*mādh etmāk*], instead they said to put their efforts towards praising Ahl al-Bayt. They started praising the people who were writing about the Imams, not just about kings or rulers ... this way they started motivating people to write *mersiye*. Here minstrels [*aşıqlar*] who played musical instruments, such as *Aşiq* Qurbani, even began to sing the praises of Imam 'Ali and the other Imams. These poets continued to write in the *irfani* tradition of the city throughout the centuries.”

single evening numerous *majlis* were held at mosques, purpose-built assembly halls (*hosseinieh*) and private homes across the city. Each of these gatherings has a minimum of four or five *meddah* and poets waiting to recite. This is in stark contrast to the minimal number of ritual gatherings held in Turkey, exclusively during Muharram and Safar, a difference acknowledged by many of my interlocutors there.

In Turkey, I would often have long conversations with my friends and interlocutors about the near-mythical status of Ardabil. Hasan, a musician in his thirties who regularly recited laments at one of the Shi'i mosques in the city of Kars, had never visited Iran but once passionately explained to me the importance of the city: "Ardabil is the heart of this culture. It is the center for *meddah* and poetry. There, they are professionals; they start learning to recite at a young age and hold mourning gatherings every night of the year! You have seen it yourself. We cannot compare, we are a small community here and have little support, time, and money for these things." Hasan often told me he dreamt of going to study with the *meddahs* in Ardabil. "I have been listening to Salim Moazenzadeh's cassettes since I was a little boy. Every day I would put on the same cassettes, write down the words, and try to replicate his voice [...] The way he begins in a low rumbling tone and then rises up to a high pitch when reciting laments. No one can compare with Salim, he is the 'The Sultan of Reciters' (*Sultan-ul Zakirin*)."

Salim Moazenzadeh (b. October 7, 1936–d. November 22, 2016) is undoubtedly the most popular Azeri-Turkish *meddah* of the twentieth century. Born to a family of reciters, Salim's father, Sheikh Abdul Karim Moazenzadeh Ardabili, was the first to recite the call to prayer on Iran's National Radio. Salim Moazenzadeh reputedly spent an average of five hours a day reciting, studying poetry and training his voice and would often recite in Persian and Arabic as well as in Turkish, his mother tongue. With his phenomenal voice and charisma, Moazenzadeh's popularity spread beyond the *majlis*, thanks to the cassette tape. Cassette recordings were not produced in studios but captured by amateurs or professional recorders at gatherings and then edited and copied by small-scale distributors across Iran, particularly in the Azerbaijan region. With these cassettes, the sounds of mourning, recitation of *mersiye*, long unmetred narrated laments, and *noha*, rhythmic lament poetry, left the confines of the *majlis* and entered the private spaces of the listener, wherever that may be. The cassette allowed individual *meddah*, such as Salim, to become well known, loved and idealized household names. In the past, many of these reciters would have remained relatively unknown, now their images and names adorned the covers of cassette tapes which circulated widely. The early cassettes of *meddah* remained relatively unmodified from their original live recordings, often only

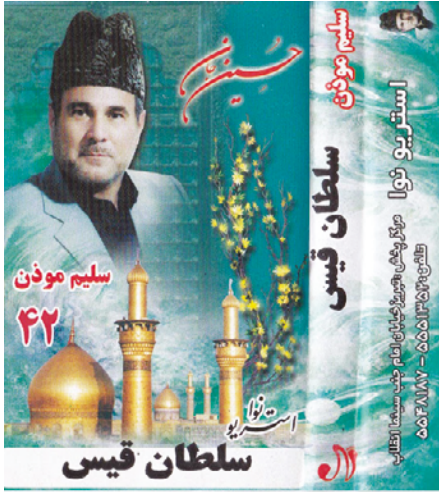


FIGURE 2.3  
 'Sultan Qays' cassette recording by Salim Moazenzadeh distributed in Tabriz, Iran  
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being cut to fit on the two sides and occasionally additional reverb would be added. The visual imagery on the front of the cassettes, however, used montage and collage, often to present the *meddah* and the contents of the cassette as being particularly holy or close to the Ahl al-Bayt.

The rise in the popularity of individual *meddah* also meant that, perhaps more so than in the past, audiences at public gatherings would be attracted by the reciter, for acoustic, aesthetic as well as for spiritual reasons. The ability to playback recordings meant that *meddah* also came to be known for their renditions of particular poems or texts that gained popularity through cassette releases; reciters would therefore be expected to repeat these during live rituals. Moazenzadeh's best known *noha*, 'Zaynab Zaynab,' in honor of Zaynab, Imam Husayn's sister, was so popular and strongly associated with him that it was played repeatedly as crowds filled the streets of Ardabil for the *meddah*'s funeral in November 2016.<sup>8</sup>

The increase in the number of students from Turkey going to study in Qom and on pilgrimage to Iran, Iraq, and Syria meant that more individuals came into contact with other Shi'i ritual traditions and the styles of recitation and poetry popular in other regions. During the 1980s and 1990s, cassettes of Shi'i lamentation were often brought back from such travels and they were copied and shared extensively, both informally and also by some shops. Cassettes of Azeri language *meddah*, such as Salim Moazenzadeh were particularly sought

8 Video of Salim Moazenzadeh's funeral, "Marāsīm tashī'e peykare *maddāh* Ahl al-Bayt Salim Moazenzadeh Ardabili" (2017).



FIGURE 2.4 CDs of Azeri-Turkish *meddah*, including Salim Moazen-zadeh (top shelf), at a bookshop in Ardabil, Iran  
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after, as they were not only aesthetically pleasing but could be easily understood, unlike Persian or Arabic recordings. The independence of the [Former Soviet] Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991 also led to new contact between communities in Turkey and both the bordering Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan. By the early 2000s, those travelling to Azerbaijan from Turkey were able to collect CDs of *meddah* and books containing Latin alphabet Azerbaijani collections of *noha* and *mersiye*, which were much easier to read than Arabic alphabet Azeri texts from Iran.

### 3 Between Ethics and Entertainment

Charles Hirschkind's (2006) work on cassette sermons in Cairo has been pivotal in showing how audio media forms can act as tools of ethical discipline as listeners seek to cultivate certain feelings and emotions. Careful listening to cassette sermons among Muslims in Cairo is said to operate as a 'technique of the self,' supporting a striving for greater piety and orthopraxy while also constituting a sphere of deliberation and dialogue. In interviews and conversations I conducted, my interlocutors spoke about listening to recordings of *meddah* in a way was similar to Hirschkind's (2006, 68) account of cassette listeners in Cairo, Egypt, where listening was a form of meditation or relaxation that simultaneously enriched one's knowledge and purified the soul. Thus, listening to sermons or devotional recordings, enables one to live more piously and avoid moral transgressions as they are a means for sedimenting a range of virtues into one's character.

Hirschkind asserts that the Cairene sermons also provide affective conditions of virtuous conduct and evoke a particular set of emotional and ethical responses, primarily an active fear of God. By contrast, the relatively short, five-to-ten-minute recordings of *noha* or *mersiye* arguably summon up different emotional and ethical responses. These shorter recordings quite clearly aim to strengthen sentiments of love and closeness to Ahl al-Bayt, by constantly reminding the listener about their suffering. The ability to constantly remember the suffering of Ahl al-Bayt in daily life is much desired as a way of bringing one closer to them, and through them, to God.

One significant feature of recordings, whether digital or cassette, is that they can be played at any time or place. The playback of these recordings may, therefore, not always constitute active listening in the same way as listening at the *majlis*. Listening to *mersiye* and *noha* in the context of the *majlis* is rich in its related programmatic elaboration. When *noha* are recited in the mourning

*majlis*, listeners are expected to beat their chests in rhythm to the recitation, self-flagellate with chains at certain points, and repeat the chorus (*nakarāt*) and respond to call and response chants. Listening to recordings of *noha* is completely different. Listeners would not consider beating their chests in a similar manner while listening to a recording alone; at most they might tap their chest lightly with the palm of their hand and recite the lyrics simultaneously in a low voice. Murat, a friend and shopkeeper in Kars, would turn down the volume when customers walked into the shop but he claimed that during quiet moments in the day he would play a longer recording of a *mersiye*, turn up the volume, close his eyes and listen carefully. These moments were not scheduled or at fixed points in the day, like his breaks for daily prayer (*namāz*). Other interlocutors affirmed that they too waited for appropriate moments to listen to recordings. One of my interlocutors said that,

Sometimes I come home late from a long day at work and I go into my room, choose a recording of a *mersiye* on YouTube, and I listen to it from start to end. It is not the same as being in the *majlis*, but I always cry for Imam Husayn [...] even if it is on my phone.

Thus, it is clear that these recordings, like the cassette sermons, are attended to with “shifting degrees of focus” (Hirschkind 2006, 82).

Not everyone, however, may cry over or consider such recordings to be tools for the cultivation of ethical virtues or emotional attachment to the Family of the Prophet. Recitation recordings are inevitably listened to and shared in multiple ways and this has raised concerns and skepticism in some quarters about their ethical potential. For Murat and others, the recordings, although beneficial, are only ever a supplement to daily prayer, attending *majlis*, and ethical action.

Despite his constant playback of these recordings, Murat was not uncritical of others who he thought misused them. He often commented on young men who drove around with the *noha* blaring out from their cars during the first ten days of Muharram.

Blasting these recordings out of your car window does not make you a good Muslim. If you don't pray, don't fast, and just play these recordings occasionally to try and prove some point, it is no good. Some of these young guys don't know what they are doing. You can't just listen to a *noha* and then change the CD and put on Ibrahim Tatlis [a well-known Turkish singer]. That is just disrespectful.

This view highlights a key tension brought about by the growth of mediatized Islamic devotion – the blurring of the boundary between ethics and entertainment. The use of media formats associated with entertainment and the transfer of devotional genres beyond their original ritual contexts is a concern for many. Cassettes, CDs, DVDs, and social media sites and apps such as Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp which allow the sharing of recordings are, by convention, media of entertainment. For many, this association with entertainment undermines the ‘seriousness’ of listening to devotional cassettes and makes it questionable. Patrick Eisenlohr has identified a similar dubious association with devotional recordings in the Mauritian and South Asian context, claiming it “thwarts the dream of a fully transparent medium” (2009, 285). Here, audio-taped performances of devotional poetry, called *na’t*, in praise of the Prophet, are occasionally associated with the Hindi film industry and its perceived moral dangers by opponents of the genre. Critics of *na’t* recitation see it as crossing into the questionable domain of music and singing – a fine line for many devotional traditions. The fear of *noha* recordings blurring into the domain of ‘music’ and commercial entertainment was also common among some of my interlocutors, including Murat who worried about listening to such recordings alongside other ‘secular’ music.

Some believe that the spirituality of the traditions of the *majlis* and recitation is devalued by the recording and circulation of these genres. In Ardabil, Tohid Ghavom firmly opposed the spread of recording technology:

Because we did not have recorders in the past the only place to listen to *mersiye* or *noha* was in the *majlis*. Some people believe that the recitation of these poems in the *majlis* has a supernatural quality and therefore shouldn’t be recorded ... some poets and reciters did not like people to record their voices because they feared it may interfere with the supernatural. They would even ask people with recorders to leave the *majlis*. Before, I did not agree; but now I have come to understand this point, which many *meddah* and clerics also agree with. In these gatherings there is an atmosphere which is restricted to that time and place. It is within this atmosphere that we weep for Imam Husayn, beat our chests, or flagellate with chains. There is a spiritual atmosphere there. Outside of this time and place these things may seem ridiculous to some. That is why these things should not be recorded and removed from their context. These things have a time and place.

Now we have such an abundance of recordings we have diminished the value of the *majlis*, the *meddah*, and the *mersiye*. As we increase the quantity, the quality has decreased. In the past, there were only two or

three gatherings, but right now they are uncountable. Those who would attend such gatherings in the past were the educated and intellectuals. Right now, there are around 400 gatherings ... the quality has lessened because of this. We have spread supernatural mourning onto CDs and the internet ... Now there are so many recordings, the poets and *meddah* have to continuously produce more and more material. In the past there were much fewer but they were much better.

... Before going to a *majlis* we would take our ablutions, spiritually cleanse ourselves and prepare for the gathering. We had to purify ourselves so we could free ourselves from everything and sacrifice ourselves to listen to that *mersiye*. But, now? A taxi driver can put on repeat a CD with a recitation about Ali al-Asghar (Imam Husayn's youngest son) while, at the same time, he is using bad language to talk with his friends!<sup>9</sup>

For Ghavom, and others, the huge proliferation of recordings has greatly devalued both the art and experience of mourning and recitation has moved from the sphere of ritual to that of entertainment. Ghavom's sentiments, shared by others I heard in Turkey, suggest a dangerous crossover of sounds from the sacred sphere to the profane. The success of a mourning *majlis* relies on a range of material, sensory, and embodied features to stage an atmosphere that is conducive to appropriate mourning. The affective qualities of the *majlis* cannot be reproduced in recordings of the same event, as acknowledged by both *meddah* and listeners. These recordings are affective in different ways. For some, like Murat, who are aware of such problems, the recordings should not be dismissed entirely. They are far from a replacement for the *majlis* but, if listened to in a 'correct' manner, they can supplement devotion in domestic space.

The posting of devotional recordings online and the ensuing changes in recitation practices have stoked disagreement further. For the time being, there is no clear consensus on whether these recordings are beneficial or merely a distraction to ethical improvement on the path of Ahl al-Bayt.

#### 4 Transnational Aesthetics

For much of the twentieth century, there were restrictions on Shi'is building mosques and congregating during Muharram and other times of the year in Turkey. The circulation of cassette recordings of Azeri-Turkish language *meddah*

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9 Author's interview with Tohid Ghavom (Ardabil, Iran, May 31, 2015).

from Iranian Azerbaijan presented opportunities for individual participation in a wider Shi'i aesthetics and ethics of mourning through listening.<sup>10</sup> As in Hirschkind's accounts from Egypt, Shi'i Muslims in Turkey could compensate for the limitations the state imposed on public discourse and religion through these acts of individual audition afforded by the medium of the cassette tape (Hirschkind 2006, 55). The circulation of cassettes, the ease with which they could be duplicated, shared, and distributed also enabled sociability locally through the physical exchange of the objects as well as the shared sentiments, discussions, and debates they inspired. I argue that, most significantly, the emergence of cassettes also marked an important acceleration of the development of wider transnational Azeri-Turkish networks as the same recordings were also listened to across Iran, as well as clandestinely in Soviet Azerbaijan. Despite the interconnected histories of these communities, the distinct political trajectories of Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan and the relatively rigid borders over much of the twentieth century meant that contact between them was limited. Recordings of folk music, of bards (*aşiq*) transmitting from the radio stations across the Soviet Caucasus and, later, cassettes of Azeri-Turkish Shi'i devotional material undoubtedly contributed to fostering a sense of cultural and religious continuity for many Azeris in Turkey, a sentiment which has persisted and, occasionally, been mobilized by Pan-Turkic nationalists as well as Shi'i Islamists.

This transnational community, however ephemeral or unfixated, is mediated through sound. It is the sound of *meddah*, in particular, that allows Shi'i Muslims in Turkey to imagine themselves as part of a bigger and transnational community. The significance of sound, and the media that carries it, is its ability to travel and create, negotiate, and mediate relations across time and space. The act of listening, in Turkey, to recordings produced in Ardabil, Baku or Tabriz connects listeners fleetingly with a wider geography of co-religionists.

The circulation of devotional recordings on the internet has led to a further increase in the popularity of individual reciters. In recent years, the most popular reciters from Azerbaijan or Iran have begun to produce recordings which are distributed widely online on social media platforms. As a result of this the most popular reciters now travel regularly and can be heard reciting for Azeri-Turkish communities in cities as far apart as Tehran, Istanbul, Frankfurt, Tbilisi, or Moscow. The increase in access to recording equipment means that studio productions have become much more widespread, with the

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10 Here my understanding of aesthetics draws on the definitions of recent anthropologists of religion (Meyer and Verrips 2008; Pinney 2004) who use the term to refer to the material, bodily, sensational, and sensory dimensions of religion.

production of media often being a transnational process in itself. One recent example highlights the transnational nature of the production of Azeri-Turkish devotional media today. In August 2019, the well-known Azerbaijani *meddah* from Baku, Seyyid Taleh Boradigahi, collaborated with a studio producer from Ardabil, Fariborz Khatami, to produce an album of ten tracks for Muharram of that year. These recordings drew on a range of sources for inspiration taking both melodies and poems from writers and reciters from both sides of the Azerbaijani border, including Salim Moazenzadeh. The album was released on YouTube and physically on CD in Iran where YouTube is currently banned. Whilst the audio was recorded and produced in Ardabil and Baku, the videos were shot in a number of different locations. This media was not only produced transnationally across the Azeri-Turkish geography but were also shared throughout the month of Muharram widely across a range of social media platforms by users across Iran, the Caucasus, and Turkey. Both the practice of reciting/ listening and the circulation of media, therefore, has come to connect people transnationally as a community sharing not only the same 'belief' but engaging in aesthetic and poetic practices.

## 5 Conclusion

Both popular and academic accounts of sectarianism in the Middle East have often problematically depicted a homogenous "Shi'i Crescent" subservient to the political expansion of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>11</sup> While a number of scholars (Shaery-Eisenlohr 2008; Mervin 2011; Leichtman 2015; Hashemi and Postel 2017) have sought to challenge such claims by describing the multi-faceted transnational nature of Shi'i Islam across the globe, studies of transnationalism have tended to focus almost exclusively on political and clerical networks (Corboz 2015; Louër 2008).<sup>12</sup> By focusing on the circulation of Shi'i devotional media, I have argued that sound is significant in mediating across transnational networks. The ways in which audio recordings of devotional recitation, both online and in earlier media forms, connect people and have the

11 The term 'Shi'i Crescent' was coined by King Abdullah of Jordan in December 2004 and has subsequently been used to depict a broad strip of Shi'i political dominance running directly through the Middle East from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, and into Southern Lebanon (Wright and Baker 2004).

12 More recently, studies of Shi'i Muslim migrants living in diverse settings have also shifted the focus away from a politics and clerical authority to address issues of community, diaspora formation, and ritual change. Important contributions include: Flaskerud (2015); Gholami (2016); Scharbrodt (2011, 2015); Shanneik (2017, 2015, 2013); Shanneik et al. (2017).

potential to foster communities of feeling underline the need to consider the role of aesthetics, emotion, and media together to better understand transnational religious communities. The circulation of sonic media is hugely significant in the formation of Shi'i communal imaginaries and highlights alternative flows and connections which do not neatly map onto existing ideas of the 'centers and peripheries' of political and clerical authority in Shi'i Islam such as Qom, Najaf, and Karbala.

The transnational circulation of audio and videos, in their material and digital forms, is central to the ways in which Shi'i men and women understand and imagine a larger religious community today. In the case discussed here a transnational community of Azeri-Turkish Shi'is has evolved, in part, around shared audio and video recordings of Shi'i devotional genres. Rather than seeing the adoption of new media forms by Shi'i Muslims as an entirely new phenomenon, I have attempted to show how older sonic and poetic forms and ties between historically connected communities have developed and evolved in the current context. The adoption of cassettes and digital recording by reciters and listeners shows that religious forms are not erased or made redundant by new media but rather evolve in new forms of articulation, creating debates over what is lost and gained in these transformations. The circulation of people, sound, media, and poems examined here follows pre-existing tracks marked by earlier generations but also divert to new directions, moving between the borders of present-day nation-states and constituting a dynamic transnational community.

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## Sonic Messages

### *Hizbullah's Mawlid an-Nabi Celebrations in Lebanon*

*Ines Weinrich*

A huge festivity hall with a central aisle and numerous rows of chairs is packed with people; yellow and white balloons are hanging in bunches every few meters, and in the narrow front part of the room, a stage is decorated with flowers and banners. The large screen on stage is flanked by an image of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina on the left and an image of the Prophet's seal on the right. Music plays, and a group of about twenty-five men, women, and children march into the room. Wearing costumes consisting of long gowns in muted colors, some carrying palm leaves or a frame drum, the performers walk onto the stage, take position, and start singing.

This scene took place in 2012 during the Main Celebration (*al-ihtifāl al-markazī*) of the Lebanese Hizbullah to commemorate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Mawlid an-Nabi, hereafter Mawlid).<sup>1</sup> Here, we encounter aesthetic forms which carry Shi'i as well as Lebanese connotations. Hizbullah is a relatively recent Shi'i movement and political party in Lebanon. Its onset and appearance are shaped by Lebanese politics; yet the Shi'i element is a crucial part of its self-conception. This chapter reads Hizbullah as an "aesthetic formation" (Meyer 2009) and analyzes the different styles and meanings that contribute to this formation as exemplified through the Mawlid<sup>2</sup> celebration.

The notion of aesthetic formation comes from the general field of material religion and builds on the concept of "sensational forms," that is, a set of authorized practices, things, and notions that involve the body and the senses and

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- 1 The analysis presented in this chapter is based on live footage of the Mawlid celebration aired on al-Manar TV on February 7, 2012. To rely on TV footage was rather rare in the context of my broader research on Islamic chanting, which covered mainly live events. Comparative remarks in this chapter are drawn from fieldwork which I carried out between 2008 and 2013. The fieldwork included observing Sunni and Shi'i commemorations and celebrations in Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut, and southern Lebanon. Major religious organizations in Lebanon usually have one Main Celebration that is broadcasted and various local celebrations.
  - 2 All non-English terms in this chapter follow the Arabic transliteration, privileging the Lebanese vernacular, where necessary.

are employed in religious mediation (Meyer 2009, 13; Meyer 2013; Morgan 2010; Prohl 2012). In this context, form is not understood “in opposition to content and meaning, or ethical norms and values, but as a necessary condition without which the latter cannot be conveyed” (Meyer 2009, 13). Shi‘is in Lebanon are not a homogeneous group, and the party needs to consider intra-Shi‘i competition as well as the dynamics of the broader political field. Both are reflected in the celebration I analyze in this chapter. The focus here will not be on the political speeches but on the aesthetic forms presented on stage, especially the sonic and performative practices.

If we are to take materiality seriously, it is not enough to merely state the presence of song or recitation; we must explore why a specific poetic text or song is chosen and how it is sounded. Such practices convey messages that are not necessarily verbalized in speeches or in the semantic meaning of a poetic text alone. In the celebration under study, two intertwined levels of messaging emerge. On a general level, sound, here represented particularly in the musical arrangement, serves as a tool of distinction within the intra-Shi‘i competition for followers. Beyond the employment of sonic strategies that mark group-specific aesthetics, there are furthermore political messages conveyed through the specific repertoire presented on stage. After a short introduction to the general historic and political background, I will situate the Mawlid celebration within the context of Hizbullah rites and give a brief overview on the party’s general sonic repertoire before moving to my main analysis.

## 1 Shi‘is in Lebanon

Lebanese Shi‘is predominantly belong to the Twelver denomination of Shi‘i Islam. They constitute about 30 percent of the Lebanese population and are thus one of the largest groups within the eighteen officially recognized confessional groups in Lebanon (Norton 2007, 11–12). They constitute a majority of the inhabitants in southern Lebanon (the South) and the Beqaa Valley, but due to the rural exodus in the 1960s, migration forced by the shelling of the South, and finally the Lebanese War (1975–1990), a considerable number have settled in Greater Beirut. The political system of confessionalism (*al-ṭāʿifiyya*) in Lebanon, according to which political offices are distributed along a proportional representation of the confessional groups, often makes belonging to a religious group overlap with partisan preferences. This system is rooted in the European power-sharing model devised for the administrative unit of the Mutaṣarrifiyya of Mount Lebanon (1861–1918). The confessional system was written into the Lebanese constitution and confirmed by the agreement

of the National Pact in 1943.<sup>3</sup> Its reform and long-term abolition was a stipulation of the Taif Agreement that ended the war;<sup>4</sup> however, despite several civic campaigns for its abolishment, no substantial steps have been taken. Hence, although political parties are theoretically open for all Lebanese, most parties de facto have their members and supporters in one confessional group.

Lebanese Shi'is adhere to different scholarly authorities,<sup>5</sup> and Hizbullah is not the only Shi'i organization that competes for followers. The 1960s witnessed a high degree of politicization among Lebanese Shi'is, when economic crises and political marginalization within the Lebanese system resulted in the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council, initiated by Musa al-Sadr, a leading cleric who was seeking an alternative to the leftist movements in the struggle for social justice and political representation.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1970s, he founded the Movement of the Deprived and its paramilitary wing, Amal. Amal is today most prominently represented by its leader Nabih Berri, the incumbent Speaker of the Parliament. Hizbullah was formed in the wake of the second Israeli invasion in Lebanon (1982) as a military resistance and successively turned into a full-fledged organization.<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, the organization established itself as a social movement and a political party. It participated in the Lebanese elections for the first time in 1992, and from 2005 onwards has participated in the Lebanese government.

During the 1990s, Hizbullah resisted the naturalization of its military forces into the Lebanese army, justified as a 'resistance project,' that is, by pointing to the fact that in spite of the war having ended, a sizeable part of southern Lebanon was still occupied by Israeli forces. Hizbullah also started to offer social and economic services that were effectual due to "substantive funding from Iran, long-term planning, and effective organization" (Abisaab and

3 See Traboulsi (2007, 43–44; 109–111). The representational system secured a ratio of 6/5 in administrative and governmental posts in favour of the Christians and, most notably, a Maronite President, a Sunni Prime Minister, and a Shi'i Speaker of Parliament.

4 The most important changes were an equal ratio of Christians and Muslims in parliament and chamber of seats and more executive powers to the Council of Ministers (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 132).

5 Twelver Shi'is choose one authority among scholars whose teachings they follow in their religious practices (*marja' al-taqlid*, literally 'source of emulation').

6 Musa al-Sadr, born in 1928 in Iran into a family of Lebanese origin, disappeared during a visit to Libya in 1978. He was the representative of the Iraqi *marja'* Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim in Lebanon. For the intertwined histories and cultures of communism and Shi'ism in Iraq and Lebanon, see Abisaab and Abisaab (2014); for the political dismantling of this relation, see: Abisaab and Abisaab (2014, esp. 159–161).

7 See Norton (2007, 32–35); for the history of Hizbullah in general and its role in Lebanese politics, see Abisaab and Abisaab (2014); Mervin (2008); Norton (2007).

Abisaab 2014, 161), presenting itself as an alternative to the established political leaders. Through all this, the party was able to mobilize many Shi'is, including those who would not subscribe to their pious program of rituals or dress code. Political opponents, in contrast, criticize the party as a 'state within a state' and as a compliant executor of Iranian politics.

Some of Hizbullah's attitudes overlapped with those of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (1934–2010), a prominent scholar whose thinking on the adequate execution of law and rituals in accordance with contemporary challenges was highly appreciated among Lebanese Shi'is (Böttcher 2002; Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 197–203). Born and raised in Najaf, Iraq, Fadlallah sporadically visited his ancestral hometown in southern Lebanon in the 1950s before establishing himself permanently in Beirut in 1966. Fadlallah never held the position of highest scholarly authority to the party, which officially adheres to the Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (b. 1939), but he nevertheless had a major impact on its members and supporters (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 130; Böttcher 2002, 41–42). The relationship between Hizbullah and Fadlallah became more distant when Fadlallah became critical of the Iranian interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurisprudent (*wilāyat al-faqīh*)<sup>8</sup> (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 200). However, the relation was never fully dismissed, and the party commemorated his first death anniversary in 2011 with a huge event. Other relevant scholars for Shi'is in Lebanon include Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (b. c.1930) and Shaykh Abdel-Amir Qabalan (b. 1936), the current president of the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council.

Hence, Hizbullah operates in a highly diversified field of inter- and intra-religious, intra-confessional, and political affinities and competition. Sabrina Mervin (2007; 2006) and Robert Benedicty (2007) have shown how different Shi'i groups in Lebanon utilize rituals as tools of intra-confessional distinction. Given their highly symbolic status within Shi'i piety as well as their visibility among other religious groups in Lebanon, rituals connected to Ashura figure prominently in this respect. Groups adhering to different spiritual leaders, political parties, or local communities differ in their flags and banners, slogans, recitations, or the degree of props employed. This chapter takes the analysis further, focusing on sonic practices. Moreover, in contrast to most scholarly examinations of Shi'i ritual cultures, it does not focus on the mourning rituals but takes the commemoration of the Prophet's birth as its starting point.

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8 According to Twelver Shi'i theology, the community has been without spiritual and political leadership since the Great Occultation of the Twelfth Imam in 941 CE. In his absence, religious scholars may act as deputies on issues of jurisprudence and, according to some religious opinions, on issues of political leadership and community affairs.

## 2 Hizbullah as an Aesthetic Formation

The notion of aesthetic formations was established by Birgit Meyer (2009) as a further development of Benedict Anderson's (1991) imagined communities. Meyer sees aesthetic formations not in contrast to but as an expansion of imagined communities, adding two main aspects: first, directing our focus to the processes of forming a social entity; and second, bringing in a bodily dimension (Meyer 2009, esp. 6–11). The bodily and cognitive dimension, she argues, are not mutually exclusive but complementary:

the strong interest in the body, the senses, experience and aesthetics in the social and cultural sciences today signals an increasing awareness that the emergence and sustenance of social formations depends on styles that form and bind subjects not only through cognitive imaginations, but also through molding the senses and building bodies. (Meyer 2009, 22)

Since its inception, Hizbullah has paid great attention to symbols, flags, the continuity of colors, and, above all, to the carefully designed politics of commemoration for both military success and the loss of lives. Hizbullah relies on distinct aesthetic styles in its material culture, especially on acoustic and visual markers. For instance, the party employs a professional design for its political iconography; the yellow flag with the Hizbullah logo is its best-known visual marker. The party furthermore employs logos for calendrical rites that combine corporate identity with yearly changing details. The illustration below shows one of the party's Ashura banners (figure 3.1). The Ashura logo on the top has been used consistently while the image below changed yearly in accordance with the party's annual Ashura motto.

Other media, in the sense of those forms and practices which mediate Hizbullah's vision of religion, resistance, and ritual, pertain to daily practices like food, fashion, and entertainment. This includes the boycotting of certain products, organized trips to historical sites, and the creation of restaurants, beaches, or amusement parks that offer religiously endorsed products (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 131, 166–169; Alagha 2016; Deeb and Harb 2013; Mervin 2008; Le Thomas 2012). Finally, the party has its own hymns, slogans, and music videos that are employed in both political and religious rites. Founded in 1985, al-Wilaya is the earliest music band associated with Hizbullah ([www.welaya.hlb.com](http://www.welaya.hlb.com), accessed February 24, 2010). The band composed the party's anthem and often performs at political festivities, such as



FIGURE 3.1 Ashura banner in Beirut. The logo, calligraphy and graphic design identify the banner as a Hizbullah banner, without showing the party's name or official emblem

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the celebration commemorating the end of the July War of 2006.<sup>9</sup> In addition to music bands, vocal ensembles, and orchestras, different associations for promoting the arts initiate workshops, video installations, and theatre plays.<sup>10</sup> Artistic works are disseminated at live events, via television and radio, and on the party's website, CDs, and DVDs. In the following, some of these aspects will be explored in more detail in order to capture Hizbullah as one actor in "settings in which actual religious groups assert their public presence against other religious and nonreligious groups, or where specific religious repertoires – or 'sensational forms' [...] – are employed in addressing people" (Meyer 2009, 10).

### 3 The Rhythm of Time: Hizbullah's Calendrical Rites

Within the liturgical year, special days are marked by different formats and varying degrees of commemoration. These include the two canonical feasts, the births and deaths of members of the Prophet's family (Ahl al-Bayt), and the anniversary of important events, such as the sending down of the Quran or the designation of Ali as Muhammad's successor (*Eid al-Ghadir*). The events connected to the death of Husayn in 680 CE, from his arrival at Karbala with his followers until the fortieth day after his death (*al-Arbain*), figure most prominently in this category. Whereas these occasions follow the Islamic calendar and are demonstrative of general Muslim and Shi'i piety, there are also Hizbullah-specific commemorative days which relate to recent history and follow the Gregorian calendar. These include the annual commemoration of the party's martyrs (on November 11), the withdrawal of the Israeli army from southern Lebanon in 2000 (on May 25), the end of the July War of 2006 (on August 14), or the Martyred Leaders' Day (on February 16).

Some of these days are only mentioned as an anniversary day in religious broadcasts or are announced by trailers on TV and radio; others get marked by specific songs and prayers that are broadcast during the day. Finally, a couple of days are marked by special events devoted to the anniversary. Among these are the birth and death anniversaries of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, their daughter Zaynab, and the birthday of the Twelfth Imam. For the elaborate commemoration, Hizbullah uses different formats: live *majlis*, studio *majlis*,<sup>11</sup> live celebrations, both local and

9 For example, on August 14, 2009 and August 3, 2010 (preponed because of Ramadan). On al-Wilaya and other music groups, see Alagha (2016); Atrissi (2008); Berg (2017).

10 For authorization of the arts as a means to support the resistance, see Alagha (2016).

11 A pre-recorded *majlis* that features only the reciting shaykh and no audience.

central, and the *sahra*. *Majlis* (short for *majlis al-‘azā’*, pl. *majālis*) here denotes the recitation of passages about the tragedy of Karbala (*al-maṣā’ib*). The *sahra* is a TV show with interview guests and speakers, punctuated by songs on the occasion that are performed by a small musical ensemble (*firqa*).

Although the party-owned TV channel al-Manar commonly does not interrupt its broadcast for the daily ritual prayers, there is at least one daily time slot that broadcasts supplications, songs, and quotes from the Quran and by religious leaders. Additional slots are added on Thursday evening or during Ramadan. However, such broadcasts are not necessarily bound to individual observation; rather, they create the soundscape that accompanies daily life.

#### 4 The Rhythm of Sound: Hizbullah’s Musical Genres

I categorize the sonic genres by Hizbullah that are noticeable in public spaces, such as on streets and in the media, into four fields: they are either Ashura-derived, come from the general field of religious chanting (*inshād*), belong to the genre of political hymns, or are newly composed pious songs.

The Ashura-derived genres can be heard in three different ritual settings. The first of these – mourning circles (*majālis*) with readings from the tragedy of Karbala – are performed during Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, as well as throughout the year on various religious and social occasions. The other two settings are limited to the month of Muharram; these are street-processions (*masīra* or *mawkib*) and the passion play, in Lebanon termed *shabīh*, and in spoken language nowadays also referred to as *tamthūliyya* (enactment) or *masraḥiyya* (play).<sup>12</sup> All three ritual settings are commonly followed or accompanied by rhythmic songs (*laṭm*, or *laṭamiyyāt*) accompanied with breast beating (*laṭm*). Such songs are either in the style of traditional elegies, many of them in the colloquial language, or modern-style songs with computerized sounds and a sharply pronounced beat. I observed both types in the context of Hizbullah events, though the singers advertised in the party-owned radio and TV station were mostly in the second style. Overlapping happens frequently within this domain, that is, elegy or sung prayers often blend over in modern *laṭm* or a political hymn.

<sup>12</sup> The research literature on the rituals connected to Ashura is abundant; an innovative analysis of the materiality of performances of dirges for breast-beating is Haag-Higuchi (2016); it includes an overview on the general research literature and studies related to Iran. For Lebanon, in addition to the already mentioned, see Deeb (2006, 129–164).

The genres from the field of religious chanting feature themes of general Muslim and Shi‘i piety. There is a repertoire of religious hymns used by Sunnis and Shi‘is alike; in addition, a repertoire exists which focuses on distinct Shi‘i themes such as the imams or Eid al-Ghadir. *Inshād* is the generic term for several vocal genres performed in religious celebrations<sup>13</sup> and comprises various genres from the art and folk music traditions as well as song in general, which is often termed *unshūda* or *nashīd*. *Nashīd* (pl. *anāshīd*) is an illustrious and versatile term: nowadays, it is often used to distinguish between singing in the secular and the religious context, but it is also used for political hymns. According to content and musical features, I differentiate between three groups of *anāshīd*: those within the already mentioned general chanting, political hymns, and religious songs that incorporate features from global pop styles.<sup>14</sup> Music bands related to Hizbullah are active in both fields of political hymns and religious songs.

## 5 Mawlid Celebration in 2012: Course of the Event

The majority of Muslims nowadays date the anniversary of the Prophet’s birthday to the 12th of Rabi‘ al-Awwal, the third month of the Muslim lunar calendar; Twelver Shi‘is tend to date it to the 17th of Rabi‘ al-Awwal. Hizbullah does not set any date officially; following an initiative of Ayatollah Montazeri (Brunner 2013, 34), it declares the 12th to the 17th of Rabi‘ al-Awwal the Week of Islamic Unity and has its Main Celebration each year on a different date within this week. The event under study was held on the 14th of Rabi‘ al-Awwal. Like most of Hizbullah’s main events, it took place in the party’s huge festivity hall, Majama‘ Sayyid al-Shuhada’, in Haret Hreik, a southern suburb of Beirut, and was broadcasted live on al-Manar. The ceremony started with a Quranic recitation in the *mujawwad* style, a musically elaborated style that marks public recitations of the Quran. After the recitation, the event’s moderator delivered a short poetic panegyric in praise of the Prophet and announced the performance of an art troupe and of “traditional chanting (*inshād taqlīdī*).”

It was at this point that the first group of performers entered wearing costumes and carrying palm leaves and drums. They sang what is considered by many Muslims to be the oldest Islamic song: *Tala‘a l-Badru ‘Alayna* (*Tala‘a l-Badru ‘Alaynā* – The Full Moon Has Risen Upon Us). According to Islamic tradition, the women and children of Medina welcomed Muhammad with

13 On *inshād* as a technical term, see Weinrich (2018, 235–237).

14 For an overview on the different musical domains of *nashīd*, see Weinrich (2020).

these verses. The earliest literal account of the verses is found in the *Dala'il al-Nubuwwa* (*Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa* – The Signs of Prophethood) by Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi (d. 1066) (al-Bayhaqi 1988, vol. 2, 506–507). The Shafi'i scholar Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 1449) gives both the Prophet's first arrival in Medina and his return from the Tabuk Raid as possible occasions for this event; he is nevertheless skeptical about the accuracy of their transmission (Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani 1959, vol. 7, 261–262; vol. 8, 128–129). In al-Bayhaqi's *Dala'il*, only the first three lines are transmitted; many lines have been since added. No fixed melody is prescribed for the rendition of these verses, and numerous versions exist, ranging from choral singing to solo singing, from stable melody to improvised versions, and from *a cappella* to the use of instruments. However, one melody in the melodic mode (*maqām*) *huzām* circulates among Muslims worldwide. In this form, *Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna* is a strophic song with each two lines forming a stanza with an underlying duple meter. The following text is then always performed; additional stanzas are added *ad libitum*.

طلع البدر علينا / من ثنّات الوداع  
 وجب الشكر علينا / ما دعا لله داع  
 أيها المبعوث فينا / جئت بالأمر المطاع  
 جئت شرفت المدينة / مرحبا يا خير داع

The full moon has risen upon us / from the mountain pass al-Wada'  
 We owe gratitude / as long as someone calls to God  
 O you who has been sent to us / you came with an instruction that is to  
 be followed  
 Your arrival has honored the city / welcome o best messenger

This form of the song was also used by the performance group on stage, but with variations as we shall see. When the song ended, instruments continued playing, and the group left the stage and walked back. A different performance ensemble entered the stage, this time wearing dark suits and white shirts. Consisting of one soloist and six choral singers, it was the usual size of the vocal ensembles that commonly perform at local religious festivities. But whereas such ensembles commonly use only one or two frame drums that are played by choral singers, this performance also featured instrumentalists playing a violin and a flute (*nāy*).

A flute solo began, and the soloist performed verses from an ode (*qaṣīda*) in the meter *al-basīṭ* and rhyming in *tā'*. This ode was composed by one Egyptian “al-Shaykh al-Munawi,” appearing in many prints of a Mawlid text

that circulates under this name. Some scholars take al-Shaykh al-Munawi as the Cairene scholar Abdel-Ra'uf al-Munawi (d. 1621) (al-Hawwari 2003, 125; Schimmel 1985, 156; Abdel-Malek 1995, 7, 29),<sup>15</sup> whilst early prints bear the name of one Abdallah ibn Muhammad al-Munawi, about whose life nothing is known (Brockelmann 1996, 931; Abu l-Fath 1995, vol. 2, 203).

I use 'Mawlid text' here to mean a literary composition on the Prophet's birth. Mawlid texts have been written by many Muslim scholars since the late-twelfth century, including Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240), al-Safadi (d. 1363), Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), Ibn Habib al-Halabi (d. 1377), or Ibn al-Dayba' (d. 1537), to name but a few.<sup>16</sup> It had become common practice to recite Mawlid texts on the occasion of Muhammad's birthday and, from the fifteenth century at the latest, also on social occasions such as engagements or weddings.<sup>17</sup> Such texts on the birth and early life of Muhammad combine rhymed prose (*saġ'*), prose, and poetry. The ode that the soloist performed in the occasion under consideration here, precedes al-Munawi's Mawlid text in several prints.<sup>18</sup> It is not very common that Mawlid texts are preceded by an ode, but many feature an ode prominently after the introduction, praising the Prophet or the month of his birth or both (e. g. Ibn Habib, folio 83r). In our case, the ode addresses the listening to a Mawlid text, or, at least, to a commemoration of Muhammad's birth:

قف واستمع ذكر من أنواره لمعت / في الكائنات كشمس في السما طلعت  
واصغى لمدح نبي جلّ خالقه / لولاه ما كانت الأنوار قد سطعت

Stop and listen to the commemoration of the one whose lights gleamed  
Among the creatures like a sun that rises in the sky  
And listen to the praise of a Prophet – how exalted is his creator –  
Were it not for him, no lights would ever have shone.

The ode continues by praising the Prophet. It ends with a supplication, asking for God's pardon for the sake of Muhammad. In the tradition of the supplicatory

15 Abdel-Ra'uf al-Munawi hailed from a Cairene scholarly family and studied and taught in Cairo. His books comprise *ḥadīth*, law, exegesis, mysticism, logic, philosophy, medicine, and botany; most of it is not edited (Hamdan 1993; Brockelmann 1902, 305–307; 1996, 417).

16 On the emergence and content of Mawlid texts, see Katz (2007, 6–62).

17 Katz concludes the reciting at that time as an established practice, since reports do not describe it as an unusual phenomenon (Katz 2007, 72, 82). In addition, the text itself sometimes gives indications for communal reading (for instance, Ibn Habib, folio 83r, 94r).

18 Abu l-Fath (1995, vol. 2, 205); al-Hawwari (2003, 127–126); al-Munawi (n. d., 3). Brockelmann does not list any *mawlid*; but Schimmel (1995, 137) remarks that the Mawlid text by al-Munawi is very popular in Egypt. Indeed, various prints indicate its wide distribution.

ode, the poet indulges in self-abasement, admitting that he has spent his days without performing any good deeds and pleading for God's forgiveness. In the last line, the poet names himself: "grant pardon to al-Munawi" (Abu l-Fath 1995, vol. 2, 205; al-Hawwari 2003, 127; al-Munawi n. d., 3). In the stage performance, the soloist changed the words, pleading for Muslims in general and especially for those listening in person. This verse evokes the notion of being rewarded through the recitation of and listening to a Mawlid text.<sup>19</sup>

فإنّ دهري انقضى في الخسر وأسفي / ولاح شبيبي وأيام الصبا ذهبت  
ولم يكن لي في الخيرات من عمل / إلا الخطايا على ظهري قد احتملت  
يا ربّ هب للمسلمين وللسامعين منك مغفرة / واكشف كربوا بنا يا ربّ قد نزلت

Indeed, my time has passed in loss, and woe,  
My white hair has appeared, since the days of youth have gone  
I have not accomplished any good deeds  
Only mistakes have been carried on my back  
O Lord, send your forgiveness for the Muslims and those who are listening now  
And take all miseries that came down away from us, o Lord.

The modified last verse no longer meets the poetic meter. However, this did not affect the performance, since the musical rendition was without an underlying beat. The rendition was slow and featured syllabic singing with occasional melisma. Principally, each hemistich formed a musical phrase, with occasional repetitions of single words or the complete hemistich. The flute played around the melodic line and filled the intervals between the musical phrases with short melodic motifs. The chorus was included in the performance by singing an invocation of blessing for the Prophet every two or three lines.

A light rhythmic song followed. Here, the soloist and the chorus performed alternately as well. The soloist sang one stanza to the accompaniment of the flute, and the chorus performed another one with the addition of drums. In addition, the chorus inserted "Allāh" between the hemistichs of the first stanza. The text started with *Qad zurtu bi-Ṭaybata Ṭāhā / wa-da'awtu bi-Ṭāhā llāha* (I have visited Taha [i. e., Muhammad] in Tayba / and supplicated to God for the sake of Taha [i. e., invoking the intercession of Taha]). The stanza pleaded for a good end at the day when all of creation will assemble to wait for the final judgement; the Prophet's intercession will be paramount on that day.

19 On the recitation of Mawlid texts as generating reward, Katz (2007, 82–87). The following verses are my transcription of the version as performed during the stage presentation.

In these few lines, a whole larger complex of religious propositions and ritual practices is retrieved. The verses address the visitation (*ziyāra*) of Muhammad's grave in Tayba (The Fragrant One, an honorific name for Medina). The *ziyāra* is commonly performed after the Hajj and used to ask for Muhammad's intercession, especially for forgiveness of one's sins: "The visiting of the prophet's tomb [...] was permissible or even to be encouraged [and] was claimed to be unanimously agreed upon all Muslims (*iğmā' al-umma*), including the Shiites" (Diem and Schöller 2004, vol. 2, 47).<sup>20</sup> The link to Judgement Day is evoked only by the keyword *yahshuranī* ('that he [God] will assemble me'), which refers to the 'day of assembly,' as this day is frequently termed in poetry and song.

This song was performed on many occasions, both Sunni and Shi'i. It usually starts with *Awqafu l-'umr 'alayhi* ('I devoted my life to him'), and *Qad zurtu bi-Ṭaybata Ṭahā* is the second stanza's beginning. Starting with these verses, the soloist moved from the birth and commemoration of the birth – and what commemoration by recitation may imply – directly to the final function of the birth: to be granted someone who is able to intercede on behalf of the believers on Judgement Day. The *ziyāra*, which figures prominently in the first sung line, is one essential prerequisite for that.

After another rhythmic song, which praised Muhammad and his family, the *inshād* ended, and the group left the stage. The moderator then officially welcomed everybody and addressed the high-ranking guests by name. He recited another text, this time longer, and announced the speech of the party's general secretary, Hasan Nasrallah.<sup>21</sup> With his speech, the celebration ended.

Having presented the progression of the celebration, I will now turn to some of the significant passages in detail. While I am aware that there is much more material for analysis – the iconography in the festivity hall, the spatial arrangement, the colors – I prefer instead to focus on the sound, since much of the analysis in material religion has been already devoted to the visual.

## 6 *Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna: Sonic Anciency and Modernity*

*Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna* was performed at almost every live celebration I observed during my fieldwork. Thus, it is not the song that is unusual in this case; rather, it is the adaptation for stage which makes it 'special' or, to quote

20 The different theological positions on visiting the grave and asking for Muhammad's intercession cannot be treated here; for an overview, see Diem and Schöller (2004, vol. 2, 46–48, 85–87).

21 On his background, see Abisaab and Abisaab (2014, 146–150).

the event's moderator "*alā ʿarīqatihā l-khāṣṣa.*" This pertains to two levels: first, the costumes, props, and choreography connected to the song; and second, the musical arrangement. For instance, the sound performance started before any actor appeared: It began with the chirping of crickets, a technique used to describe the atmosphere of free nature. The sound of a *rabāba* was added, a stringed instrument that is played with a bow and held on the knees. The *rabāba* is the instrument of the Arab singer-poet and is especially connected to the Bedouin genre of sung colloquial poetry (*shrūqī*). This genre also entered twentieth century urban culture in a song domain called *baladī* (local or folk). Coined by pre-war folklore, tourism, and popular TV serials, the *rabāba* is nowadays a powerful symbol of Bedouin culture (Racy 1996).<sup>22</sup> Thus, the sounds of chirping and the *rabāba* were intended to evoke nature, desert, the past, and the Bedouin ethos which comprises values like honor, hospitality, freedom, and bravery.

Having evoked the ancient, modernity was introduced with the sound of several strings in a European style, playing in unison and in octaves and occasionally in fifths, as it is typical for orchestrated Arab music. Arab music began to be orchestrated from the first half of the twentieth century onwards (Poche 2001; Weinrich 2011). Having internalized the nineteenth-century European perception of large orchestras playing polyphonic music as a more 'evolved' state of music, such orchestras developed along the lines of European models (Maraqa 2018; Weinrich 2011). The music made by the chamber-sized traditional Arab orchestra, the *takht*, is characterized by a filigree musical texture in contrast to the full and massive sound of European (symphonic) orchestras (Racy 2003, 76–96; Touma 1989, 171–173). The aim of its early modifications was to adopt new musical techniques that were perceived as a means of 'advancement,' like the introduction of 'new techniques' and 'scientific means,' projects that were introduced in various other administrative and educational domains. Such techniques comprised the composition, notation, teaching, and performance of music. For instance, technically, the four-stringed violin (*kamanjā*) of Arab art music does not differ greatly from the European violin, and today European violins with a different tuning are commonly used. In the orchestras, violins were multiplied with cellos and contrabasses added, and the smooth sound of the European violin often superseded the coarser sound of the Arab violin. Since Arabic song is primarily melodic with heterophonic accompaniment and heterophony is difficult to produce with large orchestras,

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22 Stressing the notion of listening as learned behavior, I must add that this interpretation of the *rabāba* sound applies to the Arab East and is different in the West where *rabāba* is part of the Andalusī music orchestra.



a typical feature is playing in unison or in octaves, which can be easily reconciled with the modal system of Arab music. Many formerly soloist genres later came to be performed by a choir. The enlargement of orchestras and multi-part musical arrangement was part of the project of 'musical progress' (*al-taṭawwur al-mūsīqī*) fostered by national cultural policy, and opera houses, national orchestras, and, as sounding above, orchestrated music became an icon of the modern nation state (El-Shawan 1982; Poche 2001; Touma 1989; Weinrich 2017).<sup>23</sup> Thus, this short musical prelude draws on sonic notions both of the traditional and the modern.

After this instrumental prelude, the camera showed the group marching into the room. When the group reached its position on stage the music stopped for a short moment, and another pre-recorded technique of creating a live atmosphere was used: that of largely indefinite shouting and speaking, suggesting a large crowd, and the noise of hooves. The introduction of the dramatic music of violins in fast tempo, accompanied by a plucked bass, signaled that something momentous was about to happen. A retarding element, that is, strings in low tempo and a solo zither (*qānūn*), led towards the vocal performance.

The group sang the first stanza twice to the traditional melody mentioned above. As a counter point to the simple melody, one of the men sang a counter voice in patches, which was later taken up by the violin. With the second stanza, a choreographic element was added: all singers synchronically turned around and pointed with one raised hand to the screen (except those playing a drum) while singing the second stanza. In addition, they switched to a different melody. On the screen, there was nothing to see but a glistening light, framed by a dark cosmos. Light refers to a central metaphor in praising the Prophet's beauty and virtues. More importantly, light figures prominently in Mawlid narratives: when Muhammad's mother, Amina, is pregnant, she can see a light so strong that it reaches the castles of Bosra in Syria; this extraordinary light is also present when Muhammad is born; and in many Mawlid texts, the primordial light connected to Muhammad's prophethood figures in the beginning.<sup>24</sup> The light on the screen thus visually represents the birth and

23 The mutual perception of music is a complex issue which cannot be discussed here in detail. One common notion shared by Arab as well as European musicologists of the early twentieth century was that of music as a universal language; however, due to the asymmetric power relations shaping the context of musical encounters since the late-nineteenth century, multi-part compositions were seen to represent the more advanced state.

24 Ibn Hisham (1955, 151); Ibn Habib (folio 83r and v, folio 85v), and similarly in other Mawlid texts. For the light motif in Mawlid texts, including the primordial light, see Katz (2007, 12–29).



FIGURE 3.2 Video still: long shot view with the performance group marching in  
© LIVE BROADCAST FROM AL-MANAR TV ON  
FEBRUARY 7, 2012. AUTHOR'S SCREENSHOT



FIGURE 3.3 Video still, detail: performing the second stanza while pointing to the screen  
© LIVE BROADCAST FROM AL-MANAR TV ON  
FEBRUARY 7, 2012. AUTHOR'S SCREENSHOT

the wondrous occurrences that accompany it, while the group sings the verses that welcome the Prophet.

When the second stanza concluded, the group turned back to face the audience and sang an invocation of blessing: *Ṣallā llāhu ‘alā Muḥammad / ṣallā llāhu ‘alayhi wa-ālih* ('God shall bless Muhammad / God shall bless him and his family'). The insertion of an invocation of blessing into the song is not unique to this stage presentation but was observed frequently during my broader research on Muslim chanting in Syria and Lebanon, also in Sunni contexts.

After three additional stanzas, interspersed by invocations, the group returned to the first stanza and the traditional melody. A soloist slowly moved to the center of the stage, and when the stanza ended, he started a solo passage while the chorus continued to sing in the background. The solo passage narrates no less than the birth of the Prophet:

<i>Taqūlu Āmina</i>	Amina says:
<i>wa-sakatati l-aṣwā__t</i>	All voices became silent
<i>wa-hada'ati l-ḥarakā__t</i>	All movements stopped
<i>wa-taṭā_walati l-a'nā____q</i>	All necks stretched
<i>wa-idhā bi-ṭā'irin abyāḍ</i>	Suddenly a white bird
<i>qad marra bi-janaḥayhi 'alā ḡahri</i>	had passed my back with his wings
<i>fā-waḍa'tu waladī_____</i>	And I gave birth to my child
<i>Muḥammada_n</i>	Muhammad.

This passage is included verbatim in modern prints of a Mawlid text commonly known as *Mawlid al-ʿArūs* (*Mawlid of the Groom*) and ascribed to the Hanbali scholar Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201).<sup>25</sup> The authorship of Ibn al-Jawzi cannot be attested with certainty, since Mawlid texts are characterized by fluidity, and existing passages could be borrowed and integrated into new compositions, especially in the early centuries of their composition. In addition, some popular texts were titled according to their opening line and copied frequently so that the author's name might have been obscured (Katz 2007, 51–53). Whether the authorship is authentic or not, the passage clearly meets the structural and formal features typical of many Mawlid texts, such as the frequent recommencement to the narrator. The narration of long passages from the perspective of

25 Al-Hawwari (2003, 112), introduced by *qālat* instead of *taqūlu* and without *qad* in line 6; Ibn al-Jawzi (n. d., 35); Abu l-Fath (1995, vol. 1, 99). In the manuscripts of *Mawlid al-ʿArūs* that I have been able to check so far, the white bird figures prominently as well, but the passage before its appearance differs (State Library Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung, Mss. Wetzstein II 1572; Landberg 586; King Saud Library, 3/1262 F).

Amina is also characteristic of many texts, often combined with the auctorial perspective recounting other occurrences during the birth. Further characteristic features include syntactic parallelisms, rhymes, and assonances.

In the performance, textual structure and content are vocally expressed: *taqūlu Āmina* ('Amina says') in a lower voice register and a short pause after its articulation indicate that this is technical information. The three syntactically parallel phrases are likewise rendered in a parallel way: syllabic singing secures that the musical rhythm is determined by the rhythm of the words, and each phrase gets a melisma on the last syllable (indicated in the transcription by a double underscore " \_ "). According to the content – the successive signs that indicate something extraordinary will happen – the soloist engages in a multi-layered building towards climax: he moves with every phrase to a higher register, the melisma in each phrase gets longer, and he adds a second melisma in third phrase on *taṭāwalat* ('to become long'). This second melisma provides additional emphasis in general and furthermore draws out the lexical meaning. Finally, *wa-idhā* ('suddenly') is marked by a sudden shift to a different, higher voice register; the complete phrase's rendition is syllabic without any melisma and thereby rendered in a faster pace. This switch to a different type of rendition takes account of the previous break with the syntactic parallelism. The last phrase starts on the highest pitch, with a descendent melodic movement in general, and especially in the long melisma of "my child." This melos, the slower pace, and the further delay by the short melisma on the last syllable give the phrase a closing character. When the soloist finished, the choral stanza had also finished, and, again, everybody turned to the screen while singing the second stanza which followed as a direct welcome of the newborn. Five invocations of blessing concluded the performance.

## 7 Sunni-Shi'i Convergences and Divergences

To understand the significance of the performed repertoire we must look at the overall texture of Mawlid celebrations in contemporary Syria and Lebanon. These two short *inshād* performances, despite the staging and the size of the festivity hall, share a remarkable number of features with small-scale Mawlid celebrations in Sunni contexts. The following data are based on an analysis of fifteen Mawlid celebrations observed between 2010 and 2013 in Damascus and Beirut. These celebrations took place in mosques and were organized by local mosque communities or charitable organizations. Inaugurated by Quran recitation, their main part consisted of *inshād* suspended by a short speech on the occasion.

In such celebrations, it has become common practice to combine sung panegyrics and poems in praise of the Prophet (*madā'ih nabawiyya*) with solo recitations from a Mawlid text. In the observed occasions, this was often a passage from al-Munawi's text. The sung poems, however, covered a variety of different poets and styles and comprised solo as well as collective performances. The passage that narrates the birth was again recited by a soloist. This passage varied and was not necessarily taken from al-Munawi's text.<sup>26</sup> Often, a welcome song followed. Customarily, the performance was concluded with a long collective invocation for blessing and a prayer. The course can be outlined as follows:

- Quran recitation (*mujawwad*)
- Sung poetry in praise of the Prophet (*madā'ih nabawiyya*)
- Solo passage from al-Munawi's Mawlid text
  - (sometimes replaced by other poetic text or characteristic song)
- Sung poetry
- Solo passage on the birth
  - optional: welcome song, often *Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna*
- Long invocation for blessing (most commonly *al-Ṣalāt al-Ibrāhimiyya*)
- Supplicatory prayer (*du'ā'*)

The link between Hizbullah's celebration and the observed Sunni celebrations is established on several levels:<sup>27</sup> firstly, by rendering the passage on the birth in a solo recitation, framed by collective singing and invocations of blessing; and secondly, by the choice of an ode by al-Munawi, whose text figures prominently in contemporary Syrian and Lebanese Mawlid commemorations. Moreover, there are confluences in the content and theological propositions in the selection of poetic texts and songs.

The song starting with *Qad zurtu bi-Ṭaybata Ṭāhā* creates a link between Muhammad's birth and his grave. The grave in this context refers not to a historical past, but to a very common and contemporary practice of visiting the Prophet's grave (*ziyāra*) to ask for his intercession (*shafā'a*) with God. As mentioned, *ziyāra* represents one, if not the most, important form of securing Muhammad's intercession. That *shafā'a* constitutes an important aspect

26 For a detailed analysis of Mawlid celebrations and the chanted poetic texts I refer to my forthcoming publication on *inshād*. For a discussion of Aleppine Mawlid celebrations, see also Dalal (2006, 36–38).

27 Quran recitation and *Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna* are so common, and thus unspecific, that they are not considered here.

of Mawlid celebrations is made clear in the typical succession of poems, texts, and songs represented by and enacted through the performance practices in the celebrations I witnessed. These practices gain the function of a verbal address. By contrast, in the speeches and sermons on the occasion of the Mawlid, the aspect of *shafā'a* is only marginal; rather it is the dualistic perspective on a world before and after Muhammad which dominates. *Shafā'a* comes in through poetry, the arrangement of *inshād* pieces, and through performance practices.<sup>28</sup>

However, it would be shortsighted to conclude that the stage presentation only reflects Sunni *Mawlid* practices. It is true that the song *Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna* often features an invocation for blessing (*taṣliya*), in both Sunni and Shi'i performances. Yet these invocations are not identical: whereas the Shi'i invocation ends with the mentioning of the Prophet's family, the Sunni invocation ends with '*wa-sallam*,' with reference to the Quranic verse (33:56). Naturally, this affects the meaning of the invocation, but content is not the crucial factor here. Also, Sunni invocations for blessing can – and in many cases do – include the family of the Prophet. Rather, the difference is maintained in melody and rhythm, as becomes evident in the musical transcription. The invocation, thus, refers at the same time to shared and distinctive practices (figure 3.4).



*Sallā llāhu 'alā Muḥammad / ṣallā llāhu 'alayhi wa-ālih*  
God bless Muḥammad / God bless Muḥammad and his family

*Sallā llāhu 'alā Muḥammad / ṣallā llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*  
God bless Muḥammad / God bless Muḥammad and grant him salvation

FIGURE 3.4 Invocation of blessing: Modifications in sound and rhythm

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28 For a poetic and musical arrangement that places *shafā'a* at the center of a Mawlid celebration, see Weinrich (2018, esp. 248–249).

A distinct Shi'i content is furthermore added in the last song on stage, which centers on Ahl al-Bayt, asking them for help. To turn to Ahl al-Bayt with the same vocabulary as a potential source of intercession was rather rare in the Sunni repertoires I observed in Syria and Lebanon.

## 8 Intra-Shi'i Distinctions

Besides the Sunni-Shi'i confluences, the repertoire shows features of intra-Shi'i distinctions. The musical outlook carries the properties of aesthetic forms that are typical of other ritual practices of Hizbullah. The politicization of Ashura rituals had started long before Hizbullah emerged on the scene. The fate of Husayn represented alternatively Palestine or the marginalized/ poor/ shelled Shi'is in southern Lebanon (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 103–125, 134–136; Mervin 2007, 140–141). Yet the purpose of rituals was not seen in bemoaning, but in their potential to initiate action, as Musa al-Sadr stated in his much-quoted speech in Baalbeck 1974, “Do not allow ceremonies or lamentation to serve as a substitute for action. We must transform the ceremonies into a spring from which revolutionary fury and constructive protest will gush forth” (quoted in Mervin 2007, 140–141). Hizbullah furthermore draws on reforms that were initiated in the early twentieth century by Muhsin al-Amin (1867–1952), a scholar from the south Lebanese region of Jabal Amil who lived and taught in Damascus.<sup>29</sup> He reformed Ashura rituals and conceived them as a ‘school,’ much like Hizbullah does today. Hizbullah appeals to believers to not take rituals as habitual repetition of what was always done but as a source for society's transformation; that is, an occasion to engage consciously with reality and with one's own individual situation which are meant to be reflected on critically. This attitude mirrors Fadlallah's concept of the ‘perpetual transformation of reality’ (*ḥarakiyyat al-wāqi'*) with respect to the reshaping of religious positions; however, Hizbullah's over-all focus is its goal to achieve the ‘resisting society’ (*al-mujtama' al-muqāwim*) with respect to the geo-political context (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 195–196, 197; speeches by Hasan Nasrallah during *majālis* on December 12 and 17, 2009, February 5, 2010, and December 12, 2010).

As has become clear, politicization and action has been part of Shi'i discourse in Lebanon since before the 1980s. What was new then, was the experience of living under occupation in the South, and Hizbullah added the momentum of resistance and modernization. Rula and Malik Abisaab

29 On him, see Mervin (2007, 138–140, 2006, 157–160, 163–164).



FIGURE 3.5 Hizbullah processions on Tenth of Muharram in Beirut's southern suburbs  
© ANNE WILLECKE (2011)

describe the developments pertaining to Hizbullah and Fadlallah in the 1990s up to 2005 noting that: “The Islamists made use of a public discourse to emphasize the inseparability of active faith from the liberation of the South and the modernization of Islamic culture” (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 155). Following the notion of aesthetic formations, such an ideological stand is also generated and shaped by the interpretation and outlook of rituals. Some keywords in the discourse on modernization of rituals are ‘rational’ (*‘aqlānī*) and ‘realistic’ (*‘wāqī’ī*). For instance, proponents of Hizbullah’s religious worldview criticize those texts recited in the ritual mourning assemblies that use hyperbole (for instance describing Husayn as killing 10,000 enemies) and take care that only narratives are recited that are ‘realistic,’ thereby dismissing others as fabricated stories.<sup>30</sup> Instead of shedding blood ‘in vain’ by practicing self-injurious flagellation (*taṭbīr*), media and organizations affiliated with Hizbullah campaign for donations to blood banks.<sup>31</sup> Sacrifice is encouraged,

30 Author’s interview with Talal Atrissi (March 2, 2010) corroborated by author’s own field observations during mourning assemblies. For more, see also, Lara Deeb (2006, 129–164).

31 *Taṭbīr* denotes the practice of cutting the head with knives, swords, or blades and hitting the wound with the hand during ritual processions. The dismissal of *taṭbīr* as superfluous and impermissible is linked to a *fatwa* by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 1994. Blood donation campaigns during Muharram have been organized elsewhere by Shi’i intellectuals (Mervin 2007, 146–147, 2006, 163–164). Shaery-Eisenlohr (2008, 135–138) emphasizes the role of the *fatwa* and gives different Lebanese opinions for and against *taṭbīr*; an interesting observation is the strategic use of an ‘ethnic argument’: Amal and local communities





FIGURES 3.6 AND 3.7 Men perform choreographed chest-thumping during Hizbullah's Muharram processions in Beirut's southern suburbs  
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but it should be for the sake and benefit of society, the argument goes. Sacrifice is not limited to blood but comprises different forms of serving society, such as donating time and, if financially viable, money to a wide variety of voluntary work (Abisaab and Abisaab 2014, 172–174; Deeb 2006, esp. 165–203).

In accordance with Hizbullah's interpretation of *'aqlānī*, the display of exuberant emotion is discouraged, and rituals are characterized by discipline and order. In particular, the ritual mass processions are highly organized events, and chest-thumping is restrained and choreographed. One typical form is to

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in Lebanon defend *taṭbīr* as genuinely Lebanese and accuse Hizbullah of frowning upon tradition and using an 'imported' (i. e., Iranian) ritual practice instead. This argumentation, of course, mirrors the different political orientations of the two rivaling Lebanese Shi'i parties.

perform a rhythmic succession of arm movements and body bending along with a leader who synchronizes the actions.

Modernization and order have a sonic dimension, too. In the celebration under study, it is manifest in the musical arrangement (*tawzīr mūsīqī*) of passages that in many respects resembles the recommendations given to the large orchestras and national ensembles under the leadership of a conductor (*qā'id*). The solo passages are precomposed and rehearsed; that is, they are note for note repetitions lacking any interaction with the chorus or the audience in general.<sup>32</sup> This is partly due to the spatial arrangement, since the stage and the size of the hall detach the soloist from his audience. Yet the preference for arranged music and a reluctant attitude towards improvisatorial vocal genres play a part in this issue as well. The musical fixation of traditionally improvisatorial forms and musical arrangement of pieces traditionally marked by heterophony is linked to the above-described musical reforms. Musical practices from the period before these reforms exist today mainly in traditional religious genres – and it is from this field that Hizbullah prefers to distinguish its aesthetic forms.

This musical behavior and attitude is not limited to the stage presentation but can be detected in the mourning sessions as well. Likewise, in ritual mourning ceremonies sponsored by Hizbullah, there is not much space for spontaneous interaction. Weeping in these sessions is not supposed to be a reaction to what happens, but ritual weeping is emphasized, independent of the concrete recitation. Hence, the reciter does not seek to provoke responses through active musical elaboration, and there is little interaction between the reciter and the congregation. This stands in sharp contrast to reciters like Sayyid Nasrat Qashaqish, an immensely popular reciter whose readings I documented during Ashura mourning ceremonies organized by the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council. He asked the congregation to produce *wanna*, a vibrating soundscape of sobbing and sighing, which inspires him, since it creates atmosphere and appreciates his effectual skills as a reciter.<sup>33</sup>

32 It is true that the second soloist occasionally repeats a hemistich as a means of emphasis. But the elaborated passage with long melisma that are reminiscent of Adhan in *maqām hijāz* is identical in its repetition, whereas in live *inshād* during the observed occasions, the soloist rarely repeats a musical phrase in the same way. Rather, he would modify the repetition to trigger responses by the audience, or the repetition would already be shaped by the audience's response to its first rendition. For interaction between solo performer and listeners in traditional *inshād*, see Weinrich 2018.

33 Fieldnotes following the observation of *majālis* in the Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council (December 23, 2009; December 13–14, 2010; December 1, 2011; November 16–17, 2012; and December 20, 2012). On audience response as a source of inspiration, see Racy (2003, 131–133).

## 9 Conclusion

The two analyzed *inshād* performances in the course of the Mawlid celebration reveal confluences to Sunni celebrations in terms of genre, text, performance practices, and sonic features: *Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna* with interspersed invocations of blessing; the solo recitation on the Prophet's birth; the reference to al-Munawi's Mawlid text; the combination of birth and grave/ *ziyāra*, thereby emphasizing the central aspect of the commemoration, that is, intercession. The Prophet's intercession as a central aspect is not mediated by a single text but instead through the interplay of poetic texts, religious propositions, and common devotional practices which are present in the musical performance. Two fields of messages emerge from the sonic and performative practices. In the political context, the choice of repertoire and styles can be read as an effort towards a Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement (*taqrīb*).<sup>34</sup> Rapprochement was one major concern of Fadlallah (Shaery-Eisenlohr 2008, 150–153) and became particularly relevant for Hizbullah in the time period covered by this chapter, especially after the party announced its Second Manifesto in 2009.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the politics of rapprochement were teamed with the politics of Lebanonization.

Practices of Lebanonization are tangible in Hizbullah's sonic repertoire as well, especially within the growing professionalism in the musical production that is revealed in the diversification of musical styles chosen according to the occasion. Up to the year 2000, hymns and music videos had been limited to the party's hymn and flag, religious themes, and the military resistance. Following the withdrawal of the Israeli army and a rising economic upswing, songs became shorter, more vivid, and joyous. Songs and music videos no longer focused on the South but included Beirut and the mountains. The Lebanese flag and the cedar figured in text, image, and sound. Some pieces furthermore featured the Lebanese colloquial language.<sup>36</sup> Finally, all of the Hizbullah-organized celebrations I examined over the course of my research started with the Lebanese national anthem, followed by the party's hymn; thereby sonically illustrating shared circles of belonging: a Shi'i party in Lebanon. The Mawlid celebration feeds into these politics by showing both confluences with other religious groups and aesthetic distinctions demonstrative of the own group.

34 On rapprochement in a broader context from the mid-twentieth century on, see Brunner 2013.

35 Analysts agree that one main aim of the Second Manifesto was to present the party as a reliable political partner in Lebanon. For a comprehensive assessment, see Abisaab and Abisaab (2014, 182–188).

36 Author's interview with Talal Atrissi (March 2, 2010). See also, Atrissi (2008).

From a broader perspective, the aesthetic choices and sonic styles presented during the celebration resonate with Hizbullah's aesthetic practices in the context of other rituals such as ritual mourning assemblies and processions. Traditional techniques of vocal performance and instrumental accompaniment are only alluded to; rather, there is a preference for pre-composition and musical arrangement along lines that have been perceived of as modern and advanced. Such choices reflect the organization's vision of contemporary society and Shi'i religiosity. Features of contemporariness and rationality become mediated through sound and serve to mark distinctive aesthetic styles in contrast to those of other Shi'i groups in Lebanon. Within the context of intra-Shi'i competition, such styles contribute to the forming and binding of members and supporters through shared aesthetics.

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## Materializing Cultural Memory

### *From Wartime Eulogies to Panegyric Pop in Contemporary Iran*

*Maryam Aras*

They just chant ‘Hossein, Hossein’<sup>1</sup> for hours. They take off their shirts and expose themselves to the whole world. Some authorities might consider that unproblematic, but from the perspective of propaganda, ritual practice, and metaphorical representation of our Shi‘i culture, these activities are not to be welcomed. Another issue is that actually, the preacher should be the basis and the *maddāh*<sup>2</sup> (eulogy reciter) an addition to him. But now, we are witnessing a contrary practice. That is a very dangerous development.

SADEQ AHANGARAN (Apparat 2018)



This chapter is dedicated to the study of the materiality of contemporary Iranian eulogy and elegy rituals (*maddāhi*). As commemorative singing rituals in honor of Ahl al-Bayt, *maddāhi* (pl. *maddāhīhā*) has been an integral part of most Shi‘i festivities, especially during Muharram, as well as of individual obsequies. The material dimension of those commemorative rituals, however, has changed significantly since the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88. Starting with the eulogist as the mediator of Shi‘i cultural memory, as Aleida Assmann frames the function of a professionalized ritual cast (A. Assmann 2006, 45), the ritual performances in praise and remembrance of Ahl al-Bayt became a means to mobilize citizens of the newly founded Islamic Republic and invite them to answer its call of duty. Hereby, the audience acted in two functions: first, in

- 1 This chapter uses ‘Hossein’ as an Anglicized version of the name as close to the Persian pronunciation as possible. Unless otherwise stated, non-English terms presented in this chapter are romanizations from Persian as used in the Iranian context.
- 2 The Arabic word for to praise, *madh*, is in Persian used for the text genre of panegyric poetry, whereas the performance of singing, reciting this poetry is called *maddāhi*. The performer, panegyrist or eulogist, is called *maddāh*.



its role as a choir accompanying the *maddāḥ* (pl. *maddāḥān*) and second, in their capacity as resonating bodies, through the ritualized self-punishment of *sīneh-zanī* (chest-beating). Mixed together with morale-boosting melodies and pugnacious lyrics, they produced a completely new soundscape and materiality of Shi'i commemoration culture. Against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq War, a new set of values of the warfront developed: solidarity, piety, and asceticism. Largely out of fashion during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, the Culture of the Sacred Defense was revived shortly after the first electoral victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad. New spaces for performances – such as the Jamkarān Mosque and countless makeshift tents on the streets of Iranian cities – were explored and established in order to contribute significantly to the formally dusted materiality of volunteer fighters (*basijī*) that were the idealized citizens of the war and their subsequent veteran-culture.

This chapter aims to dissect the components of this new materiality of Shi'i soundscapes in order to show how bodily actions, pop cultural quotations, and material spaces created a new base for a youth clientele loyal to the Islamic Republic. To achieve this, the lyrics and recorded performances of *maddāḥān* Sadeq Ahangaran and Hamid Alimi are analyzed and references to non-religious pop singers as Haydeh<sup>3</sup> are highlighted. This new material dimension of Shi'i cultural memory – as this article will conclude – does not only give way to a hybridization of religious material culture, it also contributes to a popularization of Shi'i cultural memory in general.

The towering figure of Iranian Shi'i eulogy performance is Sadeq Ahangaran (b. 1957 in Ahvaz, southwestern Iran). During the Iran-Iraq War, the eulogist himself was arguably one of the most effective weapons mobilized by the Islamic Republic on the frontlines. Ahangaran, whom the Iraqi media dubbed the 'Nightingale of the Imam' [Khomeini], sang and recruited for the war effort; more specifically, for the volunteer brigades. The songs he sang, their materiality, and aesthetic surroundings are the subject of this research. These wartime eulogies (*noḥeh-hā-ye zāman-e jang*) became a significant part of the material culture of everyday life in wartime Iran and the soundscapes they created reflected the State's propagation of the Culture of Sacred Defense (*farhang-e defā'e moqaddas*)<sup>4</sup> that included a material world of asceticism and piety. The term 'Sacred Defense' was coined to emphasize the defensive character that

3 Ma'soumeh Dadehbala (b. 1942 in Tehran; d. 1990 in San Francisco, CA), known professionally as Haydeh, was an Iranian contralto singer. Her career spanned over two decades and she is described as one of the most popular and influential musicians of Iran.

4 The Persian term *moqaddas* (مقدس) can be translated as both, 'holy' and 'sacred,' as it describes saints or any action dedicated to a religious purpose or god (in English usually characterized as 'holy'), as well as events of solemn religious ceremony or things of religious

the war had from the Iranian State's perspective (since it was Saddam Hussein who started the war). Within Iran, the war was named the 'Imposed War.' The term 'Sacred Defense' also condensed the Islamic Republic's ideology of fighting the battle of Islam against the infidel atheist and Western-backed Saddam Hussein.<sup>5</sup>

Since the declaration of Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of Safavid Iran (1501–1722), the performances of *noheh khānī* (today usually referred to as *madh*/*maddāhī*; the genres of eulogy and elegy respectively their performance) have been important pillars of Shi'i ritual practice. The poetic text genre of *madh* developed from the panegyric court poetry form of the *qaṣīda-yeh madihā* (Clinton 1986, 956–7). Commemorative rituals during Muharram for Imam Hossein and his descendants spread all over Iranian territories when Hossein b. Ali Waez Kashefi's (d. 1504–5) opus magnum *Rowzat al-shohadā'* (*The Garden of the Martyrs* composed in Persian, 1502–1503) was distributed by the new rulers. Its simple, compelling narratives of Imam Hossein's tragic death in the Battle of Karbala was performed and moved people throughout Safavid Iran.

Since the so-called 'Karbala Paradigm' is of high significance for understanding this text, a very condensed version of what is remembered by Shi'is to have happened on the Tenth of Muharram in 61 AH (680 CE) near Karbala in today's Iraq summarizes the events: Imam Hossein, the third imam of Shi'is, was called to aid by the citizens of Kufa who were not willing to swear their oath of allegiance to the Umayyad Khalif Yazid. Neglected by the Shi'is of Kufa, Imam Hossein and his following of 72 men, among them Imam Hossein's younger brother Abbas ibn Ali, were cornered and cut off from water access of the Euphrates by a superior number of Yazid's army. Attempts of the Umayyad general Omar ibn Saad to force Imam Hossein to surrender remain unsuccessful and so, Hossein releases his men from their oath of fidelity, knowing that death in battle is inevitable. All men stay at his side and together they die on the Tenth of Muharram (the tenth in Arabic being Ashura [*'āshūrā'*]). Imam Hossein's death is remembered as particularly violent – his head is sent to Damascus and displayed publicly, his torso is trodden down by battle horses and later buried by Bedouins from the area.

The martyrdom of Imam Hossein who, according to common Shi'i believe, knew that he would die and went to fight the usurper of Islamic power and principles notwithstanding became the most defining moment of Shi'i

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use (referred to as 'sacred'). Based on this, the author of this chapter prefers to translate the Persian expression *Defā'-e Moqaddas* as "Sacred Defense" and not "Holy Defense."

5 For further reading see Afshon Ostovar (2018, 62–101).

identity. The straightforward and emotional narrative of Kashefi's epos was instrumental to the myth formation of Imam Hossein's martyrdom at Karbala. The *Rowzat's* popularity contributed to the spread of Shi'ism on Iranian territories and the recitation rituals derived from its text became to be known as 'reciting the *Rowzat*' (*rowzeh khānī*). Combined with panegyric poetry that had taken a turn to the spiritual, the glorification of the twelve imams, *rowzeh khānī* developed into a variety of ritual sub-categories that are not always clearly distinguishable from one another: from panegyric poetry the ritual of *maddāhī* emanated, originally as an introduction to the *rowzeh khānī*, as Peter Chelkowski explains (2009). *Nohe khānī*, the category under which all of Sadeq Ahangaran's wartime performances were labelled back then, names actually only the performance of the very last congregational dirge/ elegy of a mourning ceremony (Chelkowski 2009). As Chelkowski (2009) describes the categorization of mourning ceremonies, the *maddāhī* is only responsible for panegyric chants at the beginning while the *rouze khānī* is the 'master storyteller' performing the main part, including the *nohe*. This categorization has changed during the last decades: strictly speaking all panegyric performances are labelled *maddāhī* today, whereas performances of elegies/ dirges are summarized under *marzīyeh khānī* (of which *nohe khānī* should be a subcategory). In practice, especially when it comes to the labelling of video clips of recorded performances posted on social media platforms, the implementation of this categorization is rarely clear-cut. Oftentimes, during the war years as today, also panegyrics are labelled *nohe khānī* or vice versa. The same ambiguities apply to the naming of the singer. While Sadeq Ahangaran used to be labelled as *nohe khānī* only, for instance, all ritual singers tend to be called *maddāhī* today. Since one singer is not limited to perform one category of ritual only, a certain fluidity of labelling seems more logical here than in the case of the actual performance.

## 1 *Maddāhī* and Cultural Memory

In his seminal work *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, cultural theorist and archaeologist Jan Assmann (2012, 30) notes: "[T]he passing of memory to history is not always just a matter of time. Some events never cease to be 'figures of memory' for a specific group such as, 680 CE (the Battle of Karbala) for [Shiis] (...)." As natural as it might be for scholars outside the study of Shi'ism to refer to the Karbala Paradigm as the most significant aspect of Shi'i cultural memory, as important it is to assert that the lives and legends of all members of

Ahl al-Bayt function as those ‘figures of memory’ in Shi‘i culture, not only the ones of Imam Hossein and his family.

Cultural memory, as it is understood in the context of this chapter, refers to the rituals, texts, archeological artifacts, and stories that are foundational for a community’s identity. In their further development of Maurice Halbwachs’ (1877–1945) concept of collective memory, Aleida and Jan Assmann think about communicative memory as the passing on of experiences and stories, family history, etc. from one generation to the next (J. Assmann 2012, 36). Communicative memory, therefore, is considered by A. and J. Assmann to exist within the time span of two generations (eighty years), whereas cultural memory can be thought of as the long-term memory of a group. Important events and personalities that lie in a historical past, as the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hossein for Shi‘is, will still be remembered by a community, and the way they are remembered in the present is formative for their identity, the collective ‘we’ of a group. Cultural memory is typically shared in institutionalized form – in rituals and festivals – and the knowledge about this mythological past is preserved and transmitted mostly by a professionalized cast (J. Assmann 2012, 37–44). In Iranian Shi‘ism it is preserved and transmitted by theologians as well as by eulogists.

This chapter aims to shed light on the materiality of *maddāhī* as one of the most important rituals for mediating the legends of the imams’ lives and sufferings, especially among young urban Shi‘is today. Still being an under researched field in general, few works comment upon the materiality of the *maddāhī* scene which evolved and grew immensely in the early 2000s.<sup>6</sup> The imperative in this text is to trace the material dimension of those affect-driven cultural performances from the *noḥeh khānī* of the war years (1980–1988) that aimed first and foremost at mobilizing for the war effort and establishing the concept of an ‘Islamic Iran’ (*Irān-e eslāmī*), to the ‘*pop maddāhī*’ of today. While an increasing number of research is being produced on various aspects of the Iran-Iraq War and Iranian musicology alike, an in-depth study of war time *noḥehhā* particularly on Sadeq Ahangaran’s body of work is still missing. This article therefore contributes to a field that offers a vast range of material yet to be studied.<sup>7</sup> The same applies to the study of contemporary mourning rituals in Iran. Although selective research in English and Persian has been published recently, the field in general, and the study of its material culture in particular,

6 For a discussion of the existing literature see next paragraph.

7 A more fundamental and in-depth study of Ahangaran’s war time eulogies and their political function than possible in the context of this chapter will be provided in the author’s doctoral dissertation.

needs further effort in order to provide a more complete picture of this part of Iranian religious culture. This chapter represents a first point of reference in its attempt to analyze pop cultural influences and bodily performances of Iranian Shi'i mourning rituals. In its final step, this chapter contextualizes these new kinds of performances to their suppositional (traditional) function in the cultivation of Shi'i cultural memory.

Interestingly, the existing literature on Iranian eulogy and elegy rituals centers almost exclusively around Shi'i commemoration of Ashura, even when discussed not merely in terms of promoting state power or political dissent. This is the case, for instance, in Aghaie's otherwise comprehensive study of Shi'i symbols and rituals in modern Iran, *The Martyrs of Karbala* (Aghaie 2004). In her widely read study of the visual culture of post-revolutionary Iran, Roxanne Varzi (2006) dedicates a chapter to the filmmaking of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* (*Revāyat-e Fatḥ*, chapter three, *Shooting Soldiers, Shooting Film*) and cites the lyrics of Ahangaran's performance that was used as an opening-sequence for multiple *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* episodes (Varzi 2006, 91), but misplaces Ahangaran as a 'well known rowzeh khan from Shiraz' (Ahangaran is from Ahvaz) (2006, 238). In her monograph, *A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Co-option Under the Islamic Republic*, literary scholar Fatemeh Shams examines, among others, the lyrics of Ahanagaran's poems (Shams 2020).

Sarah Walker (Walker 2016) gives a very interesting account of her attendance of a *maddāḥī* held by eulogist Abdolreza Helali in Tehran and the visual culture used to promote this *maddāḥ* in her book chapter entitled 'Under the Bruised Sky': *Music and Mourning in Postrevolutionary Iran*.

In her fundamental study on modern Iranian musicology, entitled *Soundtrack of the Revolution – The Politics of Music in Iran*, Nahid Siamdoust also briefly discusses the music of wartime Iran and Ahangaran's eulogies (Siamdoust 2017, 94–97).

In both her English language and Persian publications, Soudeh Ghaffari examines eulogy performances through Critical Discourse Analysis and hence offers important insight into the various and changing discourses prevalent within the '*maddāḥī*-scene' (Ghaffari 2010, 2011, and 2018). The aspects of Shi'i eulogies that scholars based in Iran engage with generally reflect the discourses in Iranian media and politics, for example on the social strata of eulogy audiences (as in Fayaz and Rahmani 2006/1384) or on innovations in performance styles and lyrics that are considered problematic by religious authorities or a development of desacralization, as in Akbar Talebpour (2015).

Overall, the Karbala Paradigm continues to be the dominant lens of looking at commemorative rituals in Iran. Considering the vast range of eulogies for the Prophet and his descendants, this proves to be a gap in the research

on Shi'i commemoration culture at present. Especially material culture of the war years is usually discussed against the backdrop of the Karbala Paradigm. Poetry, slogans, or images, all make analogical use of 'going to Karbala' like Hossein and his disciples against the 'infidel Yazid.' As omnipresent as this rhetoric might have been indeed, as rich is the use of Shi'i eschatology in wartime culture (poetry and songs referring to the return of the Twelfth Imam and his rule on Earth) or, for instance, the praise of the Prophet's daughter Fatemeh Zahra as a model for mothers and wives of soldiers. As the mother of Imam Hossein, she was thought of as 'mother of all martyrs,' and in her patience, piety, and obedience she was considered the ideal daughter, wife, and mother.<sup>8</sup> An ample example of the variety of wartime eulogies is showcased in Sadeq Ahangaran's (2012) book *Memories and Eulogies of Hajj Sadeq Ahangaran (Khāterat va Noḥeh-hā ye Hajj Šādeq Āhangarān)*. This collection lists 627 songs of which 295 cover personalities and topoi beyond Karbala – as for example Ayatollah Khomeini, Imam Ali, Fatemeh Zahra, or Ali ibn Husain Zain al-Abidin, the fourth imam of Shi'is, called Imam Sajjad.

In some cases, however, a clear distinction of the songs' subjects is difficult to draw, as my later discussion of the most iconic tune of wartime Iran, *Ey Lashkar-e Šāheb-e Zamān, āmādeh bāsh* ('Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, Get Ready'), will show.

## 2 Materiality of the War

The material culture of wartime Iran was one in transition. Revolutionary zeal and its visual representations, as painted slogans or wall newspapers still lingered on, while the new state was in the making. Then the war struck. In the beginning of the war, the makeshift materiality of revolutionary mobilization continued under different circumstances. Once more, the public sphere became fueled by revolutionary zeal and a massive mobilization of its citizens that were called to the streets to protest Saddam Hussein's attack and its Western involvement. Men of all ages were called to join the volunteer troops at the warfront, the *basījī*.<sup>9</sup> Visually, the already existing murals of Khomeini, Motahari, and other clerical spearheads became accompanied by depictions of war scenes, new martyrs, and morale-boosting war slogans on hand painted banners. In her study on the visual culture of post-revolution Iran, Roxanne

8 For further reading and a discussion about the different modes of idealization of Fatemeh and Zaynab see Friedl (1997).

9 For more context see Ostovar (2018).

Varzi (2006) describes the early Islamic Republic as an “image regime” (2006, 63) that was – due to the absence of foreign press – in complete control over the production of images and visual culture in general. She claims that the ubiquitous images of martyrs in murals, on billboards, and memorabilia throughout urban Iran constructed the Islamic Republic visually as a nation. Khomeini, Varzi writes, painted wartime Iran as a nation of martyrs (2006, 62): “[T]he space of death needs two things in wartime Iran: a martyr and a photograph. Martyrdom is meaningless without memorialization, and memorialization is not possible without a photograph.” As valid as this observation may be for the visual culture that confines the surface of the public space, it leaves aside the strong oral tradition within Iranian culture – which is, of course, not the focus of Varzi’s study. The argument she brings forward, however, is almost to its last point conferrable to the materiality of sound during the war years. The unique characteristic that sets orality aside from visuality in Iranian culture is its interconnectedness with literature. On the one hand, oral culture is the precursor of written literature and the form of mnemotechnic (the practice of aiding the memory, as rhyme and meter which facilitate the memorization of poetry) (J. Assmann 2012, 72). On the other hand, it continues to be literature’s complementary materialization in forms of poetry recitals or book readings that occupy an important space in Iranian high culture as well as in everyday life. Their equivalent in religious material culture are *rouzeh* or *maddāhī* performances. Not without reason, the lyrics of the *madh* genre (or any non-prosaic lyrics) are colloquially called *sh’er* (poem, poetry) and the activity of singing is also referred to as *sh’er goftan* (literally ‘saying/ reciting poetry’). Its textuality is only one component of the ritual performances, the other two being its musical and performative dimensions.

The function of *maddāhī* performances in Shi’i culture, however, is to incorporate a mythological past into the present in order to create a community through identification with this past. According to Jan Assmann (2012, 2–3), repetitive-narrative rituals

link yesterday with today by giving form and presence to influential experiences and memories, incorporating images and tales from another time into the background of the onward moving present, and bringing with it hope and continuity. This connective structure is the aspect of culture that underlies myths and histories. Both the normative and the narrative elements of these – mixing instruction with storytelling – create a basis of belonging, of identity, so that the individual can then talk of “we.” What binds him to this plural is the connective structure of common

knowledge and characteristics – first through adherence to the same laws and values, and second through the memory of a shared past.

During the war, and especially at the frontlines, the creation of a ‘we’ and the idea to become part of a ‘shared history’ were important means to build a new collective of an ‘Islamic Iran’ (*Irān-e Eslāmī*) and to keep up the fighting morale of the soldiers. The eulogies Sadeq Ahangaran recorded and performed at the warfront were custom-made to fulfil these needs, to create a collective ‘we’ that stressed the shared past of Shi‘i suffering and resistance against their oppressors. In a civilian context, they created the soundscape of the ‘imposed war’ (*jang-e tahmīlī*) and at the frontlines, they provided the ideological purpose to fight, boosted fighters’ morale, and created a collective of potential martyrs – primarily among the volunteer fighters. The medial link that connected those two worlds was a series of war documentaries called *Narratives of Triumph* (*Revāyat-e Fatḥ*). From 1986 until the end of the war, a new episode was broadcast every Friday on state television, weaving the films into the fabric of every free day families spent together at home. *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* not only brought the war and the mentality of the frontlines into the private spaces of civilians, it also gave an account of the spiritual journey that this war was supposed to be for those who fought it. At the same time, it appealed to yet more young men to go to war, to more parents to send their sons to the warfront. Sadeq Ahangaran’s voice and recordings of the rituals he performed at the frontlines played a substantial part in each episode and became part of the cities’ soundscapes via radio broadcasting and playing of cassettes. Therefore, the materiality of his eulogies itself created a shared space for civil society and soldiers alike.

### 3 Ahangaran as Public Figure

Sadeq Ahangaran himself was born in Ahvaz (1957/1336), Khuzestan, a fact that had a strong influence on his life as well as on his music. Being an early disciple of Khomeini, he joined the local *Komīteh* which later dissolved into the Revolutionary Guards of Ahvaz (*Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Ahvāz*). Due to the geographical proximity to the Iraqi border, they became involved in warfare actions even before Iraq’s full-scale invasion of Iranian territories on September 22, 1980. Ahangaran served in diverse capacities within the *Sepāh*; most of them related to his unique singing voice, recruiting for combat and morale boosting (Siamdoust 2017, 95). Although the singing of elegies during Muharram and at obsequies had always been one of the genres he mastered,



his favorite singing style had been a more cheerful one. In early 1981, however, he sang a *noḥeh*, entitled *Ey shahīdān-e be khūn ghaltan-e Khūzestān dorūd* ('Oh martyrs, hail to the shed blood of Khuzestan'), praising the martyrs of the events of war in Khuzestan province in Khomeini's home in Jamarān (Siamdoust 2017, 95).<sup>10</sup> The performance was broadcasted on national television and put him in the public's eye as well as in Khomeini's who encouraged him to continue singing elegiac *noḥehhā* in praise of the brave soldiers at the frontlines. The author of this *noḥeh* was Habibollah Moallemi, the father of one of Ahangaran's friends from Ahvaz. Moallemi is also the author of *Ey lashkar-e Šāheb-e Zamān, āmādeh bāsh* (English 'Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready'), a song that became one of the most characteristic tunes of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ*.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4 Ahangaran and Avini

*Revāyat-e Fatḥ* was produced by a film unit called *Jahād TV* that was sponsored by Iranian National TV (*Sedā va Sīmā*, English abbreviation IRIB) and Construction Jihad (*Jahād-e Sāzandegī*). The mastermind behind *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* and *Jahād TV* was Morteza Avini, an intellectual from Tehran with a degree in architecture (Khosronejad 2012, 9). Not particularly religious before the revolution, he became a spiritual follower of Ayatollah Khomeini and his push towards a religiously determined state and culture. He developed a cinematographic concept which he called *sīnamāi-ye eshrāqī* ('illuminationist cinema'), presumably derived from the Philosophy of Illuminism (*falsafe-ye eshrāq*) founded by Shahab ad-Din Yahya ibn Habash Sohravardi (d. 1191). Sohravardi's epistemological understanding was that true knowledge could only be reached through envisioning of a thing as a whole, through immediate illumination (Ziai 2012). Consequently, Avini wanted his films to speak directly to the hearts and senses of his audience, without analytical dissection of the content (hawzah.net 2008).

Avini was not interested in showing actual warfare or the tactics, machinery, and combat activities it entails. He was apprehensive of the war propaganda national television produced as "reaction propaganda" (*tabliqāt-e vakoneshī*) and considered it of artificial atmosphere and so badly made that it turned out to be anti-war propaganda at the end (Khosronejad 2012, 13). Avini's method,

10 The *noḥeh* was written by Moallemi before the 'Operation Hoveyzeḥ' on January 5–7, 1981, see azadeganiran.khabar.ir/115072.

11 See azadeganirankhabar.ir/94125.

Pedram Khosronejad (2012) notes, was to show the mystical and divine nature of the war, the very characteristics that made this war unique for him: “*Revāyat-e Fath* presents the differences between our sacred war, our warfronts and all other wars in the world. We will present the theosophical musings [*ab’ād-e erfānī*] of war, and we believe that the roots of our victory lie precisely here.”<sup>12</sup>

He succeeded in creating the most effective propaganda for the cause of the Islamic Republic, clearly distinguishing his films from state propaganda and focusing on the volunteer fighters and their ideological mindset instead of the regular army. He achieved this through an approach that today would be called holistic, the work of a true believer. As Hamid Naficy (2012, 13–17) points out, Avini aimed for himself and his team to become one with the volunteer fighters, unlearning their individuality and striving towards a sacred collective identity. He wanted his team members to become soldiers with a camera (2012, 10).

At the editing table he realized that he had reached a new interaction with these young fighters (hawzah.net 2008).<sup>13</sup> ‘Who are you? Where are you from? How long have you been to the frontlines? What was your occupation at home? What is your motivation to be here? How are you feeling about being at the warfront?’ These were questions Avini and his team asked countless fighters in front of their cameras. The answers they received (or at least the ones they chose to show) reflected not only an unconditional devotion to Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideology, but also an almost nonchalant readiness to die. Most of them were of humble backgrounds, but even those who were not testified to the values of the warfront (*arzeslhā-ye jebhe*) – solidarity, piety, and asceticism. In this way, he wanted to breathe new life into classical cinema, portraying the faith and the conviction of the *basijī* fighters. He created a special “sacred cinematic recitation” (*bayān-e sīnamāy-e moqaddas*) (Khosronejad 2012, 15) on the one hand and a holistic composition of picture, sound, music, and narration on the other. For a cinematographic concept like this, the collaboration with a eulogist like Ahangaran was extremely fruitful.

## 5 *Madh* and Music

The music present in *Revāyat-e Fath* falls generally in one of the following categories: it is either a) *maddahī* sung by a singer on or off screen, b) the

12 Avini (2005, as quoted in Khosronejad 2012, 14).

13 All translations and transcripts, except for the quotation by Khosronejad, are made by the author.

chanting of paroles or sometimes *maddāhī*-lyrics by a one or more soldiers, or c) Western style military marches or purist drums with clash cymbals. On few occasions there is also d) electrically produced music in the background. Reza Soltanzadeh, the composer Avini worked with, is quoted by Hawzah.Net (2008) saying: “[C]onsidering usual standards of harmony in film music, the level of the music in *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* was zero. Surprisingly, when the images and the music came together, the effect was stunning. This feeling came from *Shahīd* Avini. He was very well educated in music.”

What Avini did very frequently was blending *madḥ* and music into his over-voice narration and with the pictures on screen. Sometimes the *maddāh* is on screen and part of the ‘plot,’ singing for the troops before an operation, in the field, or in a camp. In many cases, the voices of Ahangaran or another singer stays longer than the actual sermon in the frame, until the next scene or the one after that. Sometimes the source of singing is not to be seen.

This method, as Soltanzadeh explains, followed the principles of Avini’s illuminationist cinema in which music played a special role (hawzah.net 2008):

The music appeals directly to the senses of the spectator and is mediated to the soul. That means, the music is absorbed before all other components of the film that are processed intellectually. So, it’s the music that makes the film original. But still, for Avini it had to be complementary to the ensemble.

The sound of the drums and the cymbals opens a mental space that is already filled with associations of *ta’ziye*, the Shi’i passion play depicting the death of Imam Hossein, and of heroism and battles. Avini was well aware of the epic nature of their sound and used them accordingly. “Drums already had this epic function in the battles of early Islam,” he explained (hawzah.net 2008).

When it comes to the selection of *madḥ*, there is a full range of different styles. However, the *noḥeh* (elegy) is the most frequently used, which is mostly sung by Ahangaran. Many episodes of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* were opened by his singing, his portrait with a bandana around his head framed by a luminous yellow circle, like a *basījī* poster boy. The two songs that became most commonly connected with *Revāyat-e Fatḥ*, nevertheless, were eulogies that had an inciting sound, pugnacious, and cheerful. The first one, as already mentioned, was *Ey lashkar-e Sāheb-Zamān* (1982, English ‘Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!’), written by Habibollah Moallemi and performed by Ahangaran. The second one was written by Atiq Behbahani and sung by Akbar Shariat, a *maddāh* who did not record many other successful songs beside *Karbalā’*, *Karbalā’*, *mā dārīm miāyīm* (1984, English ‘Karbala, Karbala, we are coming’),

which he performed at least once at the frontlines. The performance was filmed and Avini used it multiple times as the closing sequence of various *Revāyat-e Fath* episodes.

**6 ‘Oh, Battalion of the Master of [Our] Time, Get Ready!’**  
(*Ey Lashkar-e Şāheb-Zamān, āmādeh bāsh*)

The eulogy serves as a sound frame, as an ‘intro’ and ‘outro’ for a number of episodes of *Revāyat-e Fath*, for instance for the second film of season three which deals with the fighting of an operation in Salmancheh during winter 1987, called ‘Operation Karbala Five’ (Khosronejad 2012, 185). The episode, entitled *The Road (Jādeh)*, starts with this eulogy as an acoustic background for troops in the desert running towards a landing Iranian helicopter. Ahangaran’s voice begins with the refrain and jumps directly to the third stanza, describing the factual preparations for battle in a poetic fashion: “[...] for pride tie the band of courage around my head.” As soon as the sound of the helicopter disappears, the rhythmic sound of chest-beating on the recording becomes audible. A choir of men joins in the last *āmādeh bash* (‘be ready’) of each stanza, singing the first line of the refrain without Ahangaran. On the screen, soldiers drink from a water tank and perform their prayers. Lyrics and images are now synchronized almost to the second: soldiers shouldering their backpacks (‘Tie your backpack’), wrapping cartridge-belts around their comrades, and fixing their boot’s laces (‘Tie bayonets and cartridge-belts tight to the back/ Tie your shoelaces with the speed of male lions’). They kiss and embrace (‘For the final farewell kiss each other’). For a few seconds, the camera rests on the maimed leg of one man in khakis who bids the others farewell.

The song returns for the last five minutes of the film, during a battle scene. It is arranged overlying to the noise of gunfire and starts with the refrain, followed by the more spiritual (compared to the opening of the film) first stanza. After one minute, the scene changes from the daytime battle to fighters marching in front of a sunset. The camera zooms closer to the black contours of the men against the orange-red. During the last seconds Ahangaran sings the refrain once more while trucks and tanks drive by, a soldier is standing on top of a tanker and is raising his hands in the air.

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!<sup>14</sup>  
For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

14 Non-poeticized translation by the author.

You warriors who have taken your lives into your own hands, the day of  
courage has come

Oh, army of the Spirit of God,<sup>15</sup> the time of bravery has come

Oh, power of Islamists until eternity be ready

To defy the enemies, get ready, get ready

Through the zeal of meeting Hossein, everybody's hearts have become  
frenzied with love

By the lovers of Karbala this desert is crowded

In the hearts of these warriors, enthusiasm has risen anew

Like a determined powerful mountain, get ready

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!

For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

For pride tie the band of courage around my head

For the godly audience do perfume my body

Tie your backpack, my fellow combatant in the trenches

Test-fire your weapon, get ready

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!

For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

Tie bayonets and cartridge-belts tight to the back

Tie your shoelaces with the speed of male lions

For the final farewell kiss, each other

Say to your fellow trench men get ready, get ready!

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!

For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

Grab the banners all you manly standard-bearers

With order and method bring the battle to the street

From the right wing and the left, attack from all directions

Gallop like a young lion, get ready, get ready!

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15 A reference to Khomeini's first name, *Rūhollāh*.

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!  
 For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready! Be mutually united, assistants and disciples of Hossein  
 Go to Karbala's soil (the battleground), be pilgrims of Hossein  
 You all are wishful to see Hossein  
 Oh seekers, oh lovers, get ready, get ready!  
 Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!

متن ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش  
 بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

رزمندگان جان به کف روز شجاعت آماده  
 ای لشکر روح خدا گاه شهامت  
 ای نیروی اسلامیان تا بینهایت  
 از بهر دشمنان آماده باش آماده باش

از شوق دیدار حسین، دل ها همه شیدا شده  
 از عاشقان کربلا پوشیده این صحرا شده  
 در قلب این جنگ آوران شوری ز نو بر پا شده  
 چون کوه راسخ پرتوان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش  
 بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

بهر سرافرازی ببند بند شجاعت بر سرم  
 بهر ملاقات خدا بنما معطر پیکرم  
 بر بند کوله پشنتی رزمنده ی هم سنگرم  
 بنما سلاح امتحان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش  
 بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

سرنیزه ها، فانسرخه ها بندید محکم بر کمر  
 بندید بند کفش ها با سرعت شیران نر  
 بهر وداع آخرین بوسید روی یک دیگر  
 گویند با هم سنگران آماده باش آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش  
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

گیرید علم داران همه مردانه بیرق ها به کف  
با نظم و ترتیب آورید رو سوی میدان نبرد  
از ممینه وز میسره حمله کنید از هر  
تازید چون شیر ژیان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش  
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

باشید با هم متحد یاران و انصار حسین  
رو سوی ارض کربلا آرید زوار حسین  
هستید جمله آرزومندان دیدار حسین  
ای عارفان وی عاشقان آماده باش آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش  
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

As Hamid Naficy notes in his *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, the inner structure of the episode follows a sermon-like order, demonstrating how Shi'i performance traditions have influenced the episodes of *Revāyat-e Fath* (2012, 17). Consequently, the film starts and ends with Ahangaran's eulogy. The opening scenes show the preparations for battle: getting the combat gear ready, performing the last prayers in the open, and tying their shoelaces. The lyrics reflect these cheerful anticipations. The end closes after a (supposedly) successful day of fighting, the sunset representing the circle of nature and the contours of the soldiers walking home the minor position of mankind in this divine creation.

As untypical of *Revāyat-e Fath* as this enticing tune may be, it impressively showcases the propagandistic talent of Avini. In fact, these specific sequences that show the very practical preparations for battle paired with the performance of prayers and Ahangaran's cheerful voice, have become both, soundtrack and music video of the war. Even today, this very sequence is shown again and again as an aesthetic warm-up or historical mood-setting when the war is referenced in Persian-language media.

While the song alludes mostly to Shi'i eschatology, the merging with the tropes of martyrdom and the Karbala Paradigm is characteristic for this kind of wartime *maddāḥī*. Oftentimes, *madḥ* that is dedicated to the Twelfth Imam or to Ayatollah Khomeini also contains invocations to Imam Hossein. Considering the obvious analogy of the contemporary war with the myth of

Karbala regarding the shared geography – the soil that is today’s Iraq – and an enemy that is perceived to be the wrongful ruler of this sacred soil, this combination of invocations does not come as a surprise. Once again, it bears witness to the power that figures of memory and places of memory (*Erinnerungsorte*) can hold over the human psyche. “Places [of memory] are able to preserve and to certify cultural memory even over periods of oblivion,” as Aleida Assmann notes (2006, 21). Similar to the human body, places can also act as container of cultural memory, as Karbala does for Shi’is. The evocation of or the physical visit/ proximity to places of memory combined with other ‘storage media’ (as texts as well as music, rituals, or visuals) leads to a ‘reanimation’ of the memory represented by this very place (2006, 21). These multiple entanglements of memory, metaphor, and embodiment account for the effectiveness of those ‘memory technologies,’ the various ways in which ‘going to Karbala’ was referenced in material culture, literature, and media during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of *Erinnerungsorte*, ‘places of memory,’ as applied here according to Aleida Assmann, is derived from Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* (‘sites of memory’), which refers to spaces, objects, or events that contain meaning and enable identification for the collective memory of a group (Nora 1989). Apart from the spacial dimension of this concept as already discussed above, Karbala served as a site of memory in multiple ways during the war. The re-enactment of the event of the Karbala narrative – the ‘David against Goliath’ like fight of Imam Hossein and his disciples against the Umayyad’s troops – carried on throughout the war years. To picture every single fighter who went to the frontline as ‘lover of Karbala’ and ‘pilgrim of Hossein’ as done in the lyrics of ‘Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready,’ served the purpose to certify and reanimate Shi’i cultural memory as the initiation moment of the Islamic Republic. Already prior to and during the revolution, Khomeini had used the fight against the ‘Yazid of [our] time’ (namely then the Shah) as a site of memory in Nora’s sense. From 1980 until 1988, this usage of the Karbala narrative was instrumental to create and certify the nation’s identity as a collective of Hossein-like warriors fighting a just war against the usurper of the sacred soil.

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16 The extensive study of poster art from the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War by Chelkowski and Dabashi is an ample example of those technologies (see Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999).



## 7 Pop *Maddāhī* and the Hybridization of Shi'ī Cultural Memory

Close up inside the adjoining prayer hall in Jamkaran [Mosque], for those who believe, the devotion is real. Tears streamed down the cheeks of two thousand Iranian men ripe for the return of the Mahdi [...], many wept as they awaited their Messiah. These Shiites are led by a religious storyteller, whose lyrical songs speak of tragedy on the path to salvation, prompting cries of anguish and joy. For two hours, the bearded Mahdi Salahshur relentlessly rallied his listeners around the belief in the all-powerful Twelfth Imam. He sat in the only chair, ten rows back amid that sea of red-eyed sweating supplicants, kneeling and brought by his words to ecstasy and agony in turns. “Don’t let the wish stay in your hearts! Come on, come on! I have a fear of not seeing you!” Salahshur told the crowd in a poetic, longing voice. “Everybody wants to see the Lord and Master of the Age! Mourn, raise your hands.” People chanted. Men cried, wedged shoulder to shoulder. Sweat began to pour. “Those who sinned, cry more!” came the order. “Don’t let me down in front of the martyrs ...”! (Peterson 2010, 299–300)

After the period of societal and cultural secularization that came with the Islamic reformist’s movement and their electoral victory that led to the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), the popularity of *maddāhī* peaked again after Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s first electoral victory in 2005. A certain group of singers, colloquially called *maddāhān-e sīyāsī* (English ‘political eulogists’), reached national stardom and transformed the image, the social ranking and the humble position that *maddāhān* used to occupy within Shi’i clerical hierarchy. Since the intellectual discourses seemed to be dominated by Shi’i reformist thinkers like Abdolkarim Soroush, the reactionary move by the power center of Ali Khamenei’s bureau was not one to win over minds, but bodies. This strategy aimed at a different cultural level that was – once again as during the war – designed to transmit its message to the youth from lower-income families through the language of music and ritual. The performance Scott Peterson witnessed in 2005 in Jamkaran Mosque belongs to an early stage of this development, when there were sermons held with people sitting or kneeling. Although some of those details might have changed over the decade to come, the principle at the core of the ritual of *maddāhī* as such is embodiment, as scholars of material culture frame it: “All of these aesthetic frameworks [that] structure a people’s time, space, sense of purpose, and collective identity” (David Morgan 2010, 18). We have already encountered this concept from cultural theory, but what J. Assmann calls a ‘connective structure’ focuses

more on the two levels of the temporal and the social (J. Assmann 2012, 2–3). Since, however, the ritual practice of *rouzeh khānī*, *nohe khānī*, or *marzīyeh khānī* (what came to be summarized under the term of *maddāhī*) can be seen as primarily bodies (re) acting, it makes sense to reconceptualize the practice of *maddāhī* within the study of material culture:

The power of material culture resides in its ability to make physically present what is otherwise distant or absent or insensate, to embody the inchoate feelings, dim presentiments, the distant past, the deceased leader or saint, the religious community, the intangible or transcendent reality, and to discipline and enlist the body in acts of shared imagination. All of these aesthetic frameworks structure a people's time, space, sense of purpose, and collective identity. The study of material culture is not limited to the artefacts and spaces of human life, but also includes the concepts, aesthetic paradigms, emotional patterns, and many practices that make things and spaces apprehensible and valuable. Material culture gives form and place to such intangible structures as feelings, presentiments of ages past or future, the nation, or the personhood of ancestors and saints, investing them with a concrete presence in daily life (Morgan 2010, 18–19)

The audiences of performances as described by Peterson (2010) above seemed to have longed for Imam Hossein or Imam Mahdi having a 'concrete presence' in their daily life. The collective celebrations of their very timely feelings for those mythological figures and places of memory contextualize their lives within the Shi'i community and history making thereby the sacred tangible. After the war-weariness of the 1990s seemed forgotten and a large number of supporters of the secularization movement retired into their private realms, the public space was recharged as a religious stage of "sense of purpose and collective identity," as David Morgan (2010, 18) puts it. The Jamkaran Mosque, for example, was turned into an impressive shrine complex with funds from the Ahmadinejad government, attracting masses of young audiences for *maddāhī* sermons dedicated to the Twelfth Imam (Calmard 2011). Although the legend of the apparition of the Hidden Imam in the village near Qom in 984/373 has been doubted by many, including Ayatollah Khomeini himself; it nevertheless became a new center for millennialist rituals praising and actively promoting the return of the Mahdi. As Peterson explains: The main characteristic of Mehdi Salahshur's sermon at Jamkarān is the collective state of ecstasy and of embodying the Shi'i (millennialist) anticipation (*entezār*) of the Hidden Imam.

The mass sermons and the architectural grandeur of the five-dome complex, however, are only one side of the distinct religious materiality in Iran since 2005. A renewed audiovisual presence of *maddāḥī* culture in the urban landscape represents the other side. “[*Maddāḥī*] seemed to be everywhere,” Davud, an interviewee and eyewitness from Tehran who wished to remain anonymous, recalls: from humble to huge makeshift tents, sermon advertisements on posters and banners, and the playing, display and selling of recorded music carriers. As Davud explained: “When you want to set up a *maddāḥī* in your neighborhood, you just go to the district authorities and, without any difficulties, you would get enough money to lease a tent, audio equipment and a *maddāḥ* for the night. Especially between 2005 and 2009, there was always a *maddāḥī* going on.”<sup>17</sup> Davud worked as a medical professional in a state hospital during those years and remembers that his hospital used to treat many young-to-middle-aged men who said they were *maddāḥān* and came to treat vocal cord problems caused by their lengthy performances, as they reported.

In those years, also an institutionalization of the profession of the *maddāḥān* was executed. Specialized organizations like the *Khāne-ye Maddāḥān-e Keshvar* (English ‘The House of the Nation’s *Maddāḥān*’) or the *Sāzemān-e Basīj-e Maddāḥān* (the volunteer militia’s *Maddāḥān* organization, established in 2008, see Golkar 2013, 5) were founded. Out of a vast mass of singers (also trained by these organizations themselves, see Golkar 2013, 5) emerged a handful of them who were prominent and outspoken for Head of State Ali Khamenei – state-sponsored religious pop stars and also innovators of their craft. Over the years, performers like Helali or Hamid Alimi developed a repertoire of not just traditional *rouzeh*, *noheh*, and *madḥ* that were written and performed within the modes of the Iranian music system, the *dstgāh*, but adapted singing styles that resembled classical Iranian vocal music (*āvāz*), patriotic folk ballads (*tasnīf*), Iranian pop ballads by exiled singers based in Los Angeles (generally labelled *losanjelesi*), or even rap-like spoken word performances.

During many rituals, attendees take off their shirts, so the sounds of chest-beating on bare chests produce a strepitous soundscape that is very sensual and creates an atmosphere of close, raw physicality that is homoerotically charged. To follow this path in research is, especially for female scientists, not easy to execute. Countless video clips on *YouTube* or *Apparat* give a graphic account of sceneries where the collective performance of *maddāḥī* is fully acted out by the eulogist on the stage and his audience. In many clips, the naked torsos of the men in the audience are pixelated. In this context, homoeroticism of Sufi poetry comes to mind: the common ground to long for the beauty of or

17 Author’s interview with “Davud” (Cologne, Germany, August 2017).

proximity to God or a beautiful witness of His.<sup>18</sup> In *maddāḥi* lyrics, especially in those written for Ashura performances, mostly seeing and reaching Imam Hossein is invoked. Another approach that leans more towards the material, towards the body, is suggested by research about homoeroticism and military/fraternity culture. In Iranian culture, there is an interesting intersection with the homosocial world of ‘traditional’ male sports clubs, the *zūr-khāneh* (‘house of strength’) which Houchang E. Chehabi explores in his very illuminating article *Gender Anxieties in the Iranian Zūrkhānah* (Chehabi, 2019).

In most of the ritual performances by today’s popular *maddāḥān* as Mahmud Karimi, Said Haddadian, Abdolreza Helali, or Mehdi Salahshur, this practice of chest-beating – sometimes accompanied by rhythmic jumping – is acted out, regardless of the song’s nature. That means that it is also performed during eulogies and not exclusively during the singing of elegies. Generally, chest-beating is regarded as a form of repentance that is meant to absolve the pious ones from the sin of the Shi‘is of Kufa who did not come to aid Imam Hossein in the Battle of Karbala. It is in part understood as a ritualized form of self-punishment in Shi‘i culture for this reason. In different social and religious *maddāḥi* settings however, as the more ‘traditional’ guilds of the City of Yazd, for example, communities practice elaborate and artful chest-beating performances together with a eulogist several weeks before staging them on important holidays performances.

The aforementioned new linguistic blurriness that allows all kinds of elegies and eulogies to be summarized under the term of *maddāḥi* therefore signifies not only a linguistic/ formal shifting of ritual genre differentiation, but also brings forth a material dimension that changes the nature of the ritual fundamentally (or vice versa): as mentioned in the initial quote by Ahangaran, the “ritual practice and the metaphorical representation” of *noḥeh khānī* and *maddāḥi* (as generic terms) are altered in a fashion that empties the ritual of its “metaphorical representation.” For the materiality of the ritual, this means that the principle of embodiment is no longer acted upon. In David Morgan’s words (2010, 18): “[E]mbody[ing] the inchoate feelings, dim presentiments, the distant past, the deceased leader or saint, the religious community, the intangible or transcendent reality, and to discipline and enlist the body in acts of shared imagination” is not fulfilled once ritual acts of praise and absolution become conflicted or even erotically loaded. One can argue that regardless of the song’s nature, the attendees will feel closer to the imams by performing this collective state of ecstasy. The principle of embodiment of a community of sinners or celebrators, however, no longer applies. The ritual becomes a

18 For a discussion of homoeroticism in Sufi poetry and eulogy lyrics see below.

‘meaningless’ performance of “flight from the selfhood” (Baumeister 1991, as quoted in Koster, 211–248).

‘Meaningless’ and ‘meaningful’ refer in this context to the semantic and pragmatic understanding of lyrics and their synchronicity with established bodily performances. As Koster (2003, 6) elucidates, the chanting of a semantical ‘meaningless’ mantra composed of repetitive syllables as in Vedic rituals can serve the purpose of a ritual as well as semantically ‘meaningful’ religious slogans. ‘Meaningless’ and ‘meaningful’ are, therefore, no categories of scientific or moral evaluation.

The escape from the self is one central goal of ritual performances, according to Koster (2003, 6). ‘Meaningful’ and ‘meaningless’ rituals thereby only differ in their effectiveness of self-escape. Interestingly, meaningless rituals seem more efficient (2003, 7): “[I]t can be said that some absorbing, monotonous activity is more effective in stripping the outer semantic layers of one’s identity the more meaningless it is. Far from being without purpose, the meaninglessness of ritual acts and chants is highly functional as an ego-reducing technique.” Taken up on the word’s original meaning, the rituals become popularized. They are not, as Koster points out, without purpose. Also, Assmann remarks (2012, 3): “The basic principle behind all connective structures is repetition.”

Another material dimension of popularization is the incorporation of pop music into *maddāḥī*. *Maddāḥān* are very creative in doing so, and they use musical influences from various genres. I would like to showcase the usage of a very popular song by the *losanjelesi* singer Haydeh, *Salām-e man bā to, yāre qadīmī* (‘Hail to you, old friend’) by *maddāḥ* Hamid Alimi. Recordings of the cover version by Alimi appeared online in 2014 on the Iranian platform Apparat.com, before a number of Instagram accounts such as @maddahi\_tweet and YouTube channels reposted the audio recording and its original as late as in 2018. As often the case with video clips and recordings in cyberspace, the audio file then appeared on multiple outlets, embellished with or without the original text or appreciative or ironic comments. On the recording itself, Alimi sings the original lyrics as sung by Haydeh, unchanged, which is curious regarding the content – an invocation by the lyrical narrator (singer) to Sāqī, a mythical cupbearer. In Iranian mystical poetry, the cupbearer – renderer of wine and often also musician – is either a beautiful young woman or an (equally beautiful) young man. Especially in Sufi poetry, Saqī is often embellished with sexual connotations. The practice of gazing (*nazar*) at a beautiful adolescent male to see the beauty of God in him and to take his earthly beauty as a testimony for godly beauty was called *shāhedbāzī* (‘play with the witness’), “[f]alling in love hopelessly and selflessly with such a figure became a familiar trope of Sufi tales,” as Afsaneh Najmabadi notes (2005, 17).

And even if all covers of well-known and cherished songs of *maddāhān* play with this familiarity amongst Iranian audiences, the choice of song is an especially curious one. First, it could come to mind that the state of drunkenness itself is forbidden, even the metaphorical one, and its mentioning usually subject to censorship, but also the invocation of the mythical wine bearer seems out of place for any context a *maddāh* could possibly perform in. The metaphorical use of wine and the cupbearer in mystical Persian poetry, on the other hand, has come to reach beyond orthodox readings of homoerotic practices, of what is allowed and forbidden. As Annemarie Schimmel writes in her study of the imagery of Persian poetry (1992, 35–36; 116), wine and cupbearer are “time-honored concepts” that hint to leaving behind a piousness of law towards a religion of transcendental love. Especially interesting as a continuation of the tradition of war poetry is here, that pleasant motifs as drinking wine, were “used to distract readers from the actual brutality of war,” as Fatemeh Shams explains (2016, 26). References to *may* (English ‘wine’) were used by religious poets to suggest the pleasant state of martyrdom (Shams 2016, 26). The content and imagery of Haydeh’s song, therefore, are not necessarily inappropriate to serve as *madh*-lyrics.

Unfortunately, time and place of the recorded performance are not stated on any of the websites/ platforms that feature the recording. The lyrics Alimi sings go as the following (as the original text written by Farid Zoland):

سلام من به تو یار قدیمی  
 منم همون هوادار قدیمی  
 هنوز همون خراباتی و مستم  
 ولی بی تو سبوی می شکستم  
 همه تشنه لبیم ساقی کجایی  
 گرفتار شمیم ساقی کجایی

Hail to you, old friend  
 I am the same old supporter  
 I am the same tippler and drunk  
 But without you I broke the wine jug  
 We are all thirsty, Saqi, where are you?  
 We are captives of the night, Saqi where are you?

As in most *maddāhī*, Alimi uses an echo mode in his microphone. He sings the lyrics in a weeping voice, with sobbing sounds at the end of each line. Apparently, judging from his singing style, he has turned the popular ballade into an elegy. In between the second and the third line, he calls upon the

eighth imam, Reza. Later in the recording, the voices of a seemingly large audience join in for two stanzas. Here, Alimi plays on the general familiarity of the pop song to create a moment of communion and a collective ‘we.’ This seems all the more curious considering the official status of vocalist Haydeh, and *losanjelesī* singers in general, as ‘idolaters’ within the official state narrative. Head of State Khamenei is quoted by Aftab News (2014) saying: “[M]elodies by singers from Los Angeles that alter the religious nature of the *madh* genre are to be avoided. They are immoral and have been arranged to promote sexual lust.” This quote from 2007/1386 by Khamenei shows, however, that the boundaries of popularization have been pushed further instead of retreating to the realm of ‘traditional’ *madh*, as Khamenei demanded.

## 8 Conclusion

The materiality of Shi‘i cultural memory as it is performed in contemporary *maddāhī* rituals has changed significantly since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), it was mainly through the voice of Sadeq Ahangaran and his *nohehs*, that the ‘Culture of the Frontlines’ (*farhang-e jebhe*) was brought to Iranian cities. Although the sound of wartime Iran remained traditional in its aesthetics and the poetry of Habibollah Moallemi who wrote Ahangaran’s lyrics was as artful as the poems by older masters, the propagandistic effect of those wartime *nohehhā* was powerful. As images of leaders of the revolution and martyrs in murals and on billboards constructed the Islamic Republic visually as a nation, Ahangaran’s voice defined the soundscape of Khomeini’s ‘Islamic Iran.’ His ubiquitous presence was facilitated by IRIB in general, and by the war documentaries *Revāyat-e Fath*, directed and narrated by Morteza Avini, in particular. Every Friday from 1986 onwards, *Revāyat-e Fath* created a shared space between the soldiers at the warfront and civilian families in front of their television screens. The films not only brought Ahangaran’s voice and sermons from the warfront into the living rooms, but also – through its sermon-like structure – provided a communion for the nation of potential martyrs and their families.

While Ahangaran mobilized for warfare by declaring *basījī* fighters as ‘troops of the Master of Time,’ post-revolutionary *maddāhān* use different means to establish a fan base that complies to the red lines of religious culture set by the state: they celebrate *maddāhī* rituals like ecstatic concerts. The transmission of cultural memory through the voice of the mediator and the bodies of the audiences becomes a side effect; the main purpose of the performance of *maddāhī-ye pāp* is collective ecstasy, the flight from selfhood, as Jan Koster

puts it. Even if this is a purpose that ritual performances of most religions and cultures in fact share, it is a significant derivation from what official religious discourse claims the sermons to be, as articulated by Ahangaran himself in the opening quote. This derivation of the proclaimed function (cherishing the imams and their family, remembering and transmitting knowledge about their martyrdom and begging for absolution for the sin of the early Shi'i community) takes shape in the content of the songs (their lyrics) and their form (their melodies) and the way, the *maddāh* and the audience perform them together. The adaptation of pop music into the *madhī* genre therefore popularizes the Shi'i ritual in a fashion that goes far beyond the ideological use of the wartime sermons: Although the connective structure it seeks to establish is still the one of a community of Shi'is, its means have been stripped of most pre-existing conventions, as the general solemnity of the ritual, the semantics of chest-beating and, oftentimes, the transmission of religious knowledge. The meaninglessness brings forth a renunciation of the divine. *Maddāhī-ye pāp* is a 'secularized' ritual in which the affects that usually in religious rituals intensify the bodily memory that is established by habitualization (A. Assmann 2006, 20–22) become the main purpose for the audience.

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**PART 2**

*Gendered Perspectives on Shi'i Materiality*





## Affective Consanguinity

### *Blood, Mothers and Martyrs on the Battlefields of the Iran-Iraq War*

*Sana Chavoshian*

Consanguinity is a common form of status among Shi'is that frames, for example, the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad as *Sayyids*. This chapter explores an affective and alternative perception of consanguinity based on a haptic relationship or encounter with the blood of the fallen soldiers of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), who are perceived as martyrs. My ethnographic study among washwomen of wartime draws on theories of affect and material religion to indicate how the practice of washing blood from old and damaged military uniforms constitutes women's experience of martyrdom, motherhood, and intimate attachment to the martyrs. Experiencing the war from the support stations interlaced kinship, spirituality and handwork, especially for washwomen whose sons were on the frontline. I argue for an intergenerational relation, where the infinitesimal act of washing bloodstained uniforms undergirds a claim to justice: Washwomen demand the recognition of the support stations where they served during the war as sites of commemoration. In turn, such sites would attest to their share in the warfare and martyrdom. While washwomen's demands and practices are in line with the Iranian state's official discourse on martyrdom, their claims unsettle the binary division between victim and martyr by merging emotive and subjective experiences of women as well as places that are not commonly attended in the anthropological studies of military conflicts and war.

Therefore, the research I present in this chapter complements and complicates the Karbala Paradigm in the scholarly literature on Shi'i martyrdom as it exceeds symbols, objects, and discourses associated with this paradigm. Rather, I emphasize the non-discursive power of objects and elements, such as uniforms and blood, in shedding light on the network between human, non-human, and more-than-human agencies – in this case, between the washwomen, the martyrs, and the blood and uniforms of the martyrs – in shaping sacred spaces in sites of war memorialization.

## 1 Introduction

In the large saloon of an old garrison near the border between Iran and Iraq, women – pilgrims – are laying side by side on the floor to sleep. Once a year in April, about a hundred groups, from high schoolers to families and old veterans, visit the former battlefields of the Iran-Iraq War, where life in combat is simulated and venerated for the loss of thousands of martyrs. On the third day of the journey, our group spent the night in the city of Ahwaz. The women have walked several kilometers in the sandy narrow routs of the commemoration sites, howled with grief, and performed reverence rituals for martyrs the whole day. They lay, however, in the same black veils and draw them over their heads while sleeping. We are each given an old green fetid blanket of the garrison, that the women have wrapped over their veils. “I feel its smell even when I cover my nose with the chador,” one of the women laughs, pushing the blanket down on her shoulders. The air is thick with the breath of fifty women, the smell of their feet that were in the shoes the whole day, and the blankets. The hanging ventilator spins slowly, and the two tiny windows open to a still night outside. I see floating dust shimmering in the ray of light that is produced by my cellphone. “But we used to wash tones of such blankets from sweat and blood those days in order not to stink like this for *our sons*,” replies an elder woman from the corner of the room. Parvin, the woman who has drawn my attention with her reply, had worked as a volunteer for several months in a support station in Ahwaz during the war. Her reference to the soldiers as ‘her sons’ indicates the strong sense of care that washwomen of wartime developed for the wounded and martyred soldiers at the front, although many of them were too young to have a son in that age. She promises to take me on a separate trip to the site of the washing station in Ahwaz, where dozens of women volunteers like her used to clean and repair bloodstained military uniforms and blankets that were collected from the battlefields and hospitals. Drawing on an ethnographic fieldwork from between 2014 and 2017 among religious women circles and mothers of martyrs, I examine the contours of the wartime sacrifice in the practices and claims of women who have participated in an extended warscape – within or on the verge of combat zones at support stations – and who got affected, contaminated, and sickened through these practices. Washwomen have developed an affective relation to the blood that I call *consanguinity*: haptic rather than genetic lineage of blood between martyrs and women. In Gil Anidjar’s famous rendition, ‘blood’ has an apophatic proportion, and rather than an idea, symbol, or concept, blood stands for a “privileged figure” that engenders new notions of kinship and state (2014, 83). Driven by Anidjar’s conception, this chapter accounts blood as it engenders

and remaps martyrdom beyond official scripts. More precisely, I raise the question whether martyrdom is a formal script that is designated posthumously by the community of believers and with reference to certain historical narratives (sacred text), or could there be a *long-durée* process of mutual projection of one's subjective meanings and energies discharged by 'blood' to that occasion and contribute to martyrdom?

In this chapter, I seek to contribute to developing a material approach to the religious imagination. Thinking about religious imagination from a material perspective, I emphasize the importance of 'fluid matters' (Jansen and Dresen 2012), particularly blood, in constituting and impinging Shi'i material imaginaries. For a long time, studying Shi'i materiality has been preoccupied with the discourses of the Battle of Karbala and Muharram rituals that involve the narratives and figurations of the martyrdom of the third Shi'i imam, Husayn ibn Ali, on the Day of Ashura in 680 CE (Fischer 1980; Aghaie 2004). The main question among scholars has been concomitantly how various elements of the Battle of Karbala – its myth and symbols – intermingle with the processes of authorization and meaning making while addressing its political and performative potencies in unsettling the balance between extension and affirmation of power (Beeman 1985; Deeb 2006; Hyder 2006; Neuwirth 2014; Palizban 2016). Both strands, the soteriological and the politically ridden interpretations in the frame of the 'Karbala Paradigm,' assume a historical distinction between salvific/ passive and revolutionary/ active Shi'ism, where martyrdom transforms into a force of social cohesion and mobilization. In Iran, the Karbala Paradigm is bound particularly with the 1979 Revolution and the eight-year-war against Iraq (Afary 2005; Gözl 2019; Keddie 1983; Khosrokhavar 1995). The official martyr-cult in Iran formed in close ties with the discourses of Imam Husayn's martyrdom. Not only did the state establish several institutions to propagate its ideologies, but also did the collision between Karbala and the war dominate artistic representations and the media (Bombardier 2013; Dabbashi 2000; Marzolph 2013; Rolston 2017). The intense representations of symbols driven from Karbala narratives in the Islamic Republic affirmed the overarching formulation of the Karbala Paradigm in the scholarly literature.

While not denying that these interpretations were able to grasp many relevant developments in the religious field, I want to point to a different dynamic that seems to provide a broader perspective especially regarding material religion. In this respect, I show the interface between material imaginaries and martyrdom in Iran's transforming martyr-cult since the war. Rather than applying the meta-narrative of the Battle of Karbala, I ask how material objects correspond to the ways by which martyrdom is articulated.



Except for sacrificial blood and the blood of martyrs, whose corpses do not undergo Islamic ritual ablution before burial, blood is considered an impurity in Islam (Khomeini 1989, 269; Massignon 1980, 604). Besides, blood is a controversial constitutive element in the history of Muharram rituals<sup>1</sup> (see Pinault 2001, 29–55): Considering men's flagellating ritual and spilling blood during *ta'ziyeh*<sup>2</sup> (passion plays re-enacting the events of the Battle of Karbala), it is a strong symbol of martyrs and a source of redemption among the mourners (Jansen and Dresen 2012, 227). However, reading through their materiality, martyrs' blood exceeds their symbolic, sacramental, and purifying characters. In this regard, I argue that temporary 'ritual situations' among certain groups create an emergent constellation of meanings and material objects that characterize the state of martyrdom and render a sacred space. Drawing on theories of affect, I label this interrelation between ritual practices and material properties of objects as 'affective.'

Affective, in this understanding, is an embodied, emotive, and pre-linguistic experience that connects human subjectivity with the material environment while transcending human subjectivity (Massumi 1995, 96; Mazzarella 2010, 292; Thrift 2008, 211). In accounting religious imaginaries, I suggest an emphasis on the non-discursive realm; more precisely, to distinguish affects from the semiotically mediated symbolic order.<sup>3</sup> This demarcation between affect and symbolic order becomes relevant in capturing the centrality of mediating forces of material objects.

Since the early 2000s, scholars in religious studies have focused increasingly on the dynamics of corporality and materiality in expanding the rubrics of the study of Shi'ism (see Ruffle 2009; Torab 2007). In the same vein, the critique of the Karbala Paradigm emerged with scholarly genealogies inspired by new terminologies for emotions, performativity, and spatiality (Funke 2017; Rahimi 2011, 36–62; Sharifi-Isaloo 2017; Szanto 2011, 31–44). These works indicated that the modes of engagement in Muharram rituals are more diverse and multifaceted than the predominantly discussed passive salvific versus active

1 During Muharram rituals, men scourge their backs and chests until they bleed; in some ethnic groups they cut the skin on the forehead with a sharp knife. The mourners join processions on the streets with their bleeding wounds.

2 Unless otherwise stated, transliterations presented in this chapter are based on the Persian system of spelling and pronunciation, emphasizing especially the vernacular accent and pronunciation in Khuzestan (hence, e.g., *ta'ziyeh* and not *ta'ziye*).

3 I am referring to Brian Massumi's critique of refraining the relationship between language and image to semiotic and semantic level within symbolic order (1995, 87). There is a large array of discussions in cultural theory on the distinction of affect and emotion (see Thrift 2008, 221; Navaro 2017).

revolutionary binary. These bodily-inhabited rituals and practices embrace unaccounted visceral registers, long-standing bodily imprints and collective emotions that conjure up public resilience or non-conformism (Szanto 2013, 78–79, Eisenlohr 2015, 687). Their critical inquires have also demonstrated that Muharram rituals might have “unpredictable consequences” (Rahimi 2011, 80). I draw on these critical approaches to the Karbala Paradigm in expanding the range of rituals and emotions that reference the Battle of Karbala. This chapter, in this regard, engages with martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) not through the normative masculine perceptions of martyrdom, but rather evolves around the practice of washing bloodstains from their uniforms on the one hand and the formation of a sacred space over their remnants on the other.<sup>4</sup>

However, my approach differs from the mode of analysis proposed by Babak Rahimi and Edith Szanto in several ways. Firstly, I find it important to distinguish between emotions as individual, episodic, and categorical phenomena and affects (see von Scheve 2018, 40–41). While emotions in this sense refer to settled emotions that come to language such as grief, the effects are ‘ubiquitous’ and ‘relational’ (von Scheve 2018, 43). The washwomen with whom I talked could not distinguish their relation to the martyrs in words. Notably, some of my interviewees lost their sons and husbands during and after their volunteer employment at the support stations; these were respected widely as ‘mothers of martyrs’ (*mādar-e shahīd*). In a broader sense, however, they all had a sense of motherly care to the martyrs and an intimacy to their job, which rather than being a cultivated sense was experienced as a vague mood. For example, they would not articulate their bereavement of their sons as ‘grief’ or ‘mourn,’ but account them as ‘martyrs’ (*shohadā*) whose wounds they carry until today.

There is little said about “non-discursive” and “pre-conceptual” affects, to put it with Brian Massumi (1995), in the field of anthropology of Islam. In turn, as Georg Stauth puts it aptly, the stress on Muslim interiorities has led to an “essentialist depiction” of Muslim subjectivities, as if their body, flesh, and the cognitive system are set up as ‘Muslim’ (Stauth 2012, 136).

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4 I use the term ‘sacred geography’ to address pilgrimage sites that relate to Islamic history and hagiography, religious practices, and cosmological events. The term ‘sacred geographies,’ as Ursula Rao puts it, has an ambivalent status. It is in the here and now, and at the same time it functions as a gateway to the Otherworldly. These geographies include shrines, rock art, votive deposits, alignments, and archaeological sites. To capture the ways in which spiritual power is enshrined in places, buildings, or landscapes, it is necessary to consider the association of sacred spaces with material objects, collective rituals, and bodily orientations (see, e. g., Rao 2018).

Second, I investigate the affordances of the material ‘things’ to act as mediators that shape and affect the relationship between the washwomen and the realms of martyrdom and transcendence. Birgit Meyer has defined religion as “a practice of mediation” in which substances, objects, words, sounds, and human bodies connect what is held to be separate. It involves a particular infrastructure of transmission, which invokes the presence of transcendence or the divine in the ordinary world (Meyer 2015, 165; 2020). In line with Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (2012, 17), I lay out a differentiated reading of the mediatic perception of materials, a perception that distinguishes images and holy objects from bodily fluids. Their view sheds light on the components and processes by which the assemblage of material objects coincides with spaces and ritual practices and makes meaning and religious discourses haptic and tangible.

In the post-war contexts where the assemblage of religious material objects and rituals are enmeshed with memories and remnants of the past, the things turn to invoke varied affects. That is to say, the terrain of their mediatic role is invested in their historical specificity and generic auras. Photographs, maps, dream-images, and visions of martyrs engage in a dialectical process of making space holy and absorbing the sacred energy of the martyrs. They indicate a new reservoir where rituals and pilgrimage are intertwined with searching for lost bodies of the martyrs (Chavoshian 2020). Along totems and symbols, the logic of ‘trace’ gears into the attachments that the believers have toward these objects.<sup>5</sup> Yael Navaro (2009) has highlighted this juxtaposition as a characteristic of leftovers of past conflicts and political violence. Through the notion of ‘ruin,’ she explains the interlacing of interior melancholy (the inner destruction) on the one hand, and the affect exuded from shards, rubble, and debris of war on the other (Navaro 2009, 14–15). Further to the affective ruins, post-war context can be a fabric of re/ production of objects that release a sense of belonging while capturing the traces of martyrs. I address here what Gertrud Hüwelmeier has dubbed as ‘spirit-maps’ (2019) to demonstrate the double role of material things in a) connecting those alive to their deceased kin and b) rendering a cartographic image of the affective geography, which is located in the here and now and at the same time functions as an opening to another world (2019, 83). I follow these insights in reflecting on the ways by which a territory is assigned as sacred and martyrs are revered.

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5 ‘Trace,’ according to Walter Benjamin, is a genealogical image and an auratic character that leaves a temporal historical mark on material objects (2005, 514); I will come back to Benjamin’s articulation in addressing the soldiers’ uniforms.

The support station I describe in this chapter was located in Ahwaz, not far from the Howeyzeh battlefield in southwestern Iran. Howeyzeh was destroyed in the first year of the war: It came under Iraqi military siege and occupation for 16 months and was only liberated towards the end of the war. I engage with washwomen's stories of piling, resorting, washing, and cleaning the used uniforms that, notwithstanding their distinct pressure of war, brought them to affective-driven practices as a way of establishing their sense of attachments to the martyrs and the other world. With detailed ethnography of their veneration rituals at the former site of washing and in the cemetery of the fallen soldiers of Howeyzeh, I explore what washwomen call their 'share of martyrdom.' I call this relation 'consanguinity' to interlace their affinity with washing bloodstains from the uniforms and their haptic rather than genetic kinship as 'mothers' of the martyrs. In this context, a uniform is not only a relic in the hands of the washwomen, but also a testament to their virtuous position. Concomitantly, the function of the uniforms can be analyzed as twofold: They are objects of exhaustion and infection that caused washwomen severe illnesses on the one hand, and, on the other, they are the mediating vessels of connecting washwomen to the realm of transcendence.

## 2 Alam Al-Hoda

In the southwestern borderland of Iran, Howeyzeh is a ubiquitously war-stricken town whose name is entwined with the Alam al-Hoda family. It embraces the commemorated debris over the landscape where the military commander Hussein Alam al-Hoda (1958–1981) was martyred along with 140 soldiers. Hussein's brother, Ayatollah Hamid Alam al-Hoda, is the imam of the Central Mosque of Howeyzeh, in the garden of which the cemetery devoted to the martyrs (*golzār-e shohadā*) is situated. It is there that the bodies of Martyr (*shahīd*) Hussein Alam al-Hoda and his battalion are buried. The gravestone of his mother, Sayyida Batul Alam al-Hoda, lays in the narrow-roofed passage that is built along the eastern wall of the cemetery and connects it to the mosque.

Burying 'mothers of martyrs' in the sections devoted to martyrs is barely news, especially in Iran's post-war urban cemeteries where the Foundation of Martyrs<sup>6</sup> have registered and reserved multi-layered graves of two and

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6 The Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs is the major state organization in Iran for providing facilities to the victims of the war (the ones killed, injured, taken as prisoners of war, and missing individuals) and grant economical and social bonuses for their parents, children, and wives.

three floors for martyrs' parents. What is novel about the site of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda's burial is the way it corresponds to the imaginary of martyrdom among washwomen of wartime on the one hand, while revealing the patrimonial state's policies on the other. It has led to a long-standing negotiation where the state authorities and administrative organizations acknowledge Sayyida Alam al-Hoda as a 'mother of a martyr' (*mādar-e shahīd*), but they refuse to admit washwomen's task as 'active participation in the battlefields,' thus recognizing the washwomen as veterans and martyrs (*shahīdeh*) themselves. While the state authorities' reactions are driven by the intrinsic patriarchal structure and male religious hegemony in understanding martyrdom, the women stubbornly struggle for their own authority in the established narratives. In this context, the women's veneration of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda at the Howeyzeh cemetery, specifically their rituals of reverence around her gravestone, demonstrates the antagonistic constellation of women's martyr cult and the state's power through structures of orthodoxy in the formal discourses of martyrdom.

In March 2015, on the fourth day of our trip to the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq War, we arrived at Howeyzeh. I was in the company of a group of pious women in an old bus that they had hired from their local mosque in southern Tehran. Our tour was organized in the framework of the annual state-sponsored pilgrimage to the battlefields, known as *Rahiyan-e Nur* ('Pilgrims of Light'). These pilgrimages are organized by several state and military institutions. The target group of such tours are particularly non-participants in war, such as women and young students, but may also include war veterans and their families. The women in our bus included mothers of martyrs who used to visit the battlefields of their sons annually as well as women who used to support war fronts through nursing, cleaning, and propagation, plus their relatives and friends. Through their tour, I could observe the combination of the official tour-plan with 'unlisted sites' such as their working place as washers and the tomb of local women activists of wartime.

It was around noon, when our bus turned to an un-asphalted road and stopped in the row of buses of visitors and pilgrims. Outside the bus, waves of heat arose from the ground. Nonetheless, everyone walked barefoot, carrying their shoes in their hands, to show reverence for a land considered sacred. Not far from the buses, the women spread out a long row of a cloth on the earth to serve lunch under the only shade that was expanded over four metal bars. Parvin, one of the pious women from our bus, guided me out of the crowd to the blue fences of the Congregational Mosque. There, she reminded me to "fasten the chador under the chin and pull it more to the fore." Wearing chador was mandatory during the tour and particularly enforced by the guards at the memorial sites, as they considered it to be in accordance with the sanctity of the sites. We passed the gate of the mosque under the gaze of the female

guards and the photographs of the fallen soldiers of Howeyzeh which were erected on both sides of the entrance. The front garden of the mosque consisted of sixty-eight identical cement gravestones laid horizontally in rows. A small photograph of the fallen martyr and an Iranian flag hung on each gravestone. Its space was defined by horizontal lines that separated one grave from the next, elevated from the ground only by short-raised national flags. At the end of the garden, the blue mosaic mosque and its two high-raised columns cast their sheen to the visitors. Under the light blue cupola and its floral mosaic columns, the arcades were expanded to the right and left wings of the building.

Parvin took me directly to the gravestone of Hussein Alam al-Hoda, where she recounted his biography. In her youth, she spent several months as a volunteer in the city of Ahwaz, some forty kilometers from Howeyzeh, during the war. She had seen Hussein Alam al-Hoda once in 1980 at the gate of one of the mosques in Ahwaz but had approached him confidently. Parvin was keen to participate in women's Islamic propagating activities, and Hussein Alam al-Hoda gave her a reference letter. By that time, Hussein, who was a well-known revolutionary activist from a clerical family, was appointed military commander in charge of organizing local and external volunteer forces. Shortly after this meeting, the news of Alam al-Hoda's martyrdom left inhabitants of Ahwaz in shock and grief. He and his soldiers were killed in an ambush on January 6, 1981, and the city of Howeyzeh came under Iraqi military siege for two years. Parvin narrated the story of his martyrdom:

Alam al-Hoda martyred like the elder son of Imam Husayn in an uneven battle. On the day of their [military] operation, he and his companions were technically disconnected from the army. Eventually, Iran's army retreated, and they were left behind while the Iraqi tanks surrounded Hussein and his friends on bare land. He was only twenty-two years old but was appointed as a commander with a full battalion, some of whom were his old revolutionary friends and students. The tanks had brutally shot each soldier more than once and had passed over their corpses. Their corpses remained there as Iraq's army conquered Howeyzeh. In the absence of their bodies for a proper funeral, most people were in denial. He was really a virtuous man: Locals knew him through the religious sermons of his father at their house since before the [1979] Revolution. With his heavenly voice, he used to recite Quran in these sermons as well as in the mosque. Sometimes, he was holding courses to teach Quran to youngsters. His networks and fame reached the heads of the state in Tehran. As an influential local, he played a crucial role in organizing resistance forces in the first months of war.



FIGURE 5.1 Women of Hussein Alam al-Huda's family around his grave at the Golzâr-e Shohadâ-i Howeyzeh

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Parvin halted for a moment, closed her eyes, and recited *surat al-Fâtiha*, the first verse of the Quran, in honor of Hussein Alam al-Hoda. Meanwhile, a group of young girls sat around his gravestone. They were first-year students at the Faculty of Engineering at a private university in Tehran. They were part of a tour organized by the students' branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards

Corpse (Basij) at their university. They opened their pocket prayer books and laid their prayer clay (*mohr*) on his gravestone. One of them had brought a plate of tilltering wheat (*sabzeh*) with her. Their ritual consisted of a recitation from the prayer book, laying their forehead over the clay in prostration and stretching their hands on the gravestone. Through the end, each girl made a knot with two leaves on the dish of tilltering wheat.

The charisma of Hussein Alam al-Hoda has interlaced practices of different discourses and traditions. His “saintly face,” as one of the girls expressed, has assured them of his divinely presence. Young female pilgrims pray to him for finding a proper husband. This is particularly evident in the rite of knitting the tilltering wheats over his gravestone, which they have adopted from an ancient Iranian custom. According to this custom, crossing stems of grass invokes reconciliation with nature on the thirteenth day of spring and is a promise for betrothal by the end of the Persian calendar year. Photos and paintings of Hussein Alam al-Hoda are literally everywhere at the site; his images are sold as souvenirs at the temporary market behind the mosque, adorning notebooks, badges, postcards, and shirts with titles such as ‘My Hero.’

Women who had finished their prayers around Hussein Alam al-Hoda’s gravestone turned to the closest spot at the arcades on the right side of the cemetery. In the small space of five square meters, the women kneeled around a gravestone whose date did not match with Howeyzeh martyrs: “Mother of Shahid Alam al-Hoda, d. October 14, 1988.”

The mosque was designed and built in 1983 by a group of local volunteer workers and architects from Yazd. After retrieving the first remains and identifying three fallen soldiers, including Hussein Alam al-Hoda himself, the Municipality of Howeyzeh sponsored the construction of the mosque and the cemetery. Four years after the burial of her son and his martyred comrades-in-arms, Sayyida Batul Alam al-Hoda (*née* Jazayeri) was the only mother and the only woman to be buried in the Cemetery of the Martyrs of Howeyzeh.<sup>7</sup>

The main activities of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda started after the martyrdom of Hussein Alam al-Hoda, as Parvin told me. In the lacuna of the funeral and the corpse of her son, her personal grief turned to a motive for mobilizing the women directly behind the frontlines in areas of armed conflict for the hard

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7 In 2018, two more mothers of martyrs whose sons were entombed in the Cemetery of Howeyzeh Martyrs were buried there with the permission of the relevant authorities. The authorities claimed that the burials were in accordance to the deceased women’s will. The authorities did not grant burial permission for washwomen who did not have a first-of-kin buried in the cemetery.



task of cleaning the used uniforms of the fallen soldiers for reuse. Their activities were concentrated at a former teahouse that was built on the delta of River Karoun, outside Ahwaz. They named it after Hussein, 'Shahid Alam al-Hoda Station.'

The large marble gravestone of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda is located under the arch opposite to her son's grave. Its inscription is rather long, compared to the identical name-and-date inscriptions on other gravestones in the yard. It reads:

The mother of Shahid Hussein Alam al-Hoda ... and the daughter and wife of two grand scholars; Sayyida Batul Jazayeri<sup>8</sup> lived a virtuous life; ... her pious life-conduct was inspired by Fatima [the daughter of Prophet Muhammad] and in accordance with [Sayyida Batul's] prophetic pedigree. She was the courageous and eloquent speaker of the grief, pain, and sufferings of the mother of martyrs as well as their empathic friend. The Convoy of Hazrat-e Zeynab for the remedy of the families of martyrs was her invention.<sup>9</sup>

Against the backdrop of such relational contribution as 'mother' and 'wife,' according to Parvin who has been long affiliated with her activities at the station, "Sayyida Alam al-Hoda was indeed a *shahīdeh*." In this regard, Parvin had her own account of martyrdom; she argued for Sayyida Alam al-Hoda's dauntless preservation for inhabiting and working close to the warfronts even after Hussein Alam al-Hoda's martyrdom while keeping beavered women sane and active in drastic despair. Continuing her line of argument, she added, "witnessing every day the blood of more martyrs while washing their uniforms and ... willfully choosing to be buried in a land that was the battlefield of her son elevated her to the position of martyrs."

While Parvin sought to develop historical specificity in addressing the places and kinds of actions that ground the spiritual position of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda, her gravestone in the corner of the arcade vaguely depicts her personality and is unattended by most of the visitors.

Parvin hastily greeted the group of women who were sitting around Sayyida Alam al-Hoda's gravestone and approached it. She bended twice over the grave, then laid her right hand over its stone and anointed her face with it. Some of

8 Although both Alam al-Hoda and Jazayeri are renowned local clerical families, Sayyida Batul is addressed as Alam al-Hoda and 'mother of martyr' (*madar-e Shahid Alam al-Hoda*) in vernacular as well as local officialdom.

9 "Convoy of Hazrat-e Zaynab" refers to the parade of mourning mothers of martyrs in the city of Ahwaz during the wartime, led by Sayyida Alam al-Hoda after the martyrdom of her son. It draws parallels with the convoy of Zaynab to and in Damascus after the Battle of Karbala.

the women pilgrims who seemed to know Parvin closed their prayer books and stood in the stance of a collective prayer behind her. They performed a collective veneration (*ziyarat*) with Parvin loudly reciting a section from the prayer book with a resort to Shi'i imams (*tavassul*). Coming to the name of Fatima in her prayer, she paused and asked for the sacred intermediation of the spirit of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda. She finished the recitation by chanting salutations (*salavat*), in which she was announcing the reference and asking the followers to chant their salutes; "three *salavat* to the Prophet Mohammad," "to the martyrs of Islam" and "to our *seddikat al-shahida* Sayyida Alam al-Hoda."

Parvin's reference to Sayyida Alam al-Hoda as a *shahideh* and the collective prayer to honor her provoked the anger of the guards who were standing by the gate scrutinizingly watching over our group.

They surrounded us at the exit of the passage and interrogated us about our identity and our tour. Consequently, a dispute occurred between the guards who had joined in one camp against Parvin, accusing her harshly for innovating unorthodox practices and breaking the regulations of visitation. In their opinion, gathering around Sayyida Alam al-Hoda disrespected other martyrs and was improper in that women's voices were heard by the male pilgrims. They condemned the women's prayer, accusing them of promoting a laywoman in an act of disrespect to the martyrs buried at the cemetery. Parvin remained calm and replied shortly: "God decides upon martyrdom." For Parvin and other venerators of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda, their intimate attachment with her, their memories of washing the blood of the martyrs, and their keen interest in participating behind the area of conflict of the armed land force are decisive qualities of veneration. The confrontation with the guards seemed to be a common incidence for those who used to repeat their rituals during every visit to the site.

Even before being promoted as a countrywide site of pilgrimage through the state-sponsored commemoration project since 2005, Howeyzeh Mosque was a historically significant and well-recognized site of veneration among local women and men. The widespread resemblance of Hussein Alam al-Hoda and his friends' martyrdom to the Battle of Karbala and the state of his body that was retrieved two years after his falling marked their tombs as a site of saintly veneration. Local volunteers and provincial associations who had participated in the construction of the mosque wanted to memorialize Shahid Alam al-Hoda's battalion and celebrate the [temporary] exit of the Iraqi army from Howeyzeh in 1983.

Sayyida Alam al-Hoda was buried there, as Parvin mentioned, upon her will in which she had praised the site of the martyrdom of her son and his group, considering it a 'sacred land.' Her burial occurred after a funeral tour

with a parade of mourners in Qom and Tehran. Since then, her pious women followers, inhabitants of Ahwaz, and widows of martyrs who recalled her support and kindness have congregated around her grave for collective prayer and veneration. Many of them, especially those with a long history of affiliation at the washing station, expected to have a place along their leader, Sayyida Alam al-Hoda, in this world and hereafter. According to Parvin, they wanted a suitable memorial building around the gravestone of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda, befitting of her spiritual status, as well as more space for burying wartime washwomen.

The negligence of the state authorities toward their demands is remarkable in that it points to the differences in these women's imagination of martyrs and the state's policies of commemoration. Here, I attended the uneven veneration of Shahid Hussein Alam al-Hoda and his mother Sayyida Batul Alam al-Hoda in the mosque and cemetery of Howeyzeh Martyrs. Comparing the revering practices, discourses, and rituals around their gravestones, I mapped out their positions within the frame of the static orthodox space of martyrdom. While the martyrdom of Hussein Alam al-Hoda is depicted through heroic and extraordinary characters, narratives of Sayyida Alam al-Hoda and her group of washwomen remain derogatory and unlikely memorialized.

### 3 Affective Consanguinity

The bloodstains are not a matter of the memories of women who washed them from the uniform of the wounded and fallen soldiers, rather they act as tropes of intermediation and material means by which they connect themselves to the martyrs. The women's haptic relation with blood is reinforced by their liminal position between a wife and a widow, a mourning mother and a sacrificing one. In the same vein, their view toward martyrdom is charged by the affective geography they were located in, between the front line and behind the front, literally inside the water border that used to separate the two by means of Karoun River. Here, I attend Parvin's memories as a volunteer washwoman at Shahid Alam al-Hoda Station between 1982 and 1988, to show how the used uniforms turned to objects of connection to the martyrs. I point out how bloodstains were animated through wiping in what women thought to be an act of releasing spirits of martyrs from the damaged uniforms.

Parvin's trips to Ahwaz started shortly after the outbreak of hostilities between Iran and Iraq. As a student living in the southern provinces far from her family and feeling the increasing financial pressure due to the sanctions, she decided to move to Ahwaz as a volunteer. Soon she noticed the significance of the Alam al-Hoda family in religious and revolutionary circles. She met



FIGURES 5.2A–B Washwomen scrubbing uniforms and sheets in the waters of River Karoun at the Shahid Alam al-Huda Support Station in Ahwaz in 1986  
© MOHAMMAD NOROUZI; AND 1988. © ISMAIL DAVARI

Sayyida Alam al-Hoda during a Friday parade in which material aid was collected for the war effort on the frontline. Parvin received Alam al-Hoda's permission to join the military support station that she had just initiated inside an old teahouse for cleaning the used uniforms behind the battlefields. As Parvin explained, the site of Shahid Alam al-Hoda Station used to be a teahouse with an open courtyard facing the Karoun River. Women were following routines of washing and repairing from 8 AM to 4 PM. As the station located close to the battlefields, the atmosphere was charged with a sense of rush, unexpected events, and the soundscape of nearby explosions. The tasks at the station were divided into cleaning, sewing, washing, recollecting, and packing. The largest human sources were invested in the section for washing, which entailed soaking the heavy blankets in the water pools, prewashing the sheets from battlefield hospitals to clean the blood, and handwashing the uniforms. According to Parvin;

tons of blood-soaked uniforms and sheets were washed every day with bare hands ... The three present washing machines were reserved for the pile of sheets of the hospitals. The order of cleaning included first soaking the sheets in tubes or the pools for the blood to wipe out, second moving them to the washing machines. This way, we were sure that the machines and the sheets would get *pāk* ['clean' or 'pure' in accordance with Islamic measures].<sup>10</sup>

10 The Islamic usage of washing machine was prescribed in the Shi'i scholars' books for their followers. In Ayatollah Khomeini's *New Resala*, in the section on "rules governing water," "the purity of clothes washed in the washing machine was determined by the amount and

In the first encounter, most amateur washwomen were afraid of touching bloodstains. To smoothen the situation, they charged their pile of washing with Islamic *dhikr* sessions, litany practice of repeating phrases of prayers. In a sort of “frontier ritual” (Taussig 1993, 69), the collective rhythmic prayer replaced their fear and stress with an enigmatic spiritual feeling of being close to the martyrs. It was only after the rituals that each person would collect some uniforms to wash. The washing, too, had a rhythm and emotional intensity. Behind the row of aluminum tubs, women used to wash each uniform separately with the soap that they had grated earlier. As Parvin recalled:

We had an old blind woman in our group; she used to carry blankets and winter coats of the soldiers on her back to the pool in the middle of the yard. The water of the pool would reach her upper body. After the blankets and coats were soaked and the water would turn reddish of blood, it was her again who would recollect them for a second round of washing.

The intimate involvement of women in blood washing led to a sympathetic sensitivity towards missed soldiers and those whose corpse were not retrieved from the fields. Bloodstains became their tangible sense of what was going on in the battlefields. For Parvin, it was a sacred endeavor and a rare experience which she describes as “embracing the martyrs.” In this sense, the intensive job of blood washing was an affective visceral experience, inducing both tangibility of martyrdom and sacrifice as well as an emotional engagement that occurred by watching the scene, i. e., its “haptic visuality” (Meyer 2020, 122).

The large bloodstains and the bullet holes covered in clots of dry blood could signal definite martyrdom. Parvin felt privileged for being able to conceive martyrdom objectively and authenticated her experience as a sacred practice that has brought her close to martyrs in a certain way. She also described practices of caressing and shedding tears on the bloodstains while cleaning them. Reflecting on her narrative, the bloodstains are ‘communicating vessels’ to the divine, streaming between the martyrs, the washwomen, and the realm of the divine. By ‘communicating vessels,’ I refer to the material fluidity of the blood as well as the subjectivities and “residual affects” (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 15) that linger in the washwomen’s life-conduct until today.

Furthermore, the washwomen’s practice is distinct from the occasions that blood is mechanically washed away, ritually spilled, hidden, or withdrawn. Concomitantly, two affective trajectories that were formerly apart conjoin in

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source of water used in the machine; with detergents having no place in this process of cleaning” (see Karimi 2013, 125).



FIGURE 5.3 Preparing the sheets to wipe out the blood

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the process of wiping the blood out of the uniforms. These are the binary of purity versus impurity on the one hand and the sacrificial blood versus blood that has left the body (considered as impure [*najīs*] in Islam) on the other. In classical anthropology, following Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, blood is presented only through the first binary as a powerful yet impure object, "a matter out of place" (Douglas 1966, 34) that calls for sequestering and purification rituals; for the washwomen bloodstains are the cement of their connection to the martyrs. Their view addresses blood neither at the margins nor outside the social order; rather does it cross the boundaries of the bodily remains as it transcends from 'impurity.' Hence, the imagination of bloodstains rests upon projecting the embodiment of martyrdom, i. e., the 'redemptive' quality of blood.

Blood, through its material property as a fluid object being "dangerous and frightening," as Mary Douglas put it, or "the bodily vehicle of soul," as the Orientalist Louis Massignon (1980) expresses, harbors washwomen's attachment to the unseen martyrs. In the absence of corpses in real terms, washing the blood was a practice of mediumship, inasmuch as it animated the spirit of martyrs to the washers. Moreover, wiping the blood from the clothes invoked a sense of intimate attachment between the women and the martyrs, an intimacy exceeding kinship ties such as those of mothers or wives of the fallen soldiers. Parvin recalled washwomen's dreams of martyrs whose uniforms they

had cleaned. Often the martyrs were saluting them in the dream world; on other occasions, a martyr emerged to the dreamer to ask for caring for and visiting of his family, mothers, children, and wives (Chavoshian 2023, 198–199).

In addition to the intense work with blood, the uniforms of the soldiers demonstrate the washwomen's ways of material engagement with the other world. Uniforms enveloped messages to the washwomen: On the one hand, they anchored women's uncertainty over the fate of their sons and husbands who were fighting in the front. On the other hand, the damaged and blood-stained uniforms could act as a tool of identifying their owners. To demonstrate how (and where), Parvin grabbed her collar on the back of her neck and turned its edge: "Here the soldiers would write their names." She continued:

When the uniform was wiped [clean] from dust and blood, we would start searching for identity markers in the chest pockets and on the collars, seldom on the down edge of the shirt. We were keeping a record of these names for they could be the only witness of a martyr. There were burnt uniforms or those with [...] one sleeve or one leg [missing]. The women who used to sew matching patches knew that [an] armless shirt signals a lost hand. Yet, we would hope that the owner is alive. ... Even close to the battlefields, we would not receive for months any mail nor message from our men who were fighting in the front. Instead, after military operations piles of uniforms and helmets in blood were delivered to the station.

The uniforms invoked the washwomen's affective engagement insofar as they were akin to their own husbands' and sons' uniform at the front. In this regard, the damaged uniforms carried the shape and marks of their last owners, their "trace," to put it with Walter Benjamin (2004, 514). That is to say, the uniforms played a metonymic relation to the soldiers who had been using them. Women would not touch them without Islamic ablution while embracing them as sacred relics.

The bloodstained uniform then passes into immortality with the image of the martyred son or husband. The shape that it had borrowed from the body of the soldier in the moment of falling – for example, missing an arm, as in Parvin's narrative – is worthy of the wounds that shed the blood but gears into it as its 'trace.' As such, the used and identical uniforms derive a unique status for their long-term material relationship with the wearers' physiognomy through the physical and material experiences of the soldiers in the battlefields and during military operations. They thus participate in and figuratively

insinuate the indexical dimension to martyrdom and the existential bond to the martyrs.

The washwomen's tentative relationship to the bloodstained uniforms can be approached through the conception of 'affective consanguinity,' i. e., construing blood relations that transcend ties of kinship and that are cultivated through visual and haptic identification of the subject with persons in the past and present (s)he feels akin to. Through their belief in the eternal presence of the souls of the martyrs, washwomen transcend blood and motherhood over the boundaries of martyrs' embodiment and bind with their souls. Thereby, the notion of 'mothers of the martyrs' as an established category for addressing martyrs' female kin is embellished with the active participation of women in the lives and deaths of the fallen soldiers.

I argue that the women's consanguine connection to the martyrs highlights a process of substitution. This is the gist of Giorgio Agamben's argument in referencing classical Orientalist Louis Massignon's work on 'substitution' (*badaliya*).<sup>11</sup> Agamben suggests that the desire to "exile or extend" oneself in the sentiments of the lost lives creates 'ease' (1993, 24). His notion of 'ease' encompasses a topographic imagination in which the vow for living and compensating in the place of the other breaks with the inevitable individual afterlife in Heaven or Hell by destructing the wall between the two and thus producing an empty space of endless substitutions (Agamben 1993, 24). Taking the insight from Agamben's analysis, I account 'substitution' as a process that sheds light on the washwomen's affective and emotive inhabitation of the martyrs. More precisely, through wiping the bloodstains and touching the uniforms the women yield to the material objects to withdraw their self into the other, creating a new synthesis between wiping and becoming.

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11 Massignon's study was carried out around a pious community in 1930s Cairo who were unified through standing for one another's fate according to Massignon's notion of Christ's hospitality. For an explanation of Massignon's view and an alternative perspective to Agamben's reading of him, see Georg Stauth (2010). His view is significant here in the sense that the martyrdom of Massignon's protagonist Sufi of the tenth century, Mansur al-Hallaj, is interwoven with the notion of substitution. As Stauth (2010, 212–214) discusses, the economies of substitution and martyrdom are entwined, in that both refer to the existential unity with the presence of Truth. According to Stauth, "Massignon characterizes al-Hallaj as the sacred substitution whose soul stands for the Muslim community ... and for the immortal spiritual promotion."



#### 4      **Organs without Body**

According to the beliefs of many Iranians, the war veterans who have been severely injured in the battlefields [*jānbāzan*] die as ‘martyrs,’ and their spirits join their martyred comrades. The Islamic Republic supported this idea in the post-war era by initiating the Martyrs Foundation as a governmental institution that keeps the records of the soldiers and their families and preserves the topography of the lands in which fatalities occurred during the war. The Foundation provides social and economic facilities for the veterans and the families of the martyrs. Nonetheless, people continue to commemorate individuals and groups as martyrs and veterans who are not enlisted in the bureaucratic and administrative system (see, e. g., Talebi 2012). The politico-economic situation after the war has a significant role in this unadjusted view. The re-migration to the lands still filled with landmines and unexploded ordnance resulted in high death tolls among local farmers and shepherds, and the yet-unidentified long-term repercussions of the chemical weapons used by the Iraqi forces left remarkable impacts on the inhabitants and volunteers who were unaware of their exposure to the poisonous chemicals.<sup>12</sup> I draw on Hiva’s experience, one of the chemically infected washwomen of Shahid Alam al-Hoda Station, whose first marks of disease appeared when wiping the blood with naked hands.<sup>13</sup> Yet the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans has so far not admitted claims from any of the washwomen. This section shows how the soldiers’ uniforms correspond to the ways by which the washwomen remap the lands impacted by war through their chemically contaminated bodies and the organic remains of the fallen soldiers. I argue that the entanglement of the two material aspects of bloodstained uniforms, both as relics and as objects of exhaustion and contamination, capture the washwomen’s claim of their own share of martyrdom.

I had met Hiva at the site of the former Alam al-Hoda Station on the coastal road at Kiyan-Pars district of Ahwaz in March 2015. Together with Parvin and

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12      Since the 1988 ceasefire between the two countries, more than tens of thousands of explosions have killed and injured inhabitants of the western and southern borderlands in Iran.

13      Yaser Arab, the documentary filmmaker, writer, and social activist conducted *Naneh Qurbun* in 2012, based on field trips and interviews with a group of local washwomen of Shahid Alam al-Hoda Station. He illustrated various hardships that women undertook through their activities for more than six years at the station while depicting their physical fragility in the aftermath of exhaustive labor at the base and their precarious life without any support from the state institutions. Interesting to this chapter is the ending scene of his documentary, in which women use one of their washed uniforms from a martyr to make a testament.

her friends, we separated from the bus-tour on its way back to stay longer in the warzones. We had an appointment that Parvin had set to meet and walk around the place they used to work for several years. Hiva brought along her bags of medication and her profile from the hospitals where she had received medical treatments as a patient diagnosed with cancer, being under the age of thirty and without any familial genetic background. She noted that she owes her life to Imam Husayn, as surviving the pain of the cancer and several chemotherapies to see her son grow to a young man was a gift of the imam and the martyrs to her. She then told me her life story from the time as a young student of medicine during the war, her volunteer task at the washing station and as a medical craft in Ahwaz, to a veterinary practitioner later. Although her skin cancer had been cured two years after the end of the war, it recurred recently and disabled one of her arms. Hiva had left her home in a northern province by the Caspian Sea to study veterinary medicine in Ahwaz with the reopening of the Universities after the 1979 Revolution. She went back there with a short interval as a volunteer and medical craft behind the frontline.

Hiva used to devote part of her time as a nurse in a hotel that they had turned to a temporary hospital in Ahwaz. Quite often, she had visited washwomen who used to come for treating the blisters on their hands and arms. In the beginning, like many others, they were unaware of the long-standing effects of chemical explosions that would sit in the soldiers' uniforms. Long hours of physical labor and working steadily with washing materials had deformed washwomen's hands and fingers. Both Parvin and Hiva still had black pigments on their hands as well as wounds whose treatment neither their insurance nor social-work organizations covered since the women are not officially recognized as veterans. As Hiva commented their situation sarcastically:

Thirty years ago, they registered us on handwritten papers to go to the front. Now, they do not even recall us. They move their glasses on the nose from behind their desks and ask for forty men to individually attest as witnesses on the war crimes that were committed against us.

Hiva often suffered a weird blackness that covered her hands, wrists, and arms and caused hardship in her movements. Intriguingly, in addressing her disease, she lends a particular agency to it. The signs and marks of cancer reappear as specters of past events. They point to the recurrent specters of the chemical bombs and missile attacks as well as their martyrs. The marks were her "share of martyrdom" as Hiva insisted, by which she could identify herself as a veteran (*jānbāz*) while building an intimate attachment to the realm of transcendence. Hiva continued:

پست‌مستند تحصیلی

نام و نام خانوادگی: **موسی**

تاریخ تولد: **۱۳۳۴** شماره شناسنامه: **۲۳۷۰۴** محل تولد: **پشتک**

اعزامی از: **اهواز**

میزان تحصیلات: **سوم ابتدایی**

مستندت: **۷۶-۷۷**

نام پدر: **علاءالدین**

مجرد:  متاهل:

تاریخ شروع همکاری: **۱۳۶۷**

مستندت: **مسجد امام خمینی**

آدرس دقیق منزل: **حافظ - شش تارین - صوب مسجد حاج عدنان**

تلفن:

انواع تخصص‌ها و ترتیب توضیح دهید (کارهایی که در آن کارائی بیشتری داشته‌اید):

۱- **دندانپوشی**

۲- **دندانپوشی - حفر**

۳- **دندانپوشی**

۴- **دندانپوشی**

نظرسویه (اعزام نیرو) معرفی به بخش:

نام: **زهرا موسوی**

FIGURE 5.4 Identity card for active service on the battlefields issued in 1987 by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

The description reads "Profession: washing blood"

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I was too young to be the mother of a martyr myself, but my pain has made me their close kin. In the Otherworld, these wounds on my hands will open and testify their closeness to the martyrs.

Her point – lacing her physical wounds to the Afterworld – removes the temporal and visual boundary to the transcendence. The material wounds are the beacons for the spirit of the martyrs; i. e., they bridge the distance between the veterans and the martyrs and ground their transcendental intimacy.

Hiva took me on her personal veneration route to the former site of the station. Together with Parvin, they guided me around the former site of their blood-washing which was flattened by loaders and on whose land a huge restaurant was constructed. The two women were at unease with the new construction, yet they could recognize the spots and reimagine them nostalgically as they used to look like at the time when the station still existed.

In their view the site of the former support station is a sacred space. Their walk around the destructed place is to venerate the martyr and to mark their collective memory of a forgotten site of commemoration. Their veneration relates to a pilgrimage ritual in the quest for a transcendental goal (Coleman and Eade 2004) and a sacred travel for family or personal obligation (Hüwelmeier 2019). In view of Hiva and Parvin, their walk was a sacred walk that demarcates a land with bodily remains of martyrs in various but unknown spots. In the same sense, it aligned a form of obligation for them, as do the vivid memories of the burial of organic pieces that they used to discover during washing the uniforms at the ground of the station.

In the absence of a grave or memorial that enshrines the body of a saint or martyr, the remains and corpses of unidentified soldiers become themselves a medium for their veneration. According to both women, some of the damaged uniforms contained remains of organs and bones of the scattered corpses. These pieces were rinsed in accordance with Islamic ablution rites for deceased corpses and prepared by washwomen to be buried in the yard of the station. The two women perform a veneration around the site as if the invisible remains in the earth are actual ‘anonymous martyrs’ (*shahīd-e gomnām*). While the category of ‘anonymous martyrs’ in Iran refers to a set of bodily remains of unidentified soldiers, the two women had their own designations for categorizing them. As Hiva noted, the way of washing and burial of the organic remains was differentiated depending on whether they contained bones or not. Along with this idea, bones that constitute a full corpse receive full ablution before burial, according to Islamic law.<sup>14</sup> Concomitantly, the site

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14 Notably, washwomen performed the Islamic ablution of the soldiers’ remains, while the task is canonically exclusive to be done by men.

in their view should have been preserved for further interrogations of the identity of the buried bones.

In a situation where many state institutions have focused on the disputed borders between Iran and Iraq as war commemoration sites, forging new motives of commemoration as the one the washwomen present sounds convincing. However, since the land already belongs to one of the military organizations and its soil has been deeply shoveled through the construction, it is very unlikely that the remains would be retrieved.

The pilgrimage of Parvin and Hiva makes the invisibilities of the cleaned and reconstructed land visible. It holds other elements for tuning a landscape with spiritual atmosphere than those issued in state's commemorative policies. Hiva's wounds – that she finds integral to the remnants of the martyrs – speak of a new form of material enchantment. This underpins remnants of the war-time whether in form of Hiva's personal physical wounds or in the remnants of the territory, both of which are not assimilated to the statist commemorative processes. It incorporates them into a new material order; thus, they remain and survive. Their constellation interlaces visibility and invisibility and turn it into transcendental intimacy between women and martyrs.

## 5 Conclusion

Are affective forces capable of overthrowing discursive regimes and initiating new modes of living in the world (see Guattari 1995, Stone 2017, 170)? This chapter rethinks the Islamic emic binary between biological blood lineage (*Sayyid*) and the less attended consanguinity through substitution (*baladiyya*) to trace affects and tactility that engender martyrdom. Both genetic and haptic bloodlines can produce and proliferate sacred bodies; one through direct lineage of saints and the other through martyrs' blood. The incessant and intensive processes of care, including washing the bloodstained uniforms while knowing that the former owner must have been killed, repairing, and passing them to the next soldiers, and burying the bodily remains in a proper Islamic ritual, promoted washwomen to 'mothers of martyrs.' Substitution occurs in multiple layers: Through care, washwomen substituted mothers of martyrs; by washing chemically contaminated bloodstains they substituted the martyrs; mothers became mother again for those who wore the cleaned uniforms; and sons were substituted by sons as martyrs.

This highlights the critical significance of blood in Shi'i materiality by studying the configuration of various care practices such as washing, repairing, giving proper burial, and commemorating. It proposes a new understanding of

the figure of blood in forging intergenerational relations and bonds akin to motherhood. Reflecting the notion of consanguinity, this chapter depicts fluid matters as they demarcate warscape and connect the women to the divine. Washwomen's active engagement with wiping the bloodstains turns the damaged uniforms into objects of this sensuous experience and anchors in the fugitive experiences of enchantment as an intimate, immediate, and sensuous encounter between women and physical remains of martyrs.

Without negating the importance of the symbolic realm in the 'Karbala Paradigm,' my attempts in showing the momentary toppling of official discourses relocate affects from the margins to the center of the debate. I demonstrate that blood exceeds the semantic binary between 'sacrificial' versus 'impure,' a binary which reduces blood to a mere symbol. Instead, I argue that blood turns into a material for generating affective kinship between women and martyrs while setting out a new arena of negotiations between the state authorities and the washwomen.

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## Zur-khane

### *A Material Approach to the Embodiment of Twelver Shi'i Male Virtue Ethics*

*Ingvild Flaskerud*

In this chapter, I adopt a material approach to explore how *zur-khane* exercises establish conditions for the formation of Twelver Shi'i male virtues and ethical selves. The *zur-khane* (literally, 'House of Strength') is an ancient form of male athletic activity in Iran which over time developed a distinct material identity.<sup>1</sup> Athletes employ certain tools to carry out a fixed set of exercises, which is guided by the recitation of prayers, praise, blessings, poems, and stories with reference to Islam, and performed in a space displaying specific architectural and decorative properties. The practice can be traced back to the Safavid period (1501–1736), while its popularity increased during the Qajar era (1781–1925) when wrestling competitions drew large numbers of spectators.<sup>2</sup> Designed to build the athletes' physical strength (*varzesh*),<sup>3</sup> the exercises have been categorized as a form of martial arts (Krawietz 2013, 144–166; Luijendijk 2006). In the second half of the twentieth century, the practice attracted the attention of aspiring sportsmen as well as wrestling champions with an international reputation. In recent decades, it has received competition from other sports although there are attempts to revive its popularity (Ridgeon 2007; Rochard 2002).<sup>4</sup> *Zur-khane* is not, however, exclusively an arena for building a strong body. For centuries, it has been associated with the male ethical ideal of

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- 1 *Zur-khane* is also practiced outside of Iran, for example in Turkey and Tajikistan, and is therefore also known as a Turco-Persian wrestling (Rochard 2007).
  - 2 A drawing by Carsten Niebuhr, made when visiting Shiraz in 1765 on an expedition funded by the Danish king, depicts a *zur-khane* location which resembles today's design. In a pit at the center of a vaulted room, athletes perform exercises which today are known as *sang* and *mil*, and in a vault sits a singer, drummer, and lute-player, see Rasmussen (1997, 113). For reviews of the historical *zur-khane*, see Floor (1971); Rochard (2002); and Ridgeon (2007).
  - 3 In Persian *varzesh* is reflected in terms referring to *zur-khane*, such as 'gymnasium,' *varzesh-gah* and *varzesh-khane* (Amarlou 1998, 958) and 'athlete' or 'gymnast,' *varzesh-kar* (Haïm 1984, 935).
  - 4 Today, according to Rochard (2002, 314), the older generation practice the ancient sport and wrestling, whereas younger athletes also practice other disciplines such as bodybuilding, weightlifting, and martial arts. The activity has since the late 1980s been promoted by the Iranian Federation of Ancient Sport and Pahlavani and The Constituent Assembly of the

*javanmardi* (Persian, lit. 'young manliness') which, with deep roots in Iranian culture, conjures qualities of courage, humility, and justice (Floor 1971).

Virtue ethics continue to be cultivated at many *zur-khane*. When I observed exercises at two locations in Shiraz in 2001 and asked athletes to enlighten me on their purpose, they emphasized the formative power of exercises in shaping virtuous ethical selves, to become courageous, generous, honest, just, helpful, humble, and live a life in proximity to God. The aim of virtue ethics is the character of the ethical subject, differently from normative ethics which is concerned with the criteria of what is morally right and wrong. The two approaches to ethics differ also in their method and choice of authority. In the Islamic tradition, normative ethical truths are established from juridical, theological, and philosophical scholastic discourses, which seek to establish normative truths through analytical reasoning and theory (Fakhry 1991; Hourani 2007). Virtue ethics instead relies on peoples' reflection on moral practice, *adab*, and action, *amal*, often stimulated by storytelling and poetry conveyed in Sufi texts and classical Islamic writings (see, Khaleghi-Motlagh 1985). The present discussion contributes to the research on Islamic virtue ethics by expanding the range of sources to include material cultural practices and by exploring virtue ethics as an embodied practice. The study draws on observations I made of three performances of *zur-khane* exercises at two locations in Shiraz in 2001. To obtain rich and reliable first-hand information, participant observation has been supported by photo and video-recordings, combined with informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with athletes. In addition, I draw on information from a booklet available at the localities I visited which mediated information on *zur-khane* to the athletes.<sup>5</sup>

The examination of the formation of virtuous ethical selves through *zur-khane* as a material cultural practice is organized around four approaches: the formation of virtue ethics based on mediated established values and practices and on embodied sensorial experiences, the conditions for moral inquiry and practice created through *zur-khane* genres of material culture, and the performative ethical agency afforded by the athletes' bodies. The analysis seeks to answer the following questions: Which established values and practices are mediated and how? How does ethical formation happen and take

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International Zurkhaneh Sports Federation (IZSF), a non-government connected international to sports association.

5 Kazam Kazamaini 1343 [1964]. *Naqsh Pahlavani va nahzat ayari dar tarikh ejtema'i va hayat siyasi milat Iran* [The Role of Heroism and the Ayari Movement in the Social History and Political Life of the Iranian Nation].

place through corporeal and sensorial experiences? How do *zur-khane* exercises establish conditions for the formation of Twelver Shi'i male virtues ethical selves? What kind of moral relationship is established during exercises and what kind of character is required of the participants? How are the athletes' bodies used as tools to shape ethical virtues selves? How does the body function as an instrument for acting ethically? What can this tell us about contemporary notions of Twelver Shi'i male ethical ideals?

## 1 Ethnography from the *gaud*, the *Zur-khane* Arena

A comparison between the content presented in the booklet on *zur-khane* which circulated among the athletes I spoke with, the three *zur-khane* sessions I observed, as well as observations made by Rochard (2002) and Ridgeon (2007), indicates that *zur-khane* is a mediated cultural practice which tends to follow an established programme with some variation mainly in prayer, poetry, and music. In the booklet, *zur-khane* is mediated as a cultural practice by first offering a short presentation of the exercises' historical development (Kazamaini 1343 [1964]). This is followed by a description of the tools (*adavat*) and how they should be employed in the exercises. The text also gives advise on how athletes should dress and how to position themselves in the room. The system of ranking among the athletes is explained, as well as the manners (*adab*) and ceremonies (*rasum*) of performance. In the last section, the text offers an example of a programme for a *zur-khane* session, including prayers to be performed, thereby emphasizing religious aspects related to *zur-khane* practices. However, to engage with *zur-khane* exercises as a ground for a material approach to the study of virtue ethics, I give in the following a review of a *zur-khane* session as I observed it performed one Friday evening.<sup>6</sup>

I arrived at the *zur-khane* at 19:30.<sup>7</sup> After bending my head to get through the low-rise entrance, I observed in the center of the room the round sunken

6 The athletes met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings. The session I refer to in this chapter took place on Friday, November 9, 2001.

7 I would like to extend my gratitude to members of the two *zur khane* who accepted the presence of me and my assistant, Mariam Kamali, both females. I am also grateful to my assistant's husband, Mujtaba Haqnegahdar, who negotiated our presence in an otherwise male exclusive environment. My identity as a foreign researcher combined with the presence of a male guardian (my assistant's husband) is what prompted the exception. According to Ridgeon (2007, 256), the presence of women is not prohibited at *zur khane* although they are rarely seen as spectators, not to mention as performers. In my experience, women's access

arena, the *gaud*, where the athletes would perform the exercises. Next to the door, on a high arched bench, *sakui*, sat the reciter and percussionist, *murshid* (Arabic 'guide' or 'teacher'). From this elevated position he had a good view of the *gaud*, which was necessary to guide the athletes by his drum-playing and recitation of prayers, poems, and stories. To his disposal he had a goblet drum called *zarb* or *tumbak*, made of pottery and leather, in addition to bells, *zang*, of different sizes. The walls were decorated by images representing, mainly, Imam Ali, local athletes, and famous wrestling champions. Around the *gaud*, benches later to be occupied by a male-only audience including novices, old members, and friends.<sup>8</sup>

Soon boys and men arrived and commenced with warm-up exercises. On the floor in one of the vaults surrounding the *gaud*, a man lay on his back. Holding a wooden board, *sang*, in each hand, he lifted them slowly vertically one by one while swaying his body from one side to the other, in an exercise called *sang gereftan ghaltan*, 'rolling sang work-out.' After some repetitions, the space and boards were passed to other athletes waiting their turn. A fellow athlete counted the movements by reciting a prayer in which one line corresponds to one repetition. Simultaneously in the *gaud*, some boys around eight to twelve years old practiced slow whirling, *pa-zadan*. Two men threw a wooden cone, *mil*, in the air and grabbed it by the hand. Someone burned incense and the scent soon blended with the smell of sweat.

The *murshid* started playing the drum at 19:40. Leading the collective performance of prayers and praise, he sent a blessing, *salavat*, to Abu al-Fazl Abbas (d. 680), son of Imam Ali, followed by a poem praising Imam Ali. The nineteen athletes present ran in a circle while boys about the age of ten to thirteen practiced whirling in their middle. While running, the athletes responded to every line in the poem praising Ali by calling out 'Ali dear' (*Ali-jan*). More men arrived. After wrapping the characteristic piece of cloth called *long* around the waist (made from cotton in the pattern of stripes in red, white, and black), they

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is observed differently at different locations. When in 2012 I visited a *zur khane* in Esfahan, there were several women among the spectators. I was told they were relatives of the performing athletes. A motivation for not permitting female spectators – it seems to me – is to honour the code of modesty which seeks to prevent men and women from looking at the uncovered bodies of members of the opposite sex. During my visits to *zur khane* locations in Shiraz in 2001, my assistant and I would wear black, long, and loose coats (*manteaux*), a black hood (*maqna*) and a black *chador*. The athletes would wear shirts and pants. The exclusion of women from public sporting events was common politics in Iran in the early 2000s, when this field research was undertaken. Women bypassed the ban of on women's attendance at football stadiums by cross-dressing (Afary 2009, 333.)

8 The novice, *nucheh*, *mubtadeh*, was introduced to exercises and manners by first sitting and watching.



FIGURE 6.1 The reciter and percussionist (*murshid*) sits on an elevated, arched bench known as the *sakui*. He typically has a goblet drum called *zarb* or *tumbak*, and bells (*zang*) of different sizes. The entrance door to their right is low, forcing people to bow when entering  
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joined the group in the *gaud*. The *murshid* declared to be a follower of Ali's governance, *velayat*, and continued to praise Imam Ali and Fatima, Ali's wife and daughter of Prophet Muhammad. The athletes replied 'Ali, Ali, Ali dear.' The *murshid* then brought the exercise to a halt by ringing the bell.

The athletes positioned themselves in a circle facing the center of the *gaud*. A senior athlete (*miyandar*) placed himself in the center from where he guided

the movements. Each athlete placed a wooden board, *takhte*, in front of him on the floor. Two men walked around inviting athletes to perform push-up exercises, *takhte shenu*.<sup>9</sup> The session opened by a collective calling on benedictions, *salavat*, to benefit them all, 'To be cured of all ills, say *salavat*, and to *mawla* Ali.' The *murshid* greeted a late comer. The athletes placed their hands on either end of the 75 cm-long wooden board, with body and legs stretched out. Because of the cramped space, two men placed themselves in the center of the circle. The *murshid* rang the bell and commenced drumming. After pronouncing yet another blessing for Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali, the athletes repeated two push-ups followed by short pauses, in which they alternated between halting the body on stretched arms and resting on the board. During pauses, the *murshid* declared: 'Damnation to all the enemies of *mawla* Ali. Say *salavat*, to the people who come here to make their body and their moral virtues healthy.' The athletes stretched arms and shoulders while joining in a collective repetition of the exclamation '*mawla, mawla* Ali' led by the *murshid*. This was followed by the *murshid's* recitation of a poem by Hafez (d. 1390).

During a second session using *takhte shenu*, the athletes lowered themselves on the board and turned the head toward the armpit. The *murshid* recited a passage from the national epos *Shah-nameh* ('Book of Kings'). To give the *murshid* a break, the athletes called out 'Ali, Ali, Ali dear' after which the *murshid* continued playing the drum and reciting from the *Shah-nameh* while the athletes did push-ups. After the *murshid* recited poems praising Ali, the exercise concluded with a call from the bell. The athletes walked back and forth to relax their bodies while performing stretches. Someone called for the blessing of one of the athletes' health and the soul of his deceased father. The *murshid* recited poems by Sa'di (d. 1291/92), praised Ali, and continued with a poem by Hafez.

The athletes then brought out heavy wooden boards, *sang*, while there was some small talk among them. The *murshid* recited Hafez, after which an athlete requested blessings for the *murshid's* and athletes' health, to which everyone joined in. The boards were then exchanged with wooden cones, *mil*. The athletes held one *mil* upright in each hand. While staying in this position, a man entered the circle to swing a set of smaller cones. These were soon exchanged with three and then five small cones which he juggled in a playful

9 Hands are placed on a wooden plank, *takht*, and exercises are divided into four sets, combining stretching, strengthening, and raising and turning the body: *Shenu kursi*, 'chair exercise,' *shenu doshallaqeh*, 'exercise with two full strengths,' *shenu pich*, 'turning exercise,' and *shenu dast*, 'exercise with hand and foot in front of each other' (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 9).



FIGURE 6.2 Athletes position themselves in the *gaud* to perform push-up exercises known as the *takhte shenu*

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manner (*mil bazi*). While the cones were in the air, he whirled around accompanied by the *murshid's* drum playing. The *murshid* recited poems praising Ali while the athletes took a step into the center of the *gaud* and repeatedly raised the cone slowly into an up-right position, up over the shoulder, and back into an up-right position (*gorgeh*). Meanwhile, the *murshid* sang and the athletes responded. Afterwards, they said *salavat*, and with a hand gesture invited each other to be the first to put the mills back in its storage.

A young man walked along the circle of athletes asking each for permission (*rukhsat*) to perform the whirling (*churkh*). While whirling, the others formed a shielding fence to catch him if he lost balance. Several athletes followed his example. Someone sent a supplication, *du'ā'*, for Prophet Muhammad, Ahl al-Bayt, the prophets, teachers, students, family, and 'good men in the world,' as well as to the 'encouraging audience' present. The *murshid* added, "He sent prayers for everyone except himself and his family. Send blessings, *salavat*, to him and his family!" The athletes joined in sending blessings and the whirling continued, starting with the boys, and followed by the athletes according to their age group. Some whirled on their own initiative, others only upon invitation.





FIGURE 6.3 The *murshid* recites poems praising Ali while the athletes step into the center of the *gaud*

They repeatedly raise the wooden cones, *mil*, slowly into an up-right position, up over the shoulder, and back into an up-right position (*gorgeh*)

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At 21:15 many athletes left. The remaining men returned to juggling the cones for a while. One athlete picked up the bow, *kabada*. Maneuvering it back and forth above his head he walked around in the *gaud*.

Usually, I was told, they continued until 22:30 but tonight they left at 21.30. Everyone hurried home to watch the FIFA World Cup play-off match between Ireland and Iran.<sup>10</sup> But before leaving, the athletes stood in a circle facing the *qibla*. They invited each other to perform a last supplication (*dua akhru*). While a senior athlete asked God's blessing for those present, their families, all honest people, and the audience that came to support them, the athletes perform *sajdeh*, the act of prostration to God, by bending over to touch floor with one

<sup>10</sup> The match was played in Dublin, Ireland. Ireland won 2:0 but, five days later, on November 15, Iran beat Ireland 1:0 at the Azad stadium in Tehran. In Shiraz, thousands took to their cars, often as family groups, driving around town honking their horns, singing, and celebrating.



FIGURE 6.4 An athlete performs whirling (*churkh*) while the others form a shielding fence to catch him if he loses balance

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hand, put the hand to the forehead and then kissed the hand. As they took leave, they made a short stop by the *murshid* to leave money for a collect. A couple of young novices stayed behind to wrestle, *kushte*, in a playful manner.<sup>11</sup>

11 In wrestling it is distinguished between a 'friendly' (*dustaneh*) form which is performed during workouts and 'hostile' (*khasmaneh*) typical of formally announced match between two wrestlers. See, Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 28.



FIGURE 6.5 An athlete maneuvering the bow (*kabada*) back and forth above his head while walking around in the *gaud*

The metal bow had the string exchanged with metal rings forming a chain (*zanjir*) to make it heavier than a bow

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## 2 A Material Approach to the Study of Zur-khane Ethics

In the following, I outline a material approach for examining how *zur-khane* exercises establish conditions for the formation of Twelver Shi'i male virtues ethical selves. The academic study of material culture developed in the 1980s and 1990s, inspired by a 'cultural turn' in the social sciences and humanities. The new field, known as 'Cultural Studies' addressed the constitutive significance of culture to meaning-making processes, social relations, and identity. This discursive approach can be found also in the study of material culture, for example in how religious belief is expressed and mediated in objects and practices (see, Arweck and Keenan 2006). Critics have argued that such symbolic and representative approaches proceed from the assumption that material products convey already established ideas, and that people are seen as passive recipients of pre-defined values and moral norms.<sup>12</sup> A non-discursive alternative is suggested in a materialist phenomenology which emphasizes experience and embodiment (see, Vásquez 2011). Following this approach, religious ideas and faith are held to take place or happen through human beings' corporeal and sensorial experiences with the material. Zur-khane is a mediated practice. The ethnographic review presented earlier demonstrates that athletes were familiar with the customs mediated in the booklet, and that this knowledge was conveyed also through exercise sessions. It is therefore relevant to investigate which established ethical values are expressed and represented in the objects and practices with which the athletes engage. However, if we are to take seriously the athletes' perceptions of *zur-khane* exercises as having a formative impact in shaping ethical selves, to become courageous, generous, honest, just, helpful, humble, and live a life in proximity to God, it is appropriate to examine also how ethical formation happens and take place through corporeal and sensorial experiences.

Embedded in an epistemological discussion of the power of material culture to impact on athletes' ethical formation is the ontological question of the agentive qualities of material culture. Michael Kirchoff (2009) has broadly identified two ontological positions on the agentive qualities of material culture. Following one position, agency is held to turn partly on the properties of material culture and partly on the embodied nature of human beings. The lived body of human beings is, however, seen as making a special contribution

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12 The critique of symbolic and representative approaches is to some extent appropriate. However, attention to the mediation of religious ideas through material culture may also consider how mediated signs are interpreted from the receivers' point of view, to explore their polysemic potential in everyday religiosity (Flaskerud 2010).

to the agentive dimension of material cultural entities and technologies, and agency is thus perceived as relational but asymmetrical (Kirchhoff 2009, 206). The other position finds agency to be relational and symmetrical. Agency is held to arise in the interaction between humans and nonhumans, based on a functional equivalence between human beings and material entities (Kirchhoff 2009, 211).<sup>13</sup> During *zur-khane* exercises athletes engaged in multiple forms of subject-object relations. They performed various bodily movements and handled many types of tools while listening to and reciting prayers, praise, blessings, poems, and stories. In interaction with each other they observed established manners and ceremony, while the spatial arrangements in *zur-khane* locations structured their behaviour. To examine this complex situation of agentive subject-object relations, I organize *zur-khane* activities into four main genres or categories depending on form and technique: corporeal exercises with tools, space-related behavioral patterns, text recitation, and image display.

The analysis of agentive subject-object relations in each of the four genres paves the ground for examining how each genre creates different experiential conditions for the cultivations of ethical selves. To further approach this question, I find it useful to work with Gerald McKenny's conceptualization of how genre performs (2005). Genre is a central issue when discussing ethics, McKenny contends, because it is crucial to know how we are being formed by genres (McKenny 2005, 399). Instead of focusing on the classification of cultural endeavors according to form, technique, and content, he suggests one can examine what they perform, that is "the conditions of moral inquiry and practice they establish or project" (McKenny 2005, 398). The example he offers is from Plato's *Gorgias*, in which Socrates requests that the inquiry in which he and Gorgias are involved proceed in the form of dialogue. As a genre, dialogue establishes a distinct kind of moral relationship and requires a certain kind of character of the participants, which differ from those established by speech. In line with McKenny's conceptualization of genre, combined with Scholz, Stille, and Weinrich suggestion to study how the genres combine (2018, 5), I examine how corporeal exercises with tools, space-related behavioral patterns, text recitation, and image display, separately and combined, provide experiential conditions for moral inquiry and practice.

The present study on *zur-khane* ethics does not pursue the athletes' ethical behaviour in their everyday social life. It does, however, aspire to say something

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13 A third position can be found in radical post-humanist approaches associated with New Materialism, emerging in the twenty-first century. Critical to the anthropological inclination dominating Material Culture Studies, attention is turned to the materiality and matters of natural systems and to nonhuman processes in the nonhuman world.

about how *zur-khane* contributes to shaping the athletes' potential for virtues ethical agency, to turn them into social ethical subjects. To discuss such performative aspects, I am inspired by Hallensleben's reflections on the body as performative subjects. He suggests that the body can be used as a tool, while at the same time being the tool that "allows living, acting, interacting, creating life and producing spaces, ..." (Hallensleben 2010, 15). The current study of the formation of virtuous ethical selves through *zur-khane* as a material cultural practice is thus organized around four analytical approaches, namely, the formation of virtue ethics based on mediated established values and practices and on embodied sensorial experiences, the conditions for moral inquiry and practice created through *zur-khane* genres of material culture, and the performative ethical agency afforded by the athletes' bodies.

### 3 The Cultivation of Twelver Shi'i Male Ethics through Multiple Genres of Material Culture

Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the ethical subject rather than on rules for right conduct, and it falls upon the human subject to become sensitive to how to act in different circumstances and situations. In this section, I analyze the cultivation of ethical selves through *zur-khane* as a material cultural practice. The examination is organized according to the four identified genres, that is, corporeal exercises with tools, space-related behavioral patterns, text recitation, and image display. The study explores the various material and sensorial components involved in *zur-khane* exercises, such as tools, movements, recitation, space, and images. The analysis addresses the following questions: Which established values and practices are mediated and how? How does ethical formation happen and take place through corporeal and sensorial experiences? How do *zur-khane* exercises establish conditions for the formation of Twelver Shi'i male virtues ethical selves? What kind of moral relationship is established during *zur-khane* exercises and what kind of character is required of the participants? How are the athletes' bodies used as tools to shape ethical virtues selves?

### 4 Corporeal Exercises with Tools

As a historical mediated practice, *zur-khane* exercises are intended to build physical strength, balance, and coordination. The booklet available at the *zur-khane* I visited explained that *sang*, performed with two wooden boards or "shields," strengthens arms and improves balance. Exercises with the wooden

cone, *mil*, strengthens arms and push-up exercises, *takht-e shenu*, builds the chest. The metal bow, *kabada*, effects on the shoulders, while whirling, *churkh*, promotes physical stability, coordination, and balance (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 8). The booklet also linked *zur-khane* corporal activities to the development of the athletes' mental faculty. For example, whirling, *churkh*, was said to promote physical stability, coordination, and balance, as well as its mental complements. The text thus conveyed the idea that corporeal exercises shaped awareness and attention in the athlete. It did not, however, connect such mental capacities directly to ethics.

Nonetheless, several athletes reported that physical exercises improved their ethical faculty and that in performing the exercises they developed skills necessary for ethical behaviour in society. In explaining how this process happened, one athlete conveyed that both whirling, *churkh*, and catching cones, *mil*, taught athletes to be attentive and precise. In the past, when people were sent as messengers, whirling exercises made the couriers quick, alert, and able to keep their balance on a horse. Today, being quick and alert instead promoted ethical attention and awareness of "what one shall do in society."<sup>14</sup> Such emphasize on the cultivation of ethical selves through certain physical exercises was underlined also by other athletes. Whirling in the manner of *churkh*, I was told, inspired a certain character, one which sought to improve society by "going out in society and take the hand of the weak and helping them." In contrast, the whirling known as *sama-zan*, practiced by some Sufi groups, was described as making people "go out of this world" or "go out of themselves," to focus on spiritual rather than social issues.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, another athlete underlined the conditions established by corporal exercises to establish an ethical character in the athletes. He explained that the exercises prepared the body for "being pure," meaning to "have wisdom, be strong in judgment, and wise in a good way." When I asked him to elaborate, he said one should "not use strength to harm anyone but to help."<sup>16</sup>

Conveyed in the conversations with athletes is the idea that ethical formation can take place through corporal and sensorial experiences. Sheets-Johnstone has tied thinking to movement. To think in movement, she contends, it is to think in dynamic terms – in terms of speed, postural orientation, range of

14 Author's interview with senior athlete (private home in Shiraz, Iran, December 2, 2001).

15 *Sama-zan* is performed by the Mevlevi and Rifa'i Ma'ruf Sufi orders. Contrary to the opinions voiced by my interlocutors, Ridgeon refers to athletes claiming *churkh* derives from *sama-zan* (2007, 248), thus linking *zur-khane* and *khane-gah*. Technically, however, the two practices differ. *Churkh* requires individual athletes to circulate in the *gaud*, while in *sama-zan* (individuals move along the central line of the body in group formations, according to Luijendijk 2006, 5).

16 Author's interview (Shiraz, Iran, November 28, 2001).

movements, force, direction, and so on (Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 55). Observing the tools being used by athletes during exercises, I noticed that the tools' materiality, such as shape and weight, and the body movements designed for handling the tools combined in establishing these effects in the athletes' bodies. For example, the metal bow had the string exchanged with metal rings forming a chain, *zanjir*, to make it heavier than a bow, and the athletes maneuvered the object back and forth above the head to strengthen arms, shoulders and back. Moreover, to enhance the effect on the individual athlete, exercises were organized into various modes of implementation, distinguished by speed, steps, and formations, depending on the athlete's strength. The weight of the cones, for example, spanned from three to thirty kilograms, and in handling the cones, the athletes could choose their preferred method from a fixed set of exercises, each representing different degrees of difficulty. The booklet named these exercises as: movement (*mil harkat*), hammering movement (*harkat chakushi*), and juggling (*mil bazi/ shiryankari*) (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 7).

The cultivation of corporal stability, coordination, balance, speed, and force through *zur-khane* exercises represent, I suggest, dynamic kinetical possibilities for "intelligence in action" which is a form of instinctive thinking (see, Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 55). This possibility for instinctive thinking seems to be the result of a relational and symmetrical subject-object agentive relationship between tools (weight and shape), movement patterns (speed and configuration), and the athletes' physical body qualities, based on functional equivalence between these three material entities. As a genre, exercises with tools establish conditions for the formation of virtues ethical selves by awakened the body kinesthetically and thereby creating conditions for developing proactive and skilled virtues bodies. The kind of moral relationship established during exercises is characterized by athletes holding an agentive responsibility towards imagined needing subjects in society, a position which requires an attentive, wise, and proactive character. The body is thus a site though which virtuous corporality is shaped in a symmetrical subject-object agentive relationship. However, when becoming a tool for the ethical subject, the body is situated in an asymmetrical subject-object relationship, in which it is used to empower the subject with sharpened ethical sensibilities to act as ethical social beings in everyday social life.

## 5 Spatial Organization

The architectural space of the *zur-khane* was built to establish a moral relationship with the sacred and to inspire an embodied, sensational awareness of interpersonal ethical mindfulness. Upon entering, visitors bowed the head



to pass through a low entrance door, a bodily movement which athletes said made them feel humble. A similar capacity of architectural structure to shape the athletes' behaviour was conveyed in the manner they spoke of the circular shaped arena, *gaud*. The circular structure invited athletes not to form rows according to rank, but to stand next to each other. In these manners, the architectural structure served to achieve its intended purpose, which was to create a respectful disposition in the athletes, and to generate ideas appreciating social equality. The intended ideas seemed to become embodied through experience, as the athletes reported that standing in a circle gave them a feeling of being of equal value, that "nobody is better than anyone else."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, during exercises, the leader of champions, the *pahlavan*, together with senior athletes, guided less experienced athletes in observing social manners, *adab*, and ceremony, *rasum*, which structured fresh and experienced athletes in a hierarchical power relation. These manners and ceremony are described in the booklet (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 9). During exercises, the power relations were embodied when, for example, young athletes respectfully asked seniors' permission, *rukhsat*, to perform solo whirling, when the seniors politely accepted the requests, and when the young men performing whirling recognized each other with courtesy (*ta'arufani*).

A similar contrast between notions of equality and hierarchical relations was mediated and experienced through the mode of dressing. Most athletes wore a piece of fabric, *long*, around the waistline, which created a feeling of equality and fraternity between them.<sup>18</sup> Rank was, however, displayed in the manner of wrapping the fabric and how many pieces of cloth they could use (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 28). The observance of hierarchical relations in social behaviour and dress suggests there being a conflict between fraternity and equality versus rank and humility. Or perhaps there is no division. A *zur-khane* session, Rochard suggests (2002, 318), reminds those present of their social duties, which include generosity, mutual help, courage, loyalty, keeping one's word, and respect for elders. I agree with this observation and contend that such complex constellations of ethical values and qualities require a balance to be upheld between practicing fraternity and hierarchy. The important thing is that every athlete learns and practice correct manners according to his rank. This was achieved by balancing the young athletes' respect for rank and seniority with the elders' acceptance of courtesy by granting younger athletes their requests.

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17 Author's interview (Shiraz, Iran, November 9, 2001).

18 Author's interview (Shiraz, Iran, November 28, 2001).



FIGURE 6.6 A senior athlete performs manners of courtesy (*ta'arufani*), asking his senior for permission to perform whirling

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In addition to shaping individual and collective social ethics, *zur-khane* was a space for shaping spiritual ethics. The *gaud* was perceived to be holy and before arriving, the athletes performed ablution (*ghusul*) to ritually purify themselves before entering.<sup>19</sup> In the ethnographic review I described how the athletes during the performance of the last supplication (*dua akhru*), the athletes performed *sajdeh*, the act of prostration to God, by bending over to touch floor with one hand, put the hand to the forehead and then kissed the hand. Touching the floor of the holy *gaud* was a gesture performed to honour and thank God. The act makes a symbolical reference to the Islamic creation myth narrating that humans are made from clay and will return to clay and expresses a prayer of thanks to God. Bringing the hand to the forehead and then kissing it was performed to express that prayers and thanks come from the heart. Touching the floor of the *gaud* thus resembles the act performed

19 See also Ridgeon (2007, 244). I was at first unaware of the *gaud*'s holy status and walked across the floor. When I apologized, I was excused in my capacity of being a researcher.

during prostration involving placing the forehead on a piece of clay called *mohr* (Persian) or *turba* (Arabic).

Sometimes, I was told, the *gaud* also functions as a holy ground to which people from outside sought spiritual help. The athletes' sweat, produced while calling Imam Ali in prayers and poems, was believed to possess curative power. Sick people were therefore brought to the *gaud* and rubbed with sweat from the athletes' waist drape (*long*) to be cured.<sup>20</sup> Such belief in the curative power of body fluid, such as sweat or blood, produced while celebration or commemoration of holy personage is not uncommon among Shi'is.<sup>21</sup> This is another example of how the genres interact during exercises to produce an ethical behaviour, to help people in need, which is imbued with spirituality. In the process of becoming stained with the athletes' sweat, the dress is transformed into an object of curative power. This power is released when people get in touch with it. The athletes' creation of a spiritual space in the *zur-khane* thus had positive consequences for people's well-being.

Like all social practice, Lefebvre contends, spatial practice is lived directly, before it is conceptualized (Lefebvre 2012, 34). To the athletes, the material spatial organization of *zur-khane* conveyed established ideas regarding spiritual and social ethics. These ideas were mediated in the architectural structure which was held to represent ethical ideas about humility and respect, and fraternity and equality. As such, the space appeared as a "representational space," which is space representing complex symbolisms (Lefebvre 2012, 33). However, the material spatial organization also afforded athletes opportunities for shaping ethical behaviour through personal experience as well as relational connections, that is, through interaction with the sacred, as it was imagined, and in social interaction with each other. The shaping of ethical behaviour was thus the result of an asymmetric subject-object agentic relationship between the affordance created by architectural structure and the social behaviour adopted by the athletes. As a genre, the space, in its architectural structure and social configuration, established conditions for developing ethical behaviour and skills through the social observance of manners and ceremony. The kind of moral relationships established during exercises were both spiritual

20 Author's interview with senior athlete (private home in Shiraz, Iran, December 2, 2001).

21 Studies from nineteenth century Iraq demonstrate how female onlookers sometimes would seek out a piece of the blood-stained garment of male self-flagellants, considering it a sort of blessing, see Nakash (2004, 149–150). In contemporary Hyderabad, unmarried women take daubs of blood from the flagellating men's bodies and smear it on their right palms. The blood is perceived to be charged with the power of Qasim (Imam Husayn's young nephew) and to transmit the saint's intercession in a marriage alliance, see Ruffle (2011, 13–14).

and social. These relationships were grounded in virtues upholding humbleness and respect, to be attributed to the sacred as well as fellow beings, and in virtues advocating fraternity and equality, to be attributed to fellow human beings. When I in the following discuss textual and visual genres, we can begin to see how the genres connect to project conditions of moral inquiry and practice and to establish social and spiritual ethics.

## 6 Text Recitation

The booklet on *zur-khane* manners stated that the *murshid's* recitation should stick to 'truth singing,' *haqq khavani*. This could be achieved by praising God and singing suitable poems which were 'wise,' *hekmate-amiz*, and offered 'moral advice,' *pand*. For this reason, one should "mention God, read *bismillah*, and recite poetry which point back to God" (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 30). The booklet offered examples of prayers and poems to recite to achieve these objectives, but the *murshids* with whom I spoke kept a personal collection of texts.<sup>22</sup>

During *zur-khane* exercises, *murshid* performed praise, blessings, prayer, poems, and stories which formed a continuous flow accompanying the athletes' exercises. The praise, prayers, and poems spoke of God and revered Muslim holy figures. The main recipients of praise were the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali, Imam Reza, and Fatima, with Imam Ali being the most frequently acclaimed. Praise, Robert Howard (2005, 172–188) argues, is a genre which permits speakers to give testimony to their faith. Many recited texts at the *zur-khane* combined praise with the proclamation of faith: "God wrote on the Gate of Paradise that everyone who loves Ali would be among those living in Paradise. For us there is no other assurance than Ali." The idea that God considers believers' attitude to Ali to have vital impact on the possibility for eternal deliverance, I argue, was here mediated as a common truth. The pronoun 'us' appearing in the following line, instead gave the impression that the *murshid* declared faith in Ali on behalf of everyone present. Such proclamations of faith were also a recurring theme in the poems the *murshid* recited. This was often conveyed in a mixture of Sufi and Shi'i symbolism expressed in a metaphorical language.<sup>23</sup>

22 There were, for examples, several versions for counting the *sang*, while the sections referred to from *Shah-nameh* varied.

23 Sufism and Shi'ism have had a complex inter-relationship since the twelfth century (Momen 1985, 208–219). Ali is central to Sufism because the chains of authority (*silsila*)

In the following, I present some examples of poetry recited during the *zur-khane* session I discuss in this chapter. I have tried to identify some common topical themes although the text is not always easy to comprehend, and the meaning is open to interpretation. Common themes were love, devotion and loyalty to Ali:

It is impossible to stop looking at the face of my beloved, Ali dear  
 Even if my life leaves my body from its home in my heart,  
 my love for Ali shall not leave me, Ali dear  
 We cannot call every person a caliph,  
 and every *Haydari* cannot be a cupbearer (*Saqi*) of *Kawthar*, Ali dear  
 Friends, vow to God that the face of God is the face of Imam Ali,  
 because the mihrab of prayer was between his eyebrows, Ali dear

Love, looking at the beloved's face, and the cupbearer, are common metaphors in Sufi poetry although their connotations are debated among Sufis. While the beloved in Sufi poetry is typically the Divine, the poem cited above mediated the idea of Ali being worthy of eternal love, which is more in line with Twelver mysticism. The expression 'my beloved,' permitted the expression of individual devotional feelings toward Ali, while the subsequent use of the first-person plural, 'we,' in speaking about Ali's uniqueness, carried the double meaning of mediating a collectively known truth as well as conveying personal feelings. Shi'i sentiments were obvious in the reference to 'Haydar.' Meaning 'lion,' it suggests strength and Ali is often praised as the 'Lion of God.' The cupbearer is instead a conventional Sufi metaphor for the spiritual guide, *shaykh* or *pir*. However, placing Ali as the 'cupbearer of *Kawthar*,' the poem mediated a Shi'i interpretation of *Surat al-Kawthar*: "We have given thee (Muhammad) the *Kawthar* (abundance). In return for the blessings and grace bestowed upon him, he should pray and offer sacrifice" (The Holy Quran 1988, 108, 1–3). In a comment presented in an edited volume of the Quran (The Holy Quran 1988, 1914) S.V. Mir Ahmad Ali has suggested it is not Muhammad who is in need of guidance but the common man, and guidance will be mediated through Ali and Fatimah. The poem, I argue, related this idea metaphorically. The final line, referring to Ali's assassination while praying in the mosque in Kufa, point to Ali's proximity to God, which legitimizes his status as mediator.

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to teach the Sufi path goes back to Ali (Momen 1985, 209). Sufism has, however, been a competitor to Shi'ism in Iran and periodically persecuted since the reign of Shah Abbas (r. 1588–1629). Instead, metaphysical speculation and experience has been conceptualized as '*irfan*, 'gnosis,' and gained popularity much due the writing by Mulla Sadr (d. 1640).

While some poems spoke of Ali's proximity to God, others focused on the believer's longing for being near Ali. Steeped in Sufi and Shi'i symbolism, but in line with Twelver Shia appropriations of Sufi ideas, the following poem was performed as a first-person narrative, foregrounding personal feeling, commitments, and needs.

I am in a half drunken state of you *mawla*, *mawla* Ali  
 Although I neglect everything else, I am your lover  
 I am your sincere servant in front of the door of your house  
 I am searching for you, *mawla*, *mawla* Ali  
 Athletes: *mawla* Ali, *mawla* Ali

'Mawla,' is an Arabic term which means 'to be close to,' 'to be friend with,' and 'to have power over.' When referring to Ali in Sufi poetry, the term *mawla* places him as someone close to God. Drunkenness is another Sufi metaphor and what characterizes the drunken state of mind is to be spiritually oblivious of the world (Mojaddedi 2003, 1–13). In this poem, everything was said to be neglected but Ali, and the state of drunkenness to evolve from the joy of experiencing spiritual nearness with him. "Being a servant in front of the door" could refer to the narrator's preparedness to serve Ali but when combined with 'searching' it could also mean being on a quest for Ali. In fact, some supplications recited at the *zur-khane* presented the appeal from an uncertain and repenting believer asking Ali for help and guidance in faith and character: "I am sinful, and I am weak. Please help me, I love you Ali and I want to be like you Ali. You have said you are the helper of people, then please help me." Among the poems recited by the *murshid* were also poems by the famous Shirazi Sufi poets Saadi (d. 1291/92) and Hafez (d. 1390). They were, however, not easily recognizable as such, which is not uncommon (Wickens 1990, 573–574). From what I could identify, Saadi's poems recited at the *zur-khane* spoke of losing and finding God while Hafez's tended to orient towards the mystical form of love, consummated by the love for God and spiritual separation and closeness to Him. Rather than giving specific advice in social ethics and right moral conduct, the content of praise, prayer, and poems thus often mediated a spiritual ethics of living 'a good life' or a life worth living; that is to say, a life in proximity to God, through Ali. I did not inquire about the athletes' knowledge of classical Sufi poetry, but the genre was well known in the general public. Poetry, I observed was part of the public-school curriculum at the time. Reading and listening to poetry at home or at social gatherings is also common (Haeri 2021).

In performing or listening to praise, prayer, and poems, the athlete could enter a reciprocal relationship, binding himself to God and Ali. By implication,

spiritual experiences, such as feeling near and connected with the divine, could take place through the performing and listening to praise, prayer, and poems. Such spiritual experience does not seem to be disconnected from the material world. Often, the texts' narrators expressed requests for help and guidance from Ali, as well as being bestowed with the capacity to imitate his character, thus situating social ethics within the frames of spiritual ethics. From a Shi'i perspective, there is a lot of 'truth saying' in this, which can 'point back to God.'

The passage recited from *Shah-nameh* ('Book of Kings') by Abu al-Qassim Ferdowsi Tusi (c.940–1020), was instead presented in a descriptive language, offering a plot with an identifiable conflict, protagonist, and antagonist. In the Persianate world, the *Shah-nameh* is an important source of ethical inspiration. In a passage read at one *zur-khane* session, the protagonist is Ferdowsi who criticizes the antagonist, Sultan Mahmud (r. 999–1030) of the Ghaznavid empire, for not paying him the promised amount of money after completing the Sultan's chronicle.<sup>24</sup> While reflecting on the ideals of a ruler's good ethics, Ferdowsi also identifies his own point of view: "A king, who is too fond of money is disqualified [to be a king], and wise people will think little of him." Anticipating how the Sultan will react to his criticism, he declares: "You will say I am not following the religion and bestow me with bad titles. But [...] I love Prophet Muhammad and Ali. There is nobody smaller than the one who harbours hatred for Ali in his heart." Differently from other texts recited at the *zur-khane*, the narrative genre of *Shah-nameh* made it possible to present a clear moral issue in which different social traits, like honesty and greed, competed. Moreover, the listener was explicitly guided, in the speech of Ferdowsi, in the direction of a social ethics which cultivated honesty and denounced greed. Nevertheless, social ethics was explicitly connected to a spiritual ethics characterized by the love of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali. This connection made by Ferdowsi was not missed by athletes at the *zur-khane*. When I asked athletes about the lesson to be learned from this passage, I was told that indirectly, Ferdowsi said that the Sultan did not follow the religion whereas he, Ferdowsi, did.<sup>25</sup> By declaring his love for Muhammad and Ali, Ferdowsi announced who were his models and how he perceived them: Muhammad and Ali valued the keeping of one's word. According to some athletes, the recited passage from *Shah-nameh* thus mediated both social and spiritual ethics.

24 The dispute is from the first part of *Shah-nameh*. The following quotes are my translations from the edition of Hakim Abu al-Qasim Ferdowsi, *Shah-nameh* (Teheran: Amir Kabir, n. d.), 15, and the section titled: *Dar hajou sultan Mahmoud*.

25 Author's interview (Shiraz, Iran, November 9, 2001).

When examining how recitation offered experiences in which ethics could take shape, it is useful to distinguish between the athletes as listeners and as performers of texts. Auditorily experiences and the chanting of texts were held to be essential in shaping an ethical constitution. The *murshid* played a central role in performing textual material, which positioned the athletes as listeners and receivers of mediated messages. This position did not turn athletes into passive receivers of already established ideas. The booklet stated that poems should provide guidance as well as and be performed eloquently, in a manner which is emotional and stir excitement in the athletes (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 30). Indeed, according to a young athlete, listening to poems and Ferdowsi's story while doing exercises affected on their mind and made them think about the meaning of the story.<sup>26</sup> The experience of listening to praise, prayer, poems, and story thus established conditions for individual, self-reflective, moral inquiry, and cultivation of moral and spiritual ethical selves.

Many poems were phrased in the grammatical first person singular and plural, using the pronouns 'I,' 'my,' 'we,' 'us,' and 'our.' Given the representative quality of these pronouns, one could argue that the *murshid* not simply spoke to the athletes, but on their *behalf* while they attended to performing exercises as modes of embodied appraisal. The pronouns are also self-referential and as such offered the athletes the opportunity to internalize the content as they interpreted it. Only to some degree did the athletes perform textual genres. They supported the *murshid's* solo singing with responsorial exclamations and during his short breaks filled in by sending blessings. Such performances positioned the athletes as senders of messages addressed to God and the Twelver Shi'i imams.<sup>27</sup> Recitation thus provided a condition for ethical behaviour.

The many genres of texts, like praise, prayer, poetry, and story, each established various conditions for developing the ethical self. On the one hand, the texts mediated already established religious "truths." Nevertheless, the texts' content retained a mental space for personal reflection and decision making, and as such established conditions for moral inquiry and the cultivation of ethical selves. However, as suggested by Hirschkind, we are accustomed to think of listening as a cognitive act and often tend to ignore its practical and sensory dimensions (Hirschkind 2006, 25). Performing and listening to the various text genres during *zur-khane* exercises created conditions for the athletes to proclaim their faith and thus commit to a certain world view. At the same time, listening while performing exercises recruited the body in a rhythmic

26 Author's interview (Shiraz, Iran, November 8, 2001).

27 Such representative performance of religious texts is typical also of Shi'i rituals of commemoration and celebration.



respond which gave the lyrics a corporal material expression, serving a mnemonic function. Listening to recitation also awakened the body kinesthetically and creating conditions for developing proactive and skilled virtues bodies. As such, the texts gave the moving body a moral orientation. The moral relationship established was thus one commitment (to the faith) and ethical inquiry (reflection on the texts). That is not to say that in terms of character, the athlete *had* to be strong in faith and ethical orientation. The booklet stated that poems should provide guidance and the corporal, spatial, and textual genres afforded opportunities for a gradual formation of ethical behaviour.

## 7 Image Display

*Zur-khane* locations often exhibit photographs of famous champions, old members, and posters of holy personages although they do not follow any fixed program like the exercises.<sup>28</sup> At the location discussed here, images formed picture galleries on the walls. They were donated by athletes, but also people who could not participate in exercises. The presence of images thus reflected private motivations and current perceptions of material culture. Conversations with athletes suggest the motivation for displaying images was to support and inspire the athletes in their endeavor and to mediate and find guidance and inspiration.

Most photographs on display depicted athletes and judging from their looks, such as hair style and moustache, the pictures were shot in the mid-twentieth century. The location was established in 1948 and the depicted athletes were thus among its earliest members. Their pose demonstrated a conventional *zur-khane* portraiture genre. Dressed in traditional trousers, their shirtless, muscular torsos exhibited signs of physical strength. In single portraits, the athletes posed presenting *zur-khane* tools, displaying *zur-khane* identity whereas group portraits depicted athletes holding hands, suggesting friendship and camaraderie.

Apart from local athletes, the photo gallery included a standard inventory of many *zur-khane* athletes, namely the photograph of Gholamreza Takhti (1930–1968), a famous wrestler champion who won four medals in the Olympic Games of 1952, 1956, and 1960. As we have seen, the cultivation of humility is one of the purposes of *zur-khane* exercises. But “it is hard to be a humble

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28 The most typically displayed images are portraits of Imam Ali and photographs of athletes. Images of holy personage are based on prototypes introduced to Iran in the early nineteenth century.

champion,” one athlete admitted. He cited Takhti as an example, explaining that the wrestler was not considered a champion because of the gold medals he won, but because of his humility and generosity. The exemplary status attributed to Takhti in the context of the *zur-khane* is not surprising. The booklet on *zur-khane* states that to be a man means to be “the master of your *nafs*. [...] You are not a man if you bother other people and put your foot on a slain man. If you take the hand of a fallen man, you are a man” (Kazamaini 1343 [1964], 83). In a competition against the Russian wrestler Alexandre Medvid, Takhti had chosen not to take advantage of Medvid’s wounded knee and instead chose to lose. Moreover, after the earthquake in Bain Zahra in 1962, Takhti raised money for the needy. Takhti’s generous behaviour, both in his professional and private life, was a great inspiration. His portrait reminded the athletes of his ideals and inspired their behaviour. The photographs thus correspond to the genre of didactical images, but they were instructive in a mnemonic manner, reminding athletes of what they already knew, and encouraging them to take lessons.<sup>29</sup> This is also the case regarding the colour posters depicting religious personage.

A colour poster decorating the wall conventionally portrayed Imam Ali seated, holding his bifurcated sword *zu al-faqar*, across the lap. A bust portrait of Imam Ali instead carried the caption: “There is no true hero like Ali, no sword like Zu al-Faqar” (*la fata illa Ali, la saif illa zu al-faqar*). The sword and the quote are common in contemporary posters referring to Ali and draw on a long history.<sup>30</sup> The term *fata* was generally understood as a ‘young brave man’ who is generous and faithful. The term is mentioned in the Quran where it refers to a ‘youth’ (*surat* 18 verse 10; *surat* 21 verse 60).<sup>31</sup> Although the youth referred to is Abraham, the term has become connected with Ali and *ḥadīth* literature endorsed by both Shi‘i and Sunni Muslims accept the expression “There is no youth braver than Ali” as an authentic statement attributed to Prophet Muhammad.<sup>32</sup> In Persian, *fata* is translated as *javanmard*, an attribute often associated with Ali, who is viewed as the epitome of courage, generosity,

29 Another visual genre is the ‘visual elegy’ which creates an emotional sensation, *hal*, in viewers to establish a relation between people and the Divine in individual and collective devotion (Flaskerud 2010, 100; 228).

30 According to Abbasid sources, Prophet Muhammad gave the sword to Ali during the battle at Uhud (625 CE) (Yürekli 2015, 163). Iconographic practices linking the sword to Ali is known at least since the fourteenth century illustrated manuscripts of al-Biruni’s *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* (Hillenbrand 2000, 129–146).

31 *Fata* also refer to ‘slave’ (Surat 12 verse 32, 36, and 62; Surat 18 verse 60 and 62), also ‘Futuwwa’ (1974, 109).

32 Tirmidhi, *Sunan* (vol. 2, 299), cited in Momen (1985, 14). Other traditions state, however, it was called from Heaven by an angel, or it was an exclamation by an unknown person at the battle of Uhud. See, ‘Futuwwa’ (1974, 109).

and selflessness. These virtues were also mediated in a narrative poster depicting Ali offering succor to a fatherless family by bringing them bread and caressing the orphans. The hagiographic literature recounts many stories about how Ali cared for the people, particularly orphans, and such stories were generally well known among men and women I encountered at rituals in Shiraz.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, to make sure the message got through, a caption read: "Ali, peace be upon him. The refuge for the homeless, the merciful of orphans, friend of the weak, and the helper of the oppressed and people who suffer from injustice." The athletes knew the story. Commenting on Ali's generosity as a modelling example, one of them explained that generosity has four parts: "Being passionate when powerful, patient when angry, thoughtful when facing the enemy, and generous even when in need." During his lifetime, I was told, Ali had to endure such hardship but was nevertheless generous. When facing the enemy, he always tried to use diplomacy instead of going to war.

Also decorating the walls was a well-known depicted historical event, namely Prophet Muhammad's farewell sermon at Ghadir Khumm. The motif refers to a central tenet of Shi'i dogma claiming that during the sermon, Muhammad appointed Ali as his righteous heir. Two other depicted historical events related to the battle at Karbala (680). In one image, Imam Husayn, the son of Ali, is seated next to his dying half-brother and standard-bearer Abu al-Fazl al-Abbas. In the other, Husayn is seated on his white horse facing the army of the rival caliph. Al-Abbas and Husayn are both famous for having stood up against tyranny and injustice, at the cost of their lives.

As a visual form of instruction and guidance, the images mediated ethical and chivalrous ideals of bravery, philanthropy, and courage, and gave examples in doing what is right and just. Such methods were recognized among the athletes. One athlete explained that "when we want to learn something, we put up a cloth or use a board to point out things or explain things, like the alphabet on a board." While portraits of Ali, Husayn, al-Abbas, and Takhti encouraged athletes to be humble, courageous, and generous, the portrait of Ali stimulated the athletes' to also reflect to redemptive queries and certainties. One athlete explained: "If the Day of Judgment is in the hands of Ali, then one should be shameful when facing Ali and not commit a sin."<sup>34</sup> The idea that the images could inspire reflection was accompanied by the notion that images conveyed presence and cultivated a sense of proximity to Ali. One athlete explained: "We put the portrait of Ali here to feel that he is amongst us; to look at his representation and let him inspire us; to think about his character and use him as a model." The images expressed the athletes' feelings, their love for Ali, and

33 See Flaskerud (2010, 7; 56; 58; 62).

34 Author's interview (Shiraz, Iran, November 28, 2001).



FIGURE 6.7 The framed colour poster (top) depicts Imam Ali visiting a fatherless family, bringing them daily bread. Photographs of older members of the *zūr-khāneh* dressed in traditional pants hang underneath the poster. The shirtless, muscular torsos demonstrate physical strength, while athletes holding hands, suggested friendship and camaraderie.

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seeing it effected on their emotion. Through the display of images, like the recitation of some prayers, the athletes were seeking proximity to Ali.

Meaning can also be abstracted from the images' arrangement on the wall. A large portrait depicting Takhti was placed below a poster of Imam Ali. The arrangement was intended to show that Imam Ali was Takhti's guide. This

didactical lesson was two-fold: If they followed the way of Imam Ali, they could become humble, courageous, and generous like Takhti. And if they became like Takhti, they would follow in the way of Ali. Nevertheless, a senior athlete explained that one should not give too much importance to the images. Instead, he argued, it is through the poems that “we know Ali.”<sup>35</sup> He did, however, detect a relationship between the pictures and the poems in that one should follow Imam Ali’s character.

It thus seems like the images to some extent mediated established ethical ideals of humbleness, generosity, bravery, and courage. In reminding the athletes of these ideals, the images offered examples in social ethics, in doing what is right and just. The condition for moral inquiry and practice the images established was to revisit already known stories and ethical values, reflect on them and be inspired to act ethically. Inspiration also came from the sense of proximity to Ali which his portrait offered.

## 8 Virtue Ethics as Embodied Practice

How does the body function as an instrument for acting ethically? Central to virtues ethical practice in Islam is the cultivation of dispositions, *akhlaq* (Arabic pl. of *khulq*), to evoke a disciplined way of being and living. This may be achieved through *adab*, the cultivation of civility and manners in a broad sense, which requires the sense of proper disposition of mind and self (Sajoo 2010, 6) and how one can be useful to others. A widely used source is the *adab* literature which emphasize practice, that is, the actual action, *amal*, of ethical conduct (Khaleghi-Motlagh. 1985, 436). This literary genre requires the reader to engage in ethical mindful reflection on the foundation of a person’s actions, on how to act, to be wise, and do what is just. Being sensitive to what is right and wrong conduct is considered a great virtue, and it can be acquired through experience and to develop the best results, one must develop various forms of virtues which must work together. Popular Sufi poetry form part of the *adab* literary genre (Alibhai 2008), and storytelling and parables enjoy the status of ethical guidance, aimed at helping people to improving their character.<sup>36</sup>

35 Author’s interview (Shiraz, Iran, November 28, 2001).

36 Sadi’s two famous works *Bustan* (Orchade, 1257) and *Gulistan* (Rose Garden, 1258) offer practical advice in a mix of prose and verse, proverbs and poetry (Ormsby 2010, 67). Storytelling and parables such as *The Fables of Aesop* and *Kalila wa-Dimna*, also form part of the *adab* literature and are aimed at helping people to improving their character (Sajoo 2010, 1–30).

The same holds for the collection of sermons, letters, and saying attributed to Imam Ali's and presented in *Nahj al-balagha* ('Peak of Eloquence').

*Zur-khane* is an embodied, multi-sensuous practice which establishes a variety of conditions for shaping social and spiritual ethical subjectivities, to develop the foundation of a person's actions, for how to act, to be wise, and do what is just. In the analysis of the cultivation of Shi'i male ethics I have placed the body at the center of such ethical formation.

Outlined in a linear examination, ethical formation seems to take place along a continuum. Ethical values and practice are mediated through material culture. Interacting with the material makes people remember, reflect, understand, feel, and experience and it allows them to practice ethical behavior. Through interacting with the material and through social interaction with athletes in the *gawd*, the athletes appear as a member of an ethical collective, while the individual ethical subjectivity take shape. Practicing *zur-khaneh* is, however, build on intersecting experiences. In this context, corporeal exercises are a medium for developing the individual athlete's physical and mental faculty by bringing about personalized embodied skills, like strength and quickness. These physical qualities which can be translated into virtuous abilities and behaviors, such as sharpened attention and wise judgement, skills necessary to achieve the ethical goal of helping people. The spatial genre offers a relational context for an experienced based cultivation of ethical practices. In cultivating social ethics, attention is on the observance of manners, *adab*, and ceremony, *rasum*, to shape humble and generous actors. Integrated in the experiential method is taking and giving guidance. Newcomers observe the athletes perform and interact, and young athletes take guidance from seniors. Also note that in this experienced based cultivation of ethical practice, the virtuescape is expanded to include spiritual ethics in addition to social ethics. Through their behaviour, the athletes enter relationships with fellow human beings and the sacred, upholding virtues of humbleness and respect, in addition to the fraternity and equality performed between fellow athletes. In the process, the degree of attentiveness developed in physical exercises is put to use and to test.

The textual genres also establish conditions for moral inquiry and formation of social and spiritual ethics. The texts are not explained like in a sermon or a thesis. Instead, while listening athletes can reflect on the texts' ethical message according to personal interpretation. Although constituting several different genres, the texts' central focus is devotion to God and respect for the family of the Prophet Muhammad, the *ahl al-bayt*. It is important to notice that listening to the texts take place while exercising with tool and moving around in the *gawd*. As such, text-recitation and listening establish a mental space

which connect corporal modification and social behaviour to spiritual values and truths. Like the athletes' behaviour in the *gaud*, recitation and listening can position the athletes in a spiritual relationship with God and Twelver Shi'i holy personage, which is in itself a virtues act. Looking at images placed on the walls of the *zur-khane* also takes place while performing exercises with tools, moving in the *gaud*, and reciting and listening to texts. The images presented are not intrinsically part of *zur-khane* material culture like tools, exercises, and texts, but belong to a broader cultural tradition of image-use based on the perception that seeing certain motifs depicted can motive reactions and action in the viewer. Similar to the texts, in referring to well-known persons and stories, the images establish conditions for ethical inquiry and practice. They are instructive in a mnemonic manner, reminding athletes of what they already know although, like the textual genres, meaning is open to individualized interpretation. Moreover, viewing images shape the individual social and spiritual ethical constitutions and affords viewers to act ethically.

Through *zur-khane* exercises, the athletes' bodies are thus shaped to function as performative virtues ethical subjects. Ethical formation takes place through the modification of the body's materiality to create physical skills, such as speed and strength, which enhance mental capacities by stimulating awareness and attention, and which combine in creating the virtuous ethical subject who is wise and have strong judgement. Although material tools, spaces and objects here produce effects and behaviors in the human subject, efficacy is not seen as a function of the material, but rather as something acquired by the subject through experiences derived from bodily sensorial experiences, from doing, seeing, and feeling. The human impact is evident in the process of translating physical capacities, abilities, and skills into ethical sensitives and actions. *Zur-khane* as a material approach to ethical formation is thus based on an asymmetrical agentive subject-object relationship. As agentive subjects, the athletes' shape their bodies to function as ethical tools, while at the same time being the tools that can create an ethically just society. *Zur-khane* as a genre of virtue ethics is thus an embodied ethics of affordability, for being alert, prepared, taking action, and making just decision in dealings with fellow human beings, while living in proximity to God and members of the *ahl al-bayt*.

## 9 The Virtues of Twelver Shi'i Male Ethics

What can *zur-khane* tell us about contemporary notions of Twelver Shi'i male ethical ideals?

*Zur-khane* is a male-only activity which mediates ethical ideals, shapes ethical values, and creates embodied ethical affordability. Historical religious

characters who embody a strong social ethical constitution and are virtuous in their love of God, such as Imam Ali and his sons Husayn and al-Abbas, are singled out for praise. These figures are symbols of chivalry, bravery, and manliness, in a highly gendered masculine narrative. They embody a male social and spiritual ethics which ideals are to be courageous, generous, humble, helpful, honest, and just, and living in proximity to God. These social ethical ideals mediated and cultivated at *zur-khane* are also associated with the traditional male ethical ideal of *javanmardi*, the “ideal social man.” The *javanmard* in this sense of the term, is given a central role in Fariba Abdelkhah’s (1998) analysis of social dynamics shaping the post-revolutionary Iranian public space. The *javanmard* is a man of integrity who inspires confidence and trust, whose temperament is imbued with humanity, and who practices philanthropy. The ethics, she argues, is not exclusively an expression of Islamic ideas (Abdelkhah 1998, 4). Instead, *javanmardi* ethics conjures with the prevailing moral requirement of the social being, *adam-e ejtemai*, who is characterized by commitment to others. Ethical ideals cultivated at the *Zur-khane*, although profoundly associated with religious figures and thinking, thus form part of a broader conceptualization of male ethics in Iran. Added to this is the systematic promotion of ethical reflection. *Zur-khane* provides techniques for the cultivation of ethical selves, which requires the ongoing formation of the animal self, *nafs*, and spiritual self, *roh*, and the heart, *qalb*. The basic ethical virtue of the Twelver Shi’i male is thus to be mindful and responsible human being.

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## *Khidma: In the Service of Ahl al-Bayt*

*Gender, Agency and Social Capital in Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait*

*Nada Al-Hudaid*

**Author:** Auntie,<sup>1</sup> could you please watch the film<sup>2</sup> I made of your statues' exhibition and tell me if you would like me to change anything?

**Umm Mish'al:** Remove the word "artist" that appears before my name in the opening credits.

**Author:** You produce art, why not call yourself an artist?

**Umm Mish'al:** I am not an artist; I am a *khādima* (servant) of Imam Husayn and Ahl al-Bayt.<sup>3</sup>

For many Shi'is, to be called or to call oneself a *khādīm* (m.) or *khādīma* (f.), a servant of Ahl al-Bayt, is much desired and sought-after. During my fieldwork,<sup>4</sup> I did not pay much attention to *khidma* as a concept and a practice despite it being a recurring theme. It was not until I spoke to the statue maker, Umm Mish'al, that I realized how central *khidma* is for Shi'i women and men in Kuwait. Since then, *khidma* has occupied a more central role in my research, especially in relation to art and artforms. Literally, *khidma* means 'service,' and in the context of the Shi'i community in Kuwait, it refers to any beneficial activity done under the name of Ahl al-Bayt. These activities range from conducting religious sermons and distributing food to attendees during celebrations and commemorations to the publication of books and the creation of artforms that propagate stories about Ahl al-Bayt.

In this chapter, I develop an ethnographic understanding of *khidma*, exploring the effect serving Ahl al-Bayt has on devotees with a particular focus on

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1 It is common in Kuwait to call non-kin women and men 'auntie' and 'uncle.' In this case, as Umm Mish'al is a friend of my mother's, I call her 'auntie.'

2 Exhibition film made for Umm Mish'al and the community of artists who took part in her work, [youtu.be/j3DEEkBqO5A](https://youtu.be/j3DEEkBqO5A) [uploaded April 21, 2017], accessed August 21, 2021.

3 Ahl al-Bayt, or 'People of the Household,' is a reference to the Prophet Muhammad's family and descendants, many of whom are buried and venerated in different countries around the world such as Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria to name a few.

4 This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Kuwait in 2015 and regular follow-up trips since then.



FIGURE 7.1 Scene from “Ah, Zaynab,” an exhibition of life-size statues of Ahl al-Bayt in Kuwait in 2015

Life-size statues of Imam Ali and his six-year-old daughter, Zaynab. An audio recording of a dialogue between father and daughter can be heard in the background, where Ali and Zaynab debate the existence of God, a testimony to Zaynab's strong faith and intellect at early age

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materiality. More specifically, I will trace the process of *khidma* through art and show how art is utilized in religious service, which highlights the centrality of materiality in contemporary Shi'i religious cultures. The art that will be explored is religious statue making, which is becoming more popular amongst Shi'is as more ritual spaces as well as museums dedicate space to Shi'i statue art. Shi'is in Kuwait use several terms interchangeably to refer to 'statues,' including embodiments (*mujasamāt*), statues (*tamāthīl*), and representations (*tashābih*). Following the organization and curation of an exhibition entitled *Ah Zaynab* by Umm Mish'al, a pious Shi'i woman who self identifies as a servant of Ahl al-Bayt, the chapter will explore the relationship between *khidma* in art.

In addition, this chapter foregrounds women as prominent religious art producers in a male dominated society, using the example of Umm Mish'al to demonstrate how central the art these women produce has become among other pious Shi'i women and men. Throughout the various sections, I discuss *khidma* and how Umm Mish'al gains social and cultural capital by producing religious

art. Her work gets copied by other people (mainly by men) in the community (locally and regionally) which, as a result, gives her significant social and cultural capital. Major religious leaders and preachers promote her work and support it. No other statue art producer received as much attention as Umm Mish'al, who has become recognized as an innovator in this field of *khidma*.

Moreover, this chapter contributes to the literature on Shi'i materiality and art by presenting and introducing a particular Shi'i artform and its original creator who initiated a trend of making statues at home and incorporating them in religious events in Kuwait, Umm Mish'al, which will create a scholarly documentation of how this art tradition started in Kuwait. The photographs that will be presented in this chapter that covers the process of the making are the only such visual source available that documents a work that has influenced Shi'i rites in the Arab Gulf countries since 2004.

Umm Mish'al is known to create statue exhibitions of Ahl al-Bayt in Kuwait. Religious statue art began in Kuwait in 2004 when Umm Mish'al, an early sixties retired public servant, incorporated the statue of the seventh Shi'i imam, Musa al-Kazim, into a theatre play. The demotic approach<sup>5</sup> to the making of such statues resulted in its widespread. Non-experts and artists can put together a statue without the need to undergo professional training. She pioneered this artform due to the techniques that do not require professional training and she introduced statue-making in Shi'i ritual settings in Kuwait. Many people in Kuwait learnt from her, and her work inspired many to do the same gradually until it is now very common during various religious commemorations in Kuwait and its neighboring countries. Examples of how these statues are made will be mentioned in later sections of this chapter.

## 1 *Khidma: Serving Ahl al-Bayt*

Few scholarly works have examined *khidma*, or the rendering of a service for or in the name of Ahl al-Bayt, focusing mostly on the Egyptian Sufi context (Schielke 2006; Mittermaier 2014) and its historical development between holy men, Sufi orders, political dynasties, and the general public.<sup>6</sup> Similar to how Shi'is in Kuwait define it, *khidma* among Egyptian Sufis literally means 'service' in religious contexts. However, the definitions differ insofar as what actually constitutes service. For Egyptian Sufis, *khidma* refers to a space where food

<sup>5</sup> Techniques used by ordinary people, non-professionally trained artists.

<sup>6</sup> For more on *khidma* in non-Muslim contexts, see Adel Ibrahim (2019), Paul (2014), and Djaparidze and Gelovani (2018).

and drinks are served for attendees of the festive celebrations of a saint's birthday (*mawlid*) and the day they are 'betrothed' to Heaven (*'urs*), marking their earthly death. "Individuals, families, and Sufi orders set up tents, put out carpets on the sidewalk, or rent apartments to offer free meals and a resting place. Other *khidmas* are open all year round" (Mittermaier 2014, 54–55). For Shi'is in Kuwait, *khidma* does not refer to a place where a service is rendered, but to the set of activities that constitute the service. However, for Egypt's Sufis and Kuwait's Shi'is, *khidma* has an important salvific function in that it promises those who provide a service in the name of Ahl al-Bayt with benefits such as reward (*ajr*) and salvation (*najāt*) in the this- and hereafter.

Most of the *khidmas* that Shi'is perform in Kuwait are associated with the facilitation of Husayni rites, or *al-sha'ā'ir al-Ḥusayniyya*. Husayni rites are ritual practices that are publicly performed to narrate and propagate the history<sup>7</sup> of Ahl al-Bayt and to honour their sacrifices.<sup>8</sup> These rites initially started as a remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. However, throughout the years and especially since the eighteenth century, Husayni rites have included other members of Ahl al-Bayt (Badi 2006). Mourning rituals and the traditions associated with them developed with the aim of keeping the history of Ahl al-Bayt alive. Amongst the most common Husayni rites today are mourning rituals, crying, religious sermons narrating the stories of Ahl al-Bayt, poetry writing and eulogy recitation, grave visitations, theatre, distributing water and food, self-flagellation, and wearing black (Badi 2006; Marei and Shanneik 2020). With time, the scope of these activities expanded and today they include a vast array of activities from delivering sermons, performing laments, theatre plays to publishing books and creating artwork related to Ahl al-Bayt (Nakash 1993). Crucially, for an activity to be a considered Husayni rite, it needs to be *about* and *for* Ahl al-Bayt. Making these rites possible and facilitating them involves another act of devotion to Ahl al-Bayt: *khidma*.

*Khidma* in Kuwait is widely known as *al-khidma al-Ḥusayniyā*, the service of Imam Husayn, and sometimes also referred to as *khidmat Ahl al-Bayt*, the service of Ahl al-Bayt. *Khidma* as a term within Shi'i rituals received little attention in anthropological literature even though some of the activities it involves have been discussed in some length. For instance, Muharram rites

7 The emergence of Shi'i mourning traditions can be traced back to the immediate aftermath of the killing of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, along with seventy-two of his companions and family members by an army loyal to Yazid, the Umayyad ruler and, according to Shi'ism, usurper of Husayn's rightful claim to power (Ali 2006; Chelkowski 2010).

8 For more details on the role of Husayni rites in the past and present see Marei and Shanneik (2020).

like the performance of *ta'ziye* (Muharram passion plays) was the focus of many scholarly works and it is an act of *khidma* to Ahl al-Bayt (Aghaie 2004; Asani 2015; Chelkowski 2010; Fischer 1980). *Ta'ziye* is *khidma* insofar as the actors and organizers dedicate time, space and money to propagate the tragedies of Ahl al-Bayt in a highly interactive and emotive theatre play during mourning processions.

Considering what counts as *khidma* and how people use it is important because it puts attention to processes and relations of becoming, rather than the states of being only. *Khidma* has the ability to transform people in various ways and as it will be explored, allows the 'servant' to exercise agency and accumulate specific kinds of capital. This can be learnt when looking at the processes people take to conduct this act over time which means exploring the details before and after official events will be needed to fully appreciate what this term entails. Exploring it during events only will not do it justice. There are three main meanings that *khidma* through art helped in foregrounding; 1) *Khidma* creates sites for specific activities, 2) *khidma* creates representational model for social relations and 3) *khidma* produces social and symbolic capitals. All these combined reflect the type of agency such activities enable and inform on the process of materializing *khidma*. In the case of Umm Mish'al, the statue artist, the type of agency she acquired is similar to that of Saba Mahmood's concept of "docile agent" (2005).

The concept of docile agent, although it was initially meant to represent subaltern motives of freedom from the dominant state, yet it can still be applied to non-state politics. This concept can be useful to learn about how specific rights are gained to perform activities away from the complete control of the dominant group. Through an ethnographic research, Mahmood (2005) focuses on the informal teaching of women-only study groups across some mosques in Cairo. She describes this movement as a counter to westernization that is growing rapidly in Egypt. Her work challenges the negative views of Islam, and Muslims women in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. She explores various notions of freedom and agency from feminist literature, discussing their limitations in understanding the agency and subjectivity of women. There is a strong perception that women who support Islamist movements are under the control of a men and that if freed from their control, these women would express their dissatisfaction with the Islamic traditions that used to restrict them. Drawing on the critique of resistance by Judith Butler, Mahmood proposes an alternative understanding of the women's mosque movement. Instead of expressing such movements as resistance/subaltern movements, they should be seen as alternative forms of power. Through ethnographies of some women in the mosque movement, Mahmood

highlights the desire these women have to combat the secular, liberal movements that occupy many aspects of daily life in Egypt.

After discovering how effective these mosque movements were in Egyptian society, the government imposed strict rules and regulations to control them. They provided training centers for male and female preachers so that unfavorable views of the regime might not be propagated. Ironically, the response to this call by women was significant, and, in tandem with the state surveillance, these women continued to work and support one another in various other ways, leading to the increased popularity of their *da'wa* movement.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, docility comes within the integrity of the pious movement, which allows people to be more assertive in terms of their piety and docile to all dominant forms of the piety movement, because they believe it makes them better Muslims.

In the case of Umm Mish'al, she was able to create a religious space for women to serve Ahl al-Bayt through statue art that is somehow independent from men's control. Also, Umm Mish'al sought clerical validation of her work which makes her not fully independent from men, therefore, docile agent. In addition to how *khidma* through art revealed the type of agency Umm Mish'al has, it also reflected the agency she accumulates as a direct or indirect result of her work. The type of agency she has is impacted by the type of capital *khidma* provides in the form of social and symbolic capitals.

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 241), "capital is an accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' [immaterial and] embodied form)." In his theory of practice, Bourdieu identifies four forms of capital in a society: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. The social, symbolic and economic capitals will be discussed due to the significance in the case of *khidma* and art in Kuwait. Social capital refers to individuals who were able to accumulate social networks in specific fields or groups, which, by time, increase in value within the social field due to specific attributes that are deemed valuable by members of the social group. In other words, it is an immaterial form of capital. As for economic capital, it is a material form and it is about money and assets that can be directly converted to or used as money. Symbolic capital, also an immaterial form of capital, can be defined as the prestige or social standing based on a reputation of competence and an image of social respectability and honorability; something that, in the case study provided, Umm Mish'al has gained over the years. This type of capital depends on the recognition and

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9 *Da'wa* in the context of the Islamic revivalist movement in Egypt means the 'call to revert.' It literally means 'making an invitation, to summon or to invite.' In the contexts of the Muslim brotherhood, it refers to actions of invitation to revert to their understanding of religion which they believe is threaten by secularism (Mahmood 2005).



legitimization of the other forms of capital such as social, economic and cultural capitals therefore, symbolic capital will only exist if other forms of capital are recognized. Lastly, cultural capital is an immaterial form of capital which is reflected in the knowledge and education acquired by individuals and comes in three forms: embodied (knowledge), objectified (books, pictures, instruments, etc.) and institutionalized (educational qualifications). As capital in its various forms is the result of labor which automatically translates to specific kinds of power once they are accumulated, they become an essential element to analyze when studying certain societies and groups in order to understand how they are structured and how they function.

Furthermore, Bourdieu states that capital transfers from one person to another and can be 'converted' from one type of capital to another. For instance, social capital provides people with opportunities to obtain economic capital like obtaining a job through their networks which then can be reinvested in cultural capital such as being able to afford theatre tickets. Later this helps in obtaining social capital due to meeting more people which may result again to going back to economic capital due to pay rise, grant, new job and so on. Also, economic capital can develop to social and cultural capitals. This may not be applicable to every situation but in the case of Shi'is in Kuwait economic capital translates directly to other forms of capitals due to their privileged status as oil rich country which enabled them to run various activities that made them an important center for Shi'is around the world.

In several communities, religion contributes significantly to the symbolic form of social life due to the statues they gain from being knowledgeable in certain aspects which makes them an important source for knowledge acquisition. To further explore this, we need to learn about the contemporary understanding of religion, and this can be facilitated significantly through a focus on materials and their materiality. As Miller (2005) and Engelke (2012) state, materials and their materiality provide useful insights due to their ontological status. By understanding how economic and social capitals work, the role of *khidma* through art can be further explored which eventually will highlight the agency Umm Mish'al enjoys.

## 2 Background

Prior to my fieldwork, my understanding and experience of Kuwaiti culture in general dates to 2004 when I first moved there from Yemen with my family and lived there for fourteen years. My fieldwork covers a range of private, public, larger and houses of worship and congregation halls dedicated to Shi'i religious



FIGURE 7.2 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: Umm Mish'al in her workspace

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activities known as smaller *ḥusayniyyāt* (sg. *ḥusayniyya*, pl. *ḥusayniyyāt*). In addition, I spent most of my fieldwork working with and assisting Shi'i women manage their art studios and workshops. I assisted Umm Mish'al in preparing her exhibition of statues on the life of Sayyida Zaynab. Umm Mish'al is popular among many Shi'i women and men in Kuwait due to her contribution to making art a form of *khidma* accessible to anyone who wants to make statues on their own without undergoing formal training in fine arts. She started her statue art in 2004 and ever since it grew and developed from small scenes done in her house to stand alone exhibitions which gained popularity quickly in Kuwait and beyond.

Hayat Ashkanany (figure 7.2), or Umm<sup>10</sup> Mish'al,<sup>11</sup> sometimes known as Umm Khalid as well – previously I have written about her and used the name Umm Khalid –, is a retired woman in her early sixties, a widow, and a mother of six children. She is a very lively person with so much energy, stories, and experiences that she loves to share generously. Umm Mish'al, the eldest of ten

10 Umm (Arabic, for 'mother'). In this context it means the mother of Khalid. In many parts of the Arab World, it is a common to refer to parents by the name of their first-born son.

11 I refer to her as Umm Khalid as well in another publication (Al-Hudaïd 2020) which is also another one of her names.

siblings, was born in Kuwait. From an early age, she took responsibility of taking care of her siblings and her role as caretaker continued after even after her marriage when she had to take care of her ill husband then raise her children as a single mother. She studied midwifery and worked as a senior manager in the Commercial License Department of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Umm Mish'al retired at an early age and has since then occupied herself with raising her children and taking care of her sick husband. She was very attached to her husband and his death left her overwhelmed and in despair for many years. Her attachment to serving Ahl al-Bayt began when her husband died, as she found refuge in service that helped her forget her personal grief to identify with the suffering of Imam Husayn.

It is not uncommon for Shi'i artists in Kuwait to describe themselves as servants of Ahl al-Bayt rather than artists. This calls into question the meaning of 'service' in this context and raises the question of how art can 'serve' Ahl al-Bayt. Before addressing these questions however, it is important to provide some background information on Kuwaiti Shi'is and Shi'i art in Kuwait in order to comprehend why and how it is perceived as a form of service. To understand art as service of Ahl al-Bayt, firstly we need to get an overview of what are the traditional forms of service. The usual locations that such services take place is in the Shi'i congregation halls (*ḥusayniyyāt*). Traditional forms of service range from cleaning the congregation halls, cooking for commemoration events, recite eulogies on Imam Husayn and Ahl al-Bayt by dedicated reciters known as *rāwadīd*<sup>12</sup> who are celebrated for having dedicated their lives to narrate the plight of Ahl al-Bayt, and keep their memory alive. Mourners of the tragedy of Imam Husayn seek several benefits, such as penitence for their sins and acceptance as true followers,<sup>13</sup> by participating in the various stages of the mourning rituals. The act of devotion can be individual and communal/ collective but to be a *khādīm*, one needs to render a beneficial service to others. Umm Mish'al explains that beneficial means encouraging engagement in such events by attending and spreading the knowledge and narrating the story of Ahl al-Bayt. Aside from being an observant<sup>14</sup> Shi'i, a follower will only be able to become a true devotee when (s)he demonstrates devotion through action and servitude, or *khidma*, with which they actively contribute to the commemoration of Ahl al-Bayt.

12 *Rādūd* (sg., pl. *rāwadīd*), Arabic for 'eulogy reciter.'

13 I use 'followers' (*atbā'*) [of Ahl al-Bayt] in reference to Shi'is irrespective of the level of their devotion or piety.

14 Acts of devotion include individual actions such as prayers and attending sermons.

As many Shi'is expressed to me, one of their main motivators to work hard is to attain the honor of *servicing* Ahl al-Bayt and earn the title of *khādim*, or 'servant,' of Ahl al-Bayt. These exhibitions are very demanding in every aspect and several times a year, artists volunteer their time and money to create such exhibitions. As one artist said to me "we do not seek worldly rewards from our *khidma* but the acceptance by Ahl al-Bayt." There are several aims<sup>15</sup> that they aspire to achieve and the most important one is being *accepted* by Ahl al-Bayt. Acceptance of their work by Ahl al-Bayt, from my research participants' perspective, is a big topic in itself but in brief the indicators of being accepted is the ability for the work to be realized in the first place then if it becomes successful in provoking emotional reactions like crying then it is taken a sign of acceptance. Art becomes an important medium of communication between community, the individual, and Ahl al-Bayt. There are many ways to know how someone's work is accepted but the major signifiers are dreams and miracles of Ahl al-Bayt, therefore section three will be discussing such signifiers as rewards for their labor.

Umm Mish'al is a pioneer of religious statue exhibitions in Kuwait. Exhibitions of Shi'i art and statues, which emerged in Kuwait since 2004 have inspired similar exhibitions amongst Shi'i communities in Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq. It is worth noting that ceramic statues of Ahl al-Bayt existed in Iran and Iraq many years before Umm Mish'al's statue work began. However, her ground-breaking work has been to create a process that enables anyone to make statues for their religious events without the need to undergo a formal art education. Before Umm Mish'al worked on statues she was known for producing and directing creative Shi'i theater plays for women. In-home theaters have been very common in Kuwait. Umm Mish'al's creativity became evident in the way she has introduced some aspects that were not common for in-home theatres such as using different colors for the clothing of actors, detailed decorations, new information that is not well known, and additions of real-life size stage props such as a horse. This creative side of her work is considered *khidma* too, as women would rally to attend her plays due to the impact it had on them and the knowledge they would gain from her plays.

Umm Mish'al enjoys a significant symbolic and social capital due to her knowledge and artwork. In addition to her privileged background, her former senior position that allowed her early retirement was able to translate her economic capital into social and symbolic as well. Her job as a public servant provided her with a lot of experience on how to manage big groups of people and

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15 Some of the things they aspire to achieve is redemption, remission from their sins, follow footsteps of Imams and their friends, closeness to God etc.



FIGURE 7.3 Ceramic statues at Thakirat al-Islam Museum in Karbala, Iraq: 'The Last Moment of Prophet Muhammad'  
Ceramic statues of the Prophet on his deathbed, surrounded by Fatima, Ali, Hassan and Husayn  
© PHOTO COURTESY OF THAKIRAT AL-ISLAM MUSEUM IN KARBALA, IRAQ (2016)

take key responsibilities in ensuring the projects are managed well. This experience was transferred to how to manage people in running exhibitions and extending her networks every time she produces artwork. The statue art, that will be explained in coming sections, has influenced many pious Shi'i rites. To see statues incorporated to live sermons or other art exhibitions is common now in Kuwait. However, this was not always the case as when Umm Mish'al started making them in 2004, she received a lot of criticism from other Shi'i people. Umm Mish'al had to seek clerical validation for her artwork. As a follower of the clerical authority, or *mārjī'yya*,<sup>16</sup> of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Sadiq al-Husayni al-Shirazi,<sup>17</sup> Umm Mish'al sought the religious opinion, fatwa<sup>18</sup> (*fatwā*) of Sheikh Yousef Mulla Hady, the official representative of the Shirazi

16 *Mārjī'yya*, adjective of *mārjī'* (sg.) and *mārāji'* (pl.).

17 For further historical background on the Shirazi *mārjī'yya* see Scharbrodt (2020).

18 Individuals seeking a legal religious opinion commonly known as fatwa is a well-known practice among Muslims across the world in which a nonbinding validation for certain acts and opinions is obtained from qualified religious clerics.



FIGURE 7.4 Ceramic statues at Thakirat al-Islam Museum in Karbala, Iraq: ‘Warn Your People’ Ceramic statues of the Prophet’s uncle and close aide, Abu Talib, surrounded by friends and relatives. The scene depicts the Prophet’s announcement that he had received divine revelation  
 © PHOTO COURTESY OF THAKIRAT AL-ISLAM MUSEUM IN KARBALA, IRAQ (2016)

authority (*mārji’iyya*) in Kuwait. Eventually, an earlier religious opinion, which validated the impersonation of Ahl al-Bayt in theater was extended to include statues as well. According to the religious opinion of Grand Ayatollah al-Shirazi, “imaginary simulated drawings” of Ahl al-Bayt are “permissible” as long as these representations “[do] not necessitate a violation of their sanctity” (*Istifta’āt* [opinions] n. d.).

The ceramic statues that exist in Iraq are in permanent museums and were made by professional ceramic and wax artists. Figures 7.3–5 show two examples of statue art in Iraq, which were established years after Umm Mish’al’s work. There is no clear indication of whether the Museum on Islamic history (figures 7.3–4) was inspired by Umm Mish’al’s work, however, the organizers of this museum are followers of al-Shirazi’s clerical authority and, as Umm Mish’al sought validation from the Shirazi clerks, it seems that they were inspired by her ideas as she was the first not to make statues as part of rituals only but also create an exhibition for this type of art.

Although what Umm Mish’al introduced is novel in the Kuwaiti Shi’i scene, however, it is not entirely new as figurative depictions of Ahl al-Bayt have been



FIGURE 7.5 Wax statues at Khazain al-Najaf Museum in Najaf, Iraq: various prominent Shi'i religious scholars

© PHOTO COURTESY OF HAMLAT AL-KAWTHAR IN KUWAIT (2018)

common throughout Shi'i history. In terms of statue art, two examples are Khazain al-Najaf Museum, which was established in 2011 in Najaf, Iraq, and which houses a collection of wax statues depicting Shi'i religious figures<sup>19</sup> and Thakirat al-Islam Museum,<sup>20</sup> which was established in 2014 in Karbala, Iraq. However, what is notable to mentioning is the dates in which these projects were established, Umm Mish'al began her work in 2004 while these two started years after Umm Mish'al's work. There is no official documentation that it may have been inspired by Umm Mish'al's work however, Thakirat al-Islam Museum was established by a Shirazi female committee in Iraq and was funded by the Shirazi International Organization. Therefore, if Umm Mish'al acquired the religious opinion (fatwa) from the Shirazi representative in Kuwait when she started this process, then it was probably seen as a great way to communicate historical knowledge that is new and leaves an impression on people.

Economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) is represented by economic status of many Shi'is in Kuwait who benefit from their country's oil revenue which

19 Khazain al-Najaf Museum displays over 60 life-size wax figures of Shi'i clerics that played a significant role in the history of the city of Najaf and its seminary.

20 Thakirat al-Islam Museum is a museum that constitutes scenes made with statues to tell the story of Prophet Muhammad from birth to death. This is the first and only museum of its kind in the world today that is dedicated to present the history of Prophet Muhammad in statues. The statues are made from fiber class. The museum consists of 16 sections each represents a specific episode of the Prophet's life.

translates to their ability of owning businesses and various forms of cultural centers and activities. Shi'is in Kuwait both produce and have access to media that promotes Shi'i thought and doctrine. For example, the first and most popular Shi'i Arabic television station, *Al-Anwar* operates in Kuwait. Moreover, Shi'is in Kuwait create religious productions (visual and auditory) and own publishing houses that cater to Shi'is worldwide. This puts them in advantage and creates a significant symbolic capital. In the sixties until late eighties, Kuwait was well known to be one of the important centers for learning and performing various forms of art such as singing, theatre, and voice-over dubbing of foreign cartoons to Arabic. Kuwait has national museums and private galleries to showcase its heritage and private collections and during the sixties and seventies, Kuwait became the regional center for education, arts, and culture. Moreover, Kuwait University is a prestigious institution that attracted many Arab students from neighboring countries. Art productions flourished in these years and Kuwaiti theatre, music, and art were highly regarded.

Kuwaiti Shi'is<sup>21</sup> have economic capital due to their country being one of the richest in the world which enabled them to gain cultural and symbolic capitals as well. In Kuwait, 1.4 million are Kuwaiti citizens and 3.3 million are non-citizens. Out of the 4.7 million total population in Kuwait, 30 % are Shi'is, which includes Ahmadi and Ismaili sects, whom the government considers as Shi'i as well (Embassy of the United States of America in Kuwait 2018). Comprising a significant proportion of the population, the Shi'is in Kuwait contribute greatly to the economy which makes them a great asset to the Kuwaiti ruling family (Alhabib 2010). As Kuwaiti Shi'is had social capital which transferred to cultural and economic, they soon gained symbolic capital when the ruling family considered them allies during different historical episodes since the early 1900s.

Moreover, due to the political unrest that was happening in neighboring countries since the seventies, many important and key Shi'is from Iran and Iraq like clerics, poets, eulogy reciters found refuge in Kuwait who later on became very popular and influenced Shi'i thought, rituals, and performances in the region and beyond, for example, Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad-Ridha al-Shirazi,<sup>22</sup> Sheikh Abdul Hameed al-Muhajir,<sup>23</sup> Bassim al-Karbalaei<sup>24</sup> and

21 The three main groups constituting Shi'is in Kuwait are Kuwaitis, Ahsa' (*Aḥsā'*, from al-Ḥasā'in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia) and 'Ajmis (from Iran).

22 He was an Iraqi-Iranian Shi'i scholar, and the eldest son of the late Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi.

23 An Iraqi Shi'i cleric who revolutionized the way sermons are delivered.

24 He is from Iraq and considered one of the most well-known Shi'i eulogy reciters in the world.



many more. As Shi'i artists are situated within a country that nurtures and supports different forms of art, religious Shi'i art in Kuwait started to emerge in the seventies. The type of Shi'i religious art that became prominent since the seventies are theater, paintings of Ahl al-Bayt, calligraphy, poetry recitation and its performance in a particular style known as *latmiyyat*.<sup>25</sup> The exhibition of statues is a recent (since 2004) addition to religious service through art in Kuwait.

Also, the development of *khidma* depends on what new forms of piety are incorporated. *Khidma* was not very popular in Kuwait before the seventies. Several Shi'is informed me, including Umm Mish'al, that the expansion of *khidma* emerged when Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi took residence in Kuwait. Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi went to Kuwait in 1971 (Scharbrodt 2020) and according to Umm Mish'al and several other Shi'is I worked with, his existence in Kuwait created a 'revolution.' The revolution they referred to is an intellectual and ritual one. He co-founded several Shi'i libraries and initiated the tradition of commemorating and celebrating death and birth events of other members of Ahl al-Bayt throughout the year. The tradition in Kuwait before Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi's instructions was to have ten days only of commemorations in Muharram in public Shi'i congregation halls. He also had a huge impact on the amount of congregation halls that exist in Kuwait today as he encouraged people to have religious sermons (sg. *majlis*, pl. *majālis*) in their homes which eventually became public congregation halls. The exact numbers are difficult to ascertain, but according to my research participants within the Kuwait Shi'i community, there are over a thousand congregation halls currently active in the country. Umm Mish'al's extended family were the first family to start with this tradition of having religious sermons at home following the advice of Al-Shirazi. The other activities he started were Shi'i specific hajj trips, Shi'i religious theatre and legislated the wearing of the Hijab which included covering the face.

These traditions and rites continued to grow and be adopted by other religious authorities (*mārāji'*) and today followers of many other religious authorities have congregation halls at homes, incorporate theatre into their commemorations throughout the year and celebrating the various other events of Ahl al-Bayt throughout the year. Thus, the Shirazi authority are well known for their preference to make rituals a central part of their religiosity. Aesthetics and emotional experiences are central to how rituals are performed by the Shirazi followers which makes materiality equally important. Umm Mish'al

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25 Sad laments incorporated to religious sermons and today have their own visual and auditory productions.

builds on this tradition and expanded it by including her novel approach to *khidma* through statue art.

Space is important in the gaining of agency and power. In the context of Shi'is in Kuwait, owning a space in form of a congregation hall (*husayniyya*) is highly regarded and automatically put the owners of such a space – especially if it is activated with religious events – into a privileged position in the Shi'i community. Not everyone is able to make a space in their homes only for such activities. Umm Mish'al did what many Shi'i women and men in Kuwait try to do – convert or dedicate part of their home to Ahl al-Bayt and turned it into a congregation hall. Umm Mish'al's congregation hall, a seven-meter by five-meter room, occupies the basement of her house. While she was trying to deal with the loss of her husband twenty years ago; she moved into a new house and started to work for Ahl al-Bayt. When she began making statues in 2004, some Shi'is were against the idea, and considered it to be in unacceptable to minimize the figures of Ahl al-Bayt to a statue form.

### 3 Shi'i Materiality and Statue Art

A significant body of literature on Shi'i rituals, particularly those related to Muharram, focuses on local Shi'i and diasporic communities from Iran, Lebanon, South Asia, Indonesia, West and sub-Saharan Africa, Trinidad, and Shi'is in different European and American cities (Asani 2015; Chelkowski 2010; Hirji and Ruffle 2015; Kadhum 2020; Khosronejad 2006; Marei 2020; Marei and Shanneik 2020; Scharbrodt 2011; Shanneik 2014, 2017; Sharif and Al Khalifa 2005; Williamson Fa 2018). The little work that is available on Arab Gulf countries examines Shi'is from an economic or political perspective (Alhabib 2010; Ali 2006; Eum 2008; Foley 2010; Maktabi 1993) leaving a gap to fill in terms of what the Shi'is in the gulf can offer to the study of art and materiality.

The Shi'i art explored in literature are mainly architecture (Bloom 2015), theatrical mourning (Aghaie 2004; Asani 2015; Chelkowski 2010; Fischer 1980), cinema (Pak-Shiraz 2015), and literature such as poetry (Ormsby 2015). Views on visual depictions of Ahl al-Bayt are mixed. It was widely discussed during fieldwork that few religious authority scholars like Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani are not in favor of figural depictions of Ahl al-Bayt although he does not forbid it, while many others like the Ayatollah Sayyid Sadiq al-Shirazi and Ayatollah Abdullah al-Mirza al-Haeri are encouraging them if they do not portray Ahl al-Bayt in any negative way.

Not all Shi'is I worked with agree on what is an appropriate visual depiction of Ahl al-Bayt. Some favor face features not to be clear while others endorse

it, if it aesthetically compliments a favorable image of Ahl al-Bayt. According to several of my research participants, images of Imam Ali are common today but when they were introduced in the sixties and seventies in Iraq, they were seen as inappropriate by some religious authorities. After Umm Mish'al's work gained clerical validation, her work has gained considerable popularity and her exhibitions have attracted Shi'is from neighboring countries. A few years later, people started following her example by creating statues themselves and incorporating them into their sermons to provide visual stimulation and to encourage people to attend.

Umm Mish'al spends months researching new ideas and asks scriptwriters to proofread her theatrical work. She has a lot of experience working in religious theatre, so she develops stories as scenes that focus on only one setting per scene. Each scene is decorated in a dedicated two-square-meter space. In addition, sound is another factor that makes Umm Mish'al's work attractive to others, a quality which is lacking in the ceramic statues in Iraq and Iran. She uses recorded dialogues, sound effects, and religious music to animate her statues. She uses recorded dialogues, sound effects, and religious music to animate her statues. She considers that sound "gives life" to the statues, allowing her audience to see them as real. She involves professional male religious eulogy writers, poets, and reciters in her work to produce the background sound recordings that accompany each scene.

I worked with Umm Mish'al throughout the making of her exhibition, *Ah Zaynab*, which focused on the life the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad. Sayyida Zaynab is a key figure in Shi'i hagiography and history as she played a significant role in carrying the stories of what happened in the Battle of Karbala and she was a symbol of resistance against injustice that continue to inspire many Shi'is today (Deeb 2010). She uses too many materials to discuss in depth, so I will focus on the main materials that form the basis of her work, as presented in Figures 7.6 to 7.11: different kinds of fabric, and sometimes also recycled clothes. She circulates her family's clothes in her work and asks others to donate theirs to her. She uses galvanized iron wire: the smaller gauge is softer, so she uses it for making hands, and the bigger one to make the skeleton of the body. She also uses and polyethylene pipe insulations: each statue requires six to seven each, and there were around 150 statues in the exhibition. She makes use of thick iron rods and synthetic hands, although the rods are only used for making standing statues, which accounted for half of the 150 statues. She usually obtains synthetic hands from Halloween shops. Cotton fabric is also an important material: the cotton roll is almost five-meters into twenty-meters in a coil and she uses two rolls for the exhibition.



FIGURE 7.6 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: various cotton fabrics for the clothing  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



FIGURE 7.7 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: flexible galvanized iron wires  
Umm Mish'al usually uses one or two rolls of wire to make the base of the body and hands  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



FIGURE 7.8 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: cotton roll  
Umm Mish'al used two rolls for Sayyida Zaynab exhibition. Cotton is mainly for giving the statue the feeling of flesh and adjust body size to fit the character  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



FIGURE 7.9 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: polyethylene pipes  
They are used to cover the galvanized iron and a thickness similar to bones  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)

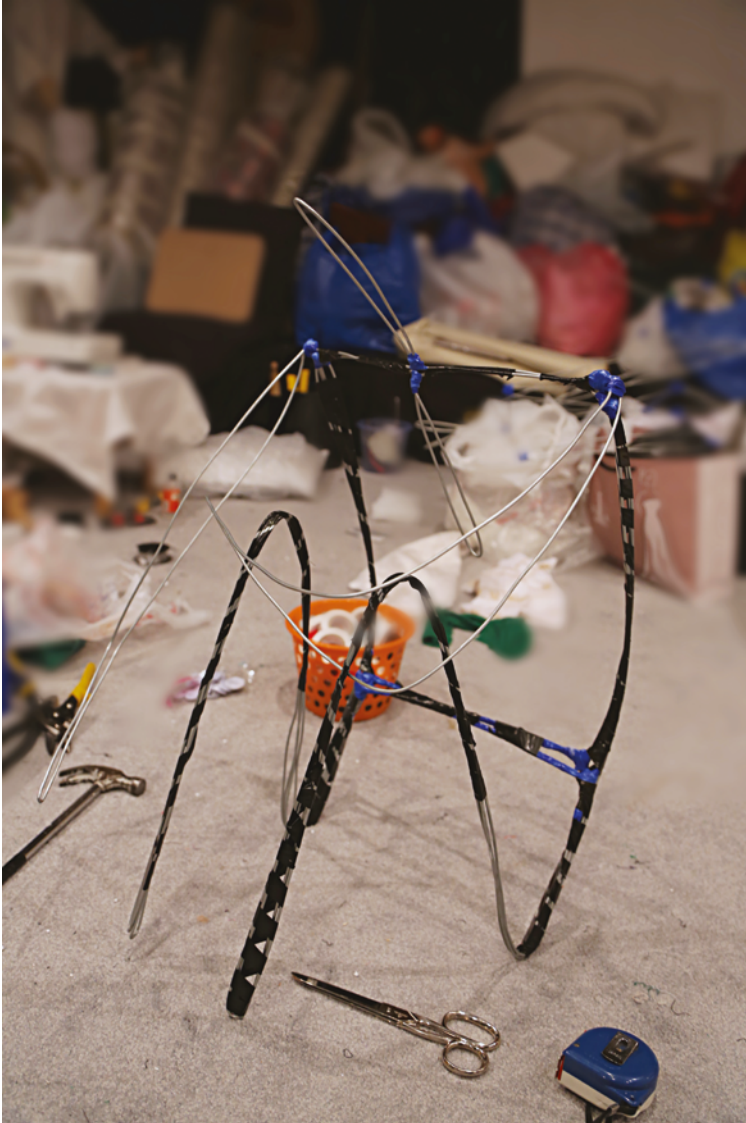


FIGURE 7.10 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: thick iron rod  
Around a hundred rods were used in the *Ah Zaynab* exhibition. They are  
mainly used as legs to allow statues to stand  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



FIGURE 7.11 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: synthetic hands  
These are mostly bought from Halloween shops or taken from manikins and  
life size dolls  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)

Umm Mish'al uses specific measurements for a man, a woman, and a child's body. The galvanized iron requires a lot of effort to shape. The process of making the statues varies however the base is the same as demonstrated by the following photographs of the statue of Imam Mahdi.



**FIGURE 7.12** Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: the skeleton  
The first stage is to create the base which works as a skeleton.  
This is a very physically demanding job  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)

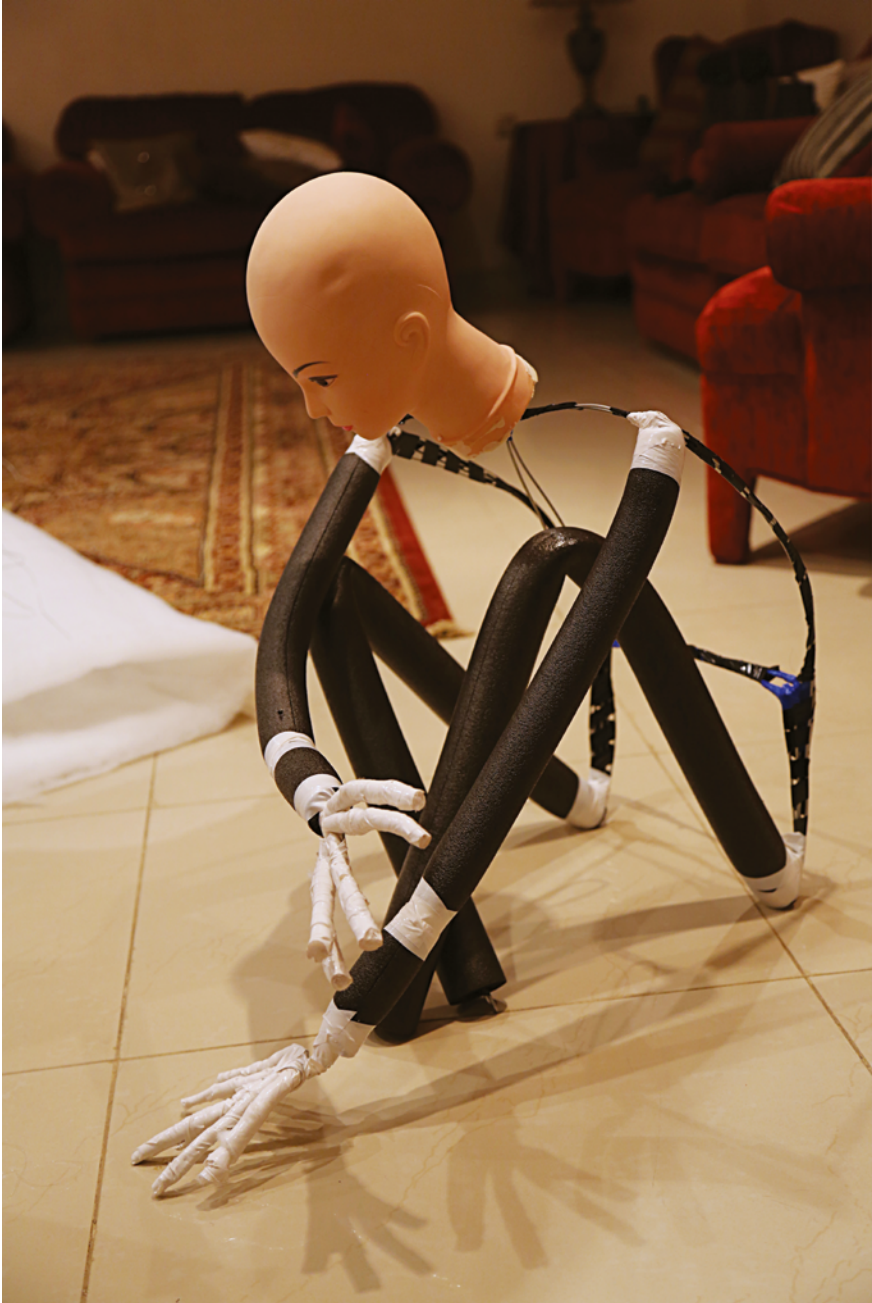


FIGURE 7.13 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: polyethylene pipes  
Then the polyethylene pipes are added to create a base that is easy to hold cotton  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)





**FIGURE 7.14** Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: adding cotton  
Cotton is added and fixed to the body until the desirable size is achieved  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



FIGURE 7.15 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: the final look  
Clothes, shoes and headwear is added to complete the final look  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



**FIGURE 7.16** Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: statue of Imam Mahdi in the exhibition  
 The imam is in a waiting position, surrounded by some of the things he will adjust once he reappears; for example, he is believed to reveal where Sayyida Fatima's grave is, an event alluded to by the burning door on the left  
 © NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



**FIGURE 7.17** Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: rooms getting prepared  
 The Shi'i congregation hall has been partitioned with wood to contain seventeen rooms as shown above. The full installation including room decorations takes around ten days of minimum twelve hours a day of continuous work  
 © NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)



FIGURE 7.18 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: exhibition rooms are ready. Each room has a distinct décor and different background audio, playing dialogues between the figures displayed by the statue art. Tissue papers are placed in front of each room for visitors, who are expected to cry or weep.  
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For Umm Mish'al, the spirituality of the work comes from the process rather than the end result itself. For example, Umm Mish'al performs the ablutions which would usually be undertaken before prayer. According to her, working on sacred beings required her to be ritually pure. Her workspace is similar to how she approaches her art. Her congregation hall's wall is painted with soil from Karbala (see figure 7.7). Soil from Karbala is considered sacred and believed to have originated in Heaven, so it is condensed into small pocket-size slabs, known as *turba*, used for prostration in prayer (Arjana 2017). This soil is used for curative and healing purposes. For Umm Mish'al to be surrounded with this soil suggests that a powerful energy is always present in her congregation hall. She commissioned a Shi'i woman to design these wall carpets, which carry the names of Ahl al-Bayt and some of the popular prayers for protection and sayings of Ahl al-Bayt. This is a common practice among Shi'is for decorating their religious spaces.

Intrigued by Umm Mish'al's refusal to be called an artist, I asked about the reason for this and with a little hesitation, Umm Mish'al smiled and explained that:



FIGURE 7.19 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: exhibition in ḥusayniyat Ashour in Bneid al-Gar, Kuwait City  
© NADA AL-HUDAID (2015)

Firstly, I didn't receive formal education in art and I only undertake work for Ahl al-Bayt; so, I only want to be known as a servant to them, not an artist. Secondly, claiming to be an artist will invite criticism and I do not want my work to lose its spiritual significance because I may become preoccupied satisfying other people's expectations. Thirdly, it is a great honor to be called a servant of Ahl al-Bayt as it is not just any person who succeeds in becoming one. If you ask someone who serves as president of any country, there will be a tone of refraction in his voice when admitting that he is a *khādim* (servant) but when you ask someone who serves Ahl al-Bayt, you will see the pride in their eyes and will say it loudly, that he is in the *khidma* (service) of Ahl al-Bayt.

While the first two reasons Umm Mish'al referred to deserve attention, it is the third that resonated the most as it seems each time, I ask a Shi'i why they do what they do for Ahl al-Bayt, I hear the same response every time. Umm



FIGURE 7.20 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: some of the techniques used by Umm Mish'al

The standing statues requires more work than the sitting ones (left). Many sticky tapes were used in the making of these statues (right). Mannequin heads are tanned using makeup to give them an appropriate brown skintone

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Mish'al spent around an hour explaining to me what serving Ahl al-Bayt means to her. Continuing our conversation, I learned about how she considers that people who do not understand the fundamentals of the Shi'i faith can overlook what it really means to serve Ahl al-Bayt to the extent she herself does. One of her concerns was regarding how non-Shi'is negatively perceive Shi'is such as being violent and perform harsh activities like self-flagellation. She pointed that most Shi'is are highly educated and such rites are performed by doctors, lawyers, businessmen to unemployed, and the youth. Many Shi'is dedicate their whole life to serve saintly figures<sup>26</sup> that are dead a long time ago and

26 Dedication takes different forms from being a preacher, a writer, or a poet to an organizer of religious events.



FIGURE 7.21 Shi'i Religious Statue Art in Kuwait: Umm Mish'al's private congregation hall and workingroom

The mud walls of the modest house can be seen behind the hanging carpets

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many people fail to understand why. She concluded her description of service by stating her aspiration that people who read this research would learn something new and positive about Ahl al-Bayt and Shi'i people; thus, to her, this scholarly work is itself a form of service to Ahl al-Bayt.

For Umm Mish'al, to be called an artist is tied to and defined by formal education and degree-based acknowledgment and that artwork for Ahl al-Bayt is deemed labor instead. The symbolic capital people, like Umm Mish'al, gain from the title of being servants is much higher than being known as solely as artists. Other Shi'i artists I know use both these titles but in different contexts. When they are working on art for Ahl al-Bayt, they like to be known as servants and when they present artwork for non-Shi'is, they use the title artist. Artists who are comfortable being referred to as such, along with the title of *khādim* (servant), use both titles simultaneously; for example, Umm Mish'al is referred to as "*khādimat Ahl al-Bayt al-fanana*<sup>27</sup> Umm Mish'al" ('Umm Mish'al, artist and servant of Ahl al-Bayt').

To many of the women and men I worked with, the statues that are exhibited in congregation halls are much more effective than those in official museums

27 *Fanāna* (f.), *fanān* (m.), Arabic for 'artist.'

like Thakirat al-Islam Museum in Karbala and Khazain al-Najaf Museum in Najaf. To them, efficacy refers to affectivity (Mitchell 1997; Eisenlohr 2018). Affect is mainly measured by tears of attendees and listeners to sermons, traditionally speaking (Fischer 1980; Chelkowski 2010). When they see artwork on Ahl al-Bayt, their tears are testament to how effective the work is. Statues that evoke emotions of empathy and sorrow regarding what happened to Ahl al-Bayt are preferred over statues that are just aesthetically appealing due to their artistic qualities. By contrast, Umm Mish'al's statues despite lacking artistic sophistication (in comparison to figures 7.3 and 7.4), as described by her and many others, are more effective on their visitors. Her statues become an embodiment of Ahl al-Bayt.

To achieve this level of service, there are rules. The first steps towards serving Ahl al-Bayt through art for Umm Mish'al and almost all of the women I worked with, is pure intentions. This means that the purpose of their artwork must only be to keep reviving the stories of Ahl al-Bayt; not the pursuit personal gains, social status or fame. This is crucial; but there are no clear rules regarding how this is achieved. An example of this approach is Umm Mish'al refusing to introduce admission fees to her exhibitions, although many Shi'i theaters apply them. In this case, theater fees are common, and they are usually consisting of a nominal amount.<sup>28</sup> As for art exhibitions, they are a relatively new phenomenon in Kuwait, so encouraging people to visit them is an ongoing process. Umm Mish'al believes that if she were to apply fees, people would not come and would think that she wants to make money by using Ahl al-Bayt. This idea of avoiding making money through religious art is very strong among the women I worked with.

All of this labor and intensions in addition to Umm Mish'al's background accumulate cultural and symbolic capitals which puts her in a position of empowerment without needing to break free from men's religious authority.

Umm Mish'al's status and respect are gained through her innovative *khidma* style. She takes her statues to al-Arbain<sup>29</sup> where thousands get to see them. She has many stories of people who see life-size figures of Ahl al-Bayt for the first time and become deeply affected by them. Holy shrines are considered scenes of authority, so people get exposed to various forms of rites which they end up

28 Tickets usually cost between \$6 to \$10.

29 This is one the most important events in the Shi'i calendar which marks the fortieth day since the Tenth of Muharram when Imam Husayn and his friends were slaughtered in Karbala. Millions of Shi'i pilgrims go to Karbala to visit Imam Husyan's shrine every year. The specialty of this event is marked by the many who walk for long distances to reach the shrine which sometimes takes days and weeks from different locations in Iraq and beyond (Nikjoo et al. 2020).



taking it back to their communities as valid forms of religiosity (Pinto 2007). Today, scenes of religious statues are popular and temporary statue exhibitions are more common in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Iraq.

The social capital Umm Mish'al gained through this type of art is significant. As we have seen, the process is as important as the end result which brought people together to be part of this process. Immense value is created through their contributions which forged many lifelong friendships and bonds of connectedness among participants. This work gave Umm Mish'al social capital as she gained access to many major Shi'i institutions and individuals locally and beyond. She is known to be a well-connected person within her community and her contribution to producing value within the art scene. Her work also created local networks of shared identity of serving through art. In other words, *khidma* does not only enable the servant, or artist, to cultivate a devotional connection with Ahl al-Bayt, but also to cultivate social relations and networks with members of the religious community and to acquire social standing among them. Umm Mish'al *trained* many people in Kuwait to statues and always receives invitations to contribute to their events with statues. Therefore, within the context of *khidma* and based on the anthography mentioned in this paper, it is about doing useful things to other people. It gives meaning and purpose for people and allow them to stay active regardless of their age. Many retired people do not have time to get bored because they occupy their free time with *khidma*. Similarly, many younger people always find time for *khidma*. It is a versatile term that can be applied to many activities as long as they are for and about Ahl al-Bayt.

Another significant creation of serving through art is appropriation of space and recreating them to become sites for artistic productions and representations. For instance, the transformation of congregation halls whether public or private to temporary workshops and exhibition halls. Some major public Shi'i congregation halls in Kuwait use art exhibition during events as means to introduce this art as part of the Husayni rite. Due to increased Shi'i art activities, Shi'i cultural centers started to host art exhibitions. In coming years, there will be a surge in art centers that specifically cater to Shi'is. By exploring the various stages Umm Mish'al went through to create the religious exhibition, insights to how she approaches *khidma* were highlighted, demonstrating how people around her conceive of the notion of 'serving' Ahl al-Bayt.

Furthermore, the focus on materiality of art gave us insights into the type of agency women like Umm Mish'al have. Her perseverance aided to establish a rite through statue art which is an example of docile agency (Mahmood 2005). She was not interested in breaking away from men's control in religion

however, she created a space through which she can practice her faith which also enabled other women to do the same. She is well read in various religious texts and many times she corrects clerics' information when they attend her exhibitions and want to suggest what mistakes she has in the artwork from a scholarly perspective. It is common for pious women to gain specific kind of agency and capital with their activities. Deeb (2005) mentions that the live rituals give Shi'i women in Lebanon a space to be more politically active and assertive because of the figure of Sayyida Zaynab. Mahmood (2005) explains that agency is subject to *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1997) which can explain the culturally specific types of agencies that exist. Therefore, if Umm Mish'al sets an example of religious piety through art, then it is expected as expressed by women in her community to see more women follow her footsteps.

The statue art is considered an extension of the live plays which are forms of depiction of Ahl al-Bayt that is very common among Shi'is worldwide. The novelty of Umm Mish'al's work has been to create a simple process of artistic production that enables anyone to make statues for their religious events without the need to undergo art education. This simple process enabled people to recreate empathy for stories they have heard many times throughout their life. The focus on materiality highlights the sentience these objects bring. The statues she makes are not just lifeless statues, they become the this-worldly, material hierophanies of Ahl al-Bayt.

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# A Price for a Wife or a Token of Love?

## *Negotiating the Materiality of Mahr in Diasporic Shi'i Marriage*

Marianne Hafnor Bøe

### 1 Introduction

This chapter explores negotiations of Shi'i marriage found among Iranians residing in Norway. Such dynamics are explored through the gateway of *mahr*, the payment promised from the husband to a wife in a Muslim marriage.<sup>1</sup> *Mahr* is mentioned several times in the Quran and seen as obligatory to Shi'i and Sunni Muslim marriages alike. The chapter builds on a three-year research project exploring Shi'i Iranian *mahr* in Norway. Although many in the Iranian diaspora community tend to distance themselves from Shi'ism, the results of this research show that *mahr* is seen as mandatory to an Iranian Shi'i marriage even when conducted outside of Iran. Hence, the meaning, function, and usage of symbolic forms of *mahr* are widely negotiated, influenced, and shaped by the interviewees' migration experiences. By exploring *mahr* through the analytical lens of materiality, Shi'i marriage is portrayed in new and complex ways. From token amounts to abundant sums of money, the materiality of *mahr* exemplifies patterns of negotiations over religious, social, legal, and economic factors involved in diasporic Shi'i marriages. In this chapter, I offer a glimpse into some of these complexities.

### 2 Materiality and Shi'i Marriage

The topic of Shi'i marriage has largely been understudied and is rarely the explicit topic of research. Shahla Haeri's (1989) *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Iran* is a noteworthy exception, addressing the issue of temporary marriages (*mut'a* or *sighe*), a marriage form seen as exclusive to Shi'ism. Yafa Shanneik's (2017) more recent research article, "Shia Marriage Practices: Kerbala as Lieux de Mémoire in London," is another contribution to the study

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1 A simplified transliteration of Persian words is used throughout this chapter and years are provided according to the hijri shamsi (HS) and common era (CE) calendars.

of Shi'i marriage.<sup>2</sup> In her article, Shanneik demonstrates that Shi'i marriage may act as a "signifier of stability" for the first generation of Iraqi Shi'is living in a diasporic context, whereas for the second generation it represents a way to connect with their parents' Shi'i religious and cultural practices (Shanneik 2017, 7–10). Shanneik also notes that the performance of Shi'i marriage ceremonies such as *sofreh aqd* work as a collective memory for which Iraqi women in Britain express and articulate their Shi'i religious and social identity (Shanneik 2017, 2).<sup>3</sup>

In their book *Things: Religion and the Question on Materiality*, Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer map the potentials of employing materiality in the study of religions (2012). They argue that the material turn in the study of religions have offered an important shift from privileging "belief" as a guiding concept in the discipline, towards attention on issues of power, practice, and material expressions of religion (Houtman and Meyer 2012, 2). Moreover, Peter J. Bräunlein has added that the material shift has paved way for the concrete, embodied, lived, affective, and aesthetic expressions of religion in ways that a simple focus on texts or practices risk to ignore (Bräunlein 2016). In particular, he has advocated for the study of materiality as a gateway into understanding in what ways migration experiences are tied together with personal aspirations and emotions.

A particular focus in this specific chapter is to investigate the token forms of *mahr* performed by Iranian Norwegians who engage in Shi'i marriages in Norway. Similar to Shanneik's findings outlined above, the *mahr* practices in the present study can be explained to mark belonging to Shi'i Iranian marriage. However, the materiality approach offers an alternative lens into the study of how *mahr* works in Shi'i marriages. Instead of focusing on rituals, concepts and ideas that are seen as exclusive to Shi'ism and confined within a Shi'i paradigm, materiality opens up a way to move beyond a binary approach of what counts as Shi'i and not. By pursuing materiality as an analytical lens in the study of the interviewees' usages of *mahr* a broader understanding of their practices has come to the fore. The interviewees show how they distance themselves, accommodate and adjust, and not least maneuver in relation to the complex aspects of Shi'i marriage. They report on the social, legal, religious,

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2 An edited volume in 2021, *Global Dynamics of Shia Marriages*, edited by Annelies Moors and Yafa Shanneik, explores various strands of Twelver Shi'ism through legal and ethical practices, rituals, and everyday life experiences.

3 *Sofreh aqd* is a marriage cloth or table decorated with objects that supposedly bring luck and fertility to the newlyweds.



and economic factors that are connected to that of performing a diasporic Shi'i Iranian marriage.

In this chapter, I argue that the study of material expressions of *mahr* reveals the intricate interplay of social experiences and life that are embedded in Shi'i marriages. Through such expressions, *mahr* is not only transformed in new ways and forms, but it also conveys basic sentiments relating to Shi'i Iranian marriage vis-à-vis migration experiences. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the ways in which Shi'i marriage is conveyed, debated, and transformed, and by doing so offering a glimpse into some of the complexities that are involved in the process. Such negotiations go beyond what counts as Shi'i or Iranian for that matter and cannot be understood outside the diasporic situation that the interviewees find themselves in.

### 3 Negotiating Shi'i Iranian Marriage in Diaspora

A vast majority of the interviewees in this study reported that they reject the idea of *mahr* as representing "the sale of a woman in marriage." Considering the negative reputation of *mahr*, or *mehrieh* as it is known in the Persian parlance, one might expect that the interviewees would refrain from the practice altogether. Interestingly, however, twenty-two out of twenty-seven interviewees chose to maintain *mahr* when getting married in the diaspora (Bøe 2018, 66–67). One explanation as to why many choose to observe *mahr* in the diaspora is that it is seen as central to Iranian marriage. *Mahr* is important for Iranian diaspora marriage both as it may potentially represent an important bargaining tool for women regarding Shi'i marriage, but also because it marks what many see as "Iranian style" marriage (Bøe 2021). Like other marriage practices, *mahr* is maintained as something that "characterizes" Iranian Shi'i marriages. As mentioned earlier, such practices are observed to mark belonging to Iran and that of being Iranian when living in a diasporic setting.

Although the continuation of Iranian Shi'i marriage is prevalent among participants in this study, such practices are not conducted in uniform ways. Rather, they are subject to continuous negotiations and sometimes even come forward as highly contradictory. The interviewees in this study have conscious and active ways of negotiating Shi'ism through their use of *mahr* in the diaspora. Such negotiations are not only limited to the choice of using *mahr* or not, but also involves deliberations regarding what forms of *mahr* should be chosen and used. In what follows, the diverse forms of *mahr* that the interviewees in study performed will be presented. Their *mahrs* range from romantic tokens of their love marriages to extravagant sums of money, and for some a combination of the two.

#### 4 Norway's Iranian Community and Shi'ism

This chapter builds on research conducted as part of a three-year postdoctoral project examining *mahr* as performed by Norway's Iranian diaspora community.<sup>4</sup> The present study is an interview study in the mentioned project, but also draws on ethnographic fieldwork and document analysis conducted during the author's PhD study from 2008–2012. Empirical material was gathered during fieldwork in connection to the PhD in Tehran in 2008 and 2009, followed by the analysis of legal texts and debates relevant to *mahr* in Iranian legislation.<sup>5</sup> In 2015–2016, in-depth interviews with members of Norway's Iranian community in the two largest cities on Norway's west coast, Bergen, and Stavanger, were conducted as part of the project on *mahr* in Norway. The author interviewed 22 women and 5 men aged between 20 and 60, who were either married, divorced, or in the process of getting marriage or divorced. The interviewees were from the middle or upper-middle class of Norwegian society, which is common for most members of Norway's Iranian diaspora community. Participants were recruited for this study based on having concluded a Shi'i Iranian marriage, i. e., having their marriage concluded by an Islamic marriage contract (*aqd al-nikah*) in Iran or in Norway. Some of those who married in Norway, had their marriage authorized by a Norwegian Shi'i mosque, and some had concluded the marriage in private. There has not been any requirement for the participants to self-identify as "Shi'i." This has been an intentional choice of selection made to explore the significance Shi'i marriage hold for those who do not necessarily identify with Shi'ism or as "proper" Shi'is.

#### 5 High and Abundant Amounts of *Mahr*

At the time of our interview in 2015, Behrouz was in his late 30s. Originally from Tehran, he came to Norway five years earlier for employment purposes. Behrouz and his wife had married in Iran a few years back. He explained the correlation between high amounts of *mahr* and women's lack of divorce rights, emphasizing that a woman can ask for a high *mahr* so long as she does not demand other rights in the marriage. Behrouz also underlined how a high

4 The research project was funded by the Norwegian Research Council from 2015–2019, grant 240993.

5 Iran's Civil Code (*Qanun-e Irani-ye Madani*), articles 1078–110, are dedicated to *mahr*. In addition, singular reforms, such as the 1992 Amendments to Divorce Regulations (*Qanun-e Eslah-e Talaq*), the 2007 and 2010 version of the Family Protection Bill (*Layehe-ye Hemayat-e az Khanedvadeh*), and the 2013 policy on *mahr* are important for the current legal regulation of *mahr* in Iran.

*mahr* is symbolic of a woman's value, a way to show that she is being appreciated. He explained:

When I got married, my wife asked me for a certain amount of money. She didn't have any other demands, and I accepted immediately. It was easy and I have not paid the money so far [they are still married]. If she had a list of demands – like where to live, divorce rights, custody of children, etc. – then it would have been more complicated. Then, I think my family would have objected [to the high amount of *mahr*].<sup>6</sup>

In Iran, it is common practice to ask for a lavish sum of money as *mahr*; and, as my interviewees explained, this practice is largely carried over when they marry in Norway. The interviewees spoke of *mahrs* that consist of between 100 and 1000 gold coins (about € 28,000 and € 280,000 respectively).<sup>7</sup> In most cases, interviewees had their *mahr* registered in gold coins in the marriage contract. However, in the two cases where *mahr* was registered in Norwegian Kroner (NOK), the amounts were approximately NOK 50,000 and NOK 200,000 (equivalent to € 5,600 and € 22,600 respectively). The value of *mahr* registered in Norwegian Kroner corresponds to the general rate of *mahr* found in Mosa Sayed's study of Muslim marriage contracts in Sweden (Sayed 2008, 187–208). Sayed discovered that, in Sweden, the prompt *mahr* in Muslim marriage contracts (not exclusively Shi'i or Iranian contracts) tends to be a symbolic amount, whereas the deferred *mahr* entails between € 3,000 to € 25,000 (Sayed 2008, 191–192). According to Sayed, a person's personal characteristics and country of origin are significant to the kind and amount of *mahr* requested.

## 6 What Is *Mahr*, and Why Is It Seen as Important to Shi'i Marriages?

*Mahr* refers to the payment promised from a husband to a wife in a Muslim marriage. It is mentioned several times in the Quran (cf. 2:236; 2:237; 4:4; 4:24; 4:25) and is seen as mandatory to a Muslim marriage. In *Surat an-Nisa* it is stated: “[A]nd give the women [upon marriage] their [bridal] gifts graciously. But if they give up willingly to you anything of it, then take it in satisfaction and ease” (the Quran 4:4). Whereas the Quran refers to *mahr* as a gift, it also sometimes translates to dower or dowry. Such translation is somewhat misleading. *Mahr* does entail a provision accorded by law from the husband to the

6 Author's interview with “Behrouz” (September 2015).

7 One gold coin equals approximately € 280 at the current Iranian gold price.

wife, but in contrast to other forms of dower and dowry it is considered the sole property of the wife; not to be offered to her parents or any other party involved in the marriage. Although it is important to distinguish between what is mandated by law, by religion or by custom, *mahr* reveals some of these overlapping complexities involved in Muslim marriages.

*Mahr* tends to be divided into prompt and deferred portions. The prompt *mahr* usually consists of gold or jewelry given to the wife at the time of marriage, whereas the deferred *mahr* often involves money. The deferred *mahr* is thus a promise that a sum of money will be paid to the wife at a later stage in case the marriage is dissolved. Typically, the *mahr* is negotiated based on the bride's personal traits, her family status, etc. In the end, though, it is the husband and the wife – and their families at times – who decide what the *mahr* should consist of. This amount and/or object is entered into the marriage contract (*aqd al-nikah*) accordingly. These aspects of *mahr* are not only relevant for Shi'i marriage, but for Islamic marriages more generally. There tend to be similarities and several overlapping aspects regarding *mahr* in Islamic marriage, but also cultural variations in practice from one area to another. Moreover, what constitutes a Sunni vs. a Shi'i marriage is often defined by the religious affiliation and background of the persons involved in the marriage.

## 7 Token Amounts of *Mahr*

Token amounts of *mahr* were commonly practiced by the interviewees in this study. About two thirds of the interviewees emphasized that they aspired to counter the Iranian trend of asking for abundant amounts of money as *mahr*. In contrast, they would contract modest amounts of money or small symbols of love as *mahr*. In their view, modest *mahr* is preferred over abundant forms, and inexpensive *mahr* is seen as the most valuable. Some reported that they had only asked for a single rose as their *mahr*, whereas others had demanded sweets or chocolate. Such *mahr* claims were perceived as romantic expressions of their love marriages.

Other interviewees made explicit religious references. One couple said they contracted five *sekkeh* (gold coins) as *mahr*, symbolizing the five members of Ahl al-Bayt (People of the Household of the Prophet).<sup>8</sup> Another couple chose to have 124,000 Norwegian Kroner as *mahr*, signaling the number of prophets in Islam more generally. Yet others refer to *ḥadīth* – i. e., stories that recount

<sup>8</sup> Prophet Muhammad, Ali in Abi Talib (the first Shi'i imam and Muhammad's cousin), Fatima (Muhammad's daughter and Ali's wife), Hassan and Hussein (Muhammad's grandsons).

what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, and silently approved of – that underline inexpensive *mahr* as the most valuable in Shi‘ism. One story referred to by three different interviewees, told that the Prophet said the *mahr* could be as small as an iron ring. Through such references, the interviewees aspire to distance themselves from the “sales aspect” of Iranian marriages and to denote what they deem to be more authentic versions of Shi‘i marriage.

However, most of my interlocutors in this study reported a general reluctance towards Shi‘ism. When asked about their own relation to Shi‘ism, many would therefore be quick to classify Shi‘ism as something belonging to the Iranian state, distant from their diasporic lives. They would typically identify Shi‘ism with the regime in Iran, referring to it as “authoritarian,” “fundamentalist,” and “against women’s rights.” As for their own religiosity, it would often be described as “personal” and “spiritual.” Such sentiments towards Shi‘ism and that of being Shi‘i have been portrayed in recent studies of Iranian diaspora communities elsewhere in Europe as well (Spellman 2004; McAuliffe 2007; Alghasi 2009; Gholami 2015). In this chapter however, a focus will be on how such sentiments play out in regard to Shi‘i marriage and the practice of *mahr* in particular. Iranian-Norwegian practices of *mahr* do not merely pertain to religious connotations of marriage, but moreover involve markers of nationality as well as socio-economic and cultural status, as well their relationships, values, and aspirations for married life. Hence, the materiality of *mahr* portrays the complex interconnections existing between religion, nationality, money, and individual aspirations that are relevant for diasporic Shi‘i marriages.

In Iran, negotiations over *mahr* also pertains to aspirations of gender equality and women’s legal rights. This has, however, not always been the case. Ali, a man in his early forties who had come to Norway in the early 1990s as a political refugee, explained that when his parents got married in Iran in the 1960s, they did what was common at that time; to include mere symbolic objects as *mahr*, such as a mirror or a Quran.<sup>9</sup> The significance of *mahr* negotiations developed after the socio-economic and legal changes that Iran has undergone since the late 1970s. Prior to the 1979 revolution, the practice of negotiating *mahr* was declining among the upper classes (Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011, 435). Due to a deteriorating legal situation for women after 1979, however, women began asking for higher amounts of *mahr* in order to compensate for their lack of legal rights. Moreover, the significance of *mahr* expanded and was intrinsically linked to women-initiated divorces (*khul’*) in Iran. Although such divorces could be pursued also prior to 1979, *khul’* divorces rose in numbers after the

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9 Author’s interview with “Ali” (October 2015).

formal annulment of the 1967 Family Protection Law which had offered an improvement in women's access to divorce. After 1979 when women's access to divorce was again extremely limited, women would forfeit their *mahr* in return for their husband's consent to divorce in many cases (Mir-Hosseini 2000, 160). In this regard, *mahr* has become significant to women's legal rights in Iran. Thus, to ask for a considerable amount of money as *mahr* may not only make women financially secure in the event of dissolution of marriage, but also remedy women's lack of rights in marriage and divorce.

Ali had married his wife after arriving in Norway, and at the time he had not himself included *mahr* in his marriage. He said he was completely against the practice, and that it contravened the principle of equality that he and his wife believed was central to marriage. He argued that if women had divorce rights in Iran, there would be no need for *mahr*. He said: "It would then become only symbolic again; a mirror or a book."<sup>10</sup> Ali's view of *mahr* is linked to his refugee status and refers to his inability but also disinterest in returning to Iran under the current government. Interviewees who had similar backgrounds as Ali also most commonly rejected *mahr* or practiced it symbolically. Not dependent on the financial or the legal guarantees that *mahr* could offer in case of divorce, they could adopt symbolic forms more easily or reject the whole practice altogether. Arguably, a break with patriarchal aspects of Shi'i Iranian marriage is also more achievable and available for someone like Ali who is in a permanent diasporic situation in Norway, compared to those who intend to return to Iran at some point.

## 8 *Mahr* and Divorce

*Mahr* is not only a topic of debate in Iran, but also among Iranians in the diaspora. The participants involved in this study emphasized the legal rights and financial security offered to women through *mahr*. They noted that such functions qualified *mahr* as an important bargaining tool for women vis-à-vis the Iranian legal system (Bøe 2018, 60–62). Iranian legislation concerning marriage and divorce is based on Islamic law and offers limited rights for women in terms of divorce. Whereas a man may terminate the marriage in court without any given reason (*talaq*, Arabic *ṭalāq*), there are only a few limited options available for women to seek divorce. She may apply for the marriage to be terminated in court (*ṭatlīq*), or she may opt for a *khul'* divorce. *Khul'* is made on the wife's initiative, but still depends on the husband's consent. Usually,

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with "Ali" (October 2015).

it involves some financial compensation from the wife to the husband. In Iran, the husband is often compensated by annulling the deferred *mahr*. Ziba Mir-Hosseini has researched the issue in Iranian family courts in the 1990s and noted that *khul'* means 'to take off' and signifies the wife's reluctance towards her husband (Mir-Hosseini 2000, 38–39). In practice, though, *khul'* divorces are dependent on the approval of the husband. In the end, it is the husband who decides if he wants to divorce or not in exchange for a financial compensation. As a result, the husband can benefit financially from the wife asking for a divorce instead of initiating *talaq* himself.

In any case, *mahr* is central to the issue of divorce. Not only do women tend to give up their *mahr* to have their husband consent to *khul'*, but they also calculate a higher sum of money as *mahr* to compensate for their lack of legal rights in the Iranian system. Hence, *mahr* works as a bargaining tool in many respects in Iran. Such functions are not only relevant or limited to marriages performed inside Iran. Interviewees who married outside Iran, also expressed the need to register their marriages in Iran. If they wanted to retain the possibility of one day returning for vacation or more permanently (as many of them did), they were required to list their marriage in their Iranian identity card (Persian *shenasnameh*). This identity document is a booklet containing personal information, place and date of birth, a place for registration of marriage, children, divorce, etc. Interviewees who had gone through the process of registering their Norwegian marriage in Iran reported complications. When contacting the Iranian embassy in Oslo, they were told that they had to get a marriage contract issued by a Shi'i mosque and then to have this contract registered at the embassy. Although many of them had already married in Norway, they had to re-marry in a manner accepted by the Iranian state. Hence, several of the interviewees had to conclude an Iranian Shi'i marriage in addition to their Norwegian one and engage in a plurality of marriages (Bøe 2018, 67–68).

## 9 *Mahr* and a Wife's Sexual Availability in Shi'i Marriage

The participants involved in this study expressed reluctance towards *mahr*, particularly the way it is practiced and enforced in Iran. Out of 27 interviewees, only a couple emphasized its positive aspects over the negative ones. The payment of money that *mahr* involves has led them to question what this practice in fact symbolizes for women in Shi'i Iranian marriages. Men and women alike typically compared *mahr* to "the sale of a woman" in marriage and saw it as old-fashioned and outdated.

Such views correspond to the link often traced between a husband's financial support of the wife and the wife's sexual availability in a Muslim marriage (Quraishi-Landes 2013, 194). A woman in a Muslim marriage receives certain payments from her husband. *Nafaqa*, for instance, involves the husband's duty to pay for basic needs of the wife (food, shelter, clothes, etc.). The wife's right to *nafaqa* is stated in Articles 1106 and 1107 of the Iranian Civil Code, and entails costs for "dwelling, clothing, food, [and] furniture." In return, a wife is expected and required to perform obedience or be submissive (*tamkin*) to her husband. The wife's compliance involves performing sexual services, and on the basis of performing *tamkin* she is entitled to *nafaqa*.<sup>11</sup> In the event of a wife's disobedience or not fulfilling her responsibilities towards her husband (*nushuz*), she could lose her right to *nafaqa*. Consequently, the doctrines of *nafaqa* and *nushuz* are highly interconnected, as the latter decides the wife's obligations towards her husband in order to receive maintenance and mostly concerns making her body available to her husband.

A similar connection is made regarding *mahr*. For instance, the size and form of *mahr* is calculated based on the bride's traits, such as age, beauty, previous marriages, sexual experience, etc. A young, previously unmarried, and presumably virgin woman can thus expect to receive a higher *mahr* than a middle aged, divorced woman. For this reason, many Iranians see *mahr* as selling and buying a woman through marriage. The Iranian Civil Code is quite explicit in defining *mahr* vis-à-vis the wife's willingness to fulfill her duties. Article 1085 states that:

So long as the marriage portion (*mahr*) is not delivered to her, the wife can refuse to fulfil the duties which she has to her husband provided, however, that the marriage portion is payable at once. This refusal does not debar her from right of maintenance expenses.

Correspondingly, if the husband fails to pay *mahr* or *nafaqa*, the wife is not obliged to perform any sexual activities in the marriage. Such provisions point to the inextricable connection existing between *mahr* and a wife's sexual availability in marriage.

Although the results of this study show that symbolic *mahr* is a widespread phenomenon among the Iranian diasporic community in Norway, most

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11 According to Article 1108 in the Iranian Civil Code, the lack of obedience of a wife towards her husband (*'adam-e tamkin*) is also identified as a reason for men to seek divorce (Mir-Hosseini 2000, 59).



interviewees still retained substantial sums of money in combination with the symbolic as their deferred *mahr*. Many examples of this came up during the interviews. For instance, one interviewee mentioned that her husband's right hand was registered as *mahr* in her marriage contract.<sup>12</sup> Parvin recounted that registering a body part was based on romantic intents to underline the close connection and the interdependence of the couple in marriage, but the value is still calculated according to *diyeh*, the blood money or financial compensation paid to the victim in case of bodily harm (Vikør 2003, 264). Parvin explained that *diyeh* may also be used to signify the value of a woman's *mahr*; a man's right hand has a certain monetary value according to such *diyeh* rules, and if the marriage ends the wife receives that amount as *mahr*. The migration background of this interviewee seems highly relevant for her choice of symbolic *mahr*. Parvin had moved to Norway to marry a man who already lived in the country, and at first relied on her husband in all respects. This situation might explain why she had opted for such a characteristic form of *mahr*, to mark symbolically that the two of them were closely interconnected, but also her dependency of her husband.

Other interviewees also combined large sums of money with symbolic forms of *mahr* by inserting token properties as *mahr* in the marriage contract. For instance, one interviewee's *mahr* consisted of a five-bedroom house in Paradis, one of Bergen's most expensive residential areas. If the marriage should end, the wife would receive the equivalent of what such a house would cost. The combination of high amounts of money with symbolic forms of *mahr* is connected to another common trend in Iran, as well as in Norway, to have the wife's birth year in gold coins (*bazar azadi*) as *mahr*; so, if a woman was born in 1370/1991, her *mahr* would equate to the value of 1370 gold coins.<sup>13</sup> Such examples of token *mahr* were primarily used by interviewees who maintained close connections with relatives in Iran, and occasionally would return to their home country on vacation, but who did not necessarily have any intention of moving back permanently.

Asking for high amounts of money as *mahr* covered up as romantic symbols, are not limited to diasporic and Shi'i Iranian marriages. This trend has also been documented by the anthropologist Annelies Moors' study of *mahr* practices in the Jabal Nablus district in Palestine (Moors 2008). The women in Moors' study would register token *mahr* as "a move towards modernity," but they still had very different possibilities for making such token *mahr* claims (Moors 2008, 88). Moors found that there was a complete disjuncture between

12 Author's interview with "Parvin" (August 2016).

13 1370 gold coins (*bazar azadi*) are worth approximately € 383,600 at the 2019 gold price.

the sum of money registered in the marriage contract and the gift that was actually provided in such token *mahr* claims (Moors 2008, 85). In some cases, more valuable gifts would be involved in token *mahr* than if a financial *mahr* had been entered in the marriage contract.

In the case of this study's interviewees, high amounts of *mahr* covered up as symbolic deferred *mahr* portray the importance of maintaining the financial and legal bargaining power of the *mahr*, but still marking a distancing from the practice. Although large amounts of money would ultimately be involved if the marriage is dissolved, symbolic forms of *mahr* turn it into something seemingly less transactional. Not only that, but it may also be seen as a move away from certain patriarchal aspects of Iranian Shi'i marriage. It is important to note that there is a clear differentiation to be found between the interviewees in this regard. Financially independent women marrying for the second time were in a better position to turn their *mahr* into a mere token amount, as they did not rely on *mahr* as a financial and legal bargaining tool in the same respects as women marrying for the first time, who relied on their husband for financial support or because they might calculate children into their marriage. In any case, the use of symbolic *mahr* among the interviewees also represents a continuation of Iranian Shia marriage in diaspora.

## 10 Controversies Surrounding *Mahr* in Iran

Behrouz, who stressed the correlation between high amounts of *mahr* and women's lack of divorce rights earlier in this chapter, was also highly concerned that high amounts of *mahr* have become widespread in Iran, and that most men are not even expected to pay. He explained:

A woman can ask for almost as much as she wants, because the probability that we have to pay is very small. I could just refuse or postpone it or pay small portions. In this way I could easily get away. I believe this is the reason why so many men accept such high amounts.<sup>14</sup>

Behrouz's point is visible in many areas of Iranian society. For one, *mahr* has been central to various legal debates in Iran in recent years. In 2007, the Family Protection Bill (*Layehe-ye Hemayat-e az Khanevadeh*) was first introduced.

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14 Author's interview with "Behrouz" (September 2015).

Dealing with topics such as polygyny (*chandzani*),<sup>15</sup> temporary marriage (*sighe*) and *mahr*, the bill was discussed and revised in several rounds in the Iranian Parliament (*Majles*) from 2007 until 2011 (Bøe 2015, 93–107). Then in 2013, *mahr*'s significance for Iranian society was once again underscored. A new policy was enforced stating that *mahr* claims could not exceed 110 gold coins (approximately € 31,000) unless the husband was financially capable of meeting higher demands. If the husband should have problems with paying *mahr* claims the court could in any case order him to pay in instalments (Yassari 2016, 165). The law was ratified after years of debate and reveals some of the complexities and controversies surrounding the practice of *mahr* in Iran. The 2013 law introducing a ceiling on *mahr* demands was a maneuver taken by the state to tackle the continuous growth in *mahr* claims. Not only did increasingly expensive *mahr* contribute to the rising costs of getting married, but to young people postponing or shying away from marriage altogether. Increasing *mahr* claims also led to a large number of men being imprisoned for not paying their ex-wives their due *mahr* claims after divorce.

The debates on *mahr* reveal a larger marriage crisis in Iran. Young men and women are postponing marriage, and some have even lost interest in marriage altogether. According to Iran Statistics, the average marriage age has gradually increased from 24,1 for men and 19,7 for women in 1979, to 27,4 for men and 23,8 for women in 2016 when the last nationwide census was conducted (Tehran Times 2018). In contrast to the booming population growth in the 1980s following Iran's successful population program, the country experienced rapid fertility declines over the last decades (United Nations 2013). What is more, the costs of marriage are sky-high. *Mahr* is only one of the expenses the husband is expected to cover. Not only are men expected to pay for extravagant weddings, but also expenses for the maintenance of the wife (*nafaqa*) have reached high levels.

These shifts are due both to changing social norms, but also the deteriorating economic situation in the country in recent years. Young people are experiencing trouble finding work and securing a steady income. In turn, this situation leads many to postpone marriages and put their aspirations to establish a family on hold. Such developments are not exclusive to Iran, but they signify trends that concern the Iranian government in terms of marriage rates and population growth.

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15 Polygyny refers to marriages involving one husband and several wives, which is the most common form of polygamy.

Another explanation for the growth of and negotiations over *mahr* is captured by the Persian saying *cheshm ham cheshmi*. Although the phrase is not transferrable to English, it refers to the social competition and envy found amongst many Iranian families. Asieh, a woman in her early forties who had come to Norway through family reunification, remarked: "If your neighbors' daughter gets 1000 gold coins as *mahr*, then your daughter should match or exceed that amount."<sup>16</sup> Arash, another interviewee, explained that these days *mahr* entails some sort of competition over who has the highest amounts in their marriage. Arash had come to Norway for work and was himself not a big fan of the sales aspect that increasing amounts of money signaled. Although he disregarded the practice, he said: "We have to have it! Because these days everyone in Iran has it!"<sup>17</sup>

These social mechanisms are not only found in Iran; according to my interviewees, they are also prevalent among families of Iranian background in Norway. Still, the social norms and expectations may only offer part of the explanation as to what constitutes *mahr*, how it is negotiated and performed. It has become common practice for women to make high *mahr* demands to compensate for their lack of legal rights and their experience of facing an uncertain financial situation in case of divorce. This uncertainty is not only caused by the deteriorating economy in Iran, but also by Iran's legal discrimination against women in terms of access to divorce. Lavish amounts of money contracted as *mahr* are caused by the insecurity many women experience due to their lack of legal and financial rights in marriage and in case of divorce in the Iranian legal system. In such cases, *mahr* works as a legal and financial security for these women. Interestingly, such motivations are persistent among the interviewees in this study as well. Many of them maintain high amounts of *mahr* as a legal and financial security in case they return to Iran, and some also preserve the practice as an expression of 'Iranian-ness,' as documented in another publication resulting from this study (Bøe 2021). Just like having a big wedding, the *sofreh aqd*,<sup>18</sup> and other Iranian wedding rituals, *mahr* persists to mark the Iranian character of their marriage.

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16 Author's interview with "Asieh" (August 2016).

17 Author's interview with "Arash" (October 2015).

18 In Iran, *sofreh aqd* typically involves decorations such as herbs, cakes, a mirror, candelabras, rose water, fruit, sugar cubes, a bowl of coins, a copy of the Quran, a prayer rug (*jay-e namaz*), and fertility symbols such as decorated eggs, almonds, and walnuts.

## 11 Negotiating Shi'i Iranian Marriage through the Materiality of *Mahr*

The interviewees in this study negotiate the meaning, function, and usage of *mahr* widely. They make use of token amounts, but also abundant sums of money as *mahr*. These material forms of *mahr* express patterns of negotiations over religious, social, legal, and economic factors involved in diasporic Shi'i marriages. Such negotiations can be interpreted and understood in diverse ways. Similar to Shanneik's (2017) findings in her study of Shi'i marriage practices among Iraqi women in Britain, my interlocutors' continuance of *mahr* can be explained to signify stability by marking belonging to Shi'i Iranian marriage. In contrast to Shanneik's study, however, the interviewees in this study portrayed how symbolic *mahr* is also used as a means of distancing from certain aspects of Shi'i Iranian marriage. They target the transactional aspect of *mahr* and what they see as patriarchal undertones of such marriages in particular. Additionally, instances of high value *mahr* covered up as romantic tokens are in use as a golden mean for those who want to refrain from traditional *mahrs*, but still rely on its financial and legal significance.

Nira Yuval-Davis' distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging can be useful for explaining the mixed sentiments involved. Belonging, she writes, entails an emotional attachment and feeling "at home" (Yuval-Davis 2011). It may refer to home as a safe place, but it may also generate feelings such as anger, resentfulness, and shame. According to Yuval-Davis, politics of belonging, however, refers to

specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivities which are themselves being constructed in very specific ways and in very specific boundaries (Yuval-Davis 2011, 10).

A similar distinction may prove useful regarding the interviewees' diverse *mahr* practices. *Mahr* has come to symbolize a sense of belonging to Iran and "Iranian-ness," and for a few of the interviewees it denotes a religious characterization of their marriage. They may also refer to social norms and expectations as to what *mahr* should consist of and how it should be performed. Still, the material expressions of *mahr* are moreover connected to the politics of belonging and to that of specific political projects, seen by most of the interviewees as enforced by Iran. Such politics entail aspects of sexuality and patriarchy involved in Shi'i Iranian marriages, but also women's lack of legal rights in such marriages. Hence, the material expressions of *mahr* convey both belonging and distancing from Shi'i Iranian marriages.

The financial and non-financial versions of *mahr*, as performed by the participants in this study, exemplify how these marriage practices relate to materiality. The material manifestations of *mahr* are connected to their different diasporic experiences of Shi'i Iranian marriages. Bräunlein claims that migration experiences are tied together with personal aspirations and emotions, which can be accessed precisely through material expressions of religion. The objects, both the symbolic and the high-value financial sums included as *mahr*, point towards how the interviewees connect differently to their religious background and to Iranian Shi'ism.

As such, material negotiations of *mahr* pave way for a non-binary understanding of what counts as Shi'i and not for the interviewees in this study. Although their use of *mahr* entails both distancing from patriarchal and inequal aspects of the practice, it also represents an important aspect of emotional and affective attachment to Iran. Hence, the transnational Shi'i marriages that Norwegian-Iranians engage in demonstrate the complexities of national, cultural, social, and religious belonging, but moreover the political, legal, and socio-economic factors involved. The usages of *mahr* do not convey one uniform and fixed Shi'i marriage, but rather reveal patterns of negotiations over the diverse factors that together make up Shi'i marriages for members of the Norwegian-Iranian diaspora.

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**PART 3**

*Sacred Objects and the Materiality of  
Shi'i Life-Worlds*







## Turbat al-Husayn

### *Development of a Tabarruk Ritual in Early Shi'i Community*

*S. M. Hadi Gerami and Ali Imran Syed*

Considering the significance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbala and its role in developing collective Shi'i identity<sup>1</sup> during the first Islamic century (Anno Hegirae, hereafter AH), any relevant associations would come to be seen as symbolic, becoming part of the sacred memory of the Imami (Twelver) Shi'i community. Pilgrimage visits and material objects, such as the soil taken from Husayn's grave, would play a pivotal role in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of reviving his memory and recounting his status, the grave soil of Husayn has occupied a prominent position. The Shi'i imams presented it as an object through which the community could strengthen its physical and spiritual dimensions. The related reports can illustrate how the soil was fundamentally presented as a source of blessing and that these blessings were mainly to be pursued by, though not limited to, therapeutic oral use, and how much of the subsequent discourse revolved around the conditions, names, and advantages of its use and other uses. These statements are made despite the absolute prohibition by Shi'i jurists of orally consuming any other soil (Al-Khu'i 1991, 88), as well as the chastisement of those who consume soil from the graves of any other imam. The venerative history of the soil can be seen in the formation of certain rituals, such as placing the soil in a newborn's palate, tasting it for recuperation, and using it to break the fasting month of Ramadan on the feast of Eid al-Fitr.

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- 1 What is meant by collective identity in this chapter is a sense of belonging to a social group that is formed and shaped through the collective memories of that group. A collective memory is comprised of cultural and communicative memories of the past that are widely shared amongst community members and binds them together. See, Brunner (2005, 318–360).
  - 2 Babak Rahimi and Peyman Eshaghi (2019, 7) in their collection of essays provide a thematic account of Muslim *ziyāra* (pilgrimage). They consider the performance of *ziyāra* less about how Islamic it is and more about what different ways pilgrims perceive, undertake, express, and internalize the performance. In this light, *tabarruk* rituals are subordinate to the performance of *ziyāra* and are to be seen as merely one of many other significant practices that occur during pilgrimage.

It is fitting to place contemporary studies and debates on the grave of Husayn in the sense of more general studies on the tradition of *tabarruk* (seeking blessings)<sup>3</sup> in which members of the community pursue blessings through the bodies or objects of prophets and saints. In his study on mimesis, mediation and ingestion, Finbarr Barry Flood elaborates on various devotional practices amongst Christians and Muslims involving bodily engagement, to argue that not only are such rituals common to many religious traditions, but that they embody the capacity of materiality to mediate sacrality that exists both transculturally and transhistorically (Flood 2014, 461). While it falls outside the context of practices sanctioned in modernity as a fitting response to material and objects associated with sacred figures, Flood (2014, 462) suggests that the resistance and longevity of some of these practices have in fact caused them to conform to modern technologies, further stressing their significance to religious tradition participants. Parker Selby (2017, 53) highlights the aspect of seeking blessings by drawing parallels between the practice of Christian and Islamic saint cults, elaborating on how both show devotion to a martyr's final resting place and occupy themselves by collecting relics associated with a saint's body. He recalls several cases where both Christian and Shi'i traditions speak of using the grave soils of saints for their curative and talismanic properties and concludes that the Shi'i practice of using Husayn's grave soil may have been borrowed from a wider tradition of pilgrimage shared by pre-Islamic Jewish, Greek, or Roman religions (Selby 2017, 58).

Josef Meri (1999, 51–52) suggests that the grave soil of Imam Husayn and the soil of Karbala more generally played a significant role as an object of veneration and a source of blessing. Since the phenomenon of seeking blessings requires physical as well as spiritual interaction with the object of devotion, many Shi'i pilgrims to Karbala would orally consume the grave soil or take an amount back with them for continued benefits. In his extensive analysis on the motif of the soil of Karbala, Khalid Sindawi (2012, 21–40) concludes that while the soil, due to its association with misfortune, was considered cursed during the first two Islamic centuries, the community's attitudes towards it eventually changed. As it was also the burial place of Husayn, they went from

3 *Baraka* is understood as a quality of intercession. Josef Meri (1999, 63) considers that *baraka* is transmitted in four primary ways, including "through physical contact, such as touching, hugging, and kissing a saint. Its recipient ordinarily does not receive enough of it to transfer it to a third party." This is referred to as *tabarruk*. Richard Kurin (1983, 314) sees that blessedness is commonly conceived of as a transcendent spiritual (*ruhānī*) quality originating from Allah and transmitted through objects and persons closely associated with Him. Blessedness may become substantiated or imbued within material objects or human beings in the form of *tabarruk* (more information on *tabarruk*, see Arabestani 1398 SH: *passim*).

considering it cursed to seeing it as sanctified. This attitude was often justified through various traditions, such as those granting it higher significance than the soil of Mecca and those associating it with past prophets and messengers. Mehreen Jiwan (2019) in her study expounds on the notion of the soil's scent and how it was employed as a means of shaping the Shi'i worldview. According to Jiwan, the scent of the grave soil is the means through which the Shi'i experience Husayn's spiritual presence with which they desire to build a connection. She concludes that smelling the soil of Karbala constructs a collective memory which revolves around mourning Husayn, making present the loss of the imam, as well as linking the community to its hagiographic past and salvific future.

However, these studies do not date the advent and development of this tradition in the early Shi'i community, and it would be inaccurate to conclude that it was widespread in the years immediately following Husayn's martyrdom. In the larger sense, the study of the formation and development of *turbat* rituals in the early Shi'i community remained somewhat unknown. The present study argues that many extant reports related to the grave soil of Husayn should be regarded with respect to the historical development of these rituals in the early Shi'i community. By way of a historical and textual study of the primary sources of Twelver Shi'ism, this chapter will include an account of the origin and development of the rituals of the seeking blessings in the grave of Husayn. This study sheds light on the discourse surrounding the soil of Karbala and, more specifically, contributes to a deeper understanding of its development in the early Shi'i community.

## 1 Karbala, *Turbat al-Husayn*, and Early Shi'i Collective Identity

Although before the martyrdom of Husayn, the Muslims had just been divided into two dominant parties, namely the supporters of the Alid family and the supporters of Mu'awiyya, the distinct Shi'i community due to a specific code of conduct and shared collective memory did not yet exist (Nakash 1993, 161). Knowing when a Twelver Shi'i collective identity was formed rests on knowing the exact point in time the Shi'a<sup>4</sup> began seeing themselves as a community

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4 This volume uses Shi'i, the adjective form derived from Arabic, to denote an attribute of a proper or common noun. Additionally, the Shi'a, derived from the Arabic noun al-Shi'a, is employed in this chapter as a reference to the Shi'i religious community, a social category with a particular religious and political implication.

distinct from the general populous, and furthermore, distinct from other Shi'i trends and off-shoots.

Maria Massi Dakake's *Loyalty, Love and Faith: Defining the Boundaries of the Early Shi'ite Community* is perhaps the most significant work which provides an overview of collective identity formation in Shi'ism.<sup>5</sup> Dakake focuses on two early concepts – *walāya* (divine authority) and *imān* (belief)<sup>6</sup> – which were ever-present in Shi'i literature and highlights three stages of the development of the collective Shi'i identity. In the first stage, the Shi'a began to recognize themselves as an active and self-sacrificing group whose members would assert their association through personal beliefs. In the second stage, which took place during the later period of the Umayyad dynasty, the Shi'a would adopt more absolutist and selective views, such that they would view themselves as a community chosen by God, existing in a world which was divided into believers and disbelievers. In the third and final stage, which occurred during the initial period of the Abbasid dynasty, the Shi'a adopted a subtler, albeit hierarchical, view of the members of their community; this view was fundamentally concerned with their co-existential relationship with the majority, the non-Shi'i community. These early years served as the catalyst for the formation of a set of religio-legal norms and paved the way for an integrated community which would eventually distinguish itself from the rest of the Muslim community (Dakake 2000, iii).

Perhaps no other event in Islamic history has played as prominent a role in shaping collective Shi'i identity as the martyrdom of Husayn and his companions in the Battle of Karbala. One of the most significant events during the formative period of Shi'ism was the martyrdom of the third Shi'i imam, Husayn, in Karbala in 680. The Battle of Karbala instilled certain perceptions within the Shi'i community which culminated in a distinct theology, rooted in the belief of a divine leader appointed directly by God. While the tragedy of Karbala had a deep impact on the perceptions of Muslim communities, for the Shi'a it transcended mere emotional commitment or desire for retribution.

The events of Karbala quickly paved the way for a discourse which highlighted a symbolic stance against an oppressive power, whose climax was the martyrdom of Husayn. This event was a movement which altered the prerogative of the subsequent Shi'i imams; that is to say, it was a transition

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5 While most research done on Shi'ism tends to focus on its credibility and the evolution of the belief in imamate, Dakake's work investigates other aspects of the evolution of early Shi'ism, focusing instead on the changes that occurred within the community, rather than solely its leadership.

6 Unless otherwise stated, a simplified transliteration of Persian words is mostly used throughout this chapter. Where necessary, the Arabic term is provided in accordance with a simplified version of the IJMES transliteration.

from Husayn, a politically active individual whose intention was to implement just government, to his relatively silent successor (Moghadam 2012, 14). After Karbala, instead of the imam being recognized as a politically active authority whose role was to rectify the transgressions committed against the rights of Ahl al-Bayt, the family of the Prophet Muhammad, the imam was instead considered to be a possessor of religious and political insight which constituted the divine Islamic revelatory teachings. Though Muslim societies in general had been politically unstable since the middle of the second century AH, this was a crucial period for the Shi'a to express themselves against various opponents and religious trends which enjoyed political support (Sachedina 1995; Kohlberg 1975, 396; Hodgson 1955, 1).

During the times of the fifth and sixth imams, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 114/732) and Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), the collective Shi'i identity became well-formed (Pakatchi 1380 AHsh, 158–159). The Twelver Shi'a are indebted to the imams' efforts in formulating a religio-legal Shi'i doctrine, which was previously unclear, and even influenced by the *'amma* (commoners). An explicit report from al-Sadiq shows that though Shi'i imamate sequentially began from the first century AH, "the Shi'a before [al-Baqir] did not know what they were required to know from the permissible and the impermissible," (al-Kashi 1409 AH, 424) and the source for their knowledge on these matters was the non-Shi'a. With al-Baqir's efforts, the Shi'i doctrine, particularly in matters of law, began to take shape, and eventually, the Shi'a became less dependent on others for their religious inquiries.

Subsequently, a distinguished congregational identity began to develop, especially in Kufa, amongst al-Sadiq's companions and students. This group came to be known as al-Ja'fariyya. According to one report, when Abu Kurayba and Muhammad bin Muslim – two companions of Jafar al-Sadiq – were brought to Sharik b. 'Abdillah b. Sinan, the judge of Kufa, to bear witness in a case, he addressed them as Ja'fari Fatimi (Al-Kashi 1409 AH, 162). It was within this framework of identity-formation that the Shi'a began referring to the majority of the Muslim community as the *'amma*. It is not clear when the term *'amma* began to be used extensively amongst the Shi'a; however, the term does exist in a few reports attributed to al-Baqir, suggesting that it may have been common jargon amongst his companions. It is possible that the Arabic term *maqālat al-'awāmm* (the doctrines of the masses or commoners), which was used to refer to an unknown group soon after the martyrdom of Husayn, may have been the initial basis for the term's usage in later periods (Kohlberg 2011).

It was in such circumstances that traditions and anecdotes in reference to events related to the military campaign of Karbala developed a symbolism of religious affiliation to an afflicted and martyred Husayn. The sorrowful events of Karbala embodied various salient and symbolic qualities which helped to

develop a shared collective memory for the Shi'a. The consequences of the event led to the formation of various social norms, fostered greater persistence and strength, and allowed for the differentiation of the Shi'a from the larger Muslim community, who they began to refer to as the commoners. Through the course of history, the Shi'a have consciously resorted to different rituals to invoke memories of the events of Karbala. Elements such as memorial services, chest-beating, pilgrimages and visitations to the shrines, and other similar acts have been used to shape identity and solidify collective memory. One such associated element is *turbat al-Husayn*, which has been used by the Shi'a throughout the centuries in various ways and for different reasons (Nakash 1993, 161–162). Sindawi (2012, 36–39) pointed out that *turbat al-Husayn* has served as an important element in developing the Twelver Shi'i sectarian identity.

## 2 *Turbat al-Husayn* as a Ritual of Seeking Blessings in Shi'ism

As the Shi'a developed their communal bonds under the guidance of al-Baqir and al-Sadiq, they came to be identified through numerous salient qualities and practices. In this light, the grave soil of Husayn became a well-known object of veneration and seeking blessings. A great part of these veneration was concerned with the consumption of the soil for its curative properties. According to the Twelver jurisprudential tradition, consuming soil from around the vicinity of any grave, or rather, all soil in general, is prohibited; the soil from the grave of Husayn is the only exception to this rule. According to a report attributed to al-Sadiq, eating soil is akin to eating "carrion, blood and swine," (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 285), which indicates the severity of its prohibition. It is important to note, however, that though the grave soil of Husayn is considered an exception, al-Sadiq has likened eating an excessive amount of it to eating the flesh and blood of the family of Husayn (al-Tusi 1411 AH, 466, 734). This statement highlights the fact that his grave soil should be orally consumed with precaution and only to the extent necessary.

The methods of consumption which formed part of this ritual of *tabarruk* for the nascent Shi'i community were not uniform. One of the methods reported involves taking a small amount of soil from Husayn's grave and placing it on the palate of a newborn child (Al-Majlisi 1403 AH, vol. 98, 136). Another ritual relates to the celebratory occasion of Eid al-Fitr, which occurs after a month-long period of fasting during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. As per one report, the Shi'a are recommended to break their fast on the last day with a small amount of soil to mark the end of the fasting period and the start of a day of festivity (Nuri 1408 AH, vol. 6, 135). In most other extant

accounts in Twelver works, the soil has generally been introduced as a treatment and a source of healing as we will demonstrate in this chapter. In some of these reports, a specific way of consuming the soil by mixing it with honey and saffron has been detailed. A few narrations describe its consumption by making it into a drink, while others delineate the preparation of a prayer bead mixed with water to be used for treatment (al-Tusi 1414 AH, 319–320). In some reports, a series of supplications have been prescribed for recitation while consuming the soil (al-Tusi 1411 AH, vol. 2, 734; Ibn Quluwayh 1356 SH, 280).

Though most reports about the grave soil concern its sanctity and the various methods of consumption, they have not been limited to these prescriptions. In Twelver jurisprudential works, extensive discussions have taken place with respect to the soil's use as a clay tablet for prostration during prayer<sup>7</sup> or for the purpose of making prayer beads (al-Tusi 1407 AH, vol. 6, 75). At the time of burial, it has also been recommended to place a small amount of this soil on the coffin (Shahid II 1422 AH, vol. 2, 383), such that the deceased may enjoy tranquility and ease when passing into the afterlife. Additionally, some have mentioned including a small amount of the soil of Husayn's grave with objects for their safety while being transported.

### 3 The Earliest Debates on *Turbat*

Even though Ali Zayn al-ʿAbidin, Husayn's son, played a unique role in highlighting the event of Karbala, the earliest report pertaining to *turbat al-Husayn* comes after his time. Extant reports in Shi'i sources indicate that veneration of the soil as a source of *tabarruk* and cure can be traced back to the early second century AH. Numerous narrations indicate that discourse concerning the grave soil developed as early as the first half of the second century, amongst which the traditions of the two imams, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 177/733) and his son, al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), appear to be most prominent. However, even during these years the greatest number of reports specifically using the term *turbat al-Husayn* are attributed to al-Sadiq. The content and quantity of these reports are significant enough for one to assume that this specific discourse was prevalent during the first half of the second Islamic century. These reports lead us to

7 While examining Shi'i jurisprudential opinions on soil as an object of prostration during *ṣalāt* (prayers), Robert Gleave highlights that the soil of Karbala has been subject to several legal debates. These discussions range from what constitutes disrespect to the soil, to whether it is permissible to break one's fast with it in the month of Ramadan, to placing it in the funeral bier before burial (Gleave 2012, 242).



a high degree of assurance that such discourse did indeed begin forming and developing during this period.

The debate around the practice of seeking blessings from the soil of Husayn was not distinct from the general practice of seeking blessings from the grave soil of the dead. It appears that seeking blessings from the tombs of the dead had a precedent in the Islamic community even before Husayn's martyrdom (see later in this section). Due to his noble status, the practice of seeking blessings through the grave soil of Husayn was deemed to be of greater importance.

In some reports, the curative properties of Husayn's grave soil have been discussed, while in others, the specific methods of consuming the soil for seeking blessings and cures have been described. In the earliest extant report on *turbat*, al-Baqir speaks about a paste prepared by mixing honey, saffron, and soil taken from the grave of Husayn for treating the sick (al-Barqi 1371, vol. 2, 500). In another narration, al-Baqir advises his companion, Muhammad ibn Muslim al-Thaqafi, to consume a drink mixed with the grave soil of Husayn, to cure his illness (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 SH, 274–275).

Though the later Twelver Shi'i jurisprudential tradition would forbid the consumption of all soil except that of the grave of Husayn, it is important to note that in the aforementioned incident where Muḥammad ibn Muslim al-Thaqafi is cured by means of a drink al-Baqir prescribed him, there is no explicit mention of whether the soil used in that drink was from the grave of Husayn. Rather, al-Baqir's narration suggests that the soil was taken from the graves of his forefathers. This wording implies that at that time, al-Baqir perhaps had not yet restricted therapeutic consumption of soil to the grave soil of Husayn; rather, it was inclusive of the graves of other Shi'i imams as well.

In another corroborative account attributed to al-Sadiq, he explicitly states that the grave soils of the Prophet, Ali, Hassan, and al-Baqir can cure ailments. The narration, however, is silent on the method of seeking this cure; hence, it cannot be concluded whether such healing is accomplished through oral consumption (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 SH, 280). Furthermore, in response to a question posed to al-Sadiq regarding the quality of prayer beads made from the grave soil of Husayn and Ḥamza (d. 3/624), Prophet Muhammad's uncle and key aide in the formative years of Islam, al-Sadiq says that the merits of a prayer bead made from Husayn's grave soil is so great that "it does *tasbīḥ*<sup>8</sup> in the hand of a man without he himself actively glorifying" (Ibn Mashhadi 1419 AH, 367; al-Tabrisi 1412 AH, 281). This question and response acknowledge that the grave soil of Hamza had been used to make prayer beads, and was also seen as a source of blessing for the early Muslim community.

8 *Tasbīḥ* refers to the repetitive utterances of short sentences in glorification of Allah, by saying, for example, *subḥānallāh*, literally meaning 'glorified be God.'

Although a few of the aforementioned incidents explicitly allude to the inherent blessings found in other grave soils, other reports emphasize that the seeking of blessings through ingesting and eating soil, regardless of its source, is prohibited upon the children of Adam, excepting the grave soil of Husayn (al-Majlisi 1403 AH, vol. 57, 154). The existence of reports which prohibit the consumption of soil indicates the presence of practices of seeking blessings through consuming the soil of gravesites belonging to noble personalities within the Muslim community. If the two aforementioned accounts of al-Baqir and al-Sadiq are true, it appears that the imams may have initially allowed the seeking of blessings through orally consuming the grave soils of a few selected figures. Eventually, however, they came to forbid these practices, prohibiting *tabarruk* in this specific manner. This prohibition would exempt the grave soil of Husayn.

These early instances describe how the grave soil of Husayn seems to have first been introduced to the Shi'i community. The reports on the grave soil which date back to the former half of the second Islamic century indicate that the earliest use of the soil was as a cure for ailments, as specifically prescribed by al-Baqir and al-Sadiq. Narrations which would follow in the latter half of the second Islamic century would not only be greater in quantity, but more detailed as well.

#### 4 Contribution of Imam al-Sadiq to the Development of *Turbat* Debates

During al-Sadiq's imamate, which comprised the second quarter of the second Islamic century, the healing properties of Husayn's grave soil continued to be emphasized. A report in which Abu Hamza al-Thumali – a companion of al-Sadiq – relates a conversation he had with al-Sadiq in Mecca on this subject illustrates how seeking cure and blessings through the grave soil had become so prevalent amongst the Twelver Shi'a that he questions the imam about the accuracy of such sanctification (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 280). Some reports even indicate that a paste mixed with the soil taken from the grave of Husayn was distributed for the treatment of the ill in Kufa during his time (al-Kulayni 1407 AH, vol. 4, 588).

As a result, certain developments also occurred during this period which differentiated it from those preceding it. Several rituals related to Husayn's grave soil came into existence or became sanctified during al-Sadiq's time, many of which did not have precedents during his father's imamate. One such act involved encouraging the placement of a small amount of soil inside the mouth of a newborn child (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 278). However, it cannot

be precisely established that this ritual had become a widespread practice amongst the Shi'a. It must be acknowledged that during a historical investigation of a community, the mere emphasis or encouragement of a practice seen in some accounts does not necessitate the prevalence of a practice in the community at large.

Another development which occurred during the mid-second Islamic century was the placement of detailed conditions on those who sought cure for their ailments from the grave soil. Surprisingly, some reports appear to emphasize that the healing properties of the soil are closely linked to the user's assertion to the right of divine authority and leadership of Abu 'Abdillah, an epithet which either refers to Jafar al-Sadiq or to Husayn himself (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 278).

As discourse amongst the Shi'a related to the sanctified status of Husayn's grave soil expanded during al-Sadiq's time, a new aspect, previously of little concern, began to be addressed. Questions arose related to the boundaries of the grave from where the soil could be taken, and which soil possessed the qualities and blessings that had become well-known to the Shi'a. In response to these concerns, it appears that the term *ḥā'ir*, linguistically meaning a hollow land where water collects, came to be used for Husayn's sanctuary, highlighting the boundaries which delineated the soil of his grave (Nuri 1408 AH, vol. 10, 331). In some traditions, these boundaries have specifically been defined and outlined (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 275, 280; al-Mufid 1413 AH, 145). This specification of boundaries was so precise and was taken so seriously that some would even dig holes around the grave of Husayn to mark it, to ensure that the correct soil was taken for seeking blessings (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 279).

Despite the prevalent practice of taking and using this soil, some accounts have indicated skepticism; individuals who used the soil to cure their ailments but did not see any results questioned the soil's healing properties and whether it was truly blessed. In response to this, there are some narrations from al-Sadiq where he discusses required pre-conditions for the effectivity of the soil, and which situations would not result in any effect (al-Rawandi 1407 AH, 186).

In addition to the theological belief in divine authority, having certainty in the grave soil's effects, as well as keeping it out of the reach of the devils and the *djinn*,<sup>9</sup> were also conditions for one to see considerable results of the soil. In a few reports, it is emphasized that the moment the soil is removed from the sanctuary, it is no longer under the protection of angels, and devils and genies can corrupt its effects by touching it themselves (Ibn Quluwayh 1356

9 *Djinn* is an Islamic term referring to the otherworldly realm of the spirits and the demons.

AHSh, 281). It is perhaps for this reason that other reports specify etiquettes and supplications for the moment the soil is taken from Husayn's sanctuary. These would have been prescribed out of the possibility that, once removed from its source, the soil's effects would cease to exist (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHSh, 283–284).

## 5 Development of *Turbat* Rituals in the Second Half of the Second Islamic Century

In the second half of the second Islamic century, a report from the seventh Shi'i imam – Musa al-Kazim (d. 183/799) – signifies that by the time of his imamate, the practice of taking soil for blessings from the graves of righteous and noble personalities had become widespread. This act was censured, as demonstrated by al-Kazim's explicit prohibition to his companion “not to take anything from my soil for the purpose of seeking blessings, for all our soil is prohibited except the soil of my grandfather Husayn” (al-Saduq 1420 AH, vol. 1, 100–104). In another report, he echoes the sentiments of his father, Ja'far al-Sadiq, emphasizing that the oral consumption of soil is prohibited, as is the consumption of blood, carrion, and swine, but that consuming soil from the grave of Husayn is an exception to the rule and a cure for all ailments (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHSh, 285).

The era of al-Kazim differs from that of his forefathers, al-Baqir and al-Sadiq, in that the sanctity of the soil became deeply associated with the essence of Shi'ism, to the extent that no Shi'a was expected to be free of this linkage to *turbat*. In one report, al-Kazim claims that the Shi'a of the imams can never do without four things, one of them being a prayer bead made from the soil taken from the grave of Husayn (al-Tusi 1407 AH, vol. 6, 75; Kashani 1406 AH, vol. 14, 1531). This report is unprecedented, as the reports attributed to the previous two imams do not provide such explicit definitions of what composes a Shi'i identity, nor do they specifically delineate the soil of Husayn as being a critical component.

Another unprecedented practice which seems to appear during al-Kazim's time is the placing of a small amount of soil on the coffin of the deceased. There is no extant reference to this act in the narrations of al-Sadiq or al-Baqir (al-Tusi 1407 AH, vol. 6, 76; 1411 AH, vol. 2, 735).

By the end of the second Islamic century and beginning of the third, a few remnant traditions attributed to Ali al-Ridha (d. 202/818), the eighth Shi'i imam, highlight the continuation of his father, al-Kazim's, teachings.

Al-Ridha emphasized the healing properties and sanctified status of the soil (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 278–279; al-Ridha 1406 AH, 345). Under these conditions, a new practice emerged – namely, the placing of the soil in a wrapped cloth as a source of protection and safety. In many cases, the soil was placed with any object meant to be transported or mailed until it reached the safety and protection of its recipient (Ibn Quluwayh 1356 AHsh, 278).

## 6 *Turbat* and Twelver Shi'i Written Heritage in the Middle Ages

It was earlier mentioned that the earliest Twelver Shi'i source on the soil of Husayn is the third Islamic century work al-Maḥāsin. Despite this, the reports compiled in works written after al-Maḥāsin are of such reliability that they may be depended upon to argue for the presence of discourse concerning the grave soil dating back to the second Islamic century and extending into the third Islamic century. Their quantity, subject matter, and methods of transmission are such that an unprejudiced reader can be convinced of the existence of a discourse much earlier than the date of the book in which it first makes an appearance.

Subsequently, the fourth Islamic century was most notable for the appearance of what would be the earliest collection of narrations on the subject. Ibn Quluwayh al-Qumi (d. 367/977) compiled *Kāmil al-Ziyārāt*, the most significant Imami work on the practice of visiting the graves of the Shi'i imams. A large portion of this book concerns the visitation of Husayn, and, by extension, the soil around his grave. Many reports in this work indicate a development of the discourse regarding the soil during the beginning of the second Islamic century.

The fourth century AH is also when the *ḥadīth* collector, Muḥammad bin Ya'qub al-Kulayni (d. 329/941), compiled his opus magnum *al-Kāfi*, the most authoritative Imami collection of *ḥadīth*. He records some narrations on the soil of Husayn in his book (al-Kulayni 1407 AH, vol. 4, 588), chronologically placing his work before that of Ibn Quluwayh.

After Ibn Quluwayh, another well-known Twelver scholar and *ḥadīth* collector, Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (d. 381/991), commonly known as Shaykh al-Saduq, recorded several relevant narrations in various works (al-Saduq 1420 AH, vol. 1, 100–104; 1385 AHsh, vol. 2, 533). Most of these narrations do not allude to a new aspect of the discourse beyond what had been previously mentioned. Thus, it cannot be inferred that new practices or rituals related to the soil of Husayn's grave had appeared in the fourth Islamic century which were not already present in the second and third centuries.

In short, references related to the soil amongst the Twelver Shi'is during the Middle Ages, the fifth to the tenth Islamic centuries, are illustrative of a continuous presence of a discourse. However, later discourse on the etiquettes of seeking cures and venerating the soil was deeply rooted in earlier Twelver works. This was particularly reflected during this period in works of supplications, visitations, and amulets. The fifth Islamic century scholar Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Hasan al-Tusi (d. 460/1067) in his work *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid wa-Silāḥ al-Muta'abbid* ('Lantern of the Vigilant in Night Prayer and Weapon of the Worshipper') dedicates a separate chapter to the *ḥā'ir* and its soil (al-Tusi 1411 AH, vol. 2, 731). He also narrates a few traditions on the topic in *al-Amālī* ('The Dictations'; al-Tusi 1414 AH, 319–320).

Fattal al-Nayshaburi (d. 508/1114), a sixth-century AH scholar, in his work *Rawḍa al-Wā'iẓīn wa-Baṣīrat al-Mutta'izīn* ('The Meadow of the Admonishers and Insight of the Admonished') also addresses this topic in a separate chapter (al-Nayshaburi 1374 AHsh, vol. 2, 411–412). In the same century, Hasan b. Fadl al-Tabrisi in his work *Makārim al-Akhlāq* ('Noble Qualities of Character'), records narrations related to the soil in a chapter of its own (al-Tabrisi 1412 AH, 166–167). Qutb al-Din al-Rawandi (d. 573/1178) also dedicates a section in his book *al-Da'awāt* ('The Invocations') to the soil and its healing properties (al-Rawandi 1407 AH, 185–187) and Ibn al-Mashhadi (d. 610/1213) in his work *al-Mazār al-Kabīr* ('The Great Sanctuary') sets apart a chapter for narrations concerning the merits of the soil and the manners of its use (Ibn al-Mashhadi 1419 AH, 361–368). In the seventh century AH, Sayyid Ibn Tawus (d. 664/1266) in his work *Miṣbāḥ al-Zā'ir* ('The Lantern of the Visitor') also transmits a few narrations regarding the soil and its etiquettes (Ibn Tawus 1417 AH, 255). Finally, in the ninth Islamic century, Ibrahim al-Kaf'ami (d. 905/1499) is seen to be discussing the merits and etiquettes pertaining to the soil in his works *Balad al-Amīn* ('The Sacrosanct Domain'; al-Kaf'ami 1405 AH, 508) and *al-Miṣbāḥ* ('The Lantern') (al-Kaf'ami 1997 CE, 310).

## 7 Conclusion

Though previous works written on *turbat al-Husayn* have described it as an object of veneration by the Twelver Shi'a, the lack of clarity on its initial introduction to the Shi'i community may have led readers to believe that this practice was developed at the same time with the Battle of Karbala. The inattention in prior works regarding the grave soil's place in the context of the historical role of the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth imams, al-Baqir, al-Sadiq, al-Kazim and al-Ridha, in linking *turbat* to Shi'i identity may lead to false assumptions

regarding its legislation and communal significance prior to the time of these imams. A holistic analysis of the reports concerning the soil of Husayn, as seen through a historical lens, showed that this discourse contributed to the formation of Shi'i collective identity as a religious minority, particularly during the presence of the Shi'i imams, and due to their efforts to link the veneration of *turbat* to the essence of Shi'ism.

The study of the existing reports showed the formation and development of *turbat* rituals between the second and third centuries, and the chronological interpretation of the reports indicates that the soil was not understood as the prevailing feature of Shi'ism during its formative period; rather, any reference to its sanctity should be interpreted as a by-product of the historical process.

The debate regarding *turbat* developed during the beginning of the second century AH as a major Shi'i ritual of *tabarruk*. Unlike other related works, this chapter was able to demonstrate that the soil was initially introduced by al-Baqir as an object of oral consumption and *tabarruk*, with the aim of curing ailments. By the mid-second century AH, contemporaneous to al-Sadiq, the soil had become part of Shi'i rituals performed during birth and funerary ceremonies. In addition to the expansion of related discourse, there were also attempts to address skepticism regarding the soil's effects, as well as to delineate the limits of the *ḥā'ir* from where the soil could be taken. In the second half of the second century AH, this discourse grew and further solidified. The Shi'i spiritual authorities, the imams, began introducing the belief in their authority as one of the conditions for Shi'ism, and the effects of consuming the soil were predicated on accepting the doctrine of *walāya*. From the third century AH onwards, discourse on the soil continued to expand, albeit incrementally, as is reflected in various written works of the Twelver Shi'a.

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# The Place of Material Objects in the Alawi *Ziyāra*

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This chapter is a survey and analysis of material objects common to a specific group of Alawi-Nusayri<sup>2</sup> shrines located within the historic village of Sutaşı which was recently annexed to the town of Samandağ in the Hatay Province of Turkey.<sup>3</sup> The specific focus on material objects found in these shrines serves as part of a larger, separate project I have undertaken about ritual healing practices of those living in this religiously-diverse area on the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the theme of this edited volume, this chapter will limit its focus to understanding the crucial role material objects play in Alawi shrine visitation in this particular district of Samandağ. Not only is interaction with material objects essential to the rites of visitation, but also to the discovery and designation of the shrines themselves. Shrine activity is not an insular phenomenon within any society. In the Samandağ area, both the

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- 1 The area discussed in this chapter was struck by the Turkey-Syria earthquakes on February 6, 2023. The townspeople and structures of Samandağ were devastated. Most of the shrine structures suffered significant damage and many of the shrines' caretakers and their families lost their lives.
  - 2 This chapter uses Arabic and Turkish words where necessary. Transliterations from Arabic are provided with full diacritics for technical terms only. Simplified romanization is used for proper nouns, place names, events, and commonplace Arabic terms. Technical terms and proper names in modern Turkish are provided in original Turkish romanization.
  - 3 Samandağ is located on the Mediterranean coast, thirty minutes outside of Antioch. Sutaşı is known among its inhabitants by its Arabic place name, Sabuniye, which is also the name used to designate the Bronze-Iron Age archeological site located within its vicinity. On this site see Pamir (2013). The village of Sutaşı/Sabuniye was incorporated into the city of Samandağ (Arabic, Suadiye) as a neighborhood in 2016, and I continue to focus my research on this section of the city.
  - 4 Alawi proponent-missionaries (*dā'ī*) can be traced back to the Shi'i Hamdanid court of Aleppo in the tenth century. By the eleventh century, Latakia on the Syrian coast became an additional base for Alawi leadership, and settlements along the coast of Northwestern Syria gradually spread from there. As a demographic group, the Alawi were estimated to be about 10 % of the total population of Syria before the Syrian Civil War. In Ottoman times, what is now the province of Hatay (Antakya) was part of the district (*sancak*) of İskenderun and then ruled as part of the French Mandate of Syria following World War I. When taken over by the Republic of Turkey in 1939, Hatay contained several Alawi-majority districts.

construction of shrine buildings and shrine visitation have enjoyed an observable proliferation over the past decade, a trend which can be seen as part of the growth in population and housing construction in general. Moreover, this role of material objects within the Alawi shrine culture stands in contrast to what is promulgated by the religious authorities of the Turkish state to be normative Islamic practice in shrine visitation.

The local use of terminology concerning shrines and visitation is at the center of understanding how the shrines themselves come into being through the visions of community members, which will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. Various types of domed-type structures (Arabic, *qubba*) have a long history in Islamic architecture in many regions, and in this area of Turkey this type of domed shrine, painted white with accents of green, is a reliable visual indication of Alawi presence in a particular village or district.<sup>5</sup> The people of the Samandağ region are native speakers of Arabic, but most people, and certainly the younger generations speak Turkish, which is the language used in educational, governmental, and most professional settings. In accordance with local use of terminology, I refer to their places of visitation in the *qubba*-type design in the local Arabic dialect, as *ziyāra* (Turkish, *ziyaret*)<sup>6</sup> that is, a sacred *place* of visitation for ritual and festival purposes.<sup>7</sup> The term *ziyāra* is used for these sacred locales in their daily parlance, although some of the *ziyāra* use the Turkish term for '[sacred] place' (Turkish, *makam*) in their formal signage. Of course, reference to the physical locale itself as *ziyāra* derives from the widely understood meaning of the term as the *practice* of pious visitation in Islam, sometimes imprecisely translated into English as pilgrimage.

The practical purpose of a physical shrine structure is to signify and shelter a range of sacred material contents, which includes both man-made and materials harvested from the natural environment. This aspect of shrine culture – the kinds of objects and materials that adorn their interiors – was the main objective of this study initially. Restricting focus to the material objects within the shrines, however, leads to the additional re-consideration of larger questions concerning the process of claiming a certain locale to be a *ziyāra*, that is,

5 While *qubba* is the most general term to denote a domed construction, it is generally associated with a tomb, which is commonly termed *mazar*. However, nomenclature has varied over region, time, and status of the entombed. For example, the term *mazar* is not used in this community. On the varied terms associated with sacred tombs in Islamic history, see Diez (2012).

6 The plural forms in the Arabic or the Turkish are *ziyārāt* and *ziyaretler* respectively. But I will only use the term in the singular in the interest of simplicity.

7 Procházka-Eisl and Procházka also note the term *ziyāra* used in this way, to designate a place of sacred visitation. They further note the less-frequent extension of the term to mean the sacred *person* or saint associated with the locale (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010, 112–113).

a sacred place worthy of visitation. The observable increase of *ziyāra* construction in this area also provides opportunity to witness the dynamic identifying and establishing this type of sacred ground. Yet another local nuance in the use of the term *ziyāra* helps us to understand the earlier, more obscure stages in the shrine-revelation process. Not only does the term *ziyāra* signify the domed building (the shrine proper) but it also refers to the sacred presence *before* the construction of the concrete *qubba*-type structure. In other words, a *ziyāra* initially manifests as a spiritual power illuminating a spot where a venerable figure once lived, an event in sacred history took place, or where a venerable figure is buried. When the term *ziyāra* is used in this in this sense, it is understood as an invisible, yet powerful presence which makes itself known through the dreams and visions of people within close proximity. Once a particular place has been revealed as a *ziyāra*, that is, a place in possession of a charismatic power, the next step is to identify the presence of its power. It is during this time that the *ziyāra* becomes associated a venerable figure, or several figures. While this stage in the process still needs more research, the identities of the sacred figures seem to be discerned by the original seers in heavy consultation with the family's shaykh. The ultimate goal is then to construct a domed building to enshrine the sacred ground and the contents it accrues. Once constructed, this building is also referred to as *ziyāra*, although technically speaking, its edifice exists to shelter the original *ziyāra* that was present before a structure was built above it. As it unfolds in stages, this process emphasizes the central role of materiality in contemporary Alawi shrine culture: spiritual dreams and visions manifest in physical reality through the demarcation and construction of a physical space. Due to lack of funds, a proper domed structure may await years or even decades to build, but as mentioned above, this process has accelerated recently. In the meantime, the presence of the *ziyāra* is demarcated physically in some way, often by the deliberate placement of rocks and the presence of materials of thurification, such as censers, matches, and incense.

## 2 Alawi Shi'ism

In the context of Alawi-Nusayri Shi'ism, exploring material culture 'beyond Karbala' yields ample opportunity for Alawis do not see the Karbala events in terms of a cosmic tragedy, maintaining that a substitute was martyred in place of Husayn. While Alawis do not mourn on the Tenth of Muharram, they use the occasion to commemorate Husayn's immortality.<sup>8</sup> Technically within the

8 On the meaning of Karbala among the Alawi from a textual standpoint, see Friedman (2010, 158–159); Bar-Asher and Kofsky (2002, 128–129). The day of Ashura is observed by visitation

category of Imami Shi'ism, it is standard to categorize Alawis and similar sects (such as Kızılbaş-Alevi of Anatolia and the Balkans) apart from mainstream Imami or Twelver Shi'ism, a distinction that is upheld by Alawis themselves.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the exceptionalism of Alawi religiosity – ritual, spiritual authority, social structure, liturgical calendar – is acknowledged and even emphasized. Past efforts to assimilate Alawis to Sunni Islam or to orthodox Imami Shi'ism have yielded equivocal results (Firro 2005).<sup>10</sup> In order to delineate both their distinction and their common Imami (Twelver) patrimony, the Alawis and similar sects are sometimes referred to as 'hyper-Shi'a' or 'ultra-Shi'a,' offering an alternative to the former term, 'extremist' Shi'a in the academic literature (Olsson 1998).

Traditionally, Alawis were known as *ghulāt* or 'exaggerators,' not only distinguishing their beliefs from Sunni Islam, but more emphatically to distinguish their position from mainstream Shi'i Islam.<sup>11</sup> Certainly the theologies of the sects identified as *ghulāt*, especially in their deification of Ali, appear to diverge sharply from other subgroups of Shi'ism (such as Imami, Ismaili, and Zaydi), but the historical relationship between the established, legalistic forms Shi'ism and the *ghulāt* has been more complex. Alawis trace their origin to Muhammad, Ali, and Salman al-Farsi, the three components of their complex godhead.<sup>12</sup> However for some time, historians have also acknowledged

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during which a prayer referred to as the *ziyārat yawm 'ashūra'* is performed. Matti Moosa (1988, 390–391) includes a translation of a hymn of praise to the undying Husayn performed for this occasion.

- 9 Especially in the Turkish context it is wise to emphasize the distinction between Anatolian Alevi and Alawi-Nusayri. Anatolian Alevism was shaped by the historical Bektashi and Safavid Sufi orders, and thus their (derogatory) designation as 'Kızılbaş' came to be. This historical and spiritual heritage is not shared by 'Arap Aleviler,' as they are referred to in the Turkish colloquial. Everything from pious visitation to religious authority, sacred texts, and ritual have developed independently and distinctly within these two group designations. However, as both Alawis and Alevi are Twelver, Ali-based sects within the Sunni-majority republic of Turkey, these communities have developed a discernable socio-political solidarity which can be seen on the level pious veneration as well. Within the Alawi (Nusayri) shrines in my sample, this affinity has manifest with the appearance of characteristic Anatolian Alevi references and décor. Iconic images of Hac Bektaş would be a common example of this cultural-political alignment in the Alawi (Nusayri) *ziyāra* context.
- 10 On efforts to convert Alawis in the nineteenth century, see Alkan (2012) and Talhamy (2011). On modern Shi'i fatwas and their irenic tendency toward the Alawi, see Talhamy (2010). For more recent developments see Mervin (2010).
- 11 On the origins of the *ghulāt* accusation, Anthony (2012).
- 12 A tripartite divinity is a feature of several Ali-centered sects. For a comparison see "The Ghulat's 'Trinity'" in Moosa (1988, 50–65). Aspects of the Alawi divinity are the subject of much elaboration both in the primary and secondary sources. The divine structure is revealed as a hierarchy with the *ma'na* ('essence,' identified as Ali Ibn Abi Talib) of the

the common Shi'i origins of what they later identified as a distinct sect. Of course, for most of its history, the sect has been associated with the name of Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Namiri (d. 883). According to the Alawi tradition, Ibn Nusayr, was a disciple of the last two visible imams of the Twelver lineage, Ali al-Hadi (d. 868) and al-Hasan al-Askari (d. 874). Not only was Ibn Nusayr privy to the inherited esoteric knowledge of the imams, but also acted as the conduit of their esoteric knowledge to future generations of believers (Arabic, *mu'minūn*), which is the self-identifying term employed in Nusayri theological treatises.<sup>13</sup> Influenced by the work of Ali Amir-Moezzi on the history of early Imami doctrine, historians have recast *ghulāt* groups, including what came to be known as the Alawi-Nusayris, as integral components of early Imami Shi'ism (Amir-Moezzi 2004). In fact, concepts which came to define the *ghulāt*, such as cyclical sacred history, metempsychosis (Arabic, *al-tanāsukh*), creaturely incarnation of the deity (Arabic, *al-ḥulūl*), were also present in the esoteric content within the Twelve Imams' teachings, according to the earliest sources (Amir-Moezzi, 128). This early convergence of certain elements, between what has become 'orthodox' and what came to be considered 'heterodox,' leads some historians to see the Alawi as a surviving cult surrounding the charismatic authority of the living imams, an earlier stage before their teaching became routinized through a legalistic tradition.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from their Ali-centered theology, Alawis are also defined by their spiritual-social stratification, which is determined by the elite transmission of knowledge. Long known as a religious system divided along the lines of a small body of initiated members and the general body of believers, only initiated individuals fully participate in some of the sect's rituals. As a wisdom tradition transmitted through the master-disciple relationship, elaboration of the beliefs of the sect are conveyed in their entirety only to those male members who have undergone an extensive initiation process.<sup>15</sup> But as observation in the field has indicated, the famous secrecy of Alawi theological teachings is

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*ism* ('name,' identified as the Prophet Muhammad), and the *bāb* ('gateway,' identified as Salman al-Farsi). The three-fold nature of the divinity has caused some to seek its origins in Christianity as first seriously proposed in Lammens (1899, 461–493).

- 13 Regarding subsequent theological development after Ibn Nusayr, special mention is also given al-Husayn ibn Hamdan al-Khasibi (d. 957 or 969) for his influence, although most of his writings have not survived. Al-Khasibi brought the Nusayri doctrine to the Shi'i Hamdanid court in Aleppo, gaining a foothold for the community in Syria and is often cited as a "Second Founder" of Nusayri Shi'ism.
- 14 According to Stefan Winter, a proponent of this view of the emergence of the Nusayri *ghulāt*, "Nusayrism simply represented the Syrian variant of medieval Twelver Shi'ism rather than a radical departure" (Winter 2016, 11).
- 15 Two recent theses have directly dealt with the sensitive issue of Alawi initiation into religious secrecy: Tendler (2012) and Erdem (2010).

better understood as a spectrum within the entire community which includes women and non-initiates as well (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010, 91–92). That is, while substantial content of the ‘secret’ teachings is known among all the community members (and beyond), *formal* instruction of these teachings is still guarded by the hereditary charismatic leaders, known as shaykhs.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the division between initiated and uninitiated – a division deemed essential to the Alawi social structure – may have formed as late as the thirteenth century when Alawi communities merged with prominent tribes in the Nusayri Mountains. According to this view of Alawi history, secrecy is a socio-historical development, rather than an original feature (Friedman 2010, 51–56, 144–145).

Given the two-tiered structure of the Alawi social system as it has evolved, the role of material culture can be approached through two distinct vantages: that of the elite and that of the general, uninitiated laity. This chapter adopts an ethnographic approach, focusing on open and public practices of the Alawi religion, including ubiquitous shrine visitations and a busy calendar of festivals, which are commemorated through animal sacrifice, often within the grounds of the shrines.<sup>17</sup> However, certain rituals, such as those described in manuscripts and private teachings, also offer possibilities to explore Alawis’ distinct material culture. The use of incense, candles, and especially wine within the rituals exclusive to the initiated contributed to the Jesuit historian Henri Lammens’ early twentieth century theory of the Christian origins of the Alawi religion.<sup>18</sup> Indeed a discernable material culture is revealed in Alawi manuscripts especially those concerning ritual precept. A prominent feature of an Alawi ritual involves the preparation, sanctification, and consumption of wine. In these ritual manuals, the wine is the sacred substance that manifests

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16 Although a full treatment of the institution of Alawi shaykhs is still desired, these hereditary lineages likely go as far back to the tribal consolidation of Alawi communities achieved under the leadership of Abu Muhammad Hasan al-Makzun al-Sinjari (d. 1240) (Winter 2016).

17 The extensive calendar of Alawi festivals was given its final (and still vital) form by Abu Sa’id Maymun al-Tabarani (d. 1034), a Nusayri scholar who brought the center of the community to Latakia. See Winter (2016, 28). Animal sacrifice (*qurbān*) often takes place on the shrine grounds, with the preparation and sacrifice taking place within buildings set apart from the main sanctuary. For an extensive account of the Alawi calendar, see Friedman (2010, 152–173).

18 This theory was elaborated in a series on the Alawi by Lammens (Lammens 1899). For his extended argument which cites archeological evidence in response to Dussaud’s thesis of the Phoenician origins of Alawism, see Lammens (1901, 33–50).

in the triune deity in the rites.<sup>19</sup> A full analysis of Alawi ritual, which would certainly advance our theological understanding, would include aspects of this and other such material sacramentals. However, approaching Alawi material religion from this insider's point of view will always have its limitations, whether due to the restriction of ritual participants to the initiated, the ethical responsibility of the researcher in preserving the valued privacy of the initiated community, or both.

Nevertheless, the secret teachings of the sect held the first scholars who studied Alawism in captive fascination and mark the beginning of modern scholarship concerning the Alawis. Sometimes missionaries at the same time, writers like Samuel Lyde (d. 1860), who declared himself the first European to 'live among' Alawis, translated and published the rare manuscripts they managed to obtain.<sup>20</sup> In both their content and the culture perpetuating their secrecy, these manuscripts established a mystique around Alawism which endures to the present. A sensationalized account of secret Alawi teachings published in 1863 by an Alawi convert to Christianity added to this intrigue as the author met a violent death, rumored to be in retribution for revealing the "secret" (Krieger 2014, 567–568). Despite resistance from the adherents of these teachings, the dissemination of Alawi texts has been taking place since the nineteenth century when Alawis first became the subjects of academic and missionary study.<sup>21</sup> Over the past decade, access to the formerly concealed written materials of the sect has accelerated, and controversy continues to accompany their contents as the question of antinomian rites are revisited.<sup>22</sup>

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19 According to Matti Moosa, "... nothing else in the whole Nusayri religious system so fully reveals the essence of their creed than their belief in the manifestation of their God Ali in the consecrated wine" (Moosa 1988, 398).

20 Lyde published extracts from a manuscript entitled *Manual for Shaykhs* in his popular 1860 account *The Asian Mystery: Illustrated in the History, Religion, and Present State of the Ansaireeh or Nusairis of Syria* (233–269). Lost for years, Lyde's original manuscript has been recently identified, giving his study a renewed legitimacy (Krieger 2014).

21 Before Lyde, Alawi-Nusayri manuscripts were published by a translator for the Prussian Consulate in Syria (Catafago 1848).

22 Formerly guarded Alawi-Nusayri manuscripts are published by the Lebanese press Dar li-Ajl al-Ma'rifa and edited under a pseudonym. The editors and publishers of the press are associated with other publications exhibiting "great hostility" towards the Alawi religion (Friedman 2010, 2–3). Nevertheless, Friedman and others maintain the authenticity of the primary sources published by the press. According to Krieger, with these publications, "our understanding of this [Alawī-Nusayri] faith can increase exponentially" (Krieger 2014, 13).



### 3 The Place of *Ziyāra* in Alawi Communities

As intriguing as the secret teachings of the Alawi religion were to European audiences in the nineteenth century, early scholars also recognized that the *ziyāra* was a central aspect of Alawi religiosity, and a good part of what identified Alawis as such. Since the eighteenth century foreign travelers have noted the striking visuals of the domed, white-washed *ziyāra* in the areas inhabited by Alawis in modern-day northern Syria and southern Turkey. These domed *ziyāra* were historically free standing, and not part of a larger complex, although occasionally kitchens and storage buildings were added. These structures continue to serve as reliable identity-markers of Alawi residents in a particular area throughout northern Syria and the Hatay and Çukurova regions of southern Turkey where most of the Alawi population is found today. Although we have little first-hand information about *ziyāra* among Alawis before the nineteenth century, it is likely that the practice of designating and visiting local sacred places goes back much further, though certainly not as far back as antiquity as nineteenth century archeologists liked to imagine.<sup>23</sup> The lack of reference to the practice of *ziyāra* in Alawi manuscripts must be attributed to the lack of need to elaborate such a common practice among the elite authors of these manuscripts, rather than the absence of the practice itself. Given the association of the foundational Nusayri leadership with the imams, it is possible that the practice of visitation originated with the tomb-shrines of the imams and other early Shi'i figures.<sup>24</sup> As Nusayri communities made their way to the mountainous Syrian coastline where they finally settled in the late medieval period, the practice of *ziyāra* proliferated as the sacred figures associated with them became localized.<sup>25</sup> A thorough inquiry into the origin and proliferation of *ziyāra* among Alawis will take into account a variety of Islamic and pre-Islamic sacred places that Alawi *ziyāra* reflects. Possible antecedents,

23 Lyde (1860) proposed a Canaanite origin for the Alawi religious practice, while the French archaeologist René Dussaud put forth an ancient Phoenician origin for the Alawi people (Dussaud 1900).

24 Though it is difficult to identify with certainty what constituted Alawi shrines in the earlier medieval period, because Alawism as such did not exist entirely as a separate category. The tomb of the famous Alawi leader al-Khasibi (d. 967 or 969) outside of Aleppo was venerated as such until modern times (Winter 2016, 20). Syrian territory also hosted numerous Alid sanctuaries which were recorded in *Kitab al-Ziyarat* of Ali ibn Ali Bakr al-Harawi (d. 1215). One such Alid shrine near al-Maskanah, which dates to 1076–1077, is dedicated to Khidr (Sourdel and Sourdel-Thomine 1974, 247–253).

25 For a historical reconstruction of Alawi migration to their present areas of present settlement, see Winter (2016, 17–41). On the later, eighteenth century migration of the Alawi to the Çukurova region in southern Turkey, see Procházka-Eisl and Procházka (2010, 49–54).

whether ritual, aesthetic, or material, would include the Kaaba, the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, and extend to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as well as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and other local Christian sites. Not only mausoleums proper, that is, structures enshrining tombs, but a variety of sacred buildings constructed to enshrine sacred materials such as rocks, should be considered in comparison.

This brings up the fundamental question of the practice of Alawi visitation in contrast and comparison to other forms of visitation across the Islamic world. Pilgrimage apart from the greater and lesser *hajj*, often distinguished as *ziyāra* or pious visitation, is a vast and varied practice and a phenomenon identifiable in Islamic history since the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Interaction with the sacred dead or with the ‘saints’ through the pious visiting of their tombs has also been the subject of a vast body of secondary literature.<sup>26</sup> With this widespread phenomenon in mind, treating the Alawi *ziyāra* as a singular and unique phenomenon can lead to emphasizing the otherness or even the exoticism in Alawi religiosity, which has imbalanced even academic treatments of the Alawis since the beginning of scholarship about them. This uneven impression is particularly apparent when considering the Alawi *ziyāra* in a village of mixed identities; in fact, a substantial number of Sunnis from the village in which I conduct research also regularly visit the village’s established and emerging *ziyāras*. The opposite, however, is not the case: Alawi villagers generally do not attend the village’s Sunni mosque, thus a discernable distinction manifests itself in this respect.

Historically, activity centered around *ziyāra* constituted a central aspect of religious activity among non-initiates of Alawi communities, both communal and individual. As Lyde observed in his popular 1860 monograph, *Asian Mystery*:

[F]or of all things which exercise a practical, religious, or rather superstitious, influence on them [the Alawi people], the *zeyârehs* are, without comparison, the most powerful ... nearly all good is looked for from them, and all ill dreaded from their displeasure. (Lyde 1860, 167)

Here Lyde uses the term *ziyāra* by enjoining its two senses: both as a place of destination, but a place so entwined with a fearsome power as to become personified. The *ziyāra* is something that can display displeasure from disrespect or neglect, but it is also something that grants healings, blessings, and boons.

26 For a recent cross-cultural treatment of *ziyāra* as a practice, see Rahimi and Eshaghi (2019); McGregor (2016).

The process of establishing sacred ground is initiated by claiming the presence of a charismatic power which is also itself referred to as a *ziyāra*. Once a locale has become established and the source of the *ziyāra*'s power identified with a venerable figure, the term *khayir* (Turkish: *hayır*) is used to describe the blessings sought from the *ziyāra*. It is similar to the use of the Arabic term *baraka* (Turkish, *bereket*) which is often used to denote the powers of a saint.

Whether the sacred ground is the site of a grave proper (Turkish, *türbe*), a cenotaph, or the place of sacred presence (Arabic, *maqām*; Turkish, *makam*), is usually irrelevant; pious visitors simply do not make such distinctions.<sup>27</sup> Thus far, I have found no evidence that any of the *ziyāras* in the village are sites of actual tombs or gravesites. Strictly speaking, the central marble constructions are cenotaphs, that is, empty 'tombs,' constructed to appear as actual stone tombs in the same rectangular shape that has been the paradigm of sarcophagi construction in this region for millennia.<sup>28</sup> Visitors refer to these interior block structures as *maqām* ('place'), with most resembling the shape of the stone cenotaph that are still used in the village's two crowded hilltop cemeteries. The marble and stone rectangular boxes do not actually contain the remains of the dead as did the sarcophagi from pre-Islamic civilizations, but, as cenotaphs, mark the ground in which the body is buried beneath ground level (Blair 2010). Alawis also follow the general Islamic custom of the interring the bodily remains below the earth, with commemorative structures above ground level.

A *ziyāra* can reveal itself as present on a certain locale in dreams, but often it is first indicated through the vision of a luminosity event. This event has been described to me as a descent of light from the sky in a stream or a streak terminating in a fixed spot, or sometimes as a glow of light emanating from the earth. This manifestation is observed by one or more witnesses who are the owners of the land, or their close relatives. The status of the location as *ziyāra* is then confirmed through dreams, the discernment of the family's shaykh, or both. The land is then cleared from debris and consecrated with an animal sacrifice at the site. The area is initially demarcated as *ziyāra* by the placement of concrete blocks or a few rocks. Once funds are raised, construction begins

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27 This lack of distinction was also noted in the study of Procházka-Eisl and Procházka (2010). Citing a rare publication by an Alawi shaykh (Serin 1998), the theory of *tashrifā* is described to explain the relationship of venerated figures with particular places. *Tashrifā* refers to a sacred type of visit whereby a figure blesses a locale by virtue of his presence (*ruhī*) at one point in time, and not by any physical remains (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010, 88). It is also notable that the term *mazar* is not used, which is common designation in other regions to designate a tomb.

28 This would be apparent by the number of sarcophagi from various civilizations on display in the recently renovated Archeological Museum (Arkeoloji Müzesi) located in Antioch.

on the marble cenotaph(s) and the domed structure. It must be reiterated that neither the construction of a cenotaph nor the domed building creates a *ziyāra*, but rather, these are physical markers that honor and protect a presence of *ziyāra* that is *a priori*. In other words, the physical constructions house a *ziyāra* that already exists. Determining precisely how long a *ziyāra* has been recognized as such prior to the construction of a building is obviously more difficult. Except for two older *ziyāra* structures in the village, the remaining majority are constructions built since the 1980s. However, their status as *ziyāra* goes back much further.

Relatively small compared to the regional shrines of Antakya and Samandağ, the shrines I have surveyed and which I list in below come under the somewhat fluid categories of ‘neighborhood,’ or ‘family’ shrines.<sup>29</sup> That is, they are small-scale constructions, with the precise location of these *ziyāra* only vaguely known outside of the neighborhood in which they are situated. Many are within the confines of a family’s domestic property (Turkish *bahçe*), almost as an extension of the family house. When I began this research in 2012, these *ziyāra* were all under the jurisdiction of the Sutaş Municipality. I now continue my research to *ziyāra* located in what has become Sutaş district of Samandağ, but in keeping with local usage, I still refer to the district as the ‘village.’ Its population is religiously mixed, consisting mainly of Alawis but also Sunnis, with an Antiochian Greek-Orthodox quarter adjacent to the village. The village has been home to a single Sunni mosque since the 1920s. The mosque was built to accommodate and educate the clans of the village whose members had converted to Sunnism. This is a conversion narrative in which several prominent clans converted (rather, ‘reverted’ to their original religion of Sunni Islam as they relay the circumstances) around the time of Hatay’s annexation to Turkey. The way villagers articulate the difference in religious affiliation between Alawi and Sunni is another indication of the importance of sacred space in the religious life of the village: Simply designated, there are “those who go to the shrine” (Turkish, *ziyaret giden*) and “those who go to the mosque” (*cami giden*). Such vernacular designations relegate the terms ‘Alawi’ and ‘Sunni,’ which are never used in casual conversation, largely to the academic realm. And as noted earlier, many of the *cami giden* villagers also frequent the *ziyāra*, in most cases for specific healing purposes.

As of my last visit to the village during the summer of 2019, there were fourteen *ziyāra* within the historical boundaries of the village; several have been

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29 This is adapted from Procházka-Eisl and Procházka’s, categorization of “sanctuaries” (as they translate the physical structures of *ziyāra*). The other categories in their survey include the “supra-regional” and “supra-local,” (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010, 183).

added since I began my research in 2012. As of this writing, twelve of these *ziyāra* spaces are marked by the characteristic domed structures, while two are marked with both natural stones and cinder blocks. I interviewed the landowners on whose premises one of these recently revealed *ziyāra* is situated, and they stated their plans for the construction of a physical, domed structure to permanently demarcate the site as sacred ground. The village now has twelve constructed *ziyāra* – that is, sacred ground graced by domed buildings. The identity of these figures who are associated with these places are inscribed or painted on a sign and prominently displayed above the entryway of these constructions. Taken together, the status of the commemorated figures within the village spans the spectrum of Alawi charismatic types, including prophets, companions of Muhammad and Ali, shaykhs (both local and historical), and several places (*makam*) marking the presence of the ubiquitous Islamic saint Hıdır (Arabic, al-Khidr). The following list numerates all the fourteen revealed *ziyāra* of the village, including those *ziyāra* awaiting a formal construction of a domed building.<sup>30</sup> If officially discerned, the names of each *ziyāra* bear the identity of the figure associated with them, and are listed below as they appear on the entryways to the main domed shine buildings. In the section following the list below, the identities of these figures are explained:

1. Hz. Hıdır Makamı.<sup>31</sup>
2. İl Hıdır, Miğdet İl Yemin, Melek Cafer Tayyar.
3. Yedi Anbiya.
4. Şeyh Daher.
5. Nabi Yunes, Mikdet El-Yemin.
6. *Sabuniye Höyük Ziyara* ('The Sabuniye Site Shrine'). There is no name inscribed on this older structured *ziyāra* which enshrines two cenotaphs. I designate the *ziyāra* after the excavation site mentioned in note one because it is situated on a hilltop next to it.
7. Nabi Allah Edris, Şeyh Hasan İbin Mekzün Sincari, Şeyh Muhammad İbin Mekzün Sincari.
8. Yunus İbin Mete, H.Z. Hıdır.
9. Seyidne Hıdır, Nebi Hemzi, Yünüs İbin Mette.
10. Identified, unconstructed.

30 Spelling of names varies even within the village, so I have listed them here as they appear on the individual sites. The list here does not follow a particular pattern, but it does begin with the *ziyāra* I have determined to be the oldest in the village. It is dedicated exclusively to Hıdır (Hz. Hıdır Makamı, no. 1) overlooking the banks of the Orontes (Asi) River.

31 Hz. is an abbreviation of *hazret* (the Exalted), an honorific title often used as an expression of reverence to saintly figures of the Islamic faith. It denotes the 'presence' of the saintly figure and translates (roughly) as 'his eminence.'

11. Nebi Yahya.
12. Seyidna El Hıdır, Melek Cafer El Tiyyor, Sultan Habib El Neccar.
13. Identified, unconstructed.
14. Şeyh Ali El Kebir, Şeyh Muhammad El Nurani Makamı.

First, it should be noted that five separate *ziyāra* are marked for the immortal Hıdır, making him the most represented single figure associated with the village's *ziyāra*. This is to be expected given the intense historical devotion to the figure among many Muslim communities, but especially Alawis.<sup>32</sup> The central ritual space of the first *ziyāra*, the Hz. Hıdır Makamı revolves around a central stone block in the shape of a square, upon which is a white-washed aniconic sculpture resembling a mountain. We will return to this exceptional *ziyāra* dedicated exclusively to Hıdır below. The four additional *ziyāras* bearing Hıdır's name on their entryways commemorate his presence by means of unadorned sarcophagus-like cenotaphs that are more traditional in their rectangular shapes. In these *ziyāras* containing more the conventional cenotaphs, Hıdır is listed alongside the other persons named on the entryways.

The Prophet Muhammad's companion and Ali's elder brother, Melek Cafer al-Tayyor possesses cenotaphs in two separate *ziyāras*.<sup>33</sup> Another companion of the Prophet, Mikdet el-Yemin,<sup>34</sup> is also present through cenotaphs in two

32 Hıdır (as his name appears on the signs of the village *ziyāras*), is the figure identified by Quranic commentators as the guide of the Prophet Moses in the Surah al-Kahf (18:62–80). With the etymology of his name connected to a vegetative green, 'Khiḍr' developed into an immortal savior figure in Islamic culture. Just as in Syria, the figure has particular relevance in the shrine culture of the Alawi in Turkey (Türk 2002). However, in Turkey 'Hızır' is not a sectarian icon but is popular among many Muslim communities (Ocak 1985). The pioneering researcher René Dussaud acknowledged the importance of Khidr in Alawi "popular religion," referring to his veneration as the "cult of the non-initiated" (Dussaud 1900, 128–135). Tord Olsson expands on this theory of Hıdır by stating "to the non-initiates he certainly plays the same role as 'Ali to the initiated, that is, as the corporeal manifestation of the divinity. It is thus very likely that the bulk of legends connect with Khiḍr is an exoteric analogue to the esoteric myths which are linked to 'Ali as the physical epiphany of the transcendent divinity ..." (Olsson 1998, 181).

33 Ja'far ibn Abi Talib is a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and the brother of Imam Ali. He is reportedly one of the first converts to Islam. Referred to as 'The King' (*al-malik*), and also as the one who flies (*al-tayyar*), he lost both arms in battle before his martyrdom in 629 CE and, according to Islamic mythology, was rewarded by wings in the Afterlife. Other *ziyāras* dedicated to him in Syria and in Çurokova are noted as well. See Procházka-Eisl and Procházka (2010, 137); Vaglieri (2012).

34 Another important figure in Alid history is al-Miqdad ibn 'Amr (d. 653–4), a companion of the Prophet and early political supporter of Ali. According to Procházka-Eisl and Procházka (2010, 138–139), his *ziyāra* in Mersin is frequented by Sunnis as well. On the designation of 'Mikdet El-Yamin' as one of the five 'orphans' (*yatīm*) in the Alawi hierarchy, see Bar-Asher and Kofsky (2002, 18, 86).

separate *ziyāras*. Using the Arabic term *nabi-Allah* (“Messenger of God”) on the inscriptions, the prophets Edris,<sup>35</sup> Hemzi,<sup>36</sup> and Yahya<sup>37</sup> each have *ziyāras* bearing their names. It is the prophet Yunus (Jonah), however, who is the most frequent sacred presence in the village after Hıdır, marked by three separate *ziyāras* bearing his name.<sup>38</sup> The *ziyāra* dedicated to a group of seven unnamed prophets inscribed simply as “The Seven Prophets” (Yedi Anbiya) is likely referencing the Quranic ‘Seven Sleepers,’ associated with Ephesus in early Christian lore.<sup>39</sup> The physical representation of this sacred group in the center of the structure is also unique: it is a single square monolith, rather than discrete cenotaphs, as is usually the case for multiple presences within one *ziyāra* structure. Five cenotaphs in total throughout the village are dedicated to shaykhs, including the renowned figure of Alawi history, Hasan İbin Mekzün Sincari (d. 1240) and his son Muhammad İbin Mekzün Sincari (they are named on the *ziyāra* along with the Prophet Edris).<sup>40</sup> The shaykhs named on the three remaining cenotaphs I assume to be local until more research can be conducted.<sup>41</sup> Finally, one *ziyāra* identifies Sultan Habib Neccar in its inscription, who was

35 Probably the Quranic Prophet Idris, mentioned in *surahs* nine and twenty-one. Some later commenters linked the figure to Khidr. See Vajda (2012).

36 Identified as ‘nabi’ on his cenotaph, this figure is possibly referring to the revered Hamza ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad who was martyred at the battle of Uhud (625). The prophet’s daughter Fatima reportedly took care of Hamza’s grave (Haider 2016).

37 The Prophet Yahya ibn Zakariyya, John the Baptist of the New Testament. As the child of a barren and aged mother, his unlikely birth may have played a role in the decision to dedicate this *ziyāra* exclusively to him. Petitions for fertility are commonplace in the village.

38 Yunus, twice designated in the village as ‘ibin Mete’ (the son of his mother’s name, Mattā). Replete with miraculous events in both scripture and legend, the story of Jonah incubating in the fish is especially beloved by the Shi’a for its prefiguration of occultation (*ghayba*).

39 This conclusion seems likely as the narrative of the Seven Sleepers is contained within the *surah al-Kahf* (18: 6–26), perhaps the most crucial *surah* shaping shrine culture in this area. Moreover, a large *ziyāra* of the Seven Sleepers located in Tarsus is also well known to the villagers. Procházka-Eisl and Procházka (2010, 183) designate the Tarsus Ashab al-Kahf as a “supra-regional sanctuary.” Though it is not an exclusive or typical Alawi *ziyāra*, many of the villagers have been to the Tarsus site for pious visitation.

40 Known for his mystical treatises as well as his military defense of Alawi tribes against the Ismailis, Hasan al-Makzun al-Sinjari (d. 1240), “stands as perhaps the most prominent individual in ‘Alawi history” (Winter 2016, 37).

41 These three remaining shaykhs are Şeyh Daher (the sole cenotaph in this *ziyāra*), Şeh Ali El Kebir and Şeh Muhammad El Nurani, (as their names and titles appear in their *makam*).

a companion of Jesus Christ, whose sarcophagus is located in a subterranean shrine beneath Antioch's oldest mosque, the Habib-i Neccar Cami.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, the reasons for *ziyāra* visitation are many, with the various types of ritual visits warranting separate treatment. Communal *ziyāra* visits, for example, are elaborate including feasts and events such as initiation and first hair cutting. These activities usually center on the sacrifice of an animal, and then the preparation and distribution of food. While my primary research focuses on healing rituals, for purposes of material inventory my survey includes all objects employed during an 'ordinary visit,' that is an informal visit of an individual or small group for the purpose of general petitions.<sup>43</sup> Briefly, an 'ordinary visit' entails a ritual greeting at the threshold of a *ziyāra* and then entry into the shrine, thurification, prayers of greeting and prayer of petition (*du'ā'*) in the central ritual space, and then circumambulation (thrice) around the central cenotaph(s). Specific petitions are common enough to be included in an ordinary visit. Following are the materials and their descriptions necessary for an ordinary visit, and they are housed in virtually every constructed *ziyāra* of the village.

#### 4 Survey of Materials

On a basic level, this survey of the material objects used in the *ziyāra* of the village can be divided into two categories: mobile materials and foundational objects. The former category includes a host of materials with which visitors interact including petitionary objects, healing aids, sacred texts, and binding materials. Thus, they are objects that are placed and replenished at the *ziyāra* according to the needs of the visitors (figure 10.1). Foundational objects refer to the graves, cenotaphs and constructed stone formations, and sometimes trees; in other words, the material that is integral to the sacred vicinity. Since these foundational objects represent the sacred figures that are identified with the *ziyāra* site, they cannot be separated from the sacred ground without fundamentally altering the *ziyāra*'s status or effectiveness. In other words, the

42 The structure of Antioch's Habib-i Neccar Cami dates from the nineteenth century but was built upon an earlier mosque. The lore surrounding Habib 'The Carpenter' is well known in Hatay. A companion of the prophet Jesus ('Isa), he died a martyr while proselytizing among the pagans of the ancient city of Antioch. Although the mosque is not officially a place of Alawī *ziyāra*, many of the villagers have visited his subterranean tomb (which is shared with other of his companions).

43 Procházka-Eisl and Procházka's study characterize a similar type of visit as "typical" (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010, 195).





FIGURE 10.1 Materials used in ritual visitation including incense, copies of the Quran, headscarves, and oil  
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building structure of a *ziyāra*, if it exists, is secondary to the substrata of foundational objects. Some *ziyāra* have existed in the Samandağ region for years, decades or perhaps centuries, marked by both ordinary and sacred stones and materials, and without formal structures enclosing them. However, in recent years the construction of the foundational materials and domed buildings (at the same time, if funds are sufficient) is something people invested in the *ziyāra* are compelled to do. This duty to build above the discerned *ziyāra* is relayed anecdotally as a directive given by the venerated figure in dreams. But the pattern to build upon the original revelation of a *ziyāra* is well established in this area, even if drawn out over years or even decades.

## 5 Incense

Of all the mobile objects that mark the presence of a *ziyāra* in the village, incense is the most essential in my observation. Frankincense is provided in every *ziyāra* in the village. Incense and censers are even observed on sites of



FIGURE 10.2 Demarcated area of a newly discovered *ziyāra*  
 A domed structure is planned for this area  
 © AMELIA GALLAGHER

newly revealed *ziyāra* which lack physical structures as visual and ritual confirmation of the sacred vicinity (figure 10.2). Also found at all the *ziyāra* are numerous censers (Arabic: *mabkhar*)<sup>44</sup> and matchboxes. Two types of censers are used: a terracotta goblet-like vessel, which is more traditional and also a more manufactured design adorned with oasis palm trees on the sides of the exterior. I was informed that the latter censer is a gift often brought back from Saudi Arabia by male villagers who work there seasonally. The *ziyāra*'s frankincense, which is often situated in the central ritual space atop the cenotaphs, is provided for the visitors' use in large metal bowls, and a few coins can be dropped in a metal padlocked donation box. It is the case that thurification is the central ritual activity in a short ordinary visit, and serves the purpose of ritually purifying the area before any greetings, circumambulations, or petitionary prayers are performed.

44 The Turkish *buhurdan* is the dictionary definition, but the term *bakurluk* is used in the local dialect.

## 6 Textiles

As far as head covering is concerned, it is an unofficial requirement in the Samandağ area for women to loosely cover their hair with a scarf before entering a *ziyāra* and headscarves are provided for this purpose, often at the entrance on wire wall racks. In this village, younger women of child-bearing age cover their hair only for funerals, work in the fields, or heavy housework. In the case of a death in one's clan, the period of wearing the headscarf is extended to anything between a few weeks and a couple of years. However, except for children, females of the Samandağ region generally cover their hair for shrine visitation regardless of their age.

As an extension of this purpose of covering to protect sacred things, textiles are universally used in the village for covering the marble cenotaphs or *maqām* of the central ritual space. These central stone axes are never bare, but draped with green satin, and sometimes piled with cotton sheets which are dyed green as well. Green is present in many shades and is of course associated with both



FIGURE 10.3 A young boy circumambulates the central ritual stone adorned with lace-covered Qurans

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the Alid family line and the figure of al-Khidr, the ‘Green One.’ Mass-produced prayer rugs are piled upon these green coverings. Copies of the Quran are placed on the central cenotaphs and are often covered with doilies made of the local hand-made white lace that is particular to this area (figure 10.3).

## 7 The Quran

Several copies of the Quran adorn the tops of the central cenotaphs. These are hardcover decorated editions that are sold inexpensively in Turkey. The Qurans are not read or recited during ordinary visits, but rather used as ritual cultic objects. As the visitor circumambulates the cenotaph, these copies are touched, repeatedly opened and closed, and are kissed and placed to the forehead several times, in a traditional gesture akin to the respectful greeting of one’s elders. The binding of many of these Qurans have worn away, and when the folios have become loose, they are not discarded, but remain on the cenotaph under a bag of incense to keep them in place.

## 8 Binding Materials: Cloth, Frankincense, Candles, and Coins

In the practice of binding, which is known in many parts of the world, a material object, such as a strip of cloth, is tied, nailed, or affixed to the sacred structure or to another object within its vicinity, such as a tree (Hasluck 1929, 93). The underlying motivations behind this action can be several, but within the *ziyāra* investigated in this chapter, the visitor petitions the sacred personage through this material object, which binds the petition to the place of sacred efficacy. As seen in other *ziyāra* across Turkey and elsewhere, strips of cloth are often tied to “petition trees” (*dilek ağacı*) in this practice.<sup>45</sup> What is notable for the *ziyāra* presented in this chapter, however, is the location of the trees, many of which are found in courtyards and gardens of the *ziyāra* complex. Two *ziyāra*, however, housed trees within the shrine structure, growing out of the concrete flooring. One *ziyāra* houses a thriving fig tree (Nabi Yunes, Mikdet El-Yemin), and the another, an olive tree (Seyidne Hıdır, Nebi Hemzi, Yünüs İbin Mette).

The fig tree holds therapeutic properties (Turkish, *şifa*), and grew through a crack in the floor of the *ziyāra* after it was constructed. The olive tree came

45 An early survey of this practice in Anatolia is found in Hasluck (1929, 262–263). Can (2015, 50) refers to this practice as leaving a “material memory of one’s visit.”

before the *ziyāra* structure, however. A relative of the *ziyāra*'s owner related that domesticated animals which had been yoked to the olive tree (both a sheep and a goat) had died. Death, whether in animals or humans, is a known consequence for not taking a *ziyāra* claim seriously. Interpreting the animals' demise as a sign of the site's identity as a *ziyāra* (manifest at this point as a fearsome power), the owner of the tree built a domed structure over the sacred olive tree. Both trees are hosts to numerous binding materials, including strips of cloth, *tesbih* (prayer beads) and unlit candles. Strips of green cloth taken from the textile material placed on the central cenotaphs for this purpose are also tied to iron grates over the window of the structure and on flag poles within the structure.

As just mentioned, *tesbih* and candles are also frequently used as binding materials. The *tesbih* are in a variety of materials and colors, and the candles are of the locally produced beeswax type, with pairs joined together by an uncut wick. Although I never witnessed the lighting of candles, nor have I observed any evidence of lit candles in any of these *ziyāra*, bunches of unlit candles are frequently draped over tree branches (indoors and outdoors) along with other binding materials. Occasionally candles are draped over ropes that were tied to the cenotaphs themselves. Similarly, *tesbih* were often draped alongside these binding materials. Occasionally, they would be draped over the few iconic portraits or photographs.<sup>46</sup>

Classified here as another material for binding, raw frankincense is used in a way that can be described as a divinatory process (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010, 202). The individual rocks are scraped along the wall of the structure or along the side of the cenotaph itself, with the petitioner releasing the pressure after a visible trace has been made by the amber pebbles in the hope that the incense will adhere to the wall. If it adheres, then the petition is likely to be granted. This practice was observed in most of the *ziyāras* using frankincense. Only in one *ziyāra* was physical evidence left showing this type of divinatory binding had been accomplished successfully with coins.

## 9 Therapeutic Materials: Oil, Water, Stones, and Trees

Small bottles of olive oil and water are present in most of the shrines, usually deliberately placed on the central cenotaph(s). Both liquids are used therapeutically, with water consumed, and both water and oil rubbed on the skin

46 The iconic images with the shrines were most often portraits of Ali, followed by the Twelve Imams, and Hac Bektaş. Photographic representations of the Kaaba are also present.



FIGURE 10.4 Mulberry tree with therapeutic properties  
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of petitioners. According to caretakers, bottles of oil and water are usually brought to *ziyāra* on Thursdays, and then the visitor returns to collect and use their contents on Friday, which is the most auspicious day of the week. Cylinder-shaped stones, rendered smooth and shiny from use over time, are often placed against the walls for visitors to roll along their legs while seated for curative effect. Four separate *ziyāra* in the village are known for their curative trees. Outside the Şeyh Daher shrine, a massive mulberry tree grew sideways to which visitors would bring children to pass under the trunk to counter bronchial problems (figure 10.4). This tree was chopped down in 2014 after it was damaged in an electrical storm, and the caretaker attesting that the number of people visiting the *ziyāra* has declined since the removal of the famed tree. In the shrine in which the fig tree is growing inside mentioned above, the veins of the leaves are broken open, and the white liquid is applied to chronic skin conditions.

These trees differ from other trees used for therapeutic or binding purposes, in that they are integral to the circumstances of the *ziyāra*'s revelation to the locals in dreams and visions. As in the case cited above, anecdotes abound about how these trees have brought great distress, even death, upon those

who have chopped them down. A large mulberry tree once grew directly behind the *ziyāra* of Nabi Allah Edris, Şeyh Hasan İbin Mekzün Sincari, and Şeyh Muhammad İbin Mekzün Sincari. On its trunk, a stream of water seeped that was abundant enough to leave a visible mark. The water from this tree was rubbed on the foreheads of visitors, especially children, for general good health. A neighbor chopped down the tree (before 2015) because it encroached on his property and had died as a result, according to the *ziyāra*'s owner, who relayed the events to me in a matter-of-fact manner. Another mulberry tree in the courtyard in front of the *ziyāra* structure now produces water to the same curative effect.

### 10 Foundational Objects: Cenotaphs, Rocks, Constructed Mountains, and Trees

All the twelve *ziyāra* in this village with constructed domed buildings house what appear to be sarcophagi-like cenotaphs. Properly speaking however, these are rectangular cenotaphs, constructed of local marble, as discussed above. It has been observed elsewhere that generally in Alawi *ziyāra*, the approach to actual tombs and cenotaphs are not delineated among visitors (Procházka-Eisl and Procházka 2010, 88). In the *ziyāra* of this village, when there are multiple cenotaphs, they are placed together in the central ritual space so that they can be circumambulated together, at once.

It is also standard in this village, and likely a common practice found in other Alawi *ziyāra*, that the central cenotaph(s) are circumambulated several times, usually three. In one of the village *ziyāras*, however, an anomalous configuration of three cenotaphs (Hıdır, Miğdet İl Yemin, Melek Cafer Tayyar) makes circumambulation impossible. In this particular *ziyāra*, the corner of the cenotaph comes directly against one of the walls of the building, blocking visitors from making the customary ritual circuits. Such a placement must be deliberate and perhaps for reasons of 'prohibited practice' that will be discussed below.

As mentioned above, four of the five *ziyāra* dedicated to Hıdır mark his place with sarcophagus-like cenotaphs alike in shape and size to all the others found within the village, both in the *ziyāra* and in the cemeteries. In the singular *ziyāra* dedicated to exclusively to Hıdır however, the Hz. Hıdır Makamı, the central ritual space is dominated by a central square marble block unlike any of the rectangle cenotaphs in the village. On top of it is a large mountain-like sculpture, which is in striking contrast to other *ziyāra* interiors within the



FIGURE 10.5 Central ritual space of the Hz. Hıdır Makamı  
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village (figure 10.5). In fact, this configuration of central ritual space, which is a sculpture resembling a mountain, can only be understood in relation to another *ziyāra* located outside the village directly on the beach. The official inscription on the threshold of the large *ziyāra* on the beach states: “The Place of the Exalted Hızır, Peace be upon him” (Hz. Hızır A.S. Makamı).<sup>47</sup> Although more research is required, it is likely that the *ziyāra* in the village is a direct replica of the interior of this regional shrine on the Mediterranean shore. Its central ritual space is a cut of a marble monolith, serving as a pedestal to a massive unburnished marble rock in the shape of a mountain. The original shrine on the beach is claimed and promoted as the meeting place of Hızır and the Prophet Musa as described in the Sura of the Cave (Figure 10.6). While the replica shrine in the village remains small-scale, the growing renown of the beach *ziyāra* is witnessed by the increasing number of tour buses that stop there, especially during the summer. Both of these *ziyāra* employ the term

47 On this *ziyāra*, see Prager (2013, 49–50).



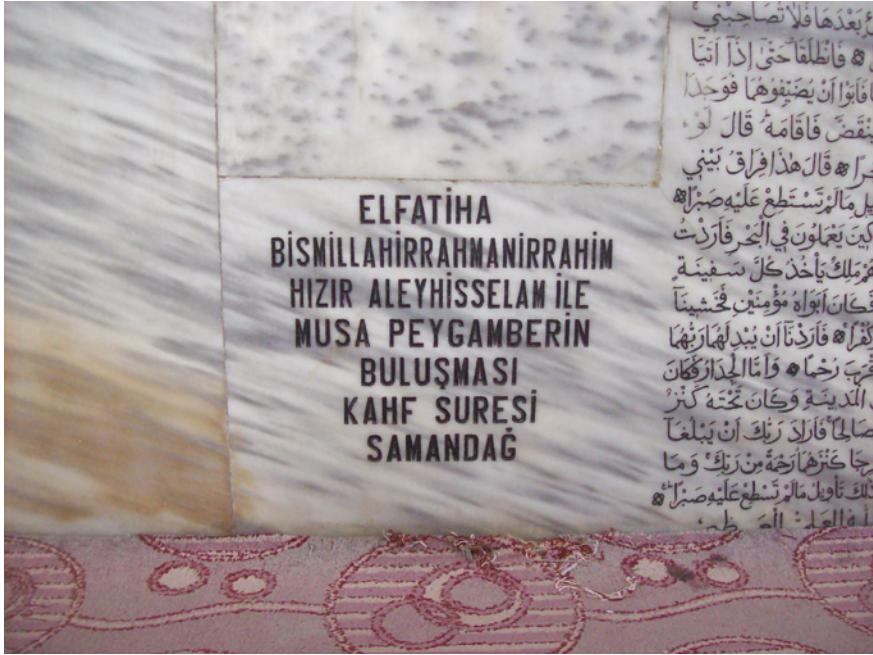


FIGURE 10.6 Inscription referencing the Sura of the Cave (Surat al-Kahf, Quran: 18) in the Hz. Hızır Makamı in the Deniz district of Samandağ  
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*makām* on their threshold inscriptions, signaling that they are commemorating a very specific event of Quranic history.

The configuration of these central stone structures in these two *makam* resemble the figuration found within the *ziyāra* dedicated to the Seven Prophets (Yedi Anbiya). Likely this designation references the narrative of the Seven Sleepers, which is also found in the Sura of the Cave. The central axis of the Yedi Anbiya is also a large square monolith, and not separated into discrete cenotaphs. Of course, the Sleepers share a characteristic with Hızır which would nullify the need for cenotaphs. They too are understood as individuals who defy mortality, lying in their tomb cave in a divinely induced sleep awaiting resurrection, according to the Sura of the Cave. Similarly, the central attribute of Hızır is everlasting vitality, so even what may appear to be a tomb would be understood as a place of his presence, and not of his remains, which in any event, theoretically cannot exist.

## 11 Implications of Materiality in Alawi Ziyāra

A *ziyāra* is created from the ground up, figuratively and literally. Looking at this particular group of shrines from the point of view of their material contents has led to further analysis of the process of shrine revelation. For both visitors and the caretakers of this group of Alawi shrines, the material contents are vital in the discovery and practice of *ziyāra*. While shrine construction in this area continues and even accelerates in all its material interaction, there are some indications of disapproval of this aspect of religiosity in other areas.

In some Alawi shrines of pre-war Syria, a process of 'orthodoxification' has been observed. Certain practices like those that were described in this chapter were disapproved or even prohibited including the use of candles, incense, therapeutic stones, and binding with cloth.<sup>48</sup> In a similar manner, the Turkish Ministry for Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) disseminates a list of prohibited behaviors associated with visitation. This list is posted in places (*makam, türbe*) of pious visitation, all over Turkey in recent years. Although I have never observed the prohibitive list within or near any *ziyāra* identified as Alawi such as what is described in this chapter, I have observed the list in larger shrines this region which are visited by both Sunnis and Alawis. These include the Eshab-i Khef in Tarsus, the regional sacred site dedicated to the Seven Sleepers mentioned earlier. The list of prohibitions is also displayed in the tomb-shrine attached to Antakya's Habib-i Neccar Cami, the historical mosque situated over the tomb of the legendary martyr whose cenotaph is also found within a *ziyāra* in the village (Seyidna El Hıdır, Melek Cafer El Tiyyor, Sultan Habib El Neccar). In the negative imperative mode, capitalized, with explanation marks, twelve actions are listed as "forbidden according to the religion of Islam":

1. Vows are not taken!
2. Animal sacrifices are not made!
3. Candles are not lit!
4. Cloth is not tied!
5. Stones and coins are not affixed!
6. Bowing or crawling are not permitted!
7. Money is not given!
8. Food items are not left!
9. Faces are not rubbed with hands!

48 Dick Douwes interprets this "purification" of Alawi shrines in Syria as an effort to align Alawi practice with accepted precepts of Twelver Shi'ism (Douwes 2013, 78).

10. Wishing for a cure/healing from the tomb of the saints [*yatırlar*] is forbidden!
11. Tombs of the saints [*yatırlar*] are not to be circumambulated!
12. Sleeping in the tomb is not permitted!

Although controlling certain ritual behaviors may be the main objective of these directives, the role of material objects within these rites is integral, and the censure of material paraphernalia from the Ministry is clear. Candles, stones, coins, food, and cloth are all essential materials in the *ziyāra* in this survey. It would be a worthy study to investigate whether these directives have in fact affected actual practice. The tombs of the Habib-i Neccar Mosque, where these directives are displayed, are placed in such a way that make circumambulation impossible. This obstruction of ambulatory passage is also seen in one of the village's *ziyāra* mentioned above (İl Hıdır, Miğdet İl Yemin, Melek Cafer Tayyar). Although more research is needed to determine the reason for the unique configuration of cenotaphs in any particular *ziyāra*.

The Alawi concept of *ziyāra* is multi-faceted and can be seen throughout the process of shrine discovery and construction. From revelation to materialization, though its multiple stages, the *ziyāra* is understood as a presence, place, and practice. The most renowned *ziyāra* in the Samandağ region and its replica in the village are identified as the meeting place of Hıdır and Moses as recounted in the Quran (18: 60–82). Within that Quranic episode, the meaning behind Hıdır's incompressible actions are revealed to the prophet Moses. That is one of the reasons why Louis Massignon referred to this Quranic chapter as the "Apocalypse of Islam" (Massignon 1969). The process of establishing a *ziyāra* is also like an apocalypse in that it is not something that is *built* so much as something *revealed*. Those privileged individuals who witness the luminosity are then deeply compelled to commemorate their revelation in material reality, as stones, trees, and mountains to encircle and enshrine.

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## Festive Illumination, Prayers, and Grave Visitation

### *Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban in Kashmir*

*Hakim Sameer Hamdani*

In the liturgical calendar of religious events linked with the Shi‘i faith, Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban (Festival of Mid-Sha‘ban)<sup>1</sup> is a festival which takes place on the eve of the fifteenth of Sha‘ban, the eighth month of the Islamic lunar calendar.<sup>2</sup> Like other Muslim festivals, the celebration starts on the night following the fourteenth of Sha‘ban, which is known as Shab-i Barat (Night of Atonement or Night of Forgiveness), and marks a unique celebration linked with the public expression of joy and festivity. Traditionally, the Festival of Shab-i Barat, or Barat, represents a night of divine grace, forgiveness and deliverance from Damnation. The sanctity of the night is reinforced by compilations of prayer manuals linked with popular Shi‘i religious literature. In these compositions dating from the fifth/eleventh century<sup>3</sup> onwards, the excellence of Shab-i Barat is also cited as being second only to Shab-i Qadr (Night of Power), the night which marks the revelation of Quran during the fasting month of Ramadan.

In popular Muslim culture, Barat is believed to be the night when sustenance and fortunes are determined by Allah amongst His creation for the coming year. The narrative of Barat as a night of sustenance, forgiveness, and salvation resonates in both Shi‘i and Sunni *ḥadīth*.<sup>4</sup> In Kashmir, the shared festivities

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1 Transliterations in this chapter are provided from the Arabic and Persian languages, according to the origin of the word. For terms and expressions used in both languages, transliterations are provided according to the language from which the word is most likely to have entered the Kashmiri context. A simplified transliteration is used throughout. For simplicity, diacritics are provided for technical terms only and are avoided for proper nouns, place names, and dates or events with a commonplace system of romanization.

2 In the Persianate world the festival is commonly known as Nimh-i Sha‘ban, while in the Arabic-speaking world it is commonly referred to as Nisf Sha‘ban.

3 Unless otherwise stated, dates in this chapter are provided according to the Hijri (lunar) and Gregorian calendars. These are indicated by AH for Anno Hegirae and CE for common (or current) era.

4 A *ḥadīth* (pl. *ahādīth*) is an authoritative narration of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad. Compilations of *ahādīth* have achieved canonical status among Muslims, rendering *ḥadīth*, as a collective canon, a major source of religious knowledge, second only to the Quran.



FIGURE 11.1 Remembering the past in a celebration reflecting sustenance for the future in Hasanabad Cemetery, Srinagar (Shab-i Barat)  
© HAKIM SAMEER HAMDANI (2017)

associated with Barat are also demonstrated by the material manifestations of festivity shared by the Sunni and Shi'i communities.

Yet, in contemporary Kashmiri Muslim society, the celebratory aspects of Shab-i Barat are increasingly specific and limited to the Shi'i community. Amongst Kashmiri Sunnis, neo-Salafi and Ahl-i Hadith<sup>5</sup> groups question the foundational basis of the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban and Shab-i Barat. On the other hand, we find that the central theme of the Shi'i community's celebration of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban has shifted from a focus on *barāt*, or atonement, to an emphasis on another event relevant only to Twelver Shi'ism – namely, the birth of the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi (b. 255 AH/879 CE),<sup>6</sup> whom Shi'is believe went into Major Occultation in 940 CE and will reappear at the End of Time.

However, such an understanding of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban does not represent a historical reality of how it was celebrated in Kashmir. In attempting a historiographic study of Shab-i Barat amongst Kashmiri Shi'is, this chapter traces the origin of the celebrations in the region: origins which are shaped by

5 Ahl-i Hadith is a religious movement that emerged in nineteenth-century British India. The movement gained prominence in Kashmir especially in the 1980s. Among other things, Ahl-i Hadith are known for their literal interpretation of *ḥadīth* and the rejection of vernacular cultural practices of the local Muslim community. In particular, followers of Ahl-i Hadith are opposed to Sufi practices and reject festivals such as Barat. For more on Ahl-i Hadith, see Bhatti (2007).

6 In some traditions the date is mentioned as 868 CE.



non- and pre-Islamic vernacular cultures rather than the textual scriptures of the Shi'i faith. Analyzing material cultures linked with *Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban*, I argue that the traditions and celebrations linked with the festival are continuously evolving, demonstrating the changing dynamics of how Kashmiri Shi'is perceive both their past and present.

The chapter also highlights the influence of religious ideation following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and how that has impacted Kashmiri Shi'is' commemoration of the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban. I argue that there has been a gradual and intermittent shift from a focus on the *barāt*-ness (the salvific qualities of atonement) of the festival to an alternative narrative centered on the *vilādat* (birth) of al-Mahdi. This subtle re-appropriation of the meaning behind and significance of the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban also resulted in additions to the material culture linked with the festival. This chapter argues that, as the canvas of celebrations linked with the birth of al-Mahdi continues to expand among Kashmiri Shi'is, Sunni festivities connected to Barat are dwindling.

In its methodology, the chapter differs and distinguishes itself from conventional historiographies by relying on memory as the primary tool of data collection.<sup>7</sup> This includes personal memories of the author, drawing on his participation in festive celebrations of Mid-Sha'ban in Kashmir, as well as oral-history testimonies of research informants collected through a series of non-structured, oral-history interviews. These personal recollections are, of course, partially conditioned by the author's and informants' sense of nostalgia for the past. Though not an alternative to history, these collective memories are nevertheless used in charting out the materiality related to the celebration of Festival of Mid-Sha'ban and the changes that have occurred in last three decades. Importantly, the study of using memory is related to the living traditions of the festival and not the past which is accessed through historical texts.

## 1 The Origin of *Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban* Celebrations in Kashmir

Celebrations linked with Mid-Sha'ban constitute a festive break from a Shi'i liturgical calendar marked otherwise by a series of mourning rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Karbala on the Tenth of Muharram (Day of Ashura) as well as the deaths of other major figures revered by Shi'i

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<sup>7</sup> The study is structured as a descriptive research design based on fieldwork in Shi'i-majority neighborhoods of Srinagar, the capital city of Kashmir. The city has historically served as the enabler of Kashmiri culture. Nevertheless, experiences linked to the celebration outside of Srinagar have also been collected, but these studies are only illustrative.

Muslims. The prevalence of mourning rituals within the Kashmiri Shi'ī society is also reflected in a popular Kashmiri proverb: *Sunnīyān bod duh ti shrakhi, Batén bod doh ti faqi, Shiyān bod duh ti bakhi* ('For a Sunni, a festival means [slaughter] and feasting; for a Hindu, it is hunger and fasting; and for Shi'ī, it is grief and mourning').

Historically amongst Kashmiri Shi'īs and well until the second half of the twentieth century, the celebration of Shab-i Barat eclipsed other major events and occasions including the two Eids (sg. *īd*, Arabic for feast or festival),<sup>8</sup> Shab-i Qadr, Mi'rāj-ul Alam (Ascent to the Heaven), or the birthdays of the Prophet and the Shi'ī imams.

While the presence of a nascent Muslim community in Kashmir<sup>9</sup> can be traced back to the eleventh century, it was only in the fourteenth century that Muslim rule was established in this Himalayan region when a Buddhist chieftain from Ladakh,<sup>10</sup> Rinchana (r. 1320–1323 CE),<sup>11</sup> ascended the throne of Kashmir and converted to Islam at the hands of a Sufi saint by the name of Bulbul Shah (d. 727 AH/1327 CE). No contemporaneous account of Bulbul Shah has survived, leaving us uncertain about his sectarian affiliation. Nevertheless, the oldest surviving textual references identify him to be Shi'ī.<sup>12</sup> The short rule of Rinchana was followed by the establishment of the Shalmiri Sultanate (1339–1555 CE), a Sunni dynasty of non-native origins, under Sultan Shams-ud Din (r. 1339–42 CE). Shi'ī influences in the emerging Muslim society of fourteenth-century Kashmir remained limited and marginal, until the arrival

8 The two Eids celebrated by all Muslims are Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice) and Eid al-Fitr (Feast of Breaking the Fast). Shi'īs celebrate two additional Eids, those of al-Ghadir (*īd al-ghadīr*) and al-Mubahala. According to Shi'ī belief, Eid al-Ghadir commemorates the Prophet Muhammad's declaration of his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his vice reagent during his Farewell Pilgrimage in 632 CE. Eid al-Mubahala commemorates the Event of Mubahala, when the Prophet Muhammad and a Christian delegation prayed together to invoke a divine sign to reveal truth and falsehood in their religious differences.

9 Shaykh Muhammad b. Yaqub Kulyani (b. 250 AH/864 CE, d. 329 AH/941 CE) in his account of the twelfth Shi'ī imam records a meeting in Baghdad between al-Mahdi and Abu Said Hindi, a Kashmiri, who reportedly arrived in the city sometime after 264 AH/877 CE. Historically, Abu Said represents one of the earliest references to Kashmir Shi'ī Muslims in Shi'ī *ḥadīth* (Kulyani 2001, 141–174). Regarding Muslim presence in Kashmir, the Kashmiri historian Kalhana speaks of *Turushka* (Sanskrit, for Turks) soldiers who were in the service of King Harsadeva (r. 1089–1101 CE), see Kalhana (2007, 353).

10 Ladakh borders Kashmir on the north and forms the entry point to Tibet.

11 On his conversion he adopted the name of Sadr-ud Din and is remembered as such by medieval Muslim historians. Malik gives his year of passing as 727 AH/1326 CE (Malik 1991, 40).

12 The author of *Tārīkh-i Kashmir* (c.1620–21 CE) speaks of Bulbul Shah as a Shi'ī, see Malik (1991).

of the Nurbakhshiyya Sufi shaykh, Mir Shams-ud Din Araki (b. 828 AH/1424 CE, d. 931 AH/1525 CE) in the fifteenth century and the conversion of the powerful Chak tribe to Shi'ism.

The marriage of ideology and power epitomized by the Nurbakhshiyya Sufi order and the Chak dynasty would soon result in the setting up of Shi'i rule in Kashmir under the Chaks (r. 1554–1586 CE).<sup>13</sup> As rulers of an independent land, Kashmiri Shi'is were open about their sectarian affiliations. They had no reservation about the public display of their *i'tiqād* (belief) neither did they practice *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation).<sup>14</sup> This was in stark contrast to the prevailing atmosphere in the rest of the Indian subcontinent where many Shi'i nobles and scholars associated with the Mughal<sup>15</sup> court practiced *taqiyya* well into the eighteenth century. Given the open expression of sectarian association by Kashmir Shi'is, it is significant that we find no mention of festivities and celebrations associated with Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban amongst the Shi'i community of sixteenth-century Kashmir. The life of Araki and the material culture linked to the Nurbakhshiyya<sup>16</sup> order is described in great details in *Tuhfatul Ahabab*,<sup>17</sup> a hagiographical account (*tazkīrah*) of the order written by a disciple of Araki in 1642 CE. Yet, *Tuhfatul Ahabab* is silent on the celebration of the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban, providing no clue as to whether this festival was celebrated amongst the Shi'i community of Kashmir. Aside from the Eid, the only other festival mentioned in this work is that of Nauroz.<sup>18</sup> In the absence of any textual references or supporting archival evidence, it is difficult to ascertain the nature and exact date of origin of the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban and its celebration in Kashmir as a festival of light and illumination. In contrast, writing in the early seventeenth century, the fourth Mughal emperor of India, Nur-ud Dyn Jahangir (r. 1605–1627 CE), refers to a Hindu festival in Srinagar, in which houses on both banks of the River Jhelum were illuminated with

13 The Sultans of Kashmir ruled from 1346–1586 CE, under the two ruling dynasties, the Shahmiris and the Chaks.

14 The last Chak ruler, Yaqub Shah (r. 1586 CE) insisted that the Sunni imam of the main congregational mosque Jamia Masjid, Srinagar, recite the typical Shi'i phrase *Ash-hadu anna 'Alī walī-u Allah* ('I testify that Ali is the Viceregent of Allah') in the *adhān* (call for prayers), see Malik (1991) and Khuihami (1999).

15 The Mughals are a Muslim dynasty of Turkic origin who ruled over much of the Indian sub-continent between 1526 and 1857 CE.

16 For the Nurbakhshiyya, see Bashir (2003).

17 The work has been translated into English, see Pandita (2009).

18 Nauroz (Persian for 'New Day') marks the beginning of the Iranian New Year and falls on the day of spring equinox. Amongst Kashmiri Shi'is, the day is celebrated to mark the commencement of the caliphate of Imam Ali.

lamps (Jahangir 1999, 167).<sup>19</sup> This textual reference indicates the prevalence of a custom, linked with communal illumination in the city amongst Kashmiri Hindus. Similarly, the tradition of burning candles to mark celebrations is also mentioned by the author of *Tuhfatul Ahbab*. This work makes a reference to a candle, *Sham'ah-i Nurbakhsh* (Nurbakhshiyya candle), which would be symbolically handed over by the *shaykh* of the Sufi order to a novice, marking the initiation of the latter into the order and the commencement of his spiritual retreat in the *khanaqa* (Sufi hospice). Likewise, members of the Nurbakhshiyya Order would also light candles on graves of deceased members of their order for a period of forty days following burial (Ali 2006, 83; 91). The absence of a similar practice on Shab-i Barat,<sup>20</sup> strongly suggests that the tradition of celebrating the festival by illumination was unknown during the days of the independent sultans of Kashmir (1320–1586 CE) and that it emerged only after the arrival of Mughals in Kashmir.

The demise of the Chak Sultanate came at the hands of the Mughals, who annexed Kashmir in 1586 CE during the reign of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605 CE). Thereafter, the Mughals would rule over Kashmir until 1752 CE, refashioning the land into their own image while also celebrating it as a 'terrestrial paradise' (*firdoūs*).<sup>21</sup> It is in writings dating from the Mughal period that we find the first recorded instances of celebrations linked with the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban, associating its celebrations with festive illumination. In his memoirs, Jahangir mentions how his Iranian wife, Empress Nur Jahan (d. 1645 CE) hosted a feast on the night following the sunset of the fourteenth of Sha'ban in her garden. Regarding the nature of the celebrations, he writes,

[T]he fourteenth of Sha'ban, which is Shab-i Barat, I held a meeting in one of the houses of the palace of Nur Jahan Begam, which is situated in the midst of large tanks [...] In the beginning of the evening, they lit lanterns and lamps all around the tanks and building, [...] the like of which has perhaps never been arranged in any place. (Jahangir 1999, 385)

19 The illumination mentioned in this account marks Vyeth Truwah (Kashmiri for 'Thirteenth of Vyeth'), an ancient Hindu festival celebrating the origin of the River Jhelum (Vyeth) on the thirteenth of the month of Bahdawan (August/September) of the Hindu calendar.

20 The *tazkirahs* of Sunni Sufi orders also lack any mention of festive celebrations linked with Mid-Sha'ban. This includes the famous books of Kashmiri hagiography, such as *Dastur-i Salikin* of Baba Dawud Khakhi (d. 1585), *Hidayat al-Mukhlisin* of Baba Haider Tulmuli (d. 1590) and *Chilchilat-al-Arifin* (c.1574) of Khwaja Ishaq Qari.

21 Traces of this fetishization of the land can be observed in official Mughal accounts and reports, imperial biographies, poetical compositions as well as in the gardens and mosques that the Mughals constructed in Kashmir.

The royal festivities marking Barat were also accompanied with full-night revelry amongst members of the Mughal nobility (Jahangir 1999, 386). Jahangir's memoirs establish the culture of Barat celebrations within the royal court as a secular event devoid of any act of religious piety; an event marked by a dinner party of roast meat, fruits, and drinks under a canvas of illuminated buildings and gardens. According to Annemarie Schimmel (2004, 138), Shab-i Barat celebrations at the Mughal court with 'illuminations and fireworks,' reflected Persianate cultural influences, which the Mughal emperors inherited from and shared with their counterpart in Persia.

During their long period of rule over Kashmir, the Mughals introduced numerous cultural influences, many of Persianate origin, which gained favor with the natives and, over the years, became an intrinsic part of Kashmiri culture. These influences can be located in architecture, cuisine, and costume as well as in the crafts of the region. The popularity of Barat festivities at the Mughal court suggests that the material culture linked with this festival came into vogue during Mughal rule in Kashmir. Simultaneously, we find existing native customs related to illumination and grave visitation prevalent among local Shi'i-Sufi orders such as the Nurbakhshiyya were also incorporated in then-emerging traditions associated with Shab-i Barat as they evolved in Kashmir under the influence of the Mughal royal court.

This transformation of a somewhat obscure festival into an occasion of exuberant illumination of the city is best characterized in the way indigenous Hindu rituals such as the public illumination of residences were adapted into Barat festivities. This propensity for synthesizing exogenous ideas with its own cultural experience is reflective of the syncretism that defines popular Muslim cultures in medieval Kashmir. Furthermore, the celebration of Shab-i Barat by members of the Sunni Mughal court ensured its acceptance by the predominantly Sunni population of Kashmir.<sup>22</sup> Tracing its roots to Kashmir's Mughal past, we observe the emergence of traditions associated with Barat, marked by similarities in celebratory practices amongst Shi'i and Sunni Muslims in Kashmir, especially the illumination of homes, gardens, and gravesites.

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22 Sunni *hadith* literature on the merits of Mid-Sha'ban is recorded in the *Mussanaf* of Abdul Razaq b. Humam (126 AH/744 CE–211 AH/827 CE) and the *Musanad* of Ahmad b. Hanbal (164 AH/780 CE–241 AH/855 CE). Amongst the canonical Sunni *hadith* collection, the *Sahihyān*, chapters on the merit of Nisf Sha'ban are to be found in both *Jamia al-Tirmidhi* and *Sunan of ibn Majah*, see Qari (undated, 444; 446).

## 2 The Festival of Illumination: Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban in the Popular Shi‘i Culture of Kashmir

In popular Shi‘i religious literature, the works of the Safavid scholar, Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (b. 1627, d. 1699 CE) and, following him, that of the twenty-first-century Iranian theologian Iranian theologian and *muḥaddith*<sup>23</sup> Shaykh Abbas Qummi (d. 1359 AH/1941 CE)<sup>24</sup> are widely used handbooks of Shi‘i rites, observed on various occasions of the liturgical year, including the Festival of Mid-Sha‘ban. In *Zād al-Ma‘ād* (Provisions for the Hereafter),<sup>25</sup> Majlisi forms a connection between grave visitation and the rites associated with Mid-Sha‘ban based on a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet Muhammad is said to have visited the Baqi Cemetery in Medina on the eve of the fifteenth of Sha‘ban to pray for the departed souls (Majlisi 1903, 76).<sup>26</sup> In Majlisi’s account, Archangel Gabriel instructed Muhammad on the supererogatory prayers (*nafl*) and supplications (*du‘ā’*) to be made on Eve of Mid-Sha‘ban.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, both Majlisi and following him Qummi link the Festival of Mid-Sha‘ban with the birth of al-Mahdi. Amongst the practices linked with an al-Mahdi-centered narrative of the festival is the recital of *Ziyārah-i Imam Mahdi*, a supplication or salutation dedicated to al-Mahdi. This *ziyāra* forges a link between the Night of Atonement and the birth of al-Mahdi:

*Allāhumma bi-ḥaq-i laylatinā hādhihī wa mawlūdihā, wa hudjatika wa maw‘ūdihā, allatī qaranta ilā fadhlihā fadhlan* (Qummi 2019, 258).

23 A *muḥaddith* (Arabic) is a person who studies and transmits *ḥadīth* (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The term usually denotes conservative or traditionalist scholarship.

24 According to Turner, Majlisi represents Shi‘i scholars from the Safavid period who were concerned primarily with the exoteric trappings of Twelver Shi‘ism – the practical aspects of Islam rather than *īmān* (faith or belief) (Turner 1989, 219). Earlier compilations like *Zād al-Ma‘ād* from which Majlisi borrows include *al-Miṣbāḥ al-Kabīr* of Shaykh al-Tusi (d. 460/1066), *al-Balad al-Amīn* and *Miṣbāḥ al-Kafami* of Ibrahim b. Ali al-Kafami (d. 905 AH/1499 CE).

25 *Zād al-ma‘ād* (Provisions for the Hereafter) is a Persian language book of prayers and supplications written by Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi in 1107 AH/1695–96 CE. Shaykh Abbas Qummi’s more recent compilation of prayers and supplications has to a large extent eclipsed Majlisi’s original work.

26 The supplications attributed to the Festival of Mid-Sha‘ban also include a *du‘ā’* whose merits are bestowed on the supplicates’ parents (Qummi 2019).

27 The *ḥadīth* is reported on the authority of the second Shi‘i imam, Hassan. The *nafl* prayer comprises of ten units (*rakat*) with the recitation of *Sura al-Ikhlās* ten times after *al-Fātiḥa* in each *rakat*.

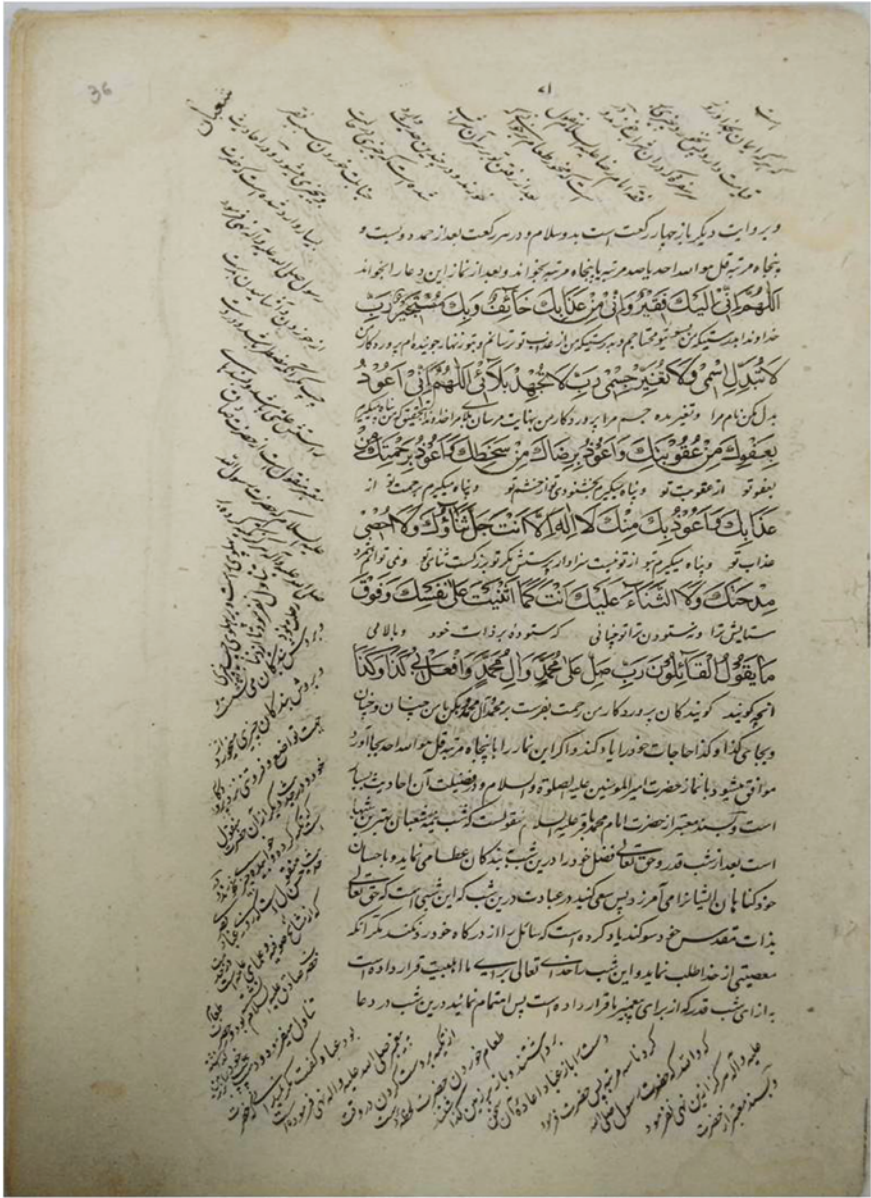


FIGURE 11.2 A lithograph of Majlisi's *Zād al-Ma'ād*  
 © HAKIM SAMEER HAMDANI (2019)

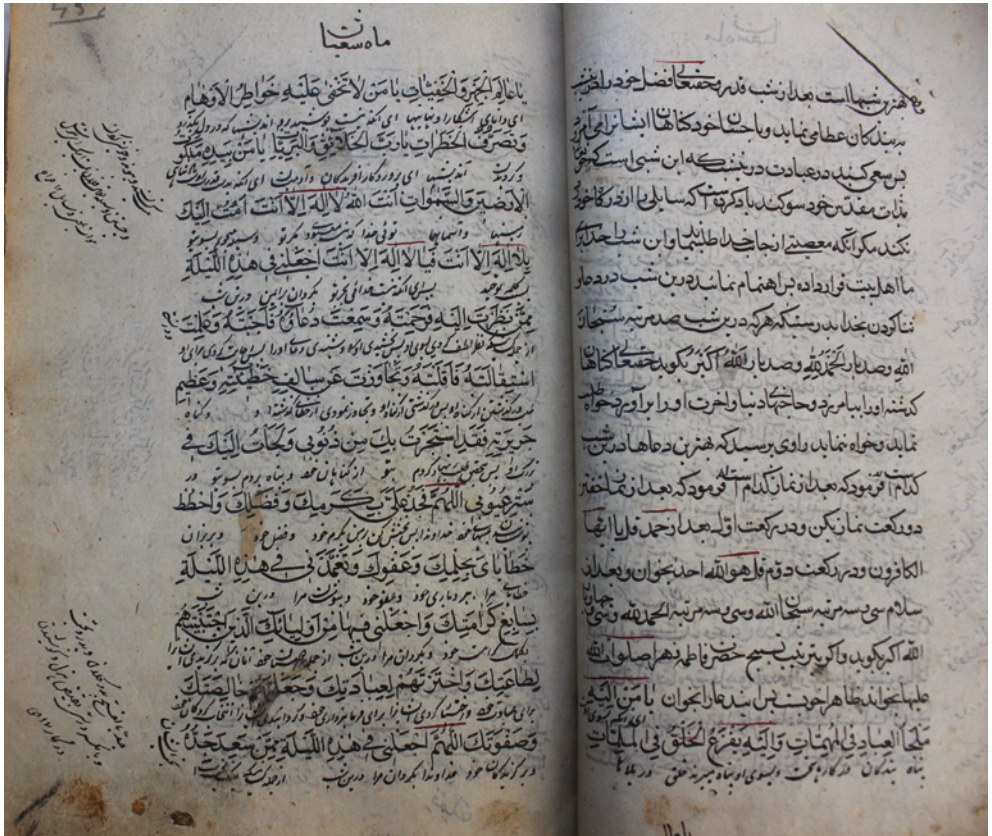


FIGURE 11.3 Manuscript of *Zād al-Ma'ād*, copied in 1264 AH by Mulla Aziz-ul Lah Hamdani © HAKIM SAMEER HAMDANI (2019)

transl. ‘O Allah: I beseech You, by the secret of this night and by the honor of [al-Mahdi], who was born on this night, by the truth of the Sign of God and Your truthful promise [of atonement] on this night; the night, whose bounties You have surmounted with bounty.’

Taken together, the works of Majlisi and Qummi define the entirety of prayer manual defining the devotional aspect of celebrating Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban. The existence of handwritten manuscripts of Majlisi’s work dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries copied in Kashmir would indicate the familiarity of his work to a Kashmiri audience. Yet the reception of works in the Persian and Arabic languages, such as *Zād al-Ma’ād* was limited to a small segment of Kashmiri society: the educated elite, especially those from the religious circle.

Even though in contemporary Kashmiri Shi‘i society the observance and recital of the supererogatory prayers is followed with greater religiosity and



discipline, historically this was not the case. In the collective memory<sup>28</sup> that Kashmiri Shi'is have evolved for themselves, the past, even the recent past, is visualized as an age of deep religious piety and ritual observance. However, the actual popular practice of many festivals such as the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban was marked by limited observance of prescribed rituals as defined in religious texts such as *Zād al-Ma'ād*. It was only in the educated classes that the observance of various supererogatory prayers as listed by Majlisi and Qummi was followed religiously. This phenomenon was also reflective of widespread illiteracy as well as unfamiliarity with texts in Persian or Arabic, which made these works unintelligible to most people. Additionally, prior to the arrival of printed books, authoritative religious texts, including works such as *Zād al-Ma'ād*, though available in Kashmir as manuscripts or lithographs, remained a prized possession within scholarly circles.

At a popular level, the festive dimensions of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban were more pronounced than the religious or devotional aspects of the festival. This was manifested by visitation to cemeteries as well as lighting lamps or candles on graves of family members and homes. Rooted as they were in popular culture, these festivities also exhibited similarity of expressions amongst both Shi'is as well as Sunnis. This entire canvas of illumination also served as a dim reminder of the more colorful celebrations under the Mughals, as described by Jahangir.

### 3 Popular Materialities and Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban in Twentieth-Century Kashmir

Based on my study, the practices linked with the celebration of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban in twentieth-century Kashmir can be divided into two distinct phases. The first phase marks the continuation of long-held local traditions and primarily associates the celebrations with *barāt* (atonement). In the second phase, the festival is 'reinvented' or reinterpreted following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, shifting the focus of Shi'ite celebrations towards the purported *vilādat* (birth) of Imam al-Mahdi.<sup>29</sup>

28 The use of 'shared memory' here is influenced by Halbwachs' view of individual's memory being influenced by the group consciousness linked to family and socio-cultural norms in which he resides. For a study of intersection of collective influences in framing an individual's memory, see Halbwachs (1992).

29 Though within educated Kashmiri Shi'ite youth, a gradual awareness of the role of al-Mahdi as the Imam of the Age and an interest in his *zuhūr* ('emergence') can be observed as early as the 1980s, this awareness nevertheless did not result in any significant re-orientation of Shi'ite ritual observances in a way that foregrounds a Mahdi-centered mode of religiosity.

Though the argument that both aspects of Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban – i.e., *barāt* and *vilādat* – were celebrated simultaneously is also made, yet the first known instance of popular linking of the festival with the birth of al-Mahdi happened only in the late 1970s. In his recollections of the festival spanning more than six decades, Professor Shaykh M. Shafi – whose father, Shaykh Muhammad Hadi (d. 2000 CE) was a respected senior Kashmiri Shi‘i cleric – recounts some of the customs and rituals that were observed in their household to celebrate Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban.

According to Shafi, in their joint family of uncles, aunts, brothers, and cousins, the festival was marked by both enactment of prescribed ritual prayers as well as festivities, especially for the younger group of children including Shafi and his cousins. For the children, the celebratory nature of the festival was marked by a special dinner and illumination of houses and cemeteries. The day of the festival commenced with the cleaning of the house and cooking utensils. The preparation of food was overseen by the matriarch of the family, Khadija Begam,<sup>30</sup> Shafi’s widowed aunt, assisted by other female members of the family. Shafi recounts that Khadija Begam would wear a white dress, and all the women that were engaged in cooking would be in a state of ritual purity (Kashmiri *bawadzu*).<sup>31</sup> The feast itself would comprise of rice, the staple Kashmiri diet, accompanied by dishes of mutton and chicken. More importantly, it was Khadija Begum who was responsible for preparing the cotton wicks for the earthen lamps (Kashmiri *tchung*)<sup>32</sup> used for illumination at night. The preparation of the lamps was uniformly associated with female members of the household and, though not part of any prescribed ritual, was nevertheless seen as one of the most significant aspects of the festival. New earthen lamps would be procured specially for the festival. By ensuring the ritual purity of everyone involved in the preparation of these lamps, the act achieved a ‘quasi-ritualistic aspect.’<sup>33</sup>

In some families four special lamps would be prepared with a varying number of wicks arranged symbolically. This would include five wicks in

30 Khadija Begam was the wife of Shaykh Abu Ali, who was also a renowned *alīm*.

31 Ritual purification baths (*ghūsul*) are listed amongst the *‘amāl* associated with the festival of Mid-Sha‘ban (Qummi n. d., 257).

32 *Tchung*, also known as *diyās* in Hindi, comprised of small earthen oil filled lamps and were the preferred means of illumination before wax-based candles became common in the 1980s.

33 Author’s interview with Professor Shaykh M. Shafi, Retired Head of the Department of Library and Information Sciences at Kashmir University (Srinagar, April 20, 2019). The Shaykh’s family is known for its scholarship and contribution to the spread of Shi‘ism, especially during the nineteenth century. For more, see Kashmiri (2011); Cole (1989); and Hamdani (2014).

honor of the *panjtan* (the Five Revered [Personages]),<sup>34</sup> four for the *mursil* (literally, the messengers, referring to the Prophets of Strong Will),<sup>35</sup> twelve for the imams, and fourteen in honor of the *Masumīn* (Infallibles).<sup>36</sup> The preparation of the earthen lamps would be approached with a great degree of devotion and sanctity.

Shafi also remembers visiting the family cemetery later in the evening, where lamps would be lit on the graves of deceased family members after offering the *fātiha*.<sup>37</sup> As a child, Shafi and his cousins would also wash the tombstones of deceased family members before lighting the lamps. Not lighting lamps or candles on graves was considered a bad omen, *manhousgī* (inauspiciousness). Prayers would also be offered at home, where the family elders would stay up for night, while the children would sleep early, after dinner.<sup>38</sup>

In modern-day Kashmir, grave visitation in addition to lighting of candles and incense sticks is accompanied with showering of the graves by flowers and rose petals.<sup>39</sup> Some will also leave a handful of rice grains on the tombstones for birds, in an act of benevolence whose merits would be transmitted to the dead. On the first year after the death of a relative, food is traditionally distributed at the cemetery of the recently deceased on the night of Mid-Sha‘ban. The same custom is also followed at home, where food is distributed amongst the neighbors. Generally, the food distributed comprises *halwa* or *firny*<sup>40</sup> spread on traditional Kashmiri *roty* (baked bread). In certain instances, food or tea is sent to the local mosque in the *mohala* (residential quarter or neighborhood) for the congregation participating in nighttime prayers. How much food is distributed depends not only on the financial state of a household but also on how ingrained the custom is within a particular family.<sup>41</sup>

34 *Panjtan*, or *Panjtan Pak*, meaning the Five Revered [Personages], is a reference to the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, her husband, Imam Ali, and their two sons, Hassan and Husayn.

35 According to the Quran, the five Prophets of Strong Will (‘Ulu al-‘Azim) are Nūḥ (Noah), Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Mūsā (Moses) and ‘Īsā (Jesus) in addition to the Prophet Muhammad himself.

36 Twelver Shi‘i Muslims consider the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and the Twelve imams to be infallible.

37 Prayer offered for the benefit of soul the dead, by reciting the first and 112th chapters of the Quran along with some additional supplications.

38 Author’s interview with Prof. Shafi (April 20, 2019).

39 Sprinkling of the tombstone with *gulab arak* (rose water) is rare, and generally only followed in case of renowned religious scholars.

40 *Halwa* and *firny* are traditional sweets introduced to Kashmir during the Mughal period.

41 So, we have instances where a family may forgo this custom because there is no young male in the family to distribute the food. This is especially true of those families whose children and grandchildren have migrated from Kashmir in search of job or better life



FIGURE 11.4 Children offer prayers at the grave of a family member in Hasanabad, Srinagar. The tomb stone is covered with rice, incense sticks and candles  
© SYED SHAHRIYAR (2016)

In rural Kashmir, a group of children, normally four, are invited over for the dinner.<sup>42</sup> Before being served dinner, the children will recite *al-Fātiḥa* or *Sura Yāsīn*, the 36th chapter of the Quran, for the benefit of the host family. In his recollections, Professor M. Y. Zafar recalls that the invitation was an intrinsic part of the culture surrounding *Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban*.

According to Zafar, in his native village of Hanjivora, Pattan, all those who could afford to invite guests for dinner would do so. Traditionally, the invitees, numbering between two and four, would be from a family of *sayyids*, descendants of prophetic pedigree, or the family of the village *moulvi* (Urdu for Muslim cleric or teacher; also, in Persian). Zafar recalls that, in their village, the only social group who would not engage in this activity was the Doumb.<sup>43</sup>

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prospects. Also, there are a small number of families who prefer to spend money on charity-based community welfare projects rather than on distribution of food etc.

42 Maqbool Sajid. Writer. Author's interview (Srinagar, September 9, 2019). In Kashmir, a communal feast is eaten by four persons on a shared copper plate (*tramm*).

43 The Doumb is a pastoral social group which was traditionally involved in rearing cattle for landed families. Due to their pastoral lifestyle, they would rarely possess any agricultural land. Every night children from the Doumb family would make a round of houses in the village to collect rice. In the twentieth century, young Doumb men would find

As members of a landless class engaged in menial tasks around the village, they could not afford to host guests for dinner. Additionally, the Doumbis, due to the nature of their profession, were seen as social outcasts by their neighbors, with whom they retained minimal social interaction. The first time when this barrier was broken was somewhere around the 1960's when Zafar and a friend joined a Doumb family for dinner. In the village, the event was seen as a highly inappropriate act of social transgression.<sup>44</sup> Today the tradition of inviting guests for the Shab dinner continues in the village of Hanjivora; yet, exclusion of certain social groups, such as the Doumbis, is no longer practiced. This does not indicate that social grouping based on castes, occupation, and wealth has ceased to exist in the Shi'i society in Kashmir. What one can posit though, based on field studies, is that the bonds of social taboos governing interactions between various castes groupings within the Shi'is community have been eased.

The widespread prevalence of hosting dinner gatherings on Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban in rural Kashmir reveals that it appeals more to an agricultural society, where community life revolves around seasons of growing and harvesting food grains. In Kashmir, where rice remains the staple food crop, even today events such as ripening of grain, preparing the first food from harvested grains is followed by organizing community feasts or distributing *tahar*<sup>45</sup> within the village.<sup>46</sup>

As opposed to the custom of going over to a neighbor's house for dinner on the Shab, the prevalent custom in Srinagar is to have dinner only at home. Not doing so on a night when Allah is said to distribute sustenance amongst His creation is considered highly inauspicious, an act that could invite a diminished fortune.

Both in urban areas as represented by Srinagar as well as in rural Kashmir, a handful of rice is also served in plate for absent members of the family. A cursory examination of this tradition indicates it as an urban phenomenon which traces its origin to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when many Kashmiri Shi'i traders from Srinagar would embark on an annual trip (*phyir*, Kashmiri for travelling in a cyclic manner) to mainland India to sell

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employment in the city as servants. Bismillah Shaukat. Housewife. Author's interview (Srinagar, April 3, 2020).

44 Author's interview with Professor M.Y. Zaffar, Former Director of the Institute of Kashmir Studies (Srinagar, April 21, 2020).

45 In Kashmir, *tahar* is used as a food offering, on fulfillment of a vow, or on religious festivals. Here, it refers specifically to a Kashmiri yellow rice cooked with oil and turmeric.

46 Author's interview with "Sajid" (Srinagar, September 9, 2019).

pashmina shawls.<sup>47</sup> In their absence, the family would remember them and their contribution to the family as bread earners by placing food on plates, as a symbolic gesture marking their absence/presence. Over time, as with many other customs originating in the city, the tradition was also adopted in rural Kashmir. On Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban, expecting mothers also prepare a plate of rice for the anticipated baby. In the morning, unconsumed rice from these plates is offered to birds or stray dogs.<sup>48</sup> Grave visitations in the evening can be seen as the communal celebration of the event, establishing a link between the individual, the family, and the community, and enshrining the memory of the past by remembering the dead. Meanwhile, limiting the dinner on Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban to immediate family members makes it a more personalized and intimate moment and connects the family to members in faraway lands or those who are yet-to-come.

Until the mid-1980s, the festivities surrounding Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban also involved group of boys going from house to house within a *mohala*, collecting rice, cooking oil, or money. The money collected, also known as *barāt*, would be used for buying the candles which would be used to illuminate the cemetery, mosque, or *imambara* (Shi‘i house of ritual mourning) in the neighborhood. In some places, the rice and oil collected would be used to cook *tahar* to be distributed amongst the children.

On arrival at each house, the group would sing a series of rhyming verses:

<i>‘Hupa hupa tamula shupa</i>	<i>Hāra hāra tamula khāra</i>
<i>Yus karī harkat</i>	<i>Tas kari barkat</i>
<i>Telli vari kichar</i>	<i>Baji dedi racher</i>
<i>Aarī ti Aarī</i>	<i>Yath Garas Yerī</i>
<i>Hagar hagar</i>	<i>Yeth Gharas Ghagar’</i>

The verses, which contain some words whose meaning has been lost, may be loosely translated as:

<i>‘Hupa Hupa</i> and a winnow of rice	Money, money, and some kilos of rice
He who acts	Will be blessed
Scrape the oil gourd	O! Great lady and fame be yours
<i>Aarī O! Aarī</i>	May this house be blessed
Wheels O! Wheels	May mice infest this house’

47 Author’s interview with “Shaukat” (Srinagar, April 2, 2020).

48 The custom of earmarking a handful of rice from the daily dinner plate for birds or animals predates Islam in Kashmir and is widely prevalent amongst Kashmiri Hindus.

The verses foretell a bountiful year for homeowners who make an offering, cursing those who refuse to do so. This youngster-driven activity was more prevalent amongst the lower strata of society and has been increasingly frowned upon by educated sections of the community, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century. The gradual dying-out of this custom can be linked both to this social negativity due to its popularity amongst the poor, as well as the increasing affluence amongst those who may have participated in it earlier.

Regarding the origins of this tradition, it is reasonable to posit that the act of gathering food from door to door by children and teenagers reflects the harsh social environment that Kashmiris in general and Kashmiri Shi'is in particular faced following the dissolution of Mughal rule in the province. Kashmir faced misrule, sectarian riots, and natural calamities including the outbreak of cholera, famine, earthquakes, and floods between the late-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. In such adverse conditions, the materiality of food gathering on Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban can be seen as symbolic of sharing and community bonding. The importance of food in the Shab festivities – collecting and eating collectively as a group or family – can also be related to association of the night with Allah's distribution of *rizq*, or sustenance.

Given the conservative nature of the Kashmiri Shi'i society, children participating in the collection would entirely comprise of males.<sup>49</sup> Even grave visitation by women in the evening was seen as an undesired activity, frowned upon and, at times, openly censured. In the early-to-mid twentieth century, we find very few instances of such an occurrence.<sup>50</sup> Even in cases where women did visit cemeteries, it would always be in the company of male relatives, though even this would not make the act entirely acceptable within the larger community. In contemporary Kashmiri Shi'i society, this trend is changing and women visiting cemeteries on the occasion of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban is no longer seen as going against societal norms.

Moulvi Ghulam Ali Gulzar, who has widely written on social issues related to Kashmiri Shi'is, believes that there is no reason for stopping females from visiting cemeteries. Taking recourse to Islamic history, he notes that the custom of visiting graves is established by the practice of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Fatima al-Zahra (d. 632 CE) who in Shi'i accounts used to visit the Prophets grave after his death. For Gulzar, there is no reason to prohibit

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49 Zulfikar Ali Ashraf. Government employee. Author's interview (Srinagar, April 14, 2019). As a participant in these collection during his childhood in the early 1980s, Ashraf's description of the event was repeated by other respondents who had participated in these processions.

50 Syed Zafar Safvi. Government employee. Author's interview (Srinagar, April 14, 2019).

women from grave visitation if Islamic proscriptions of modesty and propriety are upheld. Interestingly, he believes that these values are not specific to female but cover both the sexes.<sup>51</sup>

Female grave visitation can also be linked to instances where a family had no surviving male member. Justice Hakim Imtiyaz Husayn recounts such an event in his extended family:

In our family, women would not visit cemeteries, even though our family graveyard is walled by a high masonry wall, separating it from the public cemetery at Hassanabad (Srinagar). I do not think that there was any religious reason for their not visiting. It was primarily related to custom of *purdah* [Kashmiri for ‘veiling’; also used in Urdu] prevalent in the Shi’i community of Srinagar. Somewhere in the 1970s, an uncle, Hakim Ali passed away. Three of his daughters survived him. On the first Shab-i Barat following his death, his daughter, Dr. Suriya Hakim came to offer *fātiha* at the cemetery along with her mother. Their visit occurred in the early evening, before assembly of any large gatherings.<sup>52</sup>

Justice Husayn’s view on women performing grave visitation on Jashn-i Nisf Sha’ban are also echoed by Aga Faisal Ali Qizalbash, a young lawyer from Srinagar. The Qizalbash family graveyard is located within Baba Mazar, the main Shi’i cemetery in Srinagar, located in the *mohala* of Zadibal. According to Ali, on every Shab-i Barat, female members in the family visit Baba Mazar to offer prayers and light candles. The visit generally takes place in the late afternoon, before it gets dark, and always in the company of male relatives. Ali believes that this family tradition most probably originated in the 1940s, when a grand aunt Begum Zafar Ali (d. 1990) first visited the family graveyard following her father’s death. As such, this would be the first known instance of a women visiting Baba Mazar on the Shab.<sup>53</sup>

Begum Zafar Ali’s visit to the cemetery can be seen as a manifestation of her public role as a reformist in the Kashmiri Shi’i society. A pioneering figure and leading educator of Kashmir, she discarded *purdah* as early as 1946. Although her visit to Baba Mazar was indeed a break with tradition, its immediate affect was limited to her family. This can be understood based on my conversation

51 Moulvi Ghulam Ali Gulzar. Former Secretary, Tanzim-ul Makatib, Kashmir. Author’s interview (Srinagar, April 12, 2020).

52 Justice Hakim Imtiyaz Husayn. Retired Judge, Jammu & Kashmir High Court. Author’s interview (Srinagar, April 10, 2019).

53 Interview with Aga Faisal Qizalbash. Lawyer (Srinagar, April 12, 2020).



with Aga Syed Mustafa Rizvi, an Arabic teacher who also serves as the imam of a mosque located in close proximity to Baba Mazar. Rizvi considers the importance of women visitation to Baba Mazar on the Shab as a practice of limited consequence which should be discouraged. According to him, such visitations are to be understood in the spatial layout of the Baba Mazar, a large open land with multiple entry point leading into various neighborhoods. Additionally, the site is also bordered by the revered shrine of Hajji Syed Hassan. According to Rizvi, women inadvertently pass through the cemetery on the way to the shrine.<sup>54</sup>

Rizvi's opinion on grave visitation by women at prominent cemeteries such as Baba Mazar is contentious do not necessarily reflect the more conservative views of mainstream Shi'i in Kashmir. Nevertheless, as I mentioned above, in contemporary practices we see an increasing number of women visiting cemeteries on Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban. This can also be seen as a reflection of the expanded role of women in Kashmiri Shi'i society as they move outside the traditional domain of the household and take on new social roles beyond the role of a housewife. By openly participating in public practices such as grave visitation, they are not only challenging established social values of a patriarchal society but also democratizing interpretation of religion and what is considered acceptable religious behavior.

Grave visitation is usually followed by a family dinner which concludes the festive part of the Festival of Mid-Sha'ban. This is preceded by the lighting of candles in the house. Normally, this is an activity which involves all members of the family, children and adults, men and women. Since the mid-1990s, lighting fireworks or firecrackers have been become another aspect of Kashmiri festivities associated with Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban. Though not very popular, firecrackers are seen both as a social nuisance and a *bidah*.<sup>55</sup> The use of firecrackers is seen by many as taking away from the Islamic nature of the festival, especially because of its close resemblance to the Hindu festival of Diwali. While lighting candles on Shab-i Barat was a tradition that Kashmiri Shi'is historically shared with the Sunni community, firecrackers can be seen as an entirely Shi'i manifestation. Historically, Kashmiri Shi'is share many customs with the

54 Interview with Aga Syed Mustafa Rizvi. Imam (Srinagar, June 12, 2019).

55 Literally meaning innovation or novelty, *bidah* refers to innovations in theology, ritual or the customs of daily life, that did not exist in early Islam but came into existence in the course of history. See, Esposito (2003, 138) and Kaptein (2016, 167–168). For modern conservatives and adherents of revisionist Islamic movements, *bidah* is considered impermissible and corrupting, condemned as unauthentic, and is seen to be unsubstantiated by textual sources and religious dogma. In Kashmir, the debate about what is permissible and what constitutes *bidah* is generally confined to the Sunni community.



FIGURE 11.5 Devotees offer candles and prayers at the grave of a local saint, Astan-Mirza Saheb. Hasanabad, Srinagar  
© SYED SHAHRIYAR (2016)



FIGURE 11.6 Men and women burn candles at the main *imāmbāra* shrine in Zadibal, Srinagar  
The intermingling of both sexes in a public celebration is now a common feature of Shab-i Barat celebrations  
© SYED ILYAS RIZVI (2018)



FIGURE 11.7 A man lights candles outside his house on Shab-i Barat. Srinagar, Kashmir  
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indigenous Hindu community, including the belief in astrology, ill-omens, and others. In recent times, this manifestation of a shared-syncretic culture has been a source of Sunni criticism against the adoption of practices deemed pre- or un-Islamic by Shi'i Muslims. Given the prevalence of sectarian debates on social media sites, it is possible to posit that the 'Islamic-ness' of traditions and the question of textual authenticity have premeditated the consciousness of the learned scholars of the Kashmiri Shi'i community, leading to a rejection of such practices as lighting firecrackers.

Based on my study, it emerges that until the 1980s, there was no precedent or an established custom within the Shi'i community of Kashmir to hold night-long prayers in mosques, including on Shab-i Barat, even though individuals would offer prayers and supplications that were part of their family tradition. Generally, a supererogatory prayer followed by a *tasbīh*<sup>56</sup> and prayers seeking forgiveness and blessings would be observed. The *nafl* prayer would be followed by three recitations of *Sura Yāsīn*, invoking Allah's blessings for long life, deliverance from calamities, and righteous deeds. The entire session of prayers and supplications would be finished by 10 PM or 11 PM; rarely do we hear of an

56 In each *rak'ah*, worshipers will recitate *al-Fātiḥa* followed by *Sura al-Ikhlāṣ*. Worshipers conclude the prayers with two sets of *tasbīh* (glorification) using traditional prayer beads.

instance where individuals stay up in prayer until the dawn prayers.<sup>57</sup> Even a cursory examination of the prayers can indicate how they relate to *barāt*, the qualities of atonement associated with Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban by seeking protection and blessing for the coming year.

While Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims in Kashmir share many of the traditions and rituals associated with the Festival of Mid-Sha‘ban and Shab-i Barat, there are also several differences in the way the two communities celebrate the festival. For example, while Shi‘is customarily perform grave visitation before *maghrib* (sundown) prayers, Sunnis tend to visit their cemeteries in the night, after the *‘ishā’* (evening) prayers, citing a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet Muhammad visited the Baqi Cemetery in Madina on the night following the sunset on the fourteenth of Sha‘ban (Qari n. d., 446). In this narration, the reported event of the Prophets visit takes place at midnight. Thus, for the Sunnis grave visitation at night not only marked the closure of the Shab but also a demonstration of their literal adherence to prophetic tradition. By contrast, Shi‘is would normally avoid visiting cemeteries after the *maghrib* prayers, as this is seen as an inauspicious act, disturbing the peace of the departed.

Moreover, the observance of supererogatory fast on the day following Shab-i Barat – i.e., the fifteenth of Sha‘ban – is generally frowned upon unless it is undertaken in fulfillment of a votive vow (*nazr*). This is in keeping with traditional Shi‘i view of Shab-i Barat as a festive occasion whereas abstinence from food and drink is seen as a rejection of the blessings associated with festival. Contrary to this, the observance of the fast is a more accepted and popular practice among the Sunni community. For the Sunnis, the supererogatory fast is in accordance with the *ḥadīth* that establishes the sanctity of Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban and Shab-i Barat.

A custom common to both Shi‘is as well as Sunnis was gift-giving, especially cash gifts given to children. It was believed that gift-giving on Shab-i Barat, the night when Allah is believed to allocate sustenance amongst His creations, would ensure greater wealth for the coming year. Additionally, this act of charity also serves as an auspicious beginning for the cycle of divine munificence, commencing on the eve of Mid-Sha‘ban. Likewise, some segments of the Sunni community would also illuminate their houses on the eve of Mid-Sha‘ban, especially in mixed *mohalas*.<sup>58</sup>

57 By contrast, there are established traditions of night-long prayers on Shab-i Qadr performed not only at homes but also in mosques and congregation halls.

58 This was common especially amongst followers of the Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence, in contrast to Ahl-i Hadith and members of the Tabligh-i Jamat who oppose such customs and consider them to be *bidah*.

Exchanging gifts, especially in the form of clothes or jewelry, between families of engaged couples can also be observed especially amongst rural Kashmiris. In Srinagar, by contrast, such exchanges are more common on the festival of Nauroz,<sup>59</sup> which until the early 1980s constituted the main celebratory festival for Kashmiri Shi'is.

An examination of the nature of the celebration linked with Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban and the various prayers traditionally observed on this night amongst Kashmiri Shi'is indicates how these rituals – whether devotional or festive – foregrounded *barāt* and emphasized notions of divine grace, atonement and munificence. Well until the 1980s, nothing in these rituals bears a connection to the birth of the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi.

Allama Aga Syed Muhammad Baqir is one the senior Shi'i *ulema* (religious scholars; pl. '*ulamā*') in Kashmir. He is also the *vakil* (representative) of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani (b. 1930) in Kashmir. According to Baqir, both *barāt* as well as the *vilādat* of al-Mahdi constitute equally important aspects of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban. He recounts how his family celebrated Mid-Sha'ban, emphasizing both *barāt* and *vilādat*, though he links the practice of festive illumination only to *barāt*. Trained in the Najaf seminary and belonging to a traditional family of *ulema* which produced many leading Shi'i religious scholars of Kashmir, Baqir assumes that the commemorative practices his family upheld were also upheld by the majority of Kashmiri Shi'is. This assertion is widely held amongst families of religious scholars in Kashmir.<sup>60</sup>

Dr. Amjad Ansari belongs to another prominent family of Kashmiri scholars. Several of the Ansaris studied under the leading *marāji'* (religious authorities or sources of emulation) of Najaf, Iraq, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Dr. Amjad Ansari himself worked in Iran for many years, while also serving as personal physician of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Muntezari (d. 2009). In his recollections, Ansari relates the celebrations of Mid-Sha'ban with his experience in Iran. According to him, the illumination of homes that is undertaken in Kashmir on the eve of Mid-Sha'ban is not for *barāt* but to commemorate the *vilādat*, as is the case in Iran. Asked why such an illumination should be limited to the *vilādat* of al-Mahdi to the exception of other imams, he responded that "in Shi'i belief, al-Mahdi is the 'Imam of [this] Age!'"<sup>61</sup>

59 Until the 1980s, celebration of the two major *eids* amongst Kashmiri Shi'i was more subdued. The reason being that Eid-ul Fitr closely followed on Imam Ali's martyrdom while the Eid-ul Edha was similarly linked to the martyrdom of Muslim ibn Aqil.

60 Author's interview with Allama [Aga Syed Muhammad] Baqir, local religious scholar (Budgam, April 2, 2019).

61 Author's interview with Dr Amjad Ansari, physician (Srinagar, March 31, 2020).

Both Baqir and Ansari represent an understanding of Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban conditioned by their transnational experience of having studied or worked in major centers of Shi‘i scholarly training. Well-grounded in Shi‘i religious texts and historiography, they assume that the religious knowledge that is characteristic of their experience is also prevalent in the Kashmiri Shi‘i community at large. But based on my research and observations, it emerges that this is not the case; at least not for the generation of Kashmiri Shi‘is who came of age before the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Though some in this group also relate Mid-Sha‘ban to the *vilādat* of al-Mahdi, they associate the material cultures and the practices of grave visiting and illumination to the attainment of divine atonement, *barāt*. Younger generations of Kashmiri Shi‘is however, increasingly identify the festival with a Mahdi-centric narrative. Their reflections on the Shab characterize an increasing shift of perception amongst the Kashmiri Shi‘i society regarding what they celebrate and why.

#### 4 Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban and the Celebration of Vilādat-i Imam Mahdi

According to Shafi, Ayatollah Kirmani,<sup>62</sup> the representative of Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari (b. 1906, d. 1986),<sup>63</sup> visited Kashmir in the late 1970s. In a series of public meetings, Kirmani asked the local Shi‘i community to engage more in communal celebrations of festivals linked with birthdays of the Prophet and the Shi‘i imams. In a public meeting held in the compound of Hajji Eydah Masjid in Zadibal, Srinagar, Kirmani reiterated his message, linking Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban with the birth of al-Mahdi. It was Kirmani, who propagated the narrative of al-Mahdi’s *vilādat* as the central defining theme of the Festival of Mid-Sha‘ban.<sup>64</sup>

Historically, the first public celebration of the birth of a revered Shi‘i figure in Kashmir was that of the birth of Imam Ali, the first Shi‘i imam and an Islamic figure highly regarded by Sunni Muslims. The event took place on the Rajab 13, 1359 AH (August 17, 1940 CE) in a park at Zadibal, which was later renamed as Ali Park (Hamdani 2014, 371). This celebration was linked with the freedom

62 According to Ansari, the cleric was Shaykh Husayn Kirmani, who represented Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Golpaygani (b. 1899, d. 1993).

63 Following the death of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Husayn Borujerdi (d. 1961 CE) and well before the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, Ayatollah Shariatmadari was seen as the leading Shi‘i scholar, widely followed by Shi‘is in South Asia. Surprisingly following his defrocking by the Islamic Republic, his remembrance has almost been totally erased from collective memory of Kashmiri Shi‘is.

64 Author’s interview with Prof. Shafi (April 20, 2019).

struggle (1931–1947) launched by Kashmiri Muslims against the Hindu King of Kashmir, a struggle which involved close collaboration between Kashmiri Sunnis and Shi'is against a common feudal opponent. Representing the coming together of the Sunni and Shi'i communities, the celebration of Imam Ali's birth represented a nationalist struggle rather than a public display of religious fervor or piety particular to only one branch of Islam (Hamdani 2014, 38).

Since 1979 however, several organizations and prominent figures in Kashmir propagated views inspired by the teachings of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989), the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, including an activist reading of Shi'ism that emphasizes tropes of self-cultivation and piety to prepare the Shi'i community and immanentize the Reappearance of al-Mahdi in the End of Time. In the early 1980s, this included several Iranian students studying at Kashmir University and the Regional Engineering College in Srinagar. These students formed the nucleus of a movement that reached out and appealed to young, educated Kashmiri Shi'is.<sup>65</sup> The Iranian government encouraged Kashmiri students to study in the seminaries of Qom, provided religious literature to Kashmiri mosques and Shi'i centers, sponsored organized visits to pilgrimage sites in Iran, and funded the construction of Shi'i *imambara*, shrines and mosques in Kashmir. For a greater public messaging of this outreach, prominent members of the Iranian establishment also visited Kashmir, including the incumbent Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (b. 1939), interim Prime Minister of Iran in 1981, Ayatollah Mehdavi Kani (d. 2014), and Ayatollah Ali Gulzadeh Gafoori (d. 2010),<sup>66</sup> to name a few. These government-sponsored programs focused on fostering a sense of unity amongst the Muslims and did not seek to change or question any established cultural or religious practices prevalent amongst the Shi'is.<sup>67</sup> Yet, in the following decade, as young Kashmiris trained in Qom returned to Kashmir, they increasingly reflected the religious and ideological proclivities of Iranian Shi'ism and the viewpoints of the establishment in Iran. The increasing emphasis amongst Kashmiri Shi'i, on the devotional practices centered on the personality of al-Mahdi, including their celebration of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban, foregrounding the *viladat* of Imam Mahdi, can be traced back to this period. In appropriating the religious significance of a widely celebrated festival like Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban, al-Mahdi is elevated in the hierarchy of Shi'i imams, joining two of the most venerated imams in the popular Shi'i cultures of Kashmir,

65 Author's interview with "Husayn" (Srinagar, April 10, 2019).

66 A member of the first Majlis (parliament) of Iran following the Islamic Revolution, he developed differences with the government and left Majlis and politics in 1981.

67 Author's interview with "Gulzar" (Srinagar, April 12, 2020).

Imam Ali and Imam Husayn, to whom the two most important events in the Kashmiri liturgical calendar are linked: Nauroz and the Tenth of Muharram.

A result of this is the emergence of practices associated with the Mahd-centric reinterpretation of the Festival of Mid-Shaʿban, such as the *arīza* (Kashmiri for written requests, derived from the Arabic word for petition; also used in Persian and Urdu). *Arīza* writing owes its origin to personal ceremonies surrounding al-Mahdi. On the morning of the Fifteenth of Shaʿban, written requests, or petitions, are immersed in running water,<sup>68</sup> with the belief that they will reach al-Mahdi, the Imam of the Age, and that they will be answered. Traditionally, this ritual was largely unknown to Kashmiris, practiced only amongst few families.<sup>69</sup> But, more recently the phenomenon of writing *arīza* has been transformed into a major communal event with busloads of devotees being transferred from the shrine of Hajji Syed Hassan at Baba Mazar to the Gupkar Shrine located on the banks of the picturesque Dal Lake, some 9 kilometers away. After offering morning prayers, the devotees walk down to the banks of the lake, where they immerse their *arīzas* in the water. To ensure that the *arīza*, which is written on paper, sinks to the bottom of the lake, it is usually enveloped within a ball of flour. The immersion is accompanied and followed by reciting *duʿā* prayers which mark the culmination of the Festival of Mid-Shaʿban.<sup>70</sup> Communal participation in the *arīza* ritual, which was introduced to Kashmir 2008 by Shiʿi seminarians from Qom, can also be seen as a reflection of a similar, recent occurrence in Iran; namely, the popularization of the Jamkaran Mosque under former Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (r. 2005–2013).<sup>71</sup> Participants in the *arīza* ritual at Dal Lake also offer *nimaz-i Sāhib-i Zāman*, a supererogatory prayer dedicated to the Twelfth Imam, reiterating the association of Jashn-i Nisf Shaʿban with al-Mahdi's birth. Although the *arīza* ritual has gained popularity amongst the youth in recent

68 For citizens living in the Srinagar city this would be the River Jhelum, or the Nigin Lake which was located in close proximity to two major Shiʿi suburbs of the city, Zadibal and Hasanabad.

69 Author's interview with Allama Baqir (April 2, 2019).

70 Author's interview with "Ashraf" (Srinagar, April 14, 2019).

71 The popularization of the Jamkaran Mosque as a sacred site devoted to messianic hopes of the Shiʿi world has evoked divided opinions from the Iranian religious circles. Since 2005, the site has acquired a transnational character linked to Shiʿi eschatology; most Kashmiri pilgrims to Iran visit the site as a part of their itinerary. Hooman Majd provides an interesting insight on how the evolution of Jamkaran can be linked to the salvific hopes of nation battered by political chaos and a murderous war – the Iran-Iraq War, see Majd (2008, 86). For a more detailed discussion of the Jamkaran phenomenon and the associated architectural and pilgrimage-tourism enterprises, see Rahimi (2019, 207–22) and Rizvi (2015, 130–34).





FIGURE 11.8 Foregrounding the *vilādat* of Imam Mahdi at the shrine of Hajji Syed Hassan, devotees light candles and prepare for the night vigil. Srinagar, Kashmir  
© SYED ILYAS RIZVI (2018)

decades, it has not been very popular with the established clergy and the older generations of the Shi'i community in Kashmir.<sup>72</sup>

## 5 Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban: Reflections on Tradition, Change and Continuity in Kashmir

The procession of devotees offering their *arīza* at Dal Lake is led by a young cleric, Hojat-ul-Islam Aga Syed Ajaz, who hails from a respected family of *ulema* based at Zadibal. Ajaz is also the appointed imam at Masjid-i 'Abd Saleh and presides over the shrine of Hajji Hasan as its hereditary custodian. Incidentally, one of Ajaz's ancestors was also known to actively engage in the *arīza* ritual, though in his case it was a personal act unrelated to Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban. As the only prominent Shi'i cleric of Srinagar to oversee the *arīza* ceremony, Ajaz has uniquely marked the event and the practice with the shrine under his control. By undertaking a procession from his hereditary seat to the Gupkar shrine,

<sup>72</sup> Author's interview with Allama Baqir (April 2, 2019).

which he does not control, he has effectively expanded the spiritual territory of the shrine he presides over. The ritual of *arīza* was started by Ajaz in the mid-1990s. In the initial years, he would be accompanied by less than a dozen devotees; by 2018, hundreds of young Shi'is, including women, participated in the ritual procession, which is increasingly appealing to Shi'is, not only from Zadibal but also other parts of Srinagar. By engaging in the activity, Ajaz is also expanding his appeal base though this may not be his stated motive, which he sees as establishing a devotional practice.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to holding the *arīza* ritual, Ajaz also presides over a nightlong session of prayers, supplications, and sermons at the shrine of Hajji Hassan. A larger part of the night is dedicated to the sermon, where Ajaz is assisted by other young Kashmiri clerics, who, like him, studied in the seminary in Qom. As the main cemetery, Baba Mazar also draws a large crowd, many of whom pass through the cemetery, burning candles. Yet, as with such festivities, the cemetery also draws teenagers, who come to light their fireworks and play with firecrackers in the open space of the cemetery. Most of these activities take place around the time of *maghrib* (sundown) prayer, which also results in conflict between the mosque authorities and those involved in lighting crackers. Calls from the mosque speakers are regularly made to desist from burning crackers as this is an undesired act, disturbing the worshippers. The call resonates in the sermons given later in the night, which emphasize the night as one of forgiveness and deliverance. Though the material manifestation of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban, as a night of illumination is not questioned, yet within the congregational circles linked with seminary-trained clerics, the emphasis is more on religious piety and observance of textually defined rituals rather than festivities. The sermons delivered by the *ulema* customarily reiterate traditional morals and familial values, which also figure in Muharram assemblies. As a phenomenon, if it may be termed as such, this is a development that is widespread in both urban as well as rural Kashmir.

## 6 To Celebrate or not to Celebrate: Kashmiri Sunnis and Shab-i Barat

While festivities remain an integral part of the Shi'i celebration of Mid-Sha'ban,<sup>74</sup> the importance of the festival for Sunni Muslims has diminished

73 Author's interview with Hojat-ul-Islam Aga Syed Ajaz, local cleric (Srinagar, January 7, 2019).

74 In recent works on Kashmiri Shi'i, the celebration of Shab-i Barat is listed amongst major festivals of the community, but unfortunately no detailed account of the celebration or its origin in Kashmir is to be found, see, Gulzar (2010); Husayn (2017).

to a large extent. Though many Sunnis recall illuminating their homes on the eve of Mid-Shaʿban, only a few uphold this tradition today. Similarly, grave visitation on the eve and day of Mid-Shaʿban has completely vanished from the religious landscape of Kashmiri Sunnis. A major cause for this was the outbreak of armed insurgency in Kashmir during the 1990s. Given the disturbed political and security climate of the region, customary grave visitation at midnight was not possible.<sup>75</sup> Coinciding with political turmoil was the gradual eclipse of the Hanafi institutions in the region and the proliferation of the neo-Salafi and Wahabi *dawāh* (*daʿwa*, Arabic for call, referring to proselytism) within the Sunni community. Additionally, as the celebration of Mid-Shaʿban by the Shiʿi community foregrounds the *vilādat* of their Twelfth Imam over tropes of atonement and munificence, the festival has become increasingly defined along sectarian lines, whereby ever-fewer Sunnis observed the festivities associated with Mid-Shaʿban.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Ahl-i Hadith and other neo-Salafi movements popular among younger Sunnis in Kashmir question the authenticity of narratives around Shab-i Barat and dispute the permissibility of rituals associated with the festival. The open celebration of the festival by the Kashmiri Shiʿi community and the centering of the *vilādat* of al-Mahdi only added to neo-Salafis' disquiet and misgiving about Jashn-i Nisf Shaʿban. This is especially true of the illumination of houses and the visitation of graves both of which are practices condemned by neo-Salafis as *bidah*, or innovations lacking textual backing in the Quran and the *ḥadīth*.

This transformation is evidenced by the testimony of Fida Husain, a Shiʿi resident of the mixed Sunni-Shiʿi neighborhood of Shahid Gunj in Srinagar. Husain says that, until the mid-1990s, it was customary for Sunnis in his *mohala* would illuminate their homes as well as the local mosque on the Eve of Mid-Shaʿban. But after the outbreak of the armed insurgency in Kashmir, these celebrations ceased. Moreover, the Sunni mosque in this mixed neighborhood is now closed after *maghrib* prayers on the the eve of Mid-Shaʿban to prevent people from observing any special prayer associated with the festival. This procedure is targeted against the Hanafi Sunni members of the congregation rather than the Shiʿi community living in the locality. Over time, celebrations associated with Jashn-i Nisf Shaʿban in Shahid Gunj have become an exclusively Shiʿi event. For the Sunnis, it is increasingly seen as *bidah* and 'un-Islamic'.<sup>77</sup>

75 During most of the 1990s, Kashmir, including the capital city Srinagar, used to be placed under a curfew, restricting travel from evening till dawn.

76 Author's interview with Saleh Najar, engineer (Srinagar, July 14, 2019).

77 Author's interview with Fida Husayn, engineer (Shahid Gunj, Srinagar, December 18, 2019).

The gradual erasure of historical cultural practices and celebrations, such as Shab-i Barat, worries many Sunnis who are increasingly concerned about restrictions affecting what is and is not 'proper' and 'acceptable' religious and communal behavior. Imbibing a cosmopolitan outlook, with a home in Srinagar and another in New York City, Syed Mujtaba Qadri's memories of how Kashmiri Sunnis celebrated Shab-i Barat are also marred by nostalgia, common to many in the Kashmiri Diaspora:

My grandfather was a [prominent] spiritual guide [*pīr*] in the Qadri Sufi order [one of the leading Sufi orders amongst Kashmiri Sunnis]. Illuminating homes and grave visitation on Shab-i Barat is a long-established tradition in our family, which I continue to adhere to. Our family – the larger clan to speak, includes more than a hundred households. Traditionally all of them celebrated Barat. But today I believe that in my immediate as well as extended family, I am the only one observing festivities linked with Barat.

Qadri's understanding is that political turmoil in the 1990s and the spread of neo-Salafi ideas amongst Kashmiri Sunnis has resulted in the eclipse of celebrations such as Shab-i Barat. In continuing with these practices Qadri believes he is also helping to keeping a family tradition alive.<sup>78</sup>

While individuals from the Sunni community, like Qadri, continue to observe Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban, their numbers are dwindling. In the face of polemical attacks from neo-Salafis, adherents of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam find it increasingly difficult to accept, observe, and justify cultural practices linked with festivals such as Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban. Maulana Shaukat Keng, a prominent Sunni scholar belonging to the Hanafi school and a frequenter of various Sufi *khanqahs*, offers yet another narrative. Keng acknowledges that, until the 1990s, many Sunni families, especially in mixed neighborhoods of Srinagar, illuminated their homes and cemeteries on Shab-i Barat. He believes that this was not linked in any way with the notion of *jashn* (celebration), but as a sort of civic duty. He asserts that, in the past, when electricity was not available, people would light candles on the wall of their houses and graveyards so that wayfarers could find their way. The reasoning given by Keng is clearly an attempt to find a logical explanation for a past practice, whose celebratory nature he wants to understate, probably under the scrutiny of

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78 Author's interview with Syed Mujtaba Qadri., businessman (Srinagar, July 9, 2019).

neo-Salafi criticism. It may also be seen as an attempt to distance himself and his community from a tradition that is shared with the Shi'is of the region.<sup>79</sup>

While most respondents that I talked to have tended to locate the creeping differences in celebrations of Jashn-i Nisf Sha'ban in religion, some associated them with transformations in Kashmiri society. Saleem Beg comes from a Sunni family that used to live in the historic old part of Srinagar. Beg remembers that amongst the Sunni families living in his childhood neighborhood, illuminating by lighting candles and distributing food amongst neighbors on Shab-i Barat was a major event. Yet, today at his home, located in one of the upscale city suburbs, no one participates in these traditions. For Beg, the reasons are not entirely located in intra-Islamic polemical debates but are rooted in processes of urbanization and intra-city migrations. He believes that a major reason for the decline in the popularity of many cultural practices – such as those associated with Shab-i Barat – is the large-scale movement of people from the older parts of Srinagar to the suburbs. Traditional practices, such as lighting candles and distributing food, are collective activities, which involve active community participation as was seen in the historic *mohalas* of Srinagar. For Beg, the failure to recreate social and cultural cohesion amongst communities in the new neighborhoods and suburbs of the modern city is what led to the eclipse of such traditions.<sup>80</sup> In relating the decline of past cultural practices with the process of urbanization and urban anonymization and estrangement, Beg makes a pertinent point; that of unraveling of social and cultural bonds due to dislocation and movement of people. Large scale migration of Shi'is from mixed neighborhood of the old city has also contributed to this phenomenon, especially since the 1980s.

The reflections of Tahir Iqbal provide a unique insight as to how Sunni youth imagine Shab-i Barat in an increasingly sectarian milieu. Iqbal lives in the *mohala* of Marjanpura in the old city of Srinagar. Historically, Marjanpura was home to a large Shi'i population. However, most of the Shi'i residents of Marjanpura have migrated from there. Adhering to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, Iqbal feels that the practice of illuminating homes and cemeteries originates from the Shi'i community and was adopted in the past by Sunnis living in the *mohala*. Today, as opposed to some thirty-forty years ago, Sunnis in the *mohala* no longer observe these practices; something with which Iqbal agrees. Unlike neo-Salafis, Iqbal does not question the authenticity of Shab-i Barat.

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79 Author's interview with Maulana Shaukat Keng, local Sunni scholar (Srinagar, April 2, 2020).

80 Author's interview with Saleem Beg, retired Director General Tourism (Srinagar, January 9, 2019).



FIGURE 11.9 A local *mohala* shrine illuminated on Shab-i Barat  
 The image of Iranian leaders in the background is something that Sunnis would view as an indication of the ‘Shi’ification’ of the festival. Ali Park, Srinagar (Shab-i Barat)  
 © SYED ILYAS RIZVI (2018)

Nonetheless, he seeks to distance himself from the festivities linked with the festival, which he views as contrary to the teachings of Islam. Yet, interestingly, Iqbal was unaware of the association between Jashn-i Nisf Sha’ban and the *viladat* of al-Mahdi amongst Shi’is, an association which would reflect a genuine Shi’ification’ of the festival.<sup>81</sup> By stereotyping the origin of these festivities in a Shi’i culture, we see how a narrative lacking historical context is being advanced to question previously shared cultural practices.

Iqbal’s perception of the festival is reflective of a widespread phenomenon amongst the Kashmiri Sunnis, where the idea of festive illumination on the occasion of Mid-Sha’ban is seen as an undesirable innovation, or *bidah*, which is not authenticated by any religious text. In a move towards ‘authenticity,’ Kashmiri Sunnis prefer to distance themselves from the vernacular cultural practices previously associated with Islam as it developed in Kashmir. This

81 Author’s interview with Tahir Iqbal, Professor at the Department of Islamic Studies, Amar Singh College (Srinagar, April 12, 2020).



FIGURE 11.10 Burning candles and grave visitations continue after *magrib* prayers, Hassanabad Imambāra  
© SYED SHAHRIYAR (2012)

disassociation is achieved by emphasizing a Sunni identity that is distinct and ‘purified’ from perceived cultural borrowings of Shi’i or Hindu origin.<sup>82</sup> This is a phenomenon widespread amongst Sunni Muslim communities in South Asia, where syncretic traditions linked with the historic experience of Islam in the region are being condemned as *bidah*, or impermissible innovations in matters of religion.

## 7 Conclusion

A visitor to a Shi’i-majority *mohala* of Kashmir on Shab-i Barat would be impressed by the overwhelming scene of houses, streets, shrines, mosques, and cemeteries illuminated with candles. If the visitor would then move to a

82 As an exemplar we can see how historic Persianate influences on Muslim culture of Kashmir are being replaced by Arabized forms within the Sunni community. For example, Sunni Muslims in Kashmir are likely to replace the Persian-origin expressions referring to the five obligatory prayers (*ṣubaḥ*, *pyshan*, *dyghar*, *shām*, and *khufṭan*), preferring instead the Arabic-origin expressions (*fajr*; *zuhar*, *aṣr*, *maghrib*, and ‘*ishā*’).

*mohala* inhabited by Sunnis, he would be equally surprised by the total absence of any such celebration. By narrowing the meaning associated with the festival to a predominantly devotional aspect, Kashmiri Sunnis have effectively moved away from the shared tradition of celebrating Barat. By contrast, the appeal of the Festival of Mid-Shaʿban has remained unscathed in the Shiʿi community of Kashmir. Yet, even among Kashmiri Shiʿis, change has taken place: Today, greater emphasis is placed on the Festival of Mid-Shaʿban marking the birth of al-Mahdi, the Shiʿis' Twelfth Imam and awaited messiah, and less emphasis is placed on the night's promises of atonement, divine forgiveness, deliverance, and the distribution of good fortune. Although the material manifestations of the festival, as experienced by the Shiʿi community, may appear largely unchanged, Kashmiri Shiʿis are re-defining Jashn-i Nisf Shaʿban in an increasingly sectarian milieu. Foregrounding the *vilādat* of al-Mahdi reinvents the festival in a way that is appealing only to adherents of Twelver Shiʿism. This not only appropriates the festival, excluding the Sunni community, but also ascertains the increasingly salient Sunni-Shiʿi divide.

From shared practices of celebration, which, in the light of its illumination effaced sectarian boundaries, today the Festival of Mid-Shaʿban is increasingly representing the material articulation of variegated sectarian experiences. Although festivities associated with Shab-i Barat constituted an integral part of the lived and living tradition of Kashmiri Islam well into the 1990s, the festival has been 're-invented' in ways that emphasize the differences between the Sunni and Shiʿi communities' distinct ways of celebrating – or, indeed, not celebrating – Jashn-i Nisf Shaʿban. Today, festivities associated with the festival demonstrate a new reality, namely a material culture framing two distinct, compartmentalized, differentiated and essentialized communities: the Shiʿis and the Sunnis.

Gone, it seems, are the days, when Kashmiris greeted each other on Shab-i Barat: *Khudā karney rīzh Barāt* (transl. May God make this Barat auspicious for you.) Today, this is an almost exclusively Shiʿi greeting in Kashmir.

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## Wishing Trees and Whirling Rocks

### *Eco-material Rituals at the Alevi Shrine of Abdal Musa*

*Christiane Gruber*

The Turkish village of Tekke, close to Elmalı, does not compete with the Mediterranean coastal city of Antalya when it comes to beach vacations and the sybaritic joys of night life. Yet it, too, is a site of summer tourism and festive activities. Every year, in July, thousands of Alevi pilgrims travel from nearby areas and as far away as Iraq and Central Asia to visit this small town tucked away in lush agricultural lands about 130 kilometers inland from Antalya. The name of the village points to its major *raison d'être*, namely the presence of a *tekke*:<sup>1</sup> that is, a lodge complex that often includes the shrine of a Sufi saint, residence for dervishes, and other structures and sites used for teaching and ritual practices. This shrine-village is dedicated to the fourteenth-century *pir*, or spiritual leader, Abdal Musa, whose tomb is the town's major attraction (figure 12.1). A sacred site for Alevis in Turkey, it nevertheless is often overlooked in favor of the more famous shrine complex of Hacı Bektaş Veli (d. 1271).

The tomb of Abdal Musa belongs to a larger Alevi-Bektaşî devotional landscape that during Ottoman times included more than a hundred functioning architectural complexes stretching from eastern Europe to Central Asia (Yürekli 2012). However, the abolition of the Janissaries in 1826 and the closure of Sufi brotherhoods and *tekkes* in 1925 resulted in a great reduction (if not complete halt) in shrine-based pietistic practices during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods. By the 1980s, however, a political and cultural awakening of Alevi identity, known as *Alevi uyanışı*, was unfolding in Turkey, Germany, and across the diaspora (Tambar 2014, 96). Members of the Alevi community have emerged as a significant presence on the global stage since the 1990s, even despite continued anxieties related to their minority status as well as occasional violent attacks – most prominently the 1993 massacre of Alevi intellectuals at a hotel in Sivas. As they have become increasingly visible in public life, Alevis have also sponsored religious sites and practices. Among others, they have engaged in the construction and restoration of *cemevis*

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1 Unless otherwise stated, transliterations and translations of non-English words in this chapter are provided from the modern Turkish.

(houses of ritual assembly) and have turned their attention to the teaching and performance of ritual music and dance, above all the *semah* (audition). They also have supported Alevi shrines, pilgrimages, and festivities, including those devoted to Abdal Musa.

The image of this saintly figure central to Alevism – a Shi'i-inclined faith system discussed in greater detail subsequently – emerges from several threads so intertwined that it proves an impossible task to parse myth from fact (O. Köprülü 1988; M.F. Köprülü 1973). Uncertainties notwithstanding, several textual sources, especially Bektaşî hagiographical accounts (*menakıb*, Arabic *manāqib*), relate that Abdal Musa was a successor (*halife*, Arabic *khalīfa*) to the Turkic Central Asian mystic Ahmet Yesevi (d. 1166) as well as a student and relative of Hacı Bektaş (Seyirci 1992, 22; 1991, 41). Putatively hailing from Bukhara, Abdal Musa is said to have traveled to Anatolia and participated in Sultan Orhan's conquest of Bursa in 1326, a pivotal event that transformed the city into the Ottoman capital.<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, Abdal Musa went on to live in Manisa and Elmalı.

The date of the *tekke's* construction in the Elmalı area is not known, although it was likely built after Abdal Musa's death during the second half of the fourteenth century (Tanman 1988; Akçay 1972). By the sixteenth century, it became a fully functioning Bektaşî institution, benefiting from rich endowments. The earliest detailed textual description of the site is provided by Evliya Çelebi (d. 1682) in his *Seyahatname* ('Book of Travels'). The Ottoman explorer visited the shrine complex in the 1640s, recording that Abdal Musa was buried under a stone dome covered in pine wood at the center of a long garden surrounded by a mud wall. Along with the tomb, the complex also included ritual halls (*meydans*), mosques, a guesthouse, bathhouse, cellar, kitchen, and residential quarters housing more than three hundred dervishes who followed traditional Sunni principles and whose duties included catering to pilgrims (Akçay 1972; Yürekli 2012, 146–7; O. Köprülü 1998, 64; Aksüt 2016, 26–8). However, after the abolition of the Janissary Corps and Sufi orders, only the tomb remained extant in 1968, at which time it was repaired by the General Directorate of Foundations (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü) and opened to visitors (Tanman 1988, 65). Today, the shrine's key sites include Abdal Musa's tomb, that of his cook Budala Sultan, a cemetery, several sacred wells, rock formations, and a sycamore tree to which pilgrims – most of whom are Alevi – perform devotional visitation (*ziyaret*) and attach votive fabrics. All other structures are now long gone, having ceded their place to the site's rural, rocky surrounds.

<sup>2</sup> Abdal Musa's identity and his participation in the conquest of Bursa is the subject of debate; see Ali Aksüt (2016, 18–19).



FIGURE 12.1 Entrance, façade and green domes of the shrine of Abdal Musa  
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This essay aims to explore the shrine complex of Abdal Musa in a holistic manner, considering the architectonic spaces at the site, the icons that appear within the saint's tomb and that are offered for sale at booths of devotional paraphernalia, and the votive practices occurring, above all, at the trees and rocks located in the sacred complex. Along with a formal and visual analysis of buildings, images, and objects, information gleaned from textual sources as well as ethnographic work allow for a more rounded and textured approach to the subject at hand. This interdisciplinary methodology is also finessed through some insights drawn from eco-critical theory to shed new light on Alevi pilgrims' interactions with nature, hence re-centering the earthly environment within a larger Muslim religious landscape of belief and devotional practice.

## 1 Alevism: a 'Special Kind' of Shi'ism

Although its dervishes were not considered Shi'i by Evliya Çelebi, the Abdal Musa complex nonetheless functioned as a Bektāşi institution within the larger

orbit of Shi'ism by the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> In more recent decades, both the shrine's reopening and the politico-cultural awakening of Alevi identity have endowed the site with a more pronounced Shi'i character and visitorship. Members of the Turkish and international Alevi community in turn have expanded the site's sacrality through a range of social and ritual practices, the donation of icons and objects, and reverential interactions with both manmade and natural elements.

Before proceeding with an exploration of the shrine complex and its constituent elements, the two interrelated questions "Who are the Alevis?" and "What is Alevism?" require addressing. Considered the largest religious minority in Turkey, it is estimated that Alevis comprise 15–20 % of the country's population (Dressler 2008). Millions-strong and stretching across the globe, Alevis embrace a diversity of traditions and beliefs, chief among them a special devotion to the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin Ali (hence the appellation Alevi or Alawi, meaning 'of' or 'following' Ali). For these reasons, often Alevis are classified as belonging to Shi'ism, although of a 'special kind' (Shankland 2012, 210–11) that is substantially different from Twelver Shi'ism. At other times, they are described as Anatolian Muslim 'folk mystics,' whose non-conformist practices – including the avoidance of prayer in mosques, the performance of mixed-gender religious rituals, and the consumption of alcohol – are today at odds with what is considered 'normative' or 'orthodox' Sunni Islam (Langer and Simon 2008, 282; 286). Alevis therefore have often been described as 'heterodox' Muslims in scholarship and in public discourse; in more conflictual contexts, they also have had to explain why they should be considered Muslims at all – a query that brims with accusations of heresy stretching back to Ottoman times (Andersen 2015).

In response to incriminations of impiety, one Alevi hymn (*nefes*) counters that "a real Muslim does not need a mosque" (*halis müslüman'a mescid gerekmez*; Mélikoff 1992, 69). Nowadays mosques that are imposed upon Alevi villages and neighborhoods are studiously avoided, at times even protested, especially if they are perceived as forming part of larger state-sponsored attempts to bring – even sublimate – this minority community into a larger Sunni hegemony. Mosque, minaret, Quran, and imam cast aside, Alevis believe in other necessities of the faith. In lieu of the mosque stands the *cemevi*, which, like a *masjid*, they consider a 'house of worship' (*ibadethane*) and not, per official Turkish state parlance, a mere 'house of culture' (*kültür evi*); and instead of tall, slender minarets, Alevi villages are dotted with tombs and trees that

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3 For a discussion of the 1668–1669 dispute over the right to govern the site and its endowments, which reveals a sectarian rift, see Zeynep Yürekli (2012, 158).

punctuate the skies (Shankland 2012, 210–14). As for the state-appointed imam, often “he sits alone” (Andersen 2015, 62) in an empty mosque, the Alevi *dede* instead serving as the socio-religious leader who mediates disputes, facilitates marriages, and officiates religious rites.

The Alevis’ devotion to Ali and the imams as well as their mourning of the martyrdom of Husayn and his family members at the Battle of Karbala ensconce them in a Shi’i faith system and worldview. As noted above, however, it is a special kind of Shi’ism that synthesizes manifold religious and cultural traditions, among them Sufi and folk cultures (Shankland 2012, 217). Not just a living remnant of Turkic shamanism encrusted with readily recognized Islamic motifs, Alevism today has been described as an “inclusive universal identity grounded in egalitarian humanistic ideals” (Dressler 2008). This flexible schema of belief leaves plenty of room for divergences and convergences, most notably the display of figural icons in sacred sites and the enactment of pious acts within various natural landscapes.

## 2 A Sainly Confluence: the Shrine’s Iconotextual Elements

The shrine of Abdal Musa displays a range of textual and visual elements, including inscriptions and images. The former offers statements central to the Shi’i faith while the latter includes icons of Shi’i-Sufi heroes and Turkish secularism, to which the preserved relics of the saintly *pir* add a numinous quality. Taken altogether, these various motifs are best described as sectarian in inflection, mystical in quality, secular in outlook, and saintly in aura – thereby crafting and reflecting the overarching cultural identity and religious tenor of the architectural complex.

During festival season, Alevi pilgrims arrive at the holy site, itself adorned with inscriptions, a plaque, and banners hanging above and near the shrine’s main entrance gate (figure 12.2). Texts carved in stone praise Abdal Musa and his dervish lodge, or *dergah*. Moreover, above the entryway, a sign (made in 2018) cites a proverb attributed to Imam Ali, advising: “Die, do not take an [unconditional] oath of allegiance; die, do not retract your confession” (*Öl ikrar verme, öl ikrarından dönme*). This ethical maxim promotes loyalty to one’s faith rather than to a particular political or religious figure; it also reflects a larger ethical code of conduct that is especially cherished in Alevi circles. Immediately thereafter, a temporary banner extends the mayor’s love and respect to the companions of the Prophet’s family and to the followers of Abdal Musa (*Ehlibeyt Yoldaşlarına, Abdal Musa Gönüldaşlarına. Sevgi ve Saygularım*). This statement elevates the members of the Prophet Muhammad’s household and



FIGURE 12.2 The main gate to the shrine complex of Abdal Musa  
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leading figureheads of Shi'ism to a prominent place at the shrine's threshold while also employing palpably Sufi terms to describe those who follow in their path and are one of heart with the *pir*.

Shi'-Sufi motifs carry over into the holy enclosure, where the tomb's wall facing the main entrance welcomes visitors with a large-scale mural depicting a major moment in Abdal Musa's life and career (figure 12.3). Acting as a pictorial frontispiece to his burial spot, the scene figures the saint, sitting on the left while pointing his finger to an arrow lodged in his chest, alongside his young disciple Gaybi, looking both shocked and puzzled as he kneels on the right. The *pir's* white cloak is inscribed with the query: "Gaybi, look hard. Is this the arrow you shot?" (*Gaybi, iyi bak. Attığın ok bu mu?*). This exchange forms the climax of a tale that is well-known in Alevi circles, which relates that Abdal Musa one day transformed into a deer. At that time, Gaybi, the son of a local nobleman, happened to be out hunting and shot the deer, which then escaped to the saint's *dergah*. The ruminant animal then metamorphosed back into Abdal Musa, and Gaybi was so taken by this miraculous change-over that he decided to join the mystical order. Upon his initiation, he was given the name Gaygusuz/Kaygusuz Abdal ('Worry-Free Mystic'), and to this





FIGURE 12.3 Mural painting of Abdal Musa and Kaygusuz Sultan, flanked by a marble panel providing Abdal Musa's genealogy  
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day Kaygusuz Abdal remains a much beloved Sufi author of Turkish-language prose and poetry (Karamustafa 2020, 155–158; Aksüt 2016, 32–33; Güzel 1999, 106–7; Uçar 2006, 44–45). His presence on the tomb's main wall thus celebrates a holy lineage and major miracle, in particular the saint's animal transfiguration, itself a recurring motif in Alevi and Bektāşi hagiographical traditions.<sup>4</sup> Inching closer to the sphere of orality, the painting also personifies the stirring poetry of Kaygusuz Abdal that the Alevi faithful recite while visiting his grave *in situ*.

On the left, a white marble plaque flanks the figural painting, adding a distinctly Shi'i dimension to the depiction of an otherwise mystical and

4 On saintly metempsychosis/transmigration of souls (*tanasukh/tenasuh*) into animals, see Dressler (2013, 207); Yaşar Ocak (2000, 206–26); and Mélikoff (1994, 68).

miraculous encounter. Below the initiatory *bismillah* – “In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful” – appear the names of the twelve imams, starting with Ali and ending with the Mahdi, who is expected to reappear as an eschatological redeemer at the End of Time. If left unaltered, this pedigree represents the line of rightful prophetic inheritance according to Twelver Shi‘ism, which is espoused most prominently in Iran and India. However, in this instance the name of Pir Abdal Musa is added as the culmination of this genealogy – his descent from the Mahdi rendered in such a synoptic manner that it eschews the burden of precise explanation. In this textual matrix, Abdal Musa thus stands tall as an Anatolian saintly figure of Alid descent.

This Shi‘i inflection continues to unfold on the exterior of the shrine, extending to the finial or ‘ensign’ (*‘alam*) capping the apex of the tomb’s green dome (figure 12.4). Most likely added after the 1968 restoration campaign, this large-scale metal ornament includes the name of Ali written twice in mirror script or *muthanna* (Akin-Kivanç 2020). The vertical stems of both *lams* in the name of Ali rise upward and transform into two bifurcated swords that carry a circular medallion inscribed with the word Allah. These blades no doubt refer to Imam Ali’s sword known as Zulfiqar (also Dhu’l-Fiqar). A motif found in a variety of Ottoman arts (Yürekli 2015), this double-pointed sword is especially prominent in Shi‘i iconography, including Alevi and Bektaşî circles where it is associated with notions of spiritual chivalry (Zarcone 2015). This ‘alam includes the names of the twelve imams inscribed within roundels encircling Ali’s doubly scripted name. Not only do the imams’ names recall the textual genealogy affixed to the shrine’s wall, but they also seem inspired by standards used in Twelver Shi‘i Muharram processions.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, an Indian or Iranian pierced steel example dating to the sixteenth century likewise displays a bifurcated sword at its crown as well as the names of God, Muhammad, and Ali invoked doubly within the ‘alam’s interior field (figure 12.5). It is possible, therefore, that this modern addition to the shrine’s dome draws inspiration from processional standards that remain in use in Iran, India, and other global Shi‘i spheres today.

The influence of Iranian Shi‘i iconography is most obvious within the tomb’s interior, especially in the foyer leading to the saint’s burial chamber. There, several sarcophagi dedicated to deceased local dervishes are surmounted by a miscellany of icons. They range from the calligraphic to the pictorial, and include invocations to Ali, Turkish flags, depictions of Zulfiqar, and figural representations of Imams Ali and Husayn, Abdal Musa, and Mustafa Kemal

5 On Shi‘i processional standards, see Calmard and Allan (2011); Newid (2006); and D’Souza (1998).



FIGURE 12.4 Metal finial (*alam*) showing the name of Ali written in mirror script and the bifurcated blades of his sword Dhu'l-Fiqar, atop the dome of the shrine of Abdal Musa

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FIGURE 12.5 Ceremonial finial (*alam*) used in Muharram processions. Made of pierced steel. Iran or India (sixteenth century)

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FIGURE 12.6 Foyer of the shrine of Abdal Musa, containing the tombs of dervishes and decorated with various posters and memorabilia pasted to the walls, window frames, and pillars

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Atatürk (d. 1938), the founding father of the Turkish Republic (figures 12.6–7).<sup>6</sup> Tellingly, the images of Ali and Husayn, with eyes dramatically lifted to the skies, appear to be – or at least highly indebted to – modern Iranian popular posters and prints, especially those made for ritual display and procession during the month of Muharram.<sup>7</sup> These icons help construct a modern network of Shi'i imagery across the globe. Acting as “image vehicles,”<sup>8</sup> these representations position Alevism within a larger Shi'i discursive matrix that openly embraces the figural mode.

6 In the seventeenth century, another inscription in the *tekke* carried a clear Shi'i patina through the laudation of the “people of the cloak” (*al-i aba*). Today, the *al-i aba* – i. e., the five members of the Ahl al-Bayt – are depicted in a printed icon in the tomb's foyer. On the premodern inscription, see İlhan Akçay (1972, 364).

7 For comparative Iranian posters of Ali and Husayn, see, for example, Flaskerud (2012, fig. 47) and Newid (2006, 233, fig. G16).

8 This term is borrowed from Aby Warburg and his theory of “image vehicles” (*Bilderfahrzeuge*); see Michaud (2004).



FIGURE 12.7 Poster depicting Imam Ali on the wall in the underside of an arch in the foyer of the shrine of Abdal Musa  
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While Shi'i icons of saints and heroes construct circuits of artistic exchange and identity formation across nation-state borders, the images of Atatürk remain firmly rooted in a Turkish ethno-nationalist and secularist context. Several Alevi groups embrace political laicity and minority rights; consequently, they have tended to associate with and vote for the People's Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or CHP), Turkey's leading social democratic party. The comingling of Alevi and Kemalist images within the shrine showcases a collective identity that includes Shi'i, Sufi, secular, and Turkish nationalistic elements. These various strands are tightly woven together in one poster showing Ali and Hacı Bektaş fusing together as if the radiant moon, from which black-and-white photographic images of Atatürk radiate outward into the starry night skies (figure 12.8). A clear combinatory logic underlies this cosmic scene that was selected as a key visual to represent an Ankara-based Alevi cultural association.

As Élise Massicard and Kabir Tambar note, Hacı Bektaş is often imagined as a progressive "state-loyal figure implicated with Turkism, especially when combined with Atatürk" (Massicard 2003, 137). Both figures in essence embody



FIGURE 12.8 Poster depicting Ali and Abdal Musa surrounded by photographic images of Atatürk, placed between two arches in the foyer of the shrine of Abdal Musa  
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an officially sanctioned ethno-nationalist trajectory as well as a particular “iconographic dispensation” (Tambar 2014, 136) for Alevi identity. Within the shrine proper, Hacı Bektaş’s presence as the founder of Anatolian Alevism empowers Abdal Musa’s status as a scion of the faith in his geographically expansive position as the ‘Watchman of the Mediterranean Coast’ (*Akdeniz’in gözcüsü*). Combined with Ali, this triad of charismatic figures comes together to pictorialize a Shi’i-Sufi-secular matrix of religion and state (*din ve devlet*) for Alevism in modern-day Turkey, with a particular rootedness in its southwestern territory.<sup>9</sup> This religio-cultural construct does not shy away from the figural mode. To the contrary, visitors to the shrine encrust its walls with votive visual

9 On Ali and Atatürk as Alevi charismatic figures, see Mélikoff (1998, 275). However, it should be noted that today images of Atatürk are being excised from ritual display in other locales as he is not a religious figure in Alevism (Tambar 2014, 126). In summer 2018, when fieldwork was carried out for this essay, icons of Atatürk remained on display in the shrine of Abdal Musa, possibly because the *cem*, or ritual assembly, is not carried out within the sepulchral structure per se.



FIGURE 12.9 The cenotaph of Abdal Musa enclosed by a grille and surrounded by the tombs of his mother, sister, and Kaygusuz Abdal  
The cenotaph is located in the main chamber of the shrine  
© CHRISTIANE GRUBER (2018)

representations that serve to reify and animate the community's most radiant 'superstars.'

Proceeding into the burial chamber, pilgrims are confronted with various tombs, including that of Abdal Musa – a larger, elevated sarcophagus or cenotaph surrounded by a brass lattice and surmounted by a black banner – as well as those of his mother, sister, and his disciple Kaygusuz Sultan (figure 12.9).<sup>10</sup> The tombs are covered with green fabrics that visitors rub and kiss, and a conical donations box is placed in front of the saint's sarcophagus for those wishing to make a financial contribution for the upkeep of the shrine.<sup>11</sup> Dating to the eighteenth or nineteenth century, the railing provides a centerpiece for pious circumambulation, touching, and osculation. It is also the object of votive

10 The black banner (*kara sancak*) is said to have belonged to the Prophet Muhammad, but the original is no longer extant; Musa Seyirci (1992, 49–50); Ramazan Uçar (2006, 56).

11 An inventory drawn up during the reign of Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) notes that Abdal Musa's tomb had a stone ornament and that it included gold and silver tomb covers (*türbe puşidesi*); see Suraiya Faroqhi (1981, 97).



donation: here, ribbons and fabrics are tied to the crisscrossing metal motifs, adding a pop of color here and there. During the summer of 2018, a white male undershirt was visible lying atop the sarcophagus; it likely was dropped from above the railing by an individual who wished to offer a token of thanks for the saint's assistance in his daily affairs or the curing of an illness.<sup>12</sup> Taken together, the binding of ribbons and the gifting of a shirt materialize the process of asking for intercession and giving thanks, which mark both ends of the votive exchange. This type of sacred bilateral compact is enacted through artifactual intermediaries in many religious traditions, including Shi'i Islamic ones.<sup>13</sup>

Besides serving as a burial chamber, the tomb of Abdal Musa also functions as a chamber of relics. In one of its corners, several objects – labeled 'sacred trusts' (*kutsal emanetler*) at the tomb's entrance – are displayed in a glass vitrine with accompanying labels (figure 12.10). These effects, which belonged to Abdal Musa, include a cloak (*hurka*, said to have belonged to the Prophet Muhammad and on display in another case), his axe (*teber*), his staff of allegiance (*biat değneği*, said to have belonged to Imam Husayn), his wooden sword (*tahta kılıç*), and his black stick (*kara çomak*). Narrative sources particularly highlight the special powers of the black stick. For example, in Kaygusuz Abdal's hagiography of his *pir's* life and deeds, Abdal Musa is said to have collected monies from Europe (*Frengistan*). He would throw his *çomak* into the waters, which would carry it to *Frengistan*. There, 'infidels' would tie money to the stick and send it back to Abdal Musa. Everyone knew about this *çomak*, and it is said that anyone who intercepted it and its monies would be destroyed. Additionally, we are told that, during his travels, Abdal Musa would throw his stick to his destination ahead of time and then pick it up when he got there. One time he threw his stick all the way to Rhodes to drum up interest in his cause. He then went to Rhodes to retrieve his stick and gained new disciples as a result.<sup>14</sup> The saint's *kara çomak* was thus deemed endowed with

12 Cemal Şener (1991, 45–46) describes how devotees visit Abdal Musa's shrine. He reports that "it is entered by crawling on the knees" and that individuals circumambulate his cenotaph "with love and respect." Some kiss it and cry, while others rub their faces against it. Some stick their arms into a hole located at the foot end of Abdal Musa's cenotaph and, after making a wish, they remove a bit of sacred soil (*cöher*), place it in a handkerchief, and tie it up. This sacred earthen substance can be eaten and is considered effective against aches and pains.

13 On votive objects and traditions, see Weinryb (2018; 2016); and on Iranian Shi'i votive practices, see Gruber (2016).

14 Similar ways of gaining adherents are recorded for Ahmet Yesevi (Ahmad Yasawi) and other Sufi saints. For example, it is said that Ahmet Yesevi once threw a mistletoe to



FIGURE 12.10 The relics of Abdal Musa on display in a glass vitrine in a corner of the main chamber of the shrine

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the miraculous ability to gain funds and followers, both of which were deemed necessary to enlarge his sphere of influence in and beyond the coastal areas of southwestern Anatolia.

Besides the inscriptions, icons, and relics present at the shrine all year long, the complex truly comes to life during the yearly festival (*tören*). On July 19, 2018, I attended the festival, observed visitation and prayer practices, and interviewed attendees; I also visited the fair surrounding the site, which included booths selling food, drinks, and memorabilia. Much like the festival held annually at the shrine of Hacı Bektaş in August (Massicard 2003; Norton 1992), this Alevi *tören* is best described as a summer festival-cum-fair. It combines ritual with recreation, generating plenty of opportunities to spend time indoors and out, among family and friends, and in the saintly presence of Abdal Musa.

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Anatolia. It was caught by a certain Sultan Hoca Fakih in Konya, who planted it in front of his cell. It then grew into a tree and bore fruits (Uçar 2006, 53).



FIGURE 12.11 Magnets and votive kerchiefs (*dilek yazmaları*) offered for sale at the festival booths around the Abdal Musa shrine complex  
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For many Alevis, the festival is a boon and a blessing; for others, however, the creolization of sacred and mundane spheres causes concern about the transformation of Alevi religious practice into cultural entertainment (Tambar 2014, 104).

Anxieties notwithstanding, the memorabilia girdling the sacred site interweave some of the major strands of Turkish Alevi identity today. Most objects for sale are relatively cheap, catering to a middle- and lower-income consumership. Most popular among them are banners, t-shirts, head caps, key chains, magnets, and votive kerchiefs (*dilek yazmaları*) that pilgrims wishfully tie to trees and grilles in and around the tomb of Abdal Musa (figure 12.11). The magnets capture the site's rich mosaic of cultural and religious influences. For instance, they display figural images of Ali, either in bust format or seated with his namesake lion (*Haydar*); they reproduce the shrine's structure and its mural painting of Abdal Musa seated with Kaygusuz Abdal; and they depict a range of apotropaic devices, among them the five-digit hand (*hamsa*) and

flowering trees covered in blue evil-eye averting beads (*nazar boncuğu*).<sup>15</sup> Besides lauding Antalya as a regional center of natural plenty, these magnets commemorate Shi'i and Sufi saintly heroes while also offering pilgrims affordable keepsakes whose protective powers multiply thanks to their proximity to and association with the Alevi holy site.

Other items actively construct a Shi'i-Kemalist synthesis, which, as discussed previously, is discernible in the various icons ornamenting the shrine's interior walls. For instance, banners and t-shirts enable their bearers and wearers to show national pride in the Turkish Republic through its crescent-moon emblem; additionally, they elevate Ali and Atatürk as icons of religion and state (figure 12.12). Not mutually exclusive, these two cynosures capture a larger Alevi belief in freedom of religion at the personal level along with the promotion of secularism in political life – the latter issue made even more pressing in light of recent Sunni-Islamist endeavors undertaken by the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP). Among such pressures can be counted the encroachment of a Sunni 'mosque culture' and other attempts at bringing Alevi religious culture into a larger Sunni fold.<sup>16</sup> Resisting such pressures, Alevis proudly carry banners and posters that invoke Ali for his help and succor (*medet ya Ali!*). This slogan calling upon the imam for strength and endurance in times of pain and difficulty is uttered by Shi'i devotees to boost both individual and group morale. In Shi'i spheres, it comprises a meritorious form of seeking a saintly figure's help and intercession in one's worldly affairs. This oral practice places itself in direct opposition to the more trenchant Sunni view that such petitionary prayers should be classified as polytheism (*shirk*) and hence prohibited as disbelief (*kufır*). Collectively, the shrine's structure, iconotextual elements, festive commodities, and ritual acts effectively skirt the limits of Sunni dogmatism to espouse a more dynamic and interactional kind of Islam under the aegis of the Turkish Alevi community today (Dressler 2012, 216–36). And this more "open-ended" Islamic praxis embraces, rather than shuns, materially enacted forms of devotion.

15 For a general discussion of blue evil-eye averting beads in Turkey, see Marchese (2005, 99–125); and on the beads' increasing Islamization in contemporary Turkey, see Gruber (2020).

16 On Sunni 'mosque culture,' see Angela Andersen (2015, 58); and on the 2013 failed attempt by AKP and Gülenist actors to construct a mosque-*cemevi* complex in Ankara, see Andersen (2019, 293–305).



FIGURE 12.12 Banners and t-shirts of Ali and Atatürk on sale at the Abdal Musa shrine complex

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### 3 Wishing Trees and Whirling Rocks

In its rural Alevi manifestations, Islamic praxis is conceptualized and implemented in noticeably expansive and imaginative ways. Oftentimes it is riveted not just to a saint and his shrine but also to a natural environment; as a result, this type of rural Sufism has as one of its primary goals the “settling of uninhabited lands” (Ocak 2021, 246). The surroundings of the Abdal Musa complex offer a case in point: they are lush and green, and largely comprise agricultural lands punctuated with rocky outcrops and fresh water. These formations and resources are in turn associated with and rendered sacred via narratives associated with the saint. For example, it is said that Abdal Musa ordered a mountain to move and attack a local grandee (*bey*) who opposed him, that he survived an ordeal by fire, and that he made water flow by striking the ground. The latter miracle helps explain the origins of a waterfall, spring, and lake all located in Elmalı’s vicinity,<sup>17</sup> around which devotees hike and picnic as part of their pilgrimage route to and from the shrine. This type of practiced religion *in* and *with* nature, one might argue, comes together to construct an Islamic form of ecotourism, sustaining the human spirit as it journeys through a consecrated land of plenty. It also extends devotional materiality into the ecological domain.

Many trees and rocks also are devoted to Abdal Musa in the Antalya area and beyond. Many of these serve as sites of pious visitation (*ziyaret*) as well as places of votive offerings (*adak yerleri*), expanding the religious footprint of the shrine complex well beyond its manmade walls. As a matter of course, Alevi pilgrims amble beyond the architectural complex to reach a rocky slope where a large sycamore stands tall as hundreds – even thousands – of votive fabrics attached to its trunk and branches flutter in the wind (figures 12.13–14). This sycamore tree is said to be the same age as Abdal Musa and the area around it is called Uluçınar Meydanı (The Open Space of the Great Sycamore; Şener 1991, 34).

The *meydan* and its arboreal centerpiece comprise a major destination for pilgrims. Once there, they piously circumambulate the sycamore while uttering votive prayers (*adak duası*), whereupon they tie rags and strings to the majestic tree to symbolically ‘tie up the prayer’ (Tapper 1990, 248). Today, the attached items largely comprise the purpose-made votive kerchiefs (*dilek yazmaları*) available for sale at the temporary festival stalls erected on site.

17 See, Aksüt (2016, 33–37). The waterfall, spring, and lake are Uçarsu (‘Falling Water’), Gelin Pınarı (‘Bride’s Spring’), and Yeşilgöl (‘Green Lake’), respectively. For a further description of Abdal Musa’s water, milk, wine, stone, and fire miracles, see Güzel (1999).



FIGURE 12.13 “Uluçınar Meydanı” (“The Open Space of the Great Sycamore Tree”), with the sycamore of Abdal Musa adorned with thousands of votive fabrics and kerchiefs

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However, threads, ribbons, rags, undershirts, gloves, wet wipes, and the occasional water bottle label also appear among the *mélange* of offerings. In past years, this material miscellany proved less normalized (via commercial endeavors) and even more intimate: for instance, writing in 1998, Irène Mélikoff also recorded strands of human hair attached to the great sycamore tree (1998, 86). As protein *exuviae*, hairs metaphorically bind devotee and tree, in the process establishing a human-vegetal relational ontology predicated on mutual provision and respect.<sup>18</sup>

The votive-encrusted sycamore of Abdal Musa forms part of a larger nexus of humans acting with and through trees in both Islamic and non-Islamic lands. Starting in the vicinity of the shrine, there also exists another tree – known as ‘The Poplar of the Saint’ (Eren Kavağı) – that is considered sacred by Alevis, while, further afield, close to the city of Sivas, a grove dedicated to Abdal Musa

18 On *protein exuviae* (hairs and nail clippings) in Islamic devotional practice and art, see Flood (2014, 468); and on human-vegetal relational ontology as a kind of ‘binding,’ see Marder (2013, 184).



FIGURE 12.14 Votive fabrics and kerchiefs adorning the Great Sycamore Tree of Abdal Musa  
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is likewise visited by Alevis today (Aksüt 2016, 58, 61). At the ‘mother’ hearth of Hacı Bektaş, moreover, several other trees are of paramount importance to Alevi and Bektaşî devotees: for example, a mulberry is considered to bear curative properties while a medlar is thought particularly effective in addressing women’s complaints. During the annual pilgrimage to the shrine complex, pilgrims festoon both trees with strips of cloth and clothing, themselves material instantiations of vows and requests made, or token of thanks offered, to Hacı Bektaş Veli (Norton 1992, 191; Massicard 2003, 138). The city of Birgi (ancient Pyrgion), located in the western province of Izmir, is also stippled by a memorial tree (*anıt ağacı*) that provides the center of devotional visitation to the sacred site (*makam*) of Seyyid Ali Sultan-Kızıldeli, another saintly figure of the Bektaşî line (Şahin 2009). These few examples among many reveal the extent to which trees – including also pine, beech, olive, fir, amber, and oleander – form an essential component of Alevi-Bektaşî devotional beliefs and practices stretching to the present day (Kahyaoğlu 2000).

A number of scholars have explored the various ways in which Alevi-Bektaşî religious traditions involve cults of nature (*tabiat kültleri*) – otherwise referred to as a cult of soil-and-water (*yer-su kültü*) – wherein trees, rocks, caves, and



springs hold a preeminent place in the construction of the sacred (Eröz 1997, 73–94; Ocak 1983, 362–76). The importance accorded to these natural elements is often explained as a persistence of pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs and motifs in Muslim Sufi cultures, including Alevi-Bektaşî ones.<sup>19</sup> While such natural elements undoubtedly have deep roots, exploring their presence as a mere “shamanistic substrate from Central Asia” (Mélikoff 1998, 65–66) risks diminishing their complex meanings in Islamic registers as well. More precariously perhaps, this scholarly approach may posit a tree or spring as anathema in Islam, thus inadvertently hypostatizing faith from place.

For its part, the tree cannot be tethered to one particular tradition or location. In many religious cultures across the globe, trees are believed to avert illness and evil, and to combat barrenness in women (Frese and Gray 1986, 27, 32). They may represent life or knowledge, embody the spirit of deities and ancestors, and, indeed, be closely associated with druids, shamans, and saints. In pre-Islamic Arabia, the pagan goddess al-Uzza was thought to frequent three sacred trees in Nakhla, which were cut down in early Islamic times to eradicate this ‘she-devil’ (Ibn al-Kalbi 1952, 21–22). Stretching well into the eighteenth century, some tribes in the Arabian Peninsula continued to worship trees as if intercessory spirits: such was the case for a male palm tree at Bulaydat al-Fida in the Najd area, to which both men and women sacrificed camels and sheep. Sources narrate that unmarried women would visit and hug the tree, exclaiming: “O male of all males! I want a husband before the year is over!” (Noyes 2013, 68). The trunk of the male tree was thus clenched by female desire, its staunch verticality acting as an arboreal allegory for virile fertility.

As Michael Marder proposes in his philosophical study of ‘plant-thinking,’ the tree, like man, is conceptualized as a vertical being, a kind of vegetal guardian spirit or *daemon* (2013, 10–11). In the human imaginary, trees – as the tallest and most upright of plant forms – suggest a higher vitality and embody life and its developmental phases of germination, birth, fruition, decay, and death. Whether we admit to it or not, “vegetal life is coextensive with a distinct subjectivity with which we might engage, and which engages with us more frequently than we imagine” (Marder 2013, 8). When it comes to finding a place for plants in the realm of meaning-making in Islamic contexts, it thus may prove more productive to sidestep the interpretative tendency to stress that trees embody shamanistic spirits and pagan deities. Although they have indeed served in such capacities, within Islamic spheres trees likewise offer sites of meaning-making via phyto-phylic religious engagements (Marder 2013, xiii).

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19 For example, the juniper is considered a shamanic tree and cosmic axis; see Mélikoff (1998, 85).

Ergo, they cannot and must not be omitted from our frameworks of inquiry, especially those exploring materialized forms of piety.

In Islamic lands, trees regularly add an ecological pendant to saints' graves. There, they prove co-constitutive elements in the creation of devotional practice as it unfolds on the ground. When Muslim pilgrims visit shrines that include natural elements, they often engage in behaviors whose ultimate goal includes securing a 'balm of relief' (Olson 1994, 213) from illness, suffering, and pain. Rags tied to sacred trees in the Holy Land reify this type of transactional exchange, acting as a vestige of the self, a request for cure, and a token of thanks to a particular saint (Dafni 2002, 315, 321). As a grand testament to this practice, in rural Israel there exists a grove filled with rag-covered trees known in Arabic as Mother of Rags (*Umm al-Sharayat*), which is believed especially efficacious for matchmaking and childbirth (Dafni 2002, 320). These many bedecked trees, like the one epitomizing Abdal Musa at his shrine complex, thus bring attention to nature-oriented forms of worship, whose origins surely antedate the arrival of Islam in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> However, they simultaneously point in the direction of the present – to an ongoing and unbroken human bond with nature that allows for an eco-material flexing of the contours of Islam.

Indeed, the Islamic faith is malleable and capacious enough to involve devotees' ecological engagements, especially if these unfold in a rural context like that of Elmah. However, an agrarian context need not be a precondition for the presence of trees and rocks as central elements in Muslim religious practice. Two examples dispel such a notion: first, the famous date palm tree in the courtyard of the Prophet Muhammad's house-mosque in Medina and, second, the black stone (*al-hajar al-aswad*) lodged into the eastern corner of the Kaaba in Mecca (figure 12.15). In these two holiest of sites of Islam, both a tree and a stone take pride of place within urban architectural complexes dedicated to God and His Messenger. As for the black stone in Mecca: meteor-like in appearance, it is said to be a fragment of God's celestial temple on Earth, and it is for this reason that pilgrims attempt to unleash its blessings (*baraka*) by rubbing and kissing it as they circumambulate the cubic structure during *hajj* season. Despite the widespread popularity of this practice, anxieties about the continuance of pre-Islamic Arabian stone worship nonetheless press on today, in both Saudi Arabia and beyond.<sup>21</sup>

20 In the Prophet Muhammad's time, pagan Arabs living in Mecca had a tree called *Dhat Anwat* ('tree to hang things on'), to which they attached weapons, garments, ostrich eggs, and other objects (Dafni 2002, 321).

21 For a discussion of the topic, see Gruber (2019). In addition to extremist calls to destroy the Kaaba and its black stone, the shrines of Muslim Uighurs, which typically consist of votive-encrusted branches, were recently razed to the ground by the Chinese government;



FIGURE 12.15 Double-page painting of Mecca and Medina from *Dalā'il al-Khayrāt* (Proofs of Good Deeds) by the fifteenth-century Moroccan Sufi, Muhammad al-Jazuli (d. 1465 in Marrakesh). In the painting of Medina (left), a date palm tree can be seen in the center of the mosque and rays of light are depicted, radiating from the Green Dome adorning the Prophet Muhammad's grave. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper. 'Ottoman lands,' 1028 AH/1793 CE. Beinecke Library, Yale University, Arabic MSS suppl. 616, folios 14–2r © CHRISTIANE GRUBER (2018)

Like trees, in many religious cultures, stones are conceptualized as hierophanies – that is, as concrete and visible manifestations of divinity on Earth. They are prime matter that can be used unaltered and left in situ, or else chiseled into shape and transported elsewhere. For rulers and saints, a rocky terrain may serve as a chair of honor, as can be seen in a sixteenth-century Persian painting of King Kayumarth seated on his primeval throne within a landscape filled with lush vegetation and populated by members of his court

on these shrines, see Ross (2013); and on their destruction (along with Uighur mosques), see Kuo (2019).



FIGURE 12.16 King Kayumarth on his rocky primeval throne surrounded by members of his court. *Shahnama* ('Book of Kings') made for Shah Tahmasp. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper. Tabriz, Iran, ca. 1424–25 CE. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, AKM165

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FIGURE 12.17 Abdal Musa's rock-throne surrounded by a metal grille to which pilgrims attach votive fabrics, kerchiefs, and other objects  
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(figure 12.16). In this open-air audience scene, the monarch's soaring cathedra and backrest – his real and symbolic bedrock – frame and reinforce a notion of kingship, which Kayumarth himself is credited with having introduced to the lands of Iran.

Muslim mystics and saints had symbolic thrones as well. For his part, Abdal Musa is credited with having used the rocky landscape surrounding his shrine as his own seat of honor *en plein air*. The spot includes what is believed to be a base and backrest; as an equally sacred spot close to the sycamore tree, this lapidary formation is surrounded by a metal grille that is encrusted with votive rags and fabrics, especially during festival season (figure 12.17). Pilgrims circumambulate this enclosure while uttering wishes, and they also enter its inner precinct to light votive candles whose melted wax run-off coats the ragged formation with a glaze that is as lustrous as it is slippery (figure 12.18). The opalescent coating emits a metallic sheen thanks to the tin containers embedded in this votive conglomerate. In addition, here the wax *ex-votos* involve a “heuristic of plasticity” (Didi-Huberman 2007, 11) reminiscent of human flesh as it withers away and binds with the bedrock. This urge to fuse with the earth – to



FIGURE 12.18 Abdal Musa's rock-throne covered in the wax run-off of votive candles  
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return dust to dust – is a human one; indeed, it is not particularly Islamic, Shi'i, or Alevi in character.

Today, as Alevis embark on their own *via sacra* up the hewed slope, they piously touch revered rocks and allegorically rivet themselves to a blessed tree. They also carry stones and pebbles with them, nestling them into cradle-like hangings tied to the grille surrounding Abdal Musa's rock-throne (figure 12.19).<sup>22</sup> Based on interviews I conducted at the rock-throne in the summer of 2018, it became clear that female visitors offer these votives as part of their prayerful requests for children, the diminutive stones acting as mineral surrogates for infants resting in their cribs. This practice occurs at other Alevi sacred sites in Turkey as well. For example, individuals who visit the shrine of Battal Gazi, an eighth-century Muslim mystic and warrior saint, carry 'wish stones'

22 According to Evliya Çelebi, already in the seventeenth century visitors to Abdal Musa's shrine came as far as Samarqand, Bukhara, and Khurasan, carrying with them a variety of offerings, including *palheng* ('thick rope'), *nefir* ('wind instrument made of horn'), *keşkül* ('beggar's bowl'), and *sapan* ('slingshot'). See Aksüt (1972, 16; 2016, 16); Munis Armağan (2009, 31); and Seyirci (1992, 43).



FIGURE 12.19 'Rocks-in-a-cradle' are votive offerings attached to the metal grille surrounding Abdal Musa's rock-throne  
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(*dilek taşı*) that represent their desire for children (Küçükcan 2000, 104), while, in the Balıkesir area, childless pilgrims make cradle-shaped votives out of fabric and attach them to various sacred sites, including trees (Ayhan 2000, 129). In these various Alevi contexts, the pebble appears to symbolize an embryo or fetus poised for growth. The concept of germination is even better captured by the wheat-shaped grains that are swallowed by women wishing for offspring while they visit the shrine of Hacı Bektaş (Norton 1992, 192).

Rocks provide important hagiographical and ritual markers at these Alevi-Bektaşî shrines. They tell tales of saintly miracles, including a mystic's ability to make mountains move and to petrify into stone. According to Evliya Çelebi, Abdal Musa is said to have asked the nearby mountain to give up 12,000 stones for laying the ground outside of the lodge complex. He prayed to God and held hands and chanted with his dervishes; thereafter, lightning struck, and winds blew so powerfully that, upon waking up the next morning, they found that the complex had gained 3,000 feet worth of stone flooring (*kaldırım*) outside of it, which permitted devotees to visit the shrine without muddying their shoes during inclement weather (Seyirci 1992, 44). Hacı Bektaş, too, is

said to have made rocks come to life and stand in service (Mélikoff 2000). At his shrine, numerous stone formations are said to bear testament to his miraculous deeds, including, for example, the ‘Horse Rock’ (*Atkaya*), which moved like a horse to help the mystical saint fight off an enemy on lion-back; the ‘Five Stones’ (*Beştaş*), which were five large boulders that cried out in support of Hacı Bektaş and today cater to those suffering from lumbago; the ‘Back Rock’ (*Kulunç Kaya*), which likewise is believed effective against back pain and ailments; and, last but not least, the ‘Cushion Rock’ (*Minder Kaya*), considered a convenient seat for anyone (Norton 1992, 191–4; Mélikoff 1998, 89–90). Whether providing a pedestal, pavement, or primeval stallion, such rock formations dotting the Alevi and Bektaşî shrine complexes of Anatolia furnish versatile *prima materia* to construct wondrous naturescapes redolent with thaumaturgic powers.

Returning to Elmalı, Alevi pilgrims proceed from the sycamore tree and rock-throne onward up the rocky hill to the shrine of Budala Sultan, Abdal Musa’s cook at his *dergah*. The position of cook was a lofty one: a member of the lodge’s key personnel (*hizmetkar*), which included the convent’s manager (*zaviyedar*), the imam, and the baker, the cook acted as master of the kitchen tasked with ensuring proper food provisions, which in turn ensured the subsistence of dervishes and pilgrims at the site (Faroqhi 1981, 84; Ocak 2021, 247). Located 150 meters west of Abdal Musa’s shrine, Budala Sultan’s tomb is a centrally planned funerary edifice, built (recently, it appears) of cement and covered in green paint (figure 12.20). Its interior is rather unadorned: a simple space, it includes the cook’s sarcophagus, a few carpets strewn on the ground, and a handful of posters – containing Shi’i or Alevi statements and iconographies – pasted helter-skelter to the structure’s white-washed walls.

Its exterior area proves of greatest interest to visitors. Known as the ‘sacred site of the forty’ (*kırklar makamı*), the open-air area adjacent to the tomb is demarcated by large stones arranged in a circular formation. Pilgrims perform a series of circumrotations on the outer perimeter of these stones, often with bated breath to make their wishes come true (Aksüt 2016, 54–55; Seyirci 1992, 50). Besides tying votive fabrics to a small shrub marking the beginning of the devotional roundabout, visitors also stop and rub each one of the stones; at times they also place stones or pebbles on top of them (figures 12.21–22). Alongside the cradled offerings strung at Abdal Musa’s rock-throne, these lapidary ‘wish stones’ (*dilek taşı*) represent an entire world of hopes and desires – of dreams uttered while ambling among trees and rocks.<sup>23</sup>

23 Pebbles are also offered at the tomb of Battal Gazi (Küçükcan 2000, 107), while a grave dedicated to Abdal Musa in the village of Emirören, close to Zile, is made of collected





FIGURE 12.20 The 'sacred site of the forty' (*kırklar makamı*), a round open-air area studded with rocks, adjacent to the tomb of Budala Sultan  
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FIGURE 12.21 Pilgrims uttering prayers and piously rubbing the rocks while circumambulating the *kırklar makamı*  
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FIGURE 12.22 The 'wish stones' (*dilek taşı*) offered to the rocks at the *kırklar makamı*  
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This large ring of stones is related to another miraculous tale associated with Abdal Musa. Sources narrate that Kaygusuz Abdal's father became angry after his son joined the saint's order. He dispatched a retinue of soldiers to the *dergah*, where they prepared a fire in which to burn Abdal Musa. Rather than avoid the blaze, the *pir* and his followers jumped into the fire and performed *semah*; the surrounding rocks and trees followed in their steps, extinguishing the flames. The dervishes thus were saved in a miraculous example of nature coming to the rescue (Uçar 2006, 44–45, 52; Güzel 1999, 105–6, 108; Şener 1991, 51–52). The rocks commemorate this momentous event, appearing as if petrified dervishes performing a *semah* in perpetuity.

A major religious and cultural component of Alevi identity, the *semah* is a circular, ecstatic dance performed by men and women together. Their corporeal positions and gestures imitate cranes in flight, creating a “prayer that is expressed with bodily movements” (Mélíková 1998, 214) that mimic the parade of this wading and migratory bird (Zarcone 2017). Although the crane (*turna*) acts as an avian allegory of seasonal transhumance, it appears in Alevi hymns as a sacred bird often associated with both God and Ali (Arnaud-Demir 2002). In addition, several mystics, including those of the Yesevi and Bektaşî traditions, are said to take on gruiform qualities and/or are believed capable of metamorphosis into birds with the ability to fly.<sup>24</sup> This transmigration of souls from human to animal also includes the deer, as was the case for Abdal Musa.

The large rocks next to Budala Sultan's shrine in essence outline a round, open-air *semahane* (audition hall) for the performance of this religious dance whose origins Alevis trace to the Prophet Muhammad's celestial ascension (*miraç*, Arabic *mi'rāj*).<sup>25</sup> Alevi tales and poems state that, upon his celestial ascent, Muhammad joined thirty-nine saints and prophets led by Ali, a reunion that has come to be known as the ‘assembly,’ ‘gathering,’ and ‘forum’ of the forty (*kirklar cemi*, *kirklar meclisi*, and *kirklar meydanı*). This assembly is reenacted in the religious performance of the *cem* – that is, the ritual gathering – that is central to the Alevi faith. Although today both the *semah* and *cem* have

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rocks to which nearby villagers perform their sacrifices and offerings (Seyirci 1992, 32). Relatedly, there exist eighty erected stones (*dikili taş*) called “Abdal Musa's Stones” and/or “Abdal Musa's Soldiers” located in the Sivas area (Aksüt 2016, 61; Seyirci 1992, 33).

24 For some scholars, the bird-in-flight metamorphosis as found in Turkish Islamic mysticism retains elements of Central Asian pre-Islamic shamanism. This ‘remnants theory,’ however, is problematic as it carries a theological bias with regards to what constitutes a normative or ‘orthodox’ form of Islam, with an emphasis on the dogmatic and legalist frameworks articulated by religious elites (Dressler 2012, 213, 226).

25 For an in-depth discussion of the Alevi *semah*, see, inter alia, Erseven (1990); Erol (2010); and Tambar (2010).

taken a cultural turn as folklorized performances (Tambar 2014, 101, 104), they remain nevertheless a key component of Alevi worship and ritual. In the end, the stones that construct the ‘sacred site of the forty’ (*kurklar makamı*) next to Budala Sultan’s shrine offer a testament and arena for the enactment of the Alevi *cem*, which includes hymns and poems in honor of Ali and the imams as well as elegies mourning the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala. These Shi‘i motifs permeate the soundscape of the rite, the latter calcified yet energized by the wreath of pebble-piled rocks studding the geological apogee of the Abdal Musa shrine complex.

#### 4 Alevi Eco-Islam in the Age of Man

In scholarship, Alevis often are said to be a special kind of Shi‘i identity community – as “Shi‘i but ...” (Dressler 2015, 447), the latter a qualifying clause stressing their purported departure from ‘normative’ thought and practice as constructed by both Sunni and Shi‘i consensus. As this study has shown, Alevis indeed show a distinctive deference to Ali and nature and hence can be described with some qualifiers: in this case, as belonging to a supra-confessional form of Shi‘ism that incorporates eco-material forms of devotional behavior and practice. Their practiced Islam is not mosque-centered and aniconic but rather undertaken in prayer halls and shrines packed with images and artifacts. In outdoor forums and more rural areas, Alevis also pay devotional visitation and offer votive offerings to springs, rocks, and trees, which represent the rooting and dispersal of saintly presence and power on Earth. At the very core, these environmentally rooted, pietistic acts shed light on humans’ aesthetic and spiritual enjoyment *in* and *with* nature, stripping the material world to its very essence. What is more, they are considered as falling within the acceptable parameters of the Islamic faith, itself expansive enough to include tales of trees miraculously prostrating to the Prophet Muhammad and pebbles singing his and God’s praises (Al-Yahsubi 1991, 169–170).

On the one hand, Alevi forms of geopiety have deep roots in the soil, bespeaking to an age-old, earth-oriented form of spirituality predicated on the notions of rootedness and territoriality (Tuan 1976). On the other, they also cultivate an Islamic religious terrain that is rich in possibilities for both the present and the future. Concerned with the here and now, members of the Alevi community tend to dovetail with political environmentalists by equating a lack of minority rights with the decimation of nature in Turkey today. This alignment was clearly visible during the Gezi demonstrations of 2013, at which time the Greens demonstrated against the building of a third bridge in



FIGURE 12.23 Alevi posters opposing the naming of the Yavuz Sultan Bridge and supporting environmental protectionism and pluralistic democracy. Taksim Square, Istanbul

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Istanbul named after the Ottoman Sultan Selim, The Grim (*Yavuz*, r. 1512–20), who is infamous for having massacred Alevis. Like the newly built airport, the bridge is considered an impending environmental disaster for the city. Alevi posters depicting Imam Ali opposed the name of the third bridge while also supporting both environmental protection and a pluralistic democracy (figure 12.23). Other banners warned that “Yavuz Sultan killed 40,000 Alevis. The Yavuz Sultan Bridge will kill one million trees” (figure 12.24). These figural images and inscribed caveats uncover a larger nexus of contestation in Turkey today, in which trees are subjected to violent acts of deracination that are equated, per Alevi thought and rhetoric, to a subjugation and eradication of the country’s religious minorities.

In the age of the Anthropocene, the future of humankind hangs in the balance. Now more than ever, we are acutely aware that we are not detached from nature but entirely dependent on it for our own survival as a species. Individuals throughout the Middle East – where climate change has caused havoc via the dwindling of natural resources and the desiccation of formerly



FIGURE 12.24 Banner reads “Yavuz Sultan [Selim] killed 40,000 Alevis [and] the Yavuz Sultan Bridge will kill one million trees.” Taksim Square, Istanbul  
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fertile lands – have been hit hard and thus have been prompted to creatively reconceptualize the Muslim faith to address pressing issues, above all preserving the Earth and thus life itself. Such conservationist urges have yielded eco-friendly movements, including ‘Green Deen’ and ‘Muslim environmentalism’ (Abdul-Matin 2010; Gade 2019). In some areas of the Muslim world, mosques now must be outfitted (or retrofitted) with solar panels to serve as powerhouses of both raw energy and spiritual enlightenment. While these mosques will grow as an Islamic form of sacred eco-architecture, Alevis, for their part, will surely continue to return to nature – to water, trees, rocks, and the soil itself – tilling a rich eco-material terrain of belief and practice ripe for continued scholarly study.

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This book examines material and multi-sensorial expressions of Shi‘i Islam in diverse and understudied demographic and geographic contexts. It engages with conceptual debates and makes several propositions that push the frontiers of scholarship on Islamic and Religious Studies, Material Religion, Heritage Studies, and Anthropology and Sociology of Religion. The contributions presented in this volume demonstrate how material things and less thing-like materialities make the *praesentia* and *potentia* of the Sacred tangible, how they cultivate intimate relations between human and more-than-human beings, and how they act as links and gateways to the Elsewhere and Otherworldly. The volume posits that materialities of religion are integral to processes of heritagization shaped by competing social and political actors involved in the construction and canonization of religious – in this case, Shi‘i – heritage.

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