Following Sayyida Zaynab: Twelver Shi‘ism in Contemporary Syria

by

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Centre for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Outsiders, such as Lebanese and Syrian Shi‘is often refer to Twelver Shi‘is in the Syrian shrine-town as ‘traditional,’ and even ‘backward.’ They are not the only ones. Both Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei have called the bloody flagellation practices, which have only increased in popularity in Sayyida Zaynab over the past few decades, ‘backward’ and ‘irrational.’ Why do these outsiders condemn these Twelver Shi‘is and their Muharram rituals? Why are ‘traditional’ practices popular in the Syrian shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab? What does ‘tradition’ mean in this context? This dissertation begins with the last question regarding the notion of ‘tradition’ and examines seminary pedagogy, weekly women’s ritual mourning gatherings, annual Muharram practices, and non-institutionalized spiritual healing.

Two theoretical paradigms frame the ethnography. The first is Talal Asad’s (1986) notion that an anthropology of Islam should approach Islam as a discursive tradition and second, various iterations of the Karbala Paradigm (Fischer 1981). The concepts overlap, yet they also represent distinct approaches to the notion of ‘tradition.’ The overarching argument in this dissertation is that ‘tradition’ for Twelver Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab is not only a rhetorical trope but also an intimate, inter-subjective practice, which ties pious Shi‘i to the members of the Family of the Prophet. The sub-topics are changing patterns in religious pedagogy, the role of embodiment, self, and inter-subjectivity in women’s ritual mourning gatherings, and the applicability of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque (1984). Inspired by Frederick M. Denny (1985), who coined the term ‘orthopraxy’ to describe the importance of ritual practice in
Islam, this dissertation refers to transgressive and carnivalesque religious performances as ‘heteropraxy.’ In particular, the emphasis on ‘heteropraxy’ is a critique of recent research on Arab Muslim women’s piety by Saba Mahmood (2005) and Lara Deeb (2006).
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Over Hussain’s mansion what night has fallen?
Look at me, O people of Shaam, the Prophet’s
only daughter’s daughter, his only child’s child.
Over my brother’s
bleeding mansion dawn rose — at such forever
cost? So weep now, you who of passion never
made a holocaust, for I saw his children
slain in the desert,

crying for water. Hear me. Remember Hussain,
what he gave in Karbala, he the severed
heart, the very heart of Muhammad, left there
bleeding, unburied.

Deaf Damascus, here in your Caliph’s dungeons
where they mock the blood of your Prophet, I’m an
orphan, Hussain’s sister, a tyrant’s prisoner.
Father of Clay, he
cried, Forgive me. Syria triumphs, orphans
all your children. Farewell. And then he wore his
shroud of words and left us alone forever.
Paradise, hear me –

On my brother’s body what night has fallen?
Let the rooms of Heaven be deafened, Angels,
With my unheard cry in the Caliph’s palace:
Syria hear me

Over Hussain’s mansion what night has fallen

I alone am left to tell my brother’s story

On my brother’s body what dawn has risen

Weep for my brother
World, weep for Hussain

Agha Shahid Ali, “Zainab’s Lament in Damascus”

1 Introducing Sayyida Zaynab

At the time of my fieldwork, I thought of myself as an anthropologist. However, following the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, everything changed. I became a historian. The scenes described below no longer exist the way I examine them. Many of the Iraqis who appear below have left. Some have returned to Iraq where thousands continue to live as internally displaced persons. Others have immigrated to Europe or North America. Many of the other non-Iraqi Shi’is in Syria now lead precarious lives. In January 2012, at least 18 Iranian pilgrims to the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab were kidnapped. As a small minority which used to be allied with the Alawi regime, the position of Twelver Shi’is has and will most likely continue to change radically for the worse. As I cannot personally verify any of these changes, however, and since my fieldwork data was collected shortly before the Arab Spring, I approach my research topic as if it were still taking place in the present in order to preserve anthropological flavoring to what has become a work of history.

One of the first things I did, when I first came to Syria in September of 2004, was to visit the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, which is approximately 15 km south of Damascus. On the road from Damascus, the shrine’s two blue minarets are clearly visible from afar. The golden dome becomes visible, once you enter the shrine-town. The main street leads along hawzât (seminaries) and markets filled with religious tourists from Iran and the Arab Gulf countries. As the shrine seldom hosts women’s religious events (aside from individual tourist groups, which perform ritual mourning gatherings or majālis ‘aza), I became interested in the seminaries and husayniyyât, halls dedicated to mourning gatherings, which proliferate in the shrine-town and serve the resident Shi‘i community. In Syria, as elsewhere in the region, hawzât and husayniyyât are part of scholarly networks and participate in doctrinal politics.

Note on transliteration: Throughout this dissertation, I use as few diacritical marks as possible in order to facilitate reading. Further, I use the term ‘Shi‘i’ both as an adjective and a singular noun, referring to one Shi‘i Muslim. For the plural, I use ‘Shi‘is.’ For other names, as well, I use an ‘s’ to indicate plurals.


3 ‘Locals’ include Afghans, Iraqis, Iranian, and Palestinians, who have lived in the shrine town for decades.
During my first stay in Syria (as a Fulbright recipient in 2004-2005), I stayed mainly in central Damascus, where I focused on enhancing my Arabic. When I came for my second time in 2006, I lived on the Western edges of Damascus and volunteered with two UN agencies, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). I kept visiting the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab. However, working for UNHCR on asylum issues, allowed me to see the shrine-town with new eyes. For instance, I began noticing UNHCR aid items (e.g., bags of rice and sugar) that were being reused and resold. During my third trip in 2007, I finally stayed in Sayyida Zaynab, enrolled in seminary summer courses, and met a ‘spiritual doctor’ (tabīb ruḥānī) who claimed religious legitimacy by quoting the Qur’ān. Since 2007, I visited Syria three more times: I stayed a little more than three months during the summer of 2008, three months during the spring of 2009, and four months during the fall of 2009. While in Sayyida Zaynab, I spent most of my time at hawzāt (seminaries), husayniyyāt (halls dedicated to ritual mourning gatherings), the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, with the herbal doctor, and with classmates.4

The most important themes that kept coming up in conversations, sermons, and class discussions were questions of belonging, relating, authority, and the value and construction of tradition. In particular, questions such as what constitutes tradition5, why and how is tradition relevant today, and whether or not it must be opposed to rationality, kept resurfacing throughout my fieldwork and hence underpin this dissertation. For the Shirazis, at whose seminary I spent most of my time studying (though I also attended classes at two other seminaries), tradition is a source of authority, as well as a modality for change, and a source of stability. For many of the Shi‘i women I met, tradition is what allowed for and instilled affective relationships and an enchanted world-view. For the spiritual doctor, tradition is that which allowed him to challenge the

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4 Unlike other Arabs, Iraqis tended to not invite outsiders into their homes. Thus, I spent most of my time with classmates who were not originally from Iraq (instead they were Syrians), though I spoke extensively with Iraqi women at the shrine, at seminaries, and at husayniyyāt. Iraqi women were probably more hesitant about being hospitable because they were generally highly suspicious of strangers (whether foreigners or Iraqis) because they had just lived through decades of war and religio-political repression. For instance, after we had known each other for several months, Um Aus told me that her husband had been killed because he had worked for the Americans (she never said this to other Iraqis) and she had been forced to leave her home by Shi‘i militia groups in Baghdad. Understandably, therefore, she was highly suspicious of both Iraqis and non-Iraqis. Fieldnotes, Spring 2009.

5 For Arabic translations of ‘tradition,’ please see footnote 7.
hegemonic force of rationality, modernity, scholarly authority, as well as that which allowed him to claim miraculous abilities. Overall, the debate over the concept of tradition assumed that tradition consists of a set of practices and discourses that is handed down through personal relationships and that it revolves around an opposition of rationality and the miraculous. In contrast to Shi‘is in Lebanon and Iran, many Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab have tended to embrace what could be called a ‘post-modern’ view in that they did not feel the need to justify and ‘rationalize’ tradition but rather sought to legitimate a ‘miraculous tradition.’ This does not mean that they conceive of tradition as ‘irrational,’ but rather that ‘tradition’ exceeds rationality. As I will demonstrate in the next chapters, Twelver Shi‘i notions of tradition in contemporary Syria allow for carnivalesque and miraculous attitudes, rituals, and discourses, precisely because tradition is seen as based in interpersonal relationships.

Both Shi‘i scholars and academic scholars of Islam have written extensively on the notion of ‘tradition.’ In Arabic, ‘tradition’ can be potentially translated as a number of terms (e.g. taqlīd, ‘adāt, sunnah, riwāyah, adāb, ‘urf, and turāth). In the anglophone academy, the English term

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6 Therefore, contrary to the usual interpretation of the Karbala Paradigm, through which Shi‘i ritual is often interpreted as either ‘modern and revolutionary’ or ‘traditional and salvific,’ it is precisely Shi‘i rituals’ ‘traditional and salvific’ aspects which allow them to also be ‘modern and revolutionary.’ Cf. Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi‘i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Lara Deeb, An Enchanted Modern (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

7 Generally, when speaking of popular or social practices which are perceived as reaching back in time, the double terms ‘adāt wa taqlīd apply. ‘Adāt in particular (and I shall return to taqlīd shortly) connotes “habit, custom, usage, [and] practice” (Hans Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed. [Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1994], 654). It is derived from the verb āda which means ‘to return,’ to return to the practices of one’s fore-fathers. The term is also used together with the plural tuqūs or ritual and implies physical performances (Ibid, 563). In a sense, ‘adāt is the secular version of sunnah, Prophet Muhammad’s “habitual practices,” his “customary procedure or action, norm, usage sanctioned by tradition” (Ibid., 433). However, Shi‘is have a complicated relationship with the word sunnah and use other terms whenever possible. (For example, Sunnah prayers or invocations, which are non-obligatory but are considered recommended because they are thought to increase one’s good deeds or hasanāt, are called mustahabb.) The sunnah of the Prophet and the twelve Imams is found in hadīth or riwayāt. Here, a riwa‘yah is an authoritative story from which moral examples or laws can be extrapolated. For Imam J‘afar al-Sadiq and his student Abu Hanifa local customs or ‘urf are permissible and even enforceable as long as they do not contradict the Qur’an or an authoritative riwa‘yah. ‘Urf is derived from the verb ‘a – r – f, to know or recognize (Ibid., 605) and is also a secondary source in Hanafi and J‘afari fiqh or jurisprudence. As an adjective, the term is used to describe common-law marriages that are not registered with state authorities.

Taqlīd is a complex term. N.J. Coulson blames taqlīd, understood as the blind adherence of later generation to the opinions of earlier scholars, for the decline of Sunni fiqh and implicitly Islamdom altogether (N.J. Coulson, A History of Islamic Law [Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1964], 182-201.). Hans Wehr defines the term
‘tradition’ has also been used to designate a number of different things, people and ideologies. For instance, it has been used to refer to Prophet Muhammad’s hadith.\(^8\) Both Ash‘aris, whose theology goes back to the tenth century theology when it arose in opposition to the Mu‘tazila, and Akhbaris, who opposed the Usulis in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and still have a stronghold in Bahrain, have been referred to as ‘traditionalists.’ For the purpose of this dissertation, I draw on and contribute to debates on the notion of tradition as discussed by Talal Asad on the one hand and as employed in the analysis of the Karbala Paradigm on the other hand.

For the anthropologist Talal Asad and his students, the term ‘tradition’ carries yet another meaning.\(^9\) He writes, “[i]f one wants to write an anthropology of Islam, one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the hadith.”\(^10\) As Anjum Ovamir emphasizes, Asad adopts the concept of tradition from Alasdair MacIntyre,\(^11\) who defines “a living tradition [as] an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the

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goods which constitute that tradition.”\textsuperscript{12} Though MacIntyre acknowledges that “traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict,”\textsuperscript{13} he also closely ties ‘tradition’ to Aristotelian ethics, a stance, which Asad, his students, and others, have adopted as well. According to Samuli Schielke, this particular view of tradition (which focuses on the honing of virtues) has led Asad’s students and followers to over-emphasize ‘religious activists’ (which include scholars and ‘lay’ activists such as members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood) as the sole signifiers of piety.\textsuperscript{14} In order to rectify this trajectory, Schielke calls on scholars to look at what falls outside of the disciplinary cultivation of the virtuous self.\textsuperscript{15}

In what follows, I heed Schielke’s call by drawing attention to what I call ‘carnivalesque’ Shi’i practices, which Shi’is perform in the Syrian shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab as part of a wider set of Muharram mourning rituals, such as self-flagellation and setting up ‘hospitality tents.’\textsuperscript{16} I argue that these controversial practices (such as self-flagellation and faith healing) in Sayyida Zaynab are carnivalesque in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense because they are both in opposition with and part of institutionalized religious authorities. At the same time, they are ‘traditional’ in accordance with dominant interpretations of the Karbala Paradigm.\textsuperscript{17} And they are part of Asad’s ‘discursive tradition’ as they relate back to the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

\textsuperscript{12} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} In particular, Schielke critiques the students of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind, for focusing too much on pious activists as normative. Of course, there is a plethora of academic works on popular religious practices, which does not centre on these religious activists.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{16} Carnivalesque piety is not quotidian piety, which is what Schielke wants scholars to examine. However, carnivalesque Shi’i rituals are widely popular even among those who are not necessarily religious otherwise and therefore, do not constitute self-cultivating practices which Schielke considers to be ‘activist.’

\textsuperscript{17} In brief, the Karbala Paradigm posits that Muharram rituals can be interpreted as either ‘modern’ and ‘revolutionary’ or as ‘traditional’ and quietist.” See: Deeb, \textit{Enchanted Modern}.
Several anthropologists and historians have described various Shi’i Muharram mourning rituals as having a carnivalesque atmosphere in passing. Yet, only Frank Korom and Gustav Thaiss have seriously engaged the notion in their analysis of Muharram practices. According to Thaiss, “the Hosay [which is what Muharram processions are called in Trinidad] gave symbolic form to a growing working-class consciousness throughout the Caribbean working-class.” It united the various ethnic groups and, together with the Carnival, marked a day of ambivalence: festivities, competitions, and riots were possible. In the last few decades, Sunnis, who constitute the majority of Muslims in Trinidad, have sought to have the Hosay banned. However, because it constitutes an important tourist attraction, the government has opted to protect the practice.

In Syria, Muharram processions are neither syncretic, nor do they represent a unified working class. They represent an area of contestation between various Shi’i scholars, marāj’ā al-taqlīd, muqallidīn (lay followers), politicians, and spectators. Among contemporary scholars, carnivalesque rituals (such as self-flagellation) constitute a subject of dispute between the Shirazi brothers (Sayyid Hasan Shirazi [d. 1983], Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi [d. 2001], Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi) and Ayatollah Khamenei. While the Shirazis promote and propagate the carnivalesque aspects of Muharram mourning rituals, Khamenei denounces them (in the tradition of Khomeini). Even if they are not physically present, what the ‘ulama think, say, and do, is


19 Korom, *Hosay Trinidad*; Thaiss, “Muharram Rituals and the Carnivalesque in Trinidad.”

20 Thaiss, “Muharram Rituals and the Carnivalesque in Trinidad,” 38.

21 Hasan Shirazi founded the Zaynabiyya, but he was never a mar’ā’ al-taqlīd himself.

22 With regard to this issue, Khamenei has followed in Khomeini’s footsteps.

23 Similarly to Laurence Louër, I use the plurals of last names (though she uses the Arabic plural, whereas I employ an Anglicized plural by using the letter ‘s’ at the end of the name) to refer to not only the four Shirazi brothers, but also their families and their networks.
important because of the Shi‘i notion of taqlīd, according to which Shi‘is must follow a particular marj‘a al-taqlīd (as will be further explained in the next chapter).24 The debate about carnivalesque parts of Muharram practices, specifically, is important because they have been subject to the changing religious policies of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad over the span of his twelve years in power.

Bashar’s father and predecessor, Hafiz al-Asad, had forged good relations with Twelver Shi‘is in the early 1970s for both domestic and regional reasons. Internally, he faced opposition by the Muslim Brotherhood, which accused him of falling outside of the scope of Islam. In response, Hafiz al-Asad obtained a fatwa by Musa al-Sadr stating that ‘Alawis are Shi‘is and therefore Muslims. This move also helped Asad cement good relations with Shi‘is in Lebanon who backed him when the Syrian army entered Lebanon as a ‘peace keeping force.’ At the same time, Iranian Iraqis and Shi‘i opposition leaders, including the Shirazis, were forced to leave the Iraqi shrine-cities of Karbala. Hafiz al-Asad allowed these political asylum seekers into Syria as temporary guests.25 By doing so, Asad aided the opposition of his enemy, the Ba‘ath Party of Iraq, and later on it allowed him to become close allies with post-revolutionary Iran (even though Iran is a theocracy and Syria is nominally secular).

Bashar al-Asad initially followed his father’s policies. When hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled from the American war on Iraq beginning in 2003, Syria welcomed them as temporary visitors. However, the sudden growth and diversification of the Twelver Shi‘i community in Syria, also brought conflicts. As a range of scholars opened offices and seminaries in Sayyida Zaynab, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, also increased his presence (together

24 The office of the marj‘a al-taqlīd was created during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, partly as the result of a major Shi‘i doctrinal debate between Usulis (‘rationalists’) and Akhbaris (‘traditionalists’). The ‘rationalists’ triumphed and slowly, an institutionalized hierarchy of scholars (‘ulama) emerged. At the head of this hierarchy, stand a handful of the supposedly most knowledge scholars, who then serve as marj‘a al-taqlīd, legal points of reference. Lay Shi‘is who do not attain the level of mujtahid (independent legal reasoning), are required to perform taqlīd and follow any established marj‘a al-taqlīd.

25 They still do not enjoy Syrian citizenship.
with Hezbollah). The most prestigious seminary in Sayyida Zaynab, hawza Imam Khomeini, belongs to Khamenei. The shrine has been renovated and expanded with Iranian funds and Friday sermons at the shrine’s prayer hall are read in Khamenei’s name by his representatives.

Khamenei’s predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini was once on good terms with Muhammad Shirazi (and the Shirazi network generally). As historian Laurence Louër writes, when Khomeini came to Najaf in 1964 to establish himself Mohammed Shirazi was the only scholar who welcomed him. In 1978, Mohammad Shirazi tried to help Khomeini go to Kuwait, when the latter was forced to leave Iraq. Khomeini and Shirazi both agreed that in the absence of the awaited Imam al-Mahdi, Shi’i scholars should take over the responsibility of governing. However, they disagree about who should rule and how. While Khomeini worked on realizing his concept of ‘wilayat al-faqih,’ the rule of the jurist, Shirazi preferred his ‘shurat al-fiqaha,’ or council of jurists.

By the early 1980s, a rift between Khomeini and Shirazi became apparent. Khomeini became primarily concerned with domestic issues, whereas the Shirazis maintained an international, revolutionary position (with one foot in Bahrain and another in Qum). The Shirazis’ marginalization continued under Khamenei and by the mid-90s two of Muhammad Shirazi’s sons in Qum were arrested and tortured. Since then their disagreement has turned into a bitter, public rivalry. Muhammad Shirazi spent the last years of his life under house arrest in Qum. Following his death in 2001, governmental authorities prevented Shirazi from being buried in the garden of his house, fearing that it would become a place for worship and pilgrimage. Instead, they forced his followers to bury him at the shrine of Fatima in Qum, where his brother and other

26 This was done, for example, by renovating the shrine and claiming it. There is now an office for ‘religious information’ at the shrine, which is a place where Shi’is come to ask legal questions and they are given answers according to Ayatollah Khamenei. (Every marj’a al-taqlid has a risalah of fiqh.)

27 By 2007, the Syrian government tried to distance itself from Iran. Bashar al-Asad visited the Saudi king and on the occasion of the latter’s visit to Syria, ‘Ashura practices were restricted from the main street in Sayyida Zaynab.


29 The Shirazis also disagreed with Khomeini about the Iran-Iraq war. See: Louër, Transnational Shia Politics, 190.

30 Ibid.
scholars lay buried. In 2005, women of the Shirazi family organized mourning ceremony on the anniversary of Muhammad Shirazi’s death. However, authorities intervened and several women were arrested and beaten. Following this incident, Mujtaba Shirazi (the younger brother of Muhammad Shirazi, who has been living in England) released a video online wherein he ritually curses Khamenei for unveiling and beating Shirazi women. The important point is that the Shirazis have been marginalized and even silenced in both Iran and Iraq (under Saddam and after the fall, they were not able to reassert themselves, having lost much of their local supporters during their 30 year absence). The only place the Shirazis have been able to propagate their views openly has been in Syria. However, should Bashar al-Asad’s regime fall, there is a good chance that the Shirazis will fall out of favour in Syria, as they are known to have been supported by Asad.

The rivalry between Khamenei and the Shirazis is crucial for thinking about Twelver Shi‘ism in Sayyida Zaynab, because both parties are present (in that they operate local institutions and have representatives), but neither is in power. As I will demonstrate below, popular Muharram practices and discourses have become an area for contesting religious and worldly authority. More specifically, I posit that in Sayyida Zaynab, this rivalry has enabled the annual performance of carnivalesque mourning rituals. What do I mean when I write that the Shirazis are promoting carnivalesque rituals? The Shirazis themselves would probably never call the practices they propagate ‘carnivalesque.’ Nevertheless, I hold that the self-flagellation rituals they sponsor are best described as ‘carnivalesque’ for two reasons. First, they echo Bakhtin’s carnivalesque images. Secondly, they can subvert established religious power and authority.

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31 Ibid., 195.


33 They both vie for the good will of the Syrian government.

34 As Richard Schechner explains, Michel Bakhtin wrote about the carnivalesque with a particular, stable, non-democratic society in mind. When studying other, more contemporary carnivals, according to Schechner, one must pay attention to their historical, social, and political specifics.
In the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, the scholarly debate between Khamenei and Shirazi is, of course, not all that fuels controversial practices such as self-flagellation. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (who had banned public Muharram processions), Shi‘is performed bloody forms of self-flagellation publicly in both the Iraqi shrine-cities and in Sayyida Zaynab. By 2008, the number of flagellants and visitors in Sayyida Zaynab had drastically decreased. In 2009, there were relatively few processions and self-flagellation groups that performed publicly, though I was told that many of the men flagellated for the first time.

Amal, a local convert from Sunnism to Shi‘ism, married to a South Asian Shi‘i seminary-student and merchant, explained that perhaps a dozen or so of her husband’s colleagues usually do not participate in tatbīr (a bloody form of self-flagellation) because they have chosen to follow Ayatollah Khamenei as their marja‘ al-taqlīd. However, following the 2009 Iranian election, disgusted with the Iranian leaders, these Shi‘i men participated in the tatbīr processions in Sayyida Zaynab. Through tatbīr, by cutting themselves with swords on the top-front of their heads, these men ritually inscribed their protest onto their bodies. The practice of self-flagellation had thus become an arena for contesting Shi‘i religious authority and piety on local, individual, communal, as well as international and institutional levels.

Institutional politics and the relationships between religious scholars are important because they form the backdrop to this study, which focuses on the local implications of the scholars’ debates. By ‘local implications’ I mean the ways in which scholarly alliances and conflicts affect specifically women’s seminaries, what women study, and the rituals men perform publicly during Muharram. As mentioned above, my ethnographic data is primarily derived from


Fieldnotes, Monday, 28 December 2009.


The reason I focus mostly on women’s spaces and rituals is because as a woman, it was women interlocutors I had access to.
fieldwork I conducted in Syria, where I attended classes at religious seminaries and private, as well as public, Shi‘i women’s mourning gatherings for a period of over thirteen months between 2007 and 2009. I conducted in-depth interviews with several classmates from the seminaries I attended, especially Amal, a Palestinian convert, and Um Aus, an Iraqi widow and asylum seeker. I also spoke at length with seminary teachers, mullayāt, who lead women’s mourning gatherings in both public and private settings and other women, especially elderly and mothers with young children, who attended mourning gatherings but no other religious functions. On a daily basis, I interacted with a couple of Sunni families and with two spiritual doctors, shaykh Abu ‘Ali and Abu Haydar who both worked at the same herbal shop/clinic in Sayyida Zaynab. Beyond talking to people, studying at seminaries, and regularly attending mourning gatherings, I also collected locally available literature on mourning gatherings, including controversial practices such as tātabīr (cutting the top of the head with a sword). Based on these materials, I examine private, literary and institutional discourses and practices on education, ritual mourning, and spiritual healing. I look at the ways in which these ideas shape notions of authority, self and other, one’s relationships and responsibilities, piety and rationality. More specifically, how do the people I talked to and the religious books I read conceive and contest the concept of tradition?

1.1.1 Sayyida Zaynab: a heterotopia of tradition
According to Michel Foucault, the nineteenth century was the epoch of history, while the twentieth century is “the epoch of space” or simultaneity. He writes that “we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed… Our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skin.” Foucault explains that he is interested in two special kinds of places which were present in the pre-modern era, but which have taken on new meanings in the twentieth century. The first is utopia, which, of course, does not exist. The

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39 Ibid., 1.
second does exist but as an inversion of the first: *heterotopia*. Examples Foucault notes include cemeteries, gardens, museums, libraries, and brothels. For him, they “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.”

I argue that the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab constitutes a Foucauldian *heterotopia*. It is a ‘traditional’ place in the sense that it memorializes history and celebrates tradition, yet like a museum, it does not itself have a long history. Like Damascus, Sayyida Zaynab constitutes a space that is tied to the sacred, to religion, and to power. Yet, the shrine-town also mirrors and reflects Damascus, the imperial Umayyad city, as its opposing other: Damascus is the city of Syrian citizens, while Sayyida Zaynab is the city of stateless refugees, asylum seekers, and religious tourists. Damascus is Sunni, moderate, stable, and modern, while Sayyida Zaynab is Shi’i, extreme, constantly changing, both traditional and postmodern. One could say that while Damascus looks to the West, Sayyida Zaynab looks East (towards Iraq and Iran). Both Damascene friends and interlocutors living in Sayyida Zaynab contrast and distinguish the two spaces religiously, legally, and aesthetically.

It is ironic that Damascus should be considered ‘modern’ and Sayyida Zaynab ‘traditional.’ After all, Damascus claims a 3500-year history, while the shrine town of Sayyida Zaynab was only established in 1948 as part of a string of Palestinian refugee camps encircling Damascus to the South. Even today, the Sitt Zaynab Palestinian camp is geographically located west of the shrine and extends from there to include a number of small villages. It is under mandate of UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which was established to help Palestinian refugees in countries such as Lebanon and Syria), which means that schools and hospitals, elsewhere administered by Syrian ministries, are supervised by UNRWA which (like

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40 Ibid., 2.

41 Foucault, “Of Other Spaces (1967).”


most UN agencies) is only able to act locally in cooperation with the government. Some Palestinians receive stipends from UNRWA and most are lower to lower-middle class. Many live in ‘Arabic houses’ (*bayt ‘arabī*) or houses that have not been divided into individual apartments on each floor and which can be extended vertically for new additions to the family, such as an adult son’s wife and children.

In 1967, the evacuation of the Syrian side of the Golan Heights produced another wave of refugees or ‘internally displaced people,’ many of whom settled North of the Sayyida Zaynab Palestinian camp, to the west of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab. Notably, both the Palestinians and the Golanis are predominantly Sunni Muslims, though there are also a handful of Druze.

Beginning in the early 70s, the first Twelver Shi‘is settled to the north and north-east of the shrine, fleeing religious oppression in Iraq. In 1980, when Saddam Hussain expelled around 40,000 Iraqi Shi‘is suspected of Iranian affiliation, many came and settled in Sayyida Zaynab. Syria’s pan-Arab (B’ath) policy which was enforced at that time (and remained in force up to 2006), extended a helping hand to these Iraqis and guaranteed access to free public health services and education. (This policy was revoked in 2006 when the massive number of Iraqi refugees, then estimated around two million, became too big a financial burden on the Syrian government.) It is more expensive for Iraqis to go and live in Jordan and Lebanon and thus, the Iraqis who come to Syria are often relatively poor and Shi‘i. Iraqi Twelver Shi‘is in particular have gathered in Sayyida Zaynab and Jaramana, another Damascene suburb just to the east of the Christian quarter. This is not to say that there are no non-Shi‘i Iraqis living in Sayyida Zaynab, but rather simply that Twelver Shi‘is constitute the majority of Iraqi Shi‘is in the shrine-town. Numerous Iraqis live in Hijera, the ‘Golani’ quarter, and in the Palestinian areas. However, as my Palestinian real estate agent explained, many locals (Syrians, Golanis, and Palestinians) do not consider it prestigious to live with Iraqis, who are considered violent and untrustworthy. Rents are higher on the other side, to the east along Shari‘a al-‘Iraqiyīn, the street of the Iraqis. The street of the Iraqis is lined with Iraqi restaurants and travel bureaus that organize shared cars

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43 While Iraq and Syria, as many other neighbors, have been fierce rivals and have often fought, there have been important cultural and kinship ties between the two countries. Yet, the growing friendship between Iran and Syria and the American war on Iraq have contributed to a feeling of resentment on the part of Iraqis in Syria towards Syrians.
travelling to Baghdad, as well as other cities in Iraq. Tens of thousands of Iraqis live in the narrow side streets of the Shari‘a al-‘Iraqiyīn, some Sunni and some Shi‘i.

To the east and south-east of the shrine, former farmers and other locals began building hotels and furnished rental apartment blocks for the increasing numbers of religious tourists from Iran and the eastern Arabian Gulf. The rate at these hotels changes with the seasons, rising during the summer and other religious occasions. While statistics regarding the number of visitors from individual countries or even regions is unavailable, the French political scientist Sabrina Mervin claims that there are annually over a million people who come to visit the shrine. Moreover, she guesses that Sayyida Zaynab has a total population of 100,000, although that number seems excessive.44

The town is divided into two halves by the main road leading to Damascus and can then be further divided into four quarters, centering on the shrine. The south-eastern quarter, which hugs the shrine is the touristic area, where Iranians stay in five story hotels surrounded by crowded markets. The south-western quarter is a Palestinian camp. The north-western quarter, roughly the neighbourhoods surrounding Hijira, is inhabited predominantly by Syrians from the Golan Heights, though it has also become known for housing Twelver Shi‘is from Pakistan, India and Afghanistan who study at religious seminaries. To the north-east, the Shari‘a al-Iraqiyīn, as the name indicates, caters to and is inhabited by Iraqis.

The shrine’s rectangular compound used to be surrounded by four roads. In 2007, the road that ran along the shrine compound’s northern wall was demolished and the area was closed off in order to build an extension to the shrine’s courtyard. Stores and peddlers line these streets, encircling the shrine in touristic markets that sell clothes, candies, food, gold, religious posters, and rosaries. (The same items can be bought for less at the Hijira market.)

Along the eastern side and to the south-east of the shrine extends the sūq al-Iraniyīn, the market of the Iranians. The majority of Syrian vendors in the market, employees in the hotels and

restaurants speak Farsi, some are Kurds who picked up the language; others may have studied Farsi at either a seminary or at one of the Iranian cultural centres.

The Palestinian camp to the south-west is the oldest area in town. The houses there are built in close proximity making many of the streets too narrow for a car to pass. Amal, a local Palestinian convert to Shi‘ism, whom I knew from the Zaynabiyya, told me that the house her parents lived in, in the Palestinian camp, was built on the land, which her grandparents had pitched their tents on when they first arrived.45 When Amal and her sisters married, they all left the camp, making the Palestinian camps the ‘oldest quarter’ in more than one sense.

About 300 meters north of the shrine, along the main road to Damascus, is the Hijira circle (dawr Hijira),

45 There are a few other locals who have converted to Shi‘ism. Local women usually do so if they marry Shi‘i men. However, there are also men who covert out of conviction. The issue of conversion is further addressed in the following chapter on institutionalized piety.
where the Golani area and market street Hijira meets the Shari’a al-Iraqiyīn, cars spun around a plastic palm tree, decorated with metal lanterns, surrounded by four panels with pictures. Two depicted Bashar Asad alone. One depicted Bashar Asad with his deceased older brother Basil, and his father, Hafiz (d. 2000). The last panel facing south, towards those entering the shrine-town, used to depict Hafız Asad standing in front of the B’ath Party flag, paternalistically presiding over his children, three boys draped in the Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian flags.

In comparison to Hijira, the buildings along the Shari’a al-‘Iraqiyīn are at least twenty years younger, in better shape and thus, more expensive. Living on Shari’a al-‘Iraqiyīn or its side-streets generally indicates an elevated higher socio-economic status. Yet, those living in Hijira counter these allegations by arguing that money cannot buy true respectability. They point out that there are Gypsy families living along the Iraqi street who have worked in the Gulf, where they amassed enough wealth to be able to live in the area.46

Over the last four decades, or since the arrival of Shi‘is from Iraq, the socio-economic situation of the shrine town of Sayyida Zaynab experienced sudden and rapid growth (2004-2006), followed by a swift and steady decline. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the town slowly expanded, built hotels and apartments for Iranian and other religious tourists as well as a slow trickle of Iraqi refugees. After the American war on Iraq in 2003, however, the influx of Iraqi refugees increased exponentially (there were at least two million Iraqis in Syria by 2005) and, at first, the Iraqis brought with them an immense flow of cash. Housing and rental prices peaked and stimulated new developments in apartment building construction. However, this housing market crashed by 2008 for two reasons: first, many Iraqis with money, connections or an acceptance from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) had already left Syria for Europe, North America, and Australia. Other Shi‘i Iraqis returned to Iraq and ran out of money. Secondly, in the spring of 2008 the Syrian government cut fuel subsidies, causing the cost of diesel to rise from 7 to 24 Lira per litre, from 0.16 to 0.50 USD, which in turn caused prices generally to rise drastically.47

46 Fieldnotes, Fall 2009.

47 The price increased from roughly 15 cents to 50 cents per liter.
Political instability and the summer 2006 war on Lebanon brought ‘visitors’ to Sayyida Zaynab, but they stayed only a few weeks and did not spend lavishly.\textsuperscript{48} Official numbers claim that up to a million Lebanese came to Syria during the summer war of 2006 and many of these were from the South, the Shi‘i area of Lebanon.

Among the more regular guests Sayyida Zaynab receives are Shi‘i guests from the Eastern Arabian Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait who come every year during the summer months. When I arrived in Syria mid-May in 2008 and searched for accommodations on the Eastern side of the shrine, I was unable to find any apartments in this area. I was told that within a week or so, “the day Saudi schools close for the summer,” prices jump from 750 Lira a night for a single bedroom (approximately 16 USD) to 2000 Lira (approximate 45 USD). These visitors come not only for the shrine but also for the cooler weather. Damascus is usually ten degrees cooler than Kuwait, eastern Saudi Arabia, and at least somewhat cooler than Iraq as well. This summer tourism in Sayyida Zaynab may be best explained by considering that, in general, Gulf Arabs often travel to cooler places during the summer months.\textsuperscript{49} Today, rich Gulf Arabs may travel to Europe or Beirut. For those less well-off, Syria presents an enticing choice. Syria is generally cheaper than Lebanon and Jordan, has several historical sites, beautiful green landscapes, Mediterranean beaches, and a Sunni majority along with a religiously tolerant government.\textsuperscript{50} The latter point is especially attractive for Shi‘is from those Gulf countries where Twelver Shi‘ism is suppressed. In short, the shrine-town of Zaynab with its Twelver Shi‘i institutions enters into an economic high seas on every summer. Virtually overnight, Shi‘i families from the Eastern Gulf fill blocks of furnished apartment buildings crowded around the shrine. Prices triple. Because of the masses, the compound and the prayer hall become inaccessible during prayer times.

\textsuperscript{48} These Lebanese were, in effect, temporary refugees. However, they were not recognized as such by either the Syrian government or by UNHCR, because official recognition of refugee status would have required the Syrian government or UNHCR to provide more humanitarian and administrative aid.

\textsuperscript{49} In earlier times, nomadic tribes would move north towards Syria for the summer months.

\textsuperscript{50} Of course, all this could change soon, given the current political instability in Syria.
Local hotels and travel agencies offer tours to religious sites, such as the graveyard adjacent to the Southern gate of the Old City of Damascus, bāb al-saghīr, where Bilal the first muezzin and two of the Prophet’s wives lie buried. Seminaries such as the Zaynabiyya and the hawza of Sadrayn\(^{51}\) offer summer courses for adult men and women willing to learn more about Shi‘ism.\(^{52}\) Weekly mourning gatherings and special events, such as concerts by famous *latm* singer Basim Karbalai, invite local as well as visiting Shi‘is.\(^{53}\) There is an annual summer book sale. Three to four book-tents are set up across the Southern entrance of the shrine, close to the tourist markets. Besides the summer season, the markets of Sayyida Zaynab enjoy another lucrative season during Muharram, although some of the commodities vary each season.

In his article, “Pilgrimage, Commodities, and Religious Objectification: The Making of Transnational Shi‘ism between Iran and Syria,” Paulo Pinto writes that the display, sale, and consumption of religious paraphernalia, such as posters, flags, key-chains, rosaries, and religious jewellery, produces a transnational Shi‘i *communitas*.\(^{54}\) While Pinto is right in that the shrine and the market enable Shi‘is to feel like they are part of a larger pious community, it is also important to note that not everyone in town is happy about it. There are those who may partake in the Shi‘i *communitas* (e.g., by selling religious posters or working for tourist agencies), but do not identify with it. The largest community in the shrine town who seem to really clash with the Iraqis are the Palestinians. Ironically, the Palestinians are on the one hand the stereotypical refugee in urban Syria and, on the other hand, they are also the numeric majority and the longest residents of the shrine-town. There are, of course, Palestinians who engage with Shi‘is, Arab and non-Arab, be it through trade, marriage, or otherwise. However, there are also many who avoid contact with Shi‘is which is why, according to my Syrian seminary classmate Amal, it is

\(^{51}\) Sadrayn literally means ‘the two Sadr’s’ and refers to Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (d. 1999) and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (d. 1980). Muqtada al-Sadr is the son of the former.

\(^{52}\) Seminaries, such as the Zaynabiyya, also offered trips to their students. During the summer of 2008, for instance, the female students of the summer school were invited to attend a day trip to a private swimming pool.


not the Palestinians who own and manage the shops in the lucrative tourist market connecting the Palestinian camp with the shrine, but other Syrians. Instead, Palestinian youth such as Amal’s five siblings work in the factories of the surrounding towns.\footnote{Her father works for the Syrian government as a minor clerk.}

At these factories, they currently earn around 6000 Lira per month (120 USD). Specifically, the factories here produce soda (the brand is a local business, Mandarin) and wedding cards (by Rahwanji). To the north of town, along the main road there is an area with a concentration of upper and upper-middle class wedding halls, where Damascene couples come to be married. (These halls can cost between 20,000 to 30,000 Lira or 400 to 600 USD for the night and are dedicated to gender segregated parties, such that weddings may often take place simultaneously at two halls.)\footnote{The Palestinians who work at these halls often do not have money to celebrate their own weddings at these wedding halls. During my fieldwork in Sayyida Zaynab, I attended four Palestinian weddings, only one of which was at a wedding hall, and even that was not segregated by gender.} These halls also employ Palestinians and Syrians from the Golan Heights. Factories and wedding halls employ women, who have few employment opportunities otherwise. When I asked Palestinian friends from the area, they estimated that perhaps a third of all women work. Often, unmarried young women work until they are married. Men may also work at wedding halls and factories, though many work as daily labourers. These men can be seen (and hired) in the mornings, when they sit along the main road with their shovels and bags of cement-powder. Sometimes, Syrian and Palestinian farmers will also work as labourers, especially outside of the farming seasons or when the rain has been too scarce for farming. Iraqi men constitute a large percentage of these labourers, though they also try their luck wherever else they can. As elsewhere in the Middle East, general unemployment and the fact that everything, including employment, requires personal connections means that there are numerous Iraqis with university degrees who remain underemployed.

Religious and ethnic inter-marriage in Sayyida Zaynab tends to follow certain trends. For example, Palestinian women commonly marry Golanis, Syrians, and occasionally other
foreigners. Some Syrian women marry Iraqi men in hopes of resettling to the United States. A Syrian second wife who helped her husband and his family obtain a Syrian residency card can receive a nominal amount from UNHCR per child per month. Iraqis, Gulf Arabs, Iranians, Afghans, and Lebanese intermarry frequently as well.

Of course, there are always exceptions. I spoke with the unmarried 20-year-old granddaughter of an important Afghan scholar in Sayyida Zaynab. (We met as classmates at the seminary.) She told me that her sayyid Afghan family has been living in Sayyida Zaynab, near Hijira for more than three decades, since they left Iraq in the 70s. They do not want to return to Afghanistan. Fatima explained that she is both a local and a stranger. She is not Syrian and needs to regularly renew her residency. Among all the other foreigners and refugees in Sayyida Zaynab, however, she feels like a local. While most of her family members marry amongst themselves, or intermarry with other (especially Iranian) sayyid families, her aunt had married a non-sayyid Iraqi man. More commonly, it is sayyid men who can and do marry non-sayyid women, while sayyid women are expected to refuse non-sayyid suitors.

For sayyid women, who are individually called ‘alawiyya so-and-so’ (as descendants of ‘Ali, not to be confused with those belonging to the ‘Alawi religious sect), it means that they are more likely to remain unmarried. However, unlike other women, sayyid women are privileged within religious institutions and many are employed as mullayāt or teachers. For example, in the case of the hawza Zaynabiyya, there are several sayyid women who are attached to the Shirazis, but are unmarried. They teach and manage the women’s section of the seminary. The main mullaya who leads weekly mourning gatherings in the Zaynabiyya, ‘alawiyya Mardhiya, claims she refused a number of suitors in order to remain a ‘servant of Husayn.’ Whether or not this is true

[57] Syrian and Golani women rarely marry Palestinian men, because it means their children ‘lose’ the Syrian citizenship as nationality is awarded through the father alone.


[59] Fieldnotes, Fall 2009.
is open for debate, but the fact remains that for *sayyid* women serving at a seminary or the like is a viable and respectable alternative to marriage.\(^{60}\)

Despite these international marriages, however, there remains a strong sense of national origin. Along the Shari’a al-‘Iraqiyîn, street vendors sell scarves with the Iraqi flag on it, while those on the other side of the main street in Hijira sell Palestinian embroidered scarves, *al-Quds lina* (‘Jerusalem is for us’). In a sense, Paulo Pinto is right: the inhabitants are all united in their consumption of identity markers.\(^{61}\) They are all patriotic consumers.

At the centre of the four divisions of the shrine town, God is not the only power that meets man. The shrine-town’s police headquarters are built into the South-West corner of the shrine. However, their presence is in some ways mainly for show. A couple of police-men stand outside the station and frequently shout at the busy traffic on the adjacent road. They yell at microbus drivers not to stop and pick up people near the station. In a sense, Lisa Wedeen’s observation of the theatricality of power in Damascus in the 1990s still holds true for the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab a decade later. Exiled Iraqi politicians and activists organize in Sayyida Zaynab and even the Maliki government, which had been ruling Iraq since 2005, has had a base in Sayyida Zaynab. In an effort to control the area, periodic police raids shut down internet cafes and try to regulate who is allowed to conduct religious ceremonies and who is allowed to teach at seminaries. Security controls first tightened after September 27, 2008, when a car bomb exploded around five kilometres north on the main road from Sayyida Zaynab, destined supposedly for Sayyida Zaynab. A second bombing hit the area of Sayyida Zaynab on December 3, 2009. This time, there were rumours about a governmental inside job, part of factional rivalries. The shrine itself is only periodically under close state surveillance, for

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\(^{60}\) To a certain extent, ‘serving Husayn’ is also an alternative source of prestige for ordinary women, especially for those who do not have children. In contrast to *sayyid* women, ordinary women are expected to marry and it is a great source of shame if they cannot or do not. However, if ordinary women for some reason do not have children, this problem can be alleviated through alternate sources of prestige, such as becoming religious and possibly even a teacher or *mullaya*. This does not mean that all or even the majority of teachers and *mullayât* do not have children, but a significant number are childless. Becoming a *mullaya* is generally prestigious for the woman and her family. If her family is poor, the *mullaya* can earn a little cash (approximately 500 Lira or 10 USD). Otherwise, it is considered a sign of respectability.

instance during Muharram. In terms of its spatial management, the shrine has been under the care of the Murtadha family since the fourteenth century. The shrine has changed radically since then. Parallel to the growth of the shrine-town, the shrine has been expanded and rebuilt several times and continues to be under construction to this day. Various private donors from Pakistan, Iran, and the Arabian Gulf have contributed individual parts, and most recently, it has been the Iranian government that has financed the renovation of the shrine and its compound. With Iranian money and Iranian tourists, the shrine has become more and more Twelver Shi‘i, at least this is the complaint of some Sunnis in the area. Currently, there is a separate prayer hall for Sunni men (but nothing especially for Sunni women). Sunni men hold separate Friday prayers there, while the shrine’s main musallah or prayer hall hosts Ayatollah Khamenei’s representative who leads Shi‘is in prayer.

What makes Sayyida Zaynab a heterotopia are the moral, legal, and temporal contradictions and juxtapositions. Both Shi‘is living in Sayyida Zaynab and Damascenes draw moral distinctions between the two places: one is mainly Sunni, the other is inhabited (even if only temporarily) by largely Twelver Shi‘is. In Sayyida Zaynab, most women wear either a jilbāb and hijāb or a black abaya. In Damascus, there are women wearing manteau and niqāb, manteau and hijāb or even no hijāb. Residents of the shrine-town often claim the moral superiority of Sayyida Zaynab, the sister of Husayn, who cursed the Umayyad caliph (because she held him responsible for her brother’s death) in Damascus. Yet, the shrine-town’s pious appearance also hides

62 During the day leading up to and following ‘Ashura, authorities station more police-men at the gates of the shrine. These police-men search men’s pockets and women’s bags for weapons. During the rest of the year, there are fewer guards at the different gates and they are less likely to check bags.

63 Mervin, “Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?”

64 Notably, all mosques in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab (besides the shrine) are Sunni.

65 The jilbāb is usually a dress, which rests on a woman’s shoulder and reaches to her ankles. Depending on the decorations and the materials of the jilbāb it can be worn as a nightgown, housedress or street-wear. Hijāb here refers to headscarves. Technically, the term abaya can refer to two different garments (which have in common that they are both outer garments): black jilbāb are often referred to as abaya and are usually worn by Golani and Palestinian women. Iraqi women and women from the Arab gulf countries usually wear an abaya, which rests on their heads. These are typically worn over the jilbāb.
morally questionable practices, such as prostitution.\footnote{While it may seem like a paradox, prostitution is as common in shrine-cities today as it was in and around important Babylonian temples in antiquity. In Sayyida Zaynab, prostitution includes \textit{mut'a} marriages (temporary or ‘pleasure’ marriages) and straight-forward prostitution without the religious sanction of \textit{mut'a}. The state however considers \textit{mut'a} marriages as no different from regular prostitution.} Another feature that makes Sayyida Zaynab a \textit{heterotopia} is that even the residents are all ‘temporary’ (as the Syrian government expects Palestinian refugees to return one day). As a town made up predominantly of non-Syrians (except for the Golanis), it further constitutes a space of legal exception.

\subsection*{1.1.2 Sayyida Zaynab’s rituals of mourning}

While Shi‘is outnumbered Sunnis in Syria in the fourteenth century,\footnote{Mervin, “Sayyida Zaynab: Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?”} today Twelver Shi‘is make up no more than three percent of the Syrian population, though other Shi‘i sects (that do not practice mourning ceremonies for Husayn) make up another ten percent. Nevertheless, as indicated above, the number of Twelver Shi‘is living in Syria has risen significantly since 1980, when Saddam first purged forty thousand Iraqi Shi‘is suspected of having Iranian affiliations.\footnote{Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, \textit{Iraq since 1958} (London: I.B. Tauris, [1987] 2001), 258.} Since then, political ties have eased Iranian funding for renovating shrines and seminaries in Syria, attracting Shi‘i pilgrims and students while benefiting from the inaccessibility of Najaf and Karbala due to continuing violence in Iraq.\footnote{Pinto, “Pilgrimage, Commodities, and Religious Objectification,” 112.} Though the crowds visiting Zaynab’s shrine come from all corners of the world, they also fall into predictable patterns: wealthy but politically disenfranchised Shi‘i families from the Eastern Arabian Gulf flood Zaynab’s shrine-town in the summer months, driving up the prices already too high for the thousands of Iraqis overstaying their savings and their visas. During the rest of the year, elderly pious tourists from Iran, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and India provide the shrine, the schools, and the markets with less profitable, but loyal guests. In brief, as of 2008, there were at least half a million Iraqis, Iranians, and other Twelver Shi‘is living in Syria.\footnote{According to Giorgio Neidhardt, the total population of the shrine-town in 2005 was 133,206. Of those, 30,171 were Iraqis. For his numbers Neidhardt draws on UN publications, which are often conservative in their estimates.} Notably, many of these propagate, promulgate, and
practice rituals banned in the mid-90s by Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon and denounced by the mujtahid of Damascus, Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin in the 1920s.

Shi‘i mourning rituals commemorate the death-anniversaries of the Prophet and his family generally, but most often focus on Husayn’s martyrdom specifically. According to Shi‘i hagiography, the third Imam Husayn, grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who was living in Medina, was invited by the people of Kufa, in Southern Iraq, to lead their rebellion against the Umayyad Caliph of Damascus. The Kufans, however, had previously been unfaithful to Husayn’s father Imam ‘Ali and thus, Husayn sent his cousin Muslim bin ‘Aqil to Kufa in order to assess the situation. When Muslim reached Kufa, he was met by a warm welcome and the people took an oath of allegiance. Convinced by this show of support, Husayn decided to heed the Kufans’ request and left Medina for Kufa. However, the Umayyad Caliph Yazid learned of the imminent revolt in time and dispatched an army: first, in order to intimidate the Kufans and second, to intercept Husayn. When Husayn reached the desert plains of Karbala, around eighty kilometres from Kufa, he was met and outnumbered by Yazid’s army. The Kufans never came to help and after several days of fierce fighting, Husayn was killed on ‘Ashūra, the tenth day of the Islamic month Muharram ca. 680 CE on the desert-sands of Karbala (in present-day Southern Iraq). After Husayn died, his sister Zaynab and the other women and children, along with the sick fourth Imam ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidīn, were taken captive and brought to Damascus. There, Sayyida Zaynab was the first to lead followers in majālis or mourning gatherings. According to the principal of the Shirazi seminary, Zaynab was also the first to commit tatbīr, cut her head with a spear.

Giorgio Heinrich Neidhardt, “The integration process of Iraqi refugees in Syria,” paper presented at the 3rd Annual Conference of the International Association for Contemporary Iraqi Studies on 16 July 2008. (http://www.iraqistudies.org/English/conferences/2008/papers/Niedhardt.pdf). As violence peaked in 2007 and 2008 in the Shi‘is urban centers of Iraq, the number of Iraqis in Sayyida Zaynab increased. By the fall of 2009, Iraqi Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab decreased because it became increasingly difficult to continue living in Syria, not because the situation in Iraq was necessarily safer.
At the Iraqi shrine-cities of Najaf and Karbala, poetic eulogies and the women’s practice of slapping their cheeks date back to the ninth century. Yet, it was only during the course of the 19th century that extreme and bloody forms of self-flagellation, such as cutting one’s forehead with a sword (tatbīr) or whipping one’s back with chains, were introduced by Iranians, first to Iraq and then Lebanon. In the late 1920s, the most prominent Syrian Shi‘i leader of the twentieth century, Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (d. 1952 CE), denounced these practices. Though al-Amin condemned them as illegitimate ‘traditions’ (as bid‘a), the practice continues.

Mourning for Husayn has been both religiously and politically controversial since its nascent stages, largely because it proved an effective tool for mobilizing the masses. For example, the tawwabūn, repentant Kufans, and others who “regretted [having been] unable to support Husayn at Karbala” first met to mourn and then “marched on to fight Umayyad troops… on the Iraqi-Syrian border.” When used to destabilize the status-quo, rulers and religious scholars tended to prohibit mourning rituals. However, clerics and kings also appropriated and encouraged mourning practices when it suited their own purposes. During the Iranian Revolution of 1979 CE, for instance, Muharram symbols and rituals were used to incite people against the Pahlavi Shah. At the same time, Saddam Hussein banned popular public mourning rituals, such as processions and mourning chants. He did so fearing the rituals’ political effectiveness, though he also resorted to calling Shi‘i rituals barbaric and backwards. In contrast to Saddam and the Pahlavi Shah, Khamenei’s and Hezbollah’s mid-90s prohibition of bloody forms of flagellation was not (at least not mainly) out of concern regarding the rituals’ ability to mobilize. Rather, as Wathiq al-Shammari argues in his pamphlet distributed by Khamenei’s office, the issue has

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73 Ibid.

74 Ende, “The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi‘ite Ulama,” 22.


76 Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala.*

77 Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958.*
become one of representation. Fadhlallah and Khamenei both say they are concerned about the image of Shi‘ism and for that reason ban certain mourning rituals, such as bloody forms of flagellation.

In Syria, Shi‘i mourning rituals including bloody ones, may be performed at certain times and places. As noted above, the de facto ‘Alawi government, which periodically faces opposition from the Sunni majority on religious grounds, owes its religious legitimacy to Twelver Shi‘is who recognize ‘Alawis as Shi‘i Muslims. Yet, the government also makes a concerted effort to control these rituals and the masses that come to watch them.

According to Ali J. Hussein, Anglophone academic literature on Shi‘i Muharram mourning rituals has tended to focus on dramatic performances of the Battle of Karbala, called ta‘ziyeh in Farsi and tashbih in Arabic. He notes that this concern reflects an Euro-American (or outsider) rather than a Shi‘i (or insider) interest in the ritual. Similarly, such performances are of rather marginal importance in Sayyida Zaynab. Instead, the central Shi‘i ritual is the mourning gathering, whether private or public.

The most common ritual Shi‘i women devote to Sayyida Zaynab is the majlis ‘azā‘, the mourning gathering. According to Um Zaynab, a famous Iraqi mullaya and seminary teachers, mourning gatherings are divided into several parts, which can be elaborated or shortened depending on the occasion and the audience. A successful mullaya, similarly to a successful virtuoso of classical Arabic music, has to be able to read her audience and respond appropriately. She has to be able to improvise, play by the rules, and still engage her audience.

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78 Wathiq al-Shammari, Ikhbar al-faqīr fi ithbāt hurmat al-tatbīr (Beirut: Mu’assasat an-Naba’, 2010).
Ritual gatherings are led by a *mullaya* and her helpers. The performing *mullaya* sits on a *minbar*, which can be an elaborate setup or a plastic chair covered with black cloth, while her helpers sit by her feet or on the side. The *majlis* begins with a formulaic salutation. The one most commonly taught in Sayyida Zaynab is:

\[
\text{Sallallahu 'alayk ya mawlayi wa ibne mawlayy} \\
\text{ya rasūl allah wa 'ala āl baytak al-mathlūm} \\
\text{sallallahu 'alayk ya sayyidī, ya rasūl allah} \\
\text{sallallahu 'alayk ya sayyidī, ya abā 'abdillah}^{84}
\]

God’s blessings on you, oh master and the son of my master
Oh prophet of God and on the oppressed people of your house
God’s blessings on you, oh my lord, oh prophet of God
God’s blessings on you, oh my lord, oh father of ‘Abdallah [an epithet for Husayn]^{85}

The last words, the name Abu ‘Abdallah gives away the name of the saint to whom the *majlis* is dedicated: Imam al-Husayn.

Depending on the *mullaya*’s and her audience’s tastes, she may begin by chanting a slow *latmiyya* lament wherein the women in the audience clap their hands to their chests rhythmically. While authorities such as the late Ayatollah Fadhlallah and Khamenei do not approve of *tatbīr*, they do not oppose *latm* (chest-beating).^{86} Nevertheless, ‘Syrian’ and ‘Lebanese’ mourning gatherings generally do not include a *latm* right at the start of the ritual gathering. At the Zaynabiyya, however, the *majlis* begins with salutations and a slow *latm*, which is followed by a *khutbah*, a sermon or lecture. At private gatherings or even at certain large, public ones, the *khatība* and the *mullaya* can be the same person, but this is not necessarily the case. The end of the lesson generally returns the focus to Karbala and transitions into ritual mourning lamentation or *nā‘i*, during which women cover their faces and cry or at least pretend to cry (*tabāki*). When the *mullaya* ends the *nā‘i*, the participants dry their tears, and the *mullaya* has the option to perform *latmiyyāt* (which are chants accompanied by rhythmic chest beating) before ending the ritual gathering. Syrian and Lebanese *mullayāt* tend to minimize or omit this part, while Iraqis

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84 Fieldnotes, Monday, 30 June 2008.

85 The translation is mine.

86 Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, 868. (*l-t-m*)
tend to extend it. At the Shirazi seminary, all majālis include at least three latmiyyāt. Each increases in tempo, agitating and exciting devotees. The first latmiyya may be accompanied by clapping on thighs, the second by chest beating, and the third by slapping one’s cheeks. The majlis ends with one or more of three standard prayers. The mullaya tells her audience to “salli ‘ala Muhammed,” bless the Prophet and his family, and then recite Surah al-Fatiha for the benefit of the sponsors of the majlis and for themselves, for the sake of healing and for the fulfillment of their needs.

As Vernon Schubel explains, the centrality of mourning gatherings in Twelver Shi’ism, wherein the pious mourn the death and suffering of the ahl al-bayt, exemplifies how Shi‘i piety requires not only scriptures but also love and loyalty for Muhammad and his family. For Shi‘is, then, Talal Asad’s formulation of the anthropology of religion means relating back, not only to founding texts, but to ideal Others whose deaths and lives make demands upon their followers. For example, loving and being loyal to the ahl al-bayt requires devotees to participate in mourning gatherings, attend ‘Ashura processions, and visit shrines such as that of Sayyida Zaynab.

In her work on Lebanese Shi‘i women’s piety, Lara Deeb differentiates between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern and authenticated’ majālis. She notes that in ‘traditional’ mourning gatherings, the mullaya lays more emphasis on emotionality, on crying (and I would add aesthetics). The ‘modern and authenticated’ majlis in contrast emphasizes clarity, understanding, and historical accuracy.

In Syria, mourning gatherings are seldom entirely ‘traditional’ or ‘modern and authenticated.’ As the mullayāt ‘alawiyya Mardhiya and Um Zahra explained during khitaba lessons, there are


This is not to say, of course, that devotion to the Prophet and his family is not important for many Sunnis as well.


89 As Deeb notes, ‘traditional’ gatherings are held in Iraqi rather than Lebanese or modern standard Arabic. According to ‘alawiyya Mardhiya, Iraqi Arabic is not only more emotional, but also more poetic (and therefore, emotional). Moreover, the emphasis on poetry and the performance of mourning chants also underscores the importance of aesthetics in ‘traditional’ gatherings.
different elements in each mourning gathering, which the *mullaya* is free to improvise upon. At the same time, there are outside factors, which seek to standardize the style and content of mourning gatherings, such as the disciplinary powers of the state or foreign religious/state actors, among others. Yet, these too are not necessarily in agreement with one another. For example, while the late Lebanese Ayatollah Fadhlallah, who was also the highest-ranking religious scholar/leader of Hezbollah, may have propagated his ‘rationalist’ views in Sayyida Zaynab, the Shirazis disagree. Moreover, as Werner Ende points out, the various scholars’ views are not necessarily based solely on the legal permissibility of self-flagellation, but also on factors such as trying to appeal to the masses among whom rituals such as self-flagellation and emotional crying is popular.⁹⁰

Women attend public mourning gatherings for a number of reasons, including becoming pious and meeting other women. The *du’a* or prayer at the end of *majālis*, which asks women to join in for the sake of their wishes, suggests that the fulfillment of legitimate needs or desires can be sought through participation in mourning gatherings. It also works the other way: you make a vow to sponsor a mourning gathering at your own home, for example, and if a loved-one is healed (or finds a job, etc.) but only once the request has been fulfilled are you bound to fulfill your end of the bargain.⁹¹ If a death, especially an unexpected death, occurs in the family, it is customary for Shi‘is to sponsor several mourning gatherings in one’s private home. These mourning gatherings take the same form as weekly mourning gatherings held at *hawzāt* and *husayniyyāt*. During the *majlis*, the age and gender of the departed is symbolically approximated in the narrative the *mullaya* chooses. The name of the departed is not mentioned until the last *du’a*.

As ‘alawīyya Um Husayn explained to me, Shi‘i families can also sponsor a *majlis* in order to bring about the recovery, graduation, employment, or marriage of a loved one.⁹² She said she

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⁹² Fieldnotes, Spring 2009.
had recently helped a young woman get married by performing a mourning gathering on the theme of Qasim, who was one of the martyrs at the Battle of Karbala. Even when the primary theme is not Qasim or marriage, holding a majlis allows a large number of potential mothers-in-law to see and to be served tea and cookies or even entire meals with kebabs or chicken by marriageable girls of the host family, while also affirming social ties. It may seem contradictory that mourning a groom who died in battle is supposed to bring about the marriage of the host or sponsor of the gathering. However, as I show below, this is part of the carnivalesque aspect of Muharram mourning gatherings.

1.2 The Karbala Paradigm

Muharram rituals and discourses have been a favourite topic of discussion among historians, anthropologists, and political scientists. Prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 scholars generally framed their analysis in terms of the “Passion of Karbala,” which they treated as a Shi‘i genus of the passion play common in Christian Easter observances. Following the Revolution, however, scholars such as Nikki Keddie and Michael Fischer became interested in the politicization of Shi‘i Muharram practices and discourses at the hands of the ‘ulama’ and Shi‘i intellectuals, such as ‘Ali Shari‘ati.

In 1981, the anthropologist Fischer was the first to coin the phrase, the Karbala Paradigm, in order to distinguish Shi‘i Muharram practices from those of Catholic Penitentes. His construction pointed to the narrative’s rhetorical operation, dramatic form, and significance in differentiating Shi‘is. The paradigm, according to Fischer, “provides models for living and a

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94 For example, ritual mourning gatherings are carnivalesque in that hosts serve refreshments while commemorating hunger and the mullahya recounts grotesque details in poetic prose. Lamenting ritually for the death of Imam al-Husayn’s children, whether Qasim or ‘Ali Asghar, brings about a wedding and pregnancy.

mnemonic for thinking about how to live.” By 1983, historian Nikkie Keddie’s edited volume cast these “models for living and a mnemonic for thinking” in terms of a duality with relationship to politics. The duality in Keddie’s subtitle, “Shi’ism from Quietism to Revolution,” which Mary Elaine Hegland rephrased as “accommodation and revolution,” became the dualism through which scholars came to view the Karbala Paradigm. Comparing Iran with Lebanon, anthropologist Michael Gilsenan called politically quietist versus revolutionary modes, ‘passive’ versus ‘active’ modes of piety. In their more recent studies, Kamran Aghaie, Lara Deeb, and Sophia Pandya have adopted these politically focused and dichotomous views of the Karbala Paradigm and have argued that there has been a shift over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century from ‘traditional and salvific’ to ‘modern and revolutionary’ interpretations.

The dichotomous concepts these academics have been using largely mirror those of religious Iranian ideologues such as ‘Ali Shari’ati (d. 1975) who in the decades prior to the revolution had modified the Karbala narrative into a revolutionary manifesto. Shari’ati proposed that there are two types of Shi’ism: the first type was the “pure, just, and populist” Shi’ism of ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, the first Imam. The second was Safavid Shi’ism, the worldly, complacent, and corrupt piety of the scholarly elite, the ‘ulama‘. The clerics’ “worldly Shi’ism” implied that they were more concerned with the details of ritual observance than struggling against the corrupt regimes that had co-opted them. By holding up ‘Alid Shi’ism as the pure, just, and true form of Shi’ism and delegitimizing scholarly authority, Shari’ati emphasized “active emulation of Husayn in the form of active rebellion against corrupt rulers.”


100 Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala*, 100-103.

101 Ibid., 105.

transformed from a religio-historical account, central to mainly soteriological practices, into an on-going moral and political obligation to revolt against injustice. And Husayn became the “model for rebellion against the Shah and the foreign imperialist powers.”

After his death, ‘Ali Shari‘ati’s theories were taken up by scholars such as Ayatollah Khomeini who argued for the necessity of political involvement by Shi‘i clerics. In Syria, where Shari‘ati’s body rests in the graveyard adjacent to Sayyida Zaynab’s shrine compound, his ideas are mentioned less frequently. As Louër explains, the late-twentieth century educated Shi‘i lay elite in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and Bahrain (which she calls effendis) read Shari‘ati and sympathized with his anti-clerical views. Yet, “what the effendis retained from the ideas and way of life of Ruhollah Khomeini or Mohammed al-Shirazi was precisely that the two men were in rupture with their status group, that they effected a revolution within the clerical class as much as they strove to overthrow the political order.” In other words, Khomeini and Shirazi were equally ‘revolutionary’ because they both called for clerical involvement in politics. The difference between the two ayatollahs was that Khomeini came to power and could claim a successful revolution in Iran. Muhammad Shirazi and his brothers were politically involved in several countries but never succeeded in their revolutionary endeavours.

If Khomeini and Shirazi are both ‘revolutionary,’ how can the Karbala Paradigm and the binary of ‘revolutionary’ and ‘salvific’ interpretations help in distinguishing and analyzing them? I argue that this dilemma is best resolved by introducing the concept of the carnivalesque, because the carnival is potentially both salvific and revolutionary.

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103 Ibid.

104 Ibid., 110.

105 The reason for Shari‘ati’s doctrinal absence could be that his critique does not apply to Syria. It does not apply because Syria is a majority-Sunni country with few Shi‘i scholars in the first place. Moreover, considering that the two most important Shi‘i clerics in Syria throughout the twentieth century have been Muhsin al-Amin and Muhammad Shirazi, Shi‘i scholars in Syria cannot be described as being complacent collaborators.

106 Louër, Transnational Shia Politics, 277.

107 In the 1970s, they were politically active in Iraq, then Bahrain and Iran. They have been marginalized in Iran, but continue to have an influential presence in Bahrain.
1.2.1 The performative community and its moral guides

Scholars of South Asian Twelver Shi‘ism, such as Vernon Schubel, David Pinault, and Toby Howarth, have generally emphasized the communal and salvific aspects of Muharram mourning rituals. For example, Schubel draws on Victor Turner to posit that in Karachi, bloody self-flagellation creates a feeling of *communitas* among participants, and it strengthens and affirms their devotion for the *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet’s family, which includes his male descendants through Fatima, the Imams). For Pinault, Muharram practices in India are also demonstrative of communal identity, but more importantly, he stresses that ritual commemoration is salvific. For Toby Howarth, who also writes about India, Shi‘i mourning rituals are primarily about identity. He explains that processions constitute a visible act, witnessed by both ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders.’ Thus, Muharram rituals both serve to unite and to differentiate disparate communities in the South Asian context. Howarth points out that processions, such as those in Hyderabad, are preceded by sermons which commonly include communal polemics and apologia against Sunnis, ‘the West,’ other Shi‘i sects and Hindus. The combination of sermons and processions visually and intellectually affirms to both Shi‘is and others that Shi‘is constitute a separate moral community inhabiting a distinctive space, because demonstrative practices locate Shi‘i sites of devotion geographically as “a ritual area which facilitates the manifestation of… grief.” At the same time, Pinault also highlights that Muharram practices can be ‘syncretic.’ He argues that under Muslim rule, complex patronage networks and social loyalties often

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110 Schubel critiques Howarth for his focus on community to the exclusion of its spirituality, devotion and salvific qualities. However, the fact that Howarth is a Christian cleric may explain his approach.


overrode the admonition of religious clerics and, thus, Hindus and Sunnis would participate in Muharram processions.\(^{114}\)

Unlike in South Asia, contemporary Muharram rituals and gatherings in Syria can hardly be described as arenas for inter-faith dialogue as few Sunnis or Christians participate in Shi‘i rituals.\(^{115}\) (Though the Washington Post reported that during the summer 2006 clashes between Lebanon and Israel, there were some Syrian Sunnis who converted to Shi‘ism as an act of allegiance to Hezbollah.\(^{116}\))

During times when Twelver Shi‘is represented an oppressed group, it was mourning gatherings (rather than, for example, Friday prayers) which transmitted Shi‘i doctrines and symbols. From a historical perspective, the educational aspect of Muharram mourning gatherings has been significant from the beginning. After the Battle of Karbala, Zaynab and her nephew “used every opportunity when a crowd formed to make speeches which would arouse great sorrow and much weeping.”\(^{117}\) While spreading the message of Karbala, “Zaynab coached the believers... in the finer points of the ideology propagated by Hosayn.”\(^{118}\) Especially considering that Friday prayers and sermons and their obligatory attendance for men are a relatively recent phenomenon in Shi‘ism, because it was considered an illegitimate practice in the absence of the Imam,\(^{119}\) it was Muharram mourning gatherings that served to expose Shi‘is to refined discourses.\(^{120}\)

\(^{114}\) Ibid.

\(^{115}\) Few non-Shi‘is show up to observe groups of young Shi‘i men perform tatbîr after the sunrise prayer. However, around noon, when South Asian men gather south of the shrine to perform zanjîr, the observing crowds often include Sunnis (and others), some of whom loudly disapprove. For further discussions of this point, please see the chapter on ‘Carnivalesque Piety.’


\(^{117}\) Howarth, The Twelver Shi’a, 5-6.

\(^{118}\) Aghaie, “The Gender Dynamics,” 53-54.

\(^{119}\) Howarth, The Twelver Shi’a, 4.

\(^{120}\) Schubel, Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam, 90.
In his analysis of Shi‘i Muharram sermons in Hyderabad, India, Toby Howarth also underlines the importance of education. While laying out the structural components of Shi‘i majālis (sg. majlis, a ‘sitting’ where Shi‘is gather to listen to a sermon and lament the events of Karbala), Howarth points out that Muharram sermons usually begin with exhortations of the virtues (fadhā’il) of the fourteen Infallibles (which include the Prophet, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Imams). Lectures on virtues, according to Howarth, primarily serve as means to unite the community in common admiration of the fourteen Infallibles. Secondly, such descriptions also serve as models for ethical behaviour.121 Imam ‘Ali, the first Imam and father of Husayn, for example, is among the most commonly praised male figures. Since he is the only Imam who ever held power, he serves as a model for a free man of justice and generosity.122 Mary Elaine Hegland underscores this by quoting a common saying: “Live like ‘Ali, die like Husain!”123 Interestingly, though ‘Ali is generally highly esteemed, he does not embody ideal manhood for all Shi‘is. As my Iraqi Arabic tutor, Um ‘Ali explained once: “He is the best of all men. La fat illa ‘Ali! (‘There is no young man but ‘Ali!) But I wouldn’t want to marry him.”124 According to Yitzhak Nakash, Southern Iraqi tribesmen favour ‘Abbas who died with his half-brother Husayn at Karbala. As a fallible man, ‘Abbas is on the one hand loyal and just. On the other hand, he was also quick to anger and will punish those who wrongfully swear an oath by his name.125

For women, the Karbala Paradigm offers a number of choices as well: for example, Howarth quotes a majlis sermon wherein Fatima’s virtues were extolled. In this particular instance, Fatima’s virtues interestingly overlap with her sufferings; her patience and endurance are models

121 Howarth, The Twelver Shi’a, 136-142.

122 See also: Fischer, Iran, 147.


125 Nakash, The Shi’is of Iraq, 178-179.
for ethical female behaviour. Another model for ideal female behaviour is Zaynab. In Lebanon, Shi‘i women differentiate between a ‘traditional’ and an ‘authenticated’ interpretation of Zaynab’s story and character. According to the traditional model, Zaynab was lost in her grief after Husayn’s death and, thus, served as a model for mourning. However, according to the newer, ‘authenticated’ version, emphasis is placed on how Zaynab stood up to Yazid, disseminated the tragic story of Karbala, and cared for the other women and children. Since numerous characters were involved in Karbala both directly and indirectly (as in the case of Fatima, who was ‘present’ spiritually), there are consequently multiple acceptable models for ethical behaviour and “source[s] of spiritual and moral guidance.” Via this multiplicity of pious models, Muharram rituals and symbols can both unite and accommodate diversity among participants.

1.2.2 Carnivalesque piety

It may seem out of order to think about Muharram rituals in terms of a carnival. But, while Muharram and other death anniversaries are theoretically a sad and solemn time, they often feel more festive and ambivalent in their moods. As Vernon Schubel writes, “[a]lthough it was a time of mourning there was an almost carnival atmosphere to the place.” For example, the fact that Qasim’s wedding is celebrated as a moment of uncertain happiness within the context of

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129 Aghaie, “Gender Dynamics,” 47.

Muharram rituals, creates a paradoxical juxtaposition of life and death, his marriage and his martyrdom.

Muharram practices in Sayyida Zaynab are carnivalesque in their imagery: grotesque blood from self-flagellation and large quantities of food. Bakhtin’s ‘grotesque image of the body’ captures the scene of flagellants who continue to display their bloodstained white robes all day. At noon, during zanjīr-performances, flagellants even spray bystanders with droplets of blood and for hours, the ground is covered with bloodied mud. Before and after ‘Ashura flagellation processions Shi‘i seminaries, organizations, and families sponsor the distribution of food and drinks. The standard dish, which is served in Iraq and in Sayyida Zaynab during Muharram, is called qayma and consists of rice topped with beans and meat. Plastic cups, paper plates, and discarded white rice on the streets further add on to the grotesque trash, which is also part of the carnival. The blood from tatbīr and the qayma together not only symbolize life and death, but also enable Shi‘is to feel and imagine the Battle of Karbala.

Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, as Michael Taussig notes, is a form of transgression, in the sense that it is not only different from the norm, but also opposes and subverts it. In Shi‘i theology, there are two possible forms of transgression: ghuluw and taqsīr. The ghulāt commit the sin of excess, while those who commit taqsīr fail to give the ahl al-bayt their dues. In either case, the devotee transgresses against norms dictated by those who disagree. For instance, those performing tatbīr or zanjīr could be seen as committing the sin of ghuluw, while those not flagellating would be seen as committing taqsīr. Notably, both ghuluw and taqsīr are sins that occur in gifting relationships. As the various marj‘a al-taqlīd represented in Sayyida Zaynab do not agree where the lines of transgression lie with regard to ghuluw and taqsīr, there is a lively ongoing debate about ritual transgression among Twelver Shi‘i scholars and their followers. In particular, Khamenei and Fadhllallah accuse those who participate in tatbīr of being backward, ignorant, and undisciplined. Meanwhile, the Shirazis denounce those who oppose tatbīr for

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133 Momen, *Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, 81.
committing *taqsīr*.

Each accuses the other of transgressing against the ‘proper’ practice of piety.

I examine Muharram practices (and specifically, *tātbīr*) by drawing on and comparing Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque and Guy Debord’s concept of the spectacle. Contrasting the two enables me to distinguish not only between different ritual performances but also between audiences and their relations to performers. While Bakhtin’s crowd actively participates in the carnival, Debord’s audience passively observes spectacles (i.e. public performances of self-flagellations). In other words, Bakhtin’s carnival assumes a community, while Debord’s audience is a fractured society. I argue that the Shirazis’ propagation of bloody mourning rituals is carnivalesque, because it presumes a community which participates in grotesque rituals. In contrast, Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei have adopted a view which resonates with Debord’s spectacle, as they focus on an international, fragmented audience which observes and judges. Their assumptions about the relationships between the audience and performers differ.

As noted earlier, relationships (between Shi‘is, devotees and the *ahl al-bayt*, or followers and their *marāja‘ al-taqlīd*) are central to Twelver Shi‘i piety. However, beyond simply stating the importance of relationships, I also examine the forms, which pious relationships take and the practices that sustain them. As Anne Betteridge explains, it is central to Shi‘i women’s piety for women to enter into gifting relationships with the *ahl al-bayt*. She shows that these gifting relationships can make different kinds of demands and forms the basis for miracles, the fruits of sainthood. One is not born into a relationship with the *ahl al-bayt*; such a relationship must be cultivated. By visiting the saints’ graves, reciting *ziyarāt* (or visitation rituals, which can also be recited from afar), and making promises Shi‘is establish gifting relationships with divine others. Seeing a saint is a special boon, which is usually accompanied by an answer to a particular moral question a devotee has been struggling with or by an act of healing. For instance, members of

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134 The Shirazis are important because they founded and still maintain the largest and oldest seminary in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, the *hawza* Zaynabīyya.

135 For a detailed discussion of this topic, please see the ‘Carnivalesque Piety’ chapter.

136 Betteridge, “Gift Exchange in Iran.”
the *ahl al-bayt*, such as Fatima Zahra (the daughter of the Prophet), sometimes appear to Shi‘i who are critically ill. Zahra always appears in a black *abaya* and her face is always covered either in black or in green. She then either touches the wound or the sick body-part or gives the dreamer water to drink. Thus Shi‘i relate to Zahra sensually, through touching and receiving water from Zahra in dreams, in dimensions outside of institutionalized piety.

Another way to relate to the *ahl al-bayt* is *nidhr*, making a vow.\(^{137}\) Anne Betteridge explains that Shi‘i women in Iran make promises directly at shrines whereby they promise, for example, to sponsor a private mourning gathering if their wish is fulfilled.\(^{138}\) Similarly in Sayyida Zaynab, there are Iranian-Iraqi women who, for example, sponsor a *sufra* which is similar to a mourning gathering in many ways.\(^{139}\) More commonly, however, women will promise that if, for example, a daughter finally gets married or a loved one recovers from illness, they will sponsor a private mourning gathering during next year’s Muharram. Or they may simply promise to contribute milk (symbolic of Tifl Radhi‘, Husayn’s baby son who died while thirsty at Karbala) or sandwiches with yoghurt and greens, called *sanwish ‘Abbas* (a half-brother of Husayn who died with his hands cut off in Karbala) to other women’s *majālis*.\(^{140}\) In this way, holding a mourning gathering may be a joint effort by a number of different women, each of whom made a particular vow during the last year, which was fulfilled. Conversely, if the vow remains unfulfilled, the women are not obliged to hold up their end of the bargain either.\(^{141}\)

\(^{137}\) For a *nidhr*, a Shi‘i makes a vow to one of the saints that she will cook and donate a particular amount and kind of food, if her wish for the improvements of a loved one’s health (success in an exam or pregnancy) occurs in a given time-frame.

\(^{138}\) For a brilliant account of reciprocity between Twelver Shi‘is and the Family of the Prophet, see: Betteridge, “Gift Exchange in Iran.”

\(^{139}\) A *sufra* is a ritual meal to be performed on consecutive Tuesdays. The devotee sponsors two, then waits for her wish to be fulfilled. If it is, she sponsors the third *sufra*, otherwise, the interaction remains deferred.

Fieldnotes, Summer 2008 and Fall 2009.

\(^{140}\) Fieldnotes, Spring 2009.

\(^{141}\) Cf. Betteridge, “Gift Exchange in Iran.”
Spiritual healing, which can be obtained down the street, at the end of the Hijira market, is similarly rooted in reciprocity. The spiritual healer not only requires payments for his services, his services require more than a one-time visit. Healing takes both time and money, such that the healer gets to know his patients over the course of several weeks. While offering his patients coffee, there is a give and take as they talk. Moreover, spiritual healing is carnivalesque because it is both intricately tied to religious language, symbols, and material culture, while also being opposed to institutionalized piety and authority. Abu ‘Ali, for instance, uses the tatbīr sword in his therapies, which are supposed to ward off jinn, or spirits. He does not use the sword otherwise, nor does he participate in actual flagellation. Still, he emphasises that he has cultivated strong relationships with the saints. He proudly explains that he has visited all of the Imams’ tombs. In his shop, he keeps green cloth, which he says he took with him to the shrine of Husayn. He cuts little pieces for his customers to whom the blessings will transfer. Besides the green cloth, Abu Ali’s shop is covered with posters of the Imams, Fatima, and Zaynab, as well as Qur’anic verses and the ever-present picture of the Syrian president. Abu ‘Ali prays conspicuously and thereby tries to establish his ‘orthodox’ credentials. Though he makes both pious invocations and flirty comments when speaking with his patients, he also makes serious references to religious concepts and piety. He invokes tradition through his references to Qur’anic verses about magic and jinn, yet he also transgresses orthodoxy by disagreeing with institutionalized religious authorities.

1.3 Conclusion

As noted above, there are two theoretical paradigms to which I return to and converse with throughout the following chapters. The first is Asad’s anthropology of Islam, “understood as a discursive tradition,” and the second is the Karbala Paradigm, which juxtaposes ‘traditional, quietist piety’ with ‘modern, revolutionary piety.’ My dissertation brings together these two concepts representing different disciplinary approaches in order to re-think the notion of ‘tradition.’ In particular, I elaborate on the relationship between ‘tradition’ and ‘transgression’ in

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142 It must be noted that he does not decry religious authorities publicly. He does so in conversation only after getting to know his patients.
order to highlight pious practices and discourses, which fit neatly into neither Asad’s anthropology of Islam, nor into dominant interpretations of the Karbala Paradigm.

First, I draw attention to local conceptions and uses of ‘tradition’ by examining the religious institutions in Sayyida Zaynab, including seminaries, the shrine, and aid organizations. I trace the institutionalization of religious authority, the growth and organization of religious seminaries and *husayniyyāt*, and their effects on religious learning. I historicize the concept of religious authority, and look at the semantics of authority. Through looking at the seminaries in Sayyida Zaynab, I discuss the institutionalization of pious authority. I argue that institutionalization in Sayyida Zaynab has brought about a standardization within religious discourses. Moreover, I show how the re-orientation of ritual space in seminaries and at the shrine informs pedagogy and structures of authority.

In the second chapter, I examine affect in the context of mourning rituals, the relationship between saints (that is, members of the *ahl al-bayt*) and their devotees, and mediated mourning chants. By drawing on local categories, I posit that affect works in two directions (*athara* and *thāra*): it can impress and it can arouse. 143 I show how affect is a conceptually integral aspect of Shi‘i ritual mourning gatherings. It creates and sustains relationships with other Shi‘is and members of the *ahl al-bayt*. Following the *ahl al-bayt* as role-models and as patron saints makes demands on devotees, who fulfill these demands through participating in mourning gatherings, making vows, and becoming *mullayāt*. 144 In the last section of this chapter I examine digitalized mourning gathering (i.e. religious media) for which I adapt Walter Benjamin’s notions of concentration and distraction in order to reformulate the affective binary of *athara* and *thāra*.

In the third chapter, I examine Twelver Shi‘i ‘Ashura practices and discourses. First, I look at Shi‘i scholars and their debates and contests over authority as well as their discussions over the legitimacy and legality of ‘Ashura flagellation practices. Second, I draw attention to the ways in

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143 They can transmit, have influence, and make an impression, or they can stir up, arouse, and excite. The first term derives from the root ‘*a – th – r*’; the noun *athār* designates ‘traces’ or ‘tradition.’ The second derives from the root ‘*th – ā – r*,’ which is also the root of the word ‘revolution,’ *thawra*. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, 4, 109.

144 A variety of Iraqi Shi‘i women commented to me that they had not learned about Shi‘ism, they had not pursued a religious education, or had chosen not to become a *mullaya* in Iraq during Saddam Hussein’s reign, since Shi‘i piety was politically suspect.
which ‘Ashura practices are considered salvific and what salvation can mean in this context. In contrast to the common emphasis on the sacrifice in academic literature on ritual, I highlight the concept of the miracle which I link to Maussian gifting practices. In the last part of this third chapter, I discuss the practice and performance of ‘Ashura self-flagellation rituals. Drawing on Michael Taussig, who argues that academics have focused too much on the ‘clean’ aspects of ritual, I examine flagellation as part of a (potentially) transgressive piety. The notion of transgression, here, helps in thinking about the grotesque and carnivalesque aspects of Muharram.

The relevance of the notion of transgression continues in the fourth chapter, wherein I discuss ‘spiritual’ or ‘faith healing.’ The concept of healing here reflects and draws on the healing powers of saints such as Sayyida Zaynab. Moreover, it is through ‘healing’ that the spiritual doctors, whom I describe in this ethnography, justify their practices as moral (in contrast to black magic, which harms rather than heals people).

In sum, by looking at institutions, emotions, rituals, conceptions of sainthood, transgression, and healing, I not only examine Shi‘i piety in contemporary Syria but also re-think the concept of tradition. I argue that the shrine-town constitutes a Foucauldian heterotopia, because it is a space and state of crisis and of deviation. Both the shrine, symbolized by Zaynab - a saintly figure in crisis, and the shrine-town, which was founded and continues to function as a refugee camp, are literally and figuratively heterotopias. They are also sites of deviation, in that those present, pilgrims, refugees, and seminarians deviate from the ‘norm’ set elsewhere. While many of my Damascene acquaintances referred to Sayyida Zaynab as dirty and backward, for Shi‘is such as Um Mustafa it is an act of piety to live there.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Um Mustafa was an Iraqi Shi‘i married to her cousin. They used to live in a Sunni area in Iraq before the Fall in 2003. Now, since they cannot return, she has contemplated staying in Syria but has also applied for refugee status with UNHCR. When she and her husband first came to Syria after the Fall, they lived in a Sunni area north of Damascus. While she does not wear visibly Shi‘i clothing, in other words she wears the manteau instead of the more conservative and symbolically Shi‘i abaya, she felt the need to identify as a Shi‘i and finally move to Sayyida Zaynab. Similarly, moving to Sayyida Zaynab for many Iraqi Shi‘i women is an act of piety. For the Sunni Iraqis whom I talked to, the presence of Sayyida Zaynab was less important compared to the presence of other Iraqis, as well as access to some aid. Fieldnotes, Summer 2008 and Fall 2009.
Chapter 2
Institutionalizing Authority, Piety, and Learning

2 Introduction

In his article “Madrasas Medieval and Modern” Jonathan Berkey writes that medieval Islamic learning was not tied to particular institutions. As scholars tended to move from country to country, medieval Muslims were “uninterested in where an individual had studied. The only thing that mattered was with whom one had studied.”\(^{146}\) In contemporary Shi‘ism, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, both are important questions and they influence one another.

Unlike in medieval Islam, Twelver Shi‘i learning is no longer entirely de-centralized. There are four major centers of learning for contemporary Shi‘is: Qum, Najaf, Karbala, and Sayyida Zaynab. On the one hand, there are numerous, different, and competing seminaries in each of these centers of learning. On the other hand, there are dedicated students, who study at more than one seminary, and there are many teachers, who teach at multiple seminaries. As such, it makes sense that the term hawza is often used as a collective term to refer to particular centers of learning (as in “the hawza of Najaf”), though it can also refer to individual seminaries belonging to specific scholars.\(^ {147}\) In a sense, the various seminaries in a given centre of learning resemble colleges, which belong to the same university by the mere fact that they are all located in the same city and share the same teachers and students. Moreover, as each center of learning is known for its unique ethnic configuration, political attitudes, and doctrinal leanings, simply asking the question where someone has studied can serve as an indicator for guessing with whom someone has studied.


The *hawza* of Sayyida Zaynab is the youngest and least well established of these centers. Moreover, it is also known as the most politically independent center of learning.\(^{148}\) The Syrian government has tended to interfere very little and even the elite scholars who head the networks to which individual seminaries belong do not actually reside in Sayyida Zaynab.\(^{149}\) The seminaries’ young age, their lack of close supervision, and the fact that they have had to deal with an enormous influx of refugees from Iraq (many of whom decided to spend their time in Syria studying at seminaries) means that these seminaries have undergone immense changes in the last two decades. These changes include high turnover rates among staff, students, and visitors, and spatial rearrangements. As I demonstrate below, these changes affect personal relationships, which in turn affect conceptions of authority, tradition, and education.

In this chapter, I will focus on the institutional changes that occurred during the span of my fieldwork from 2007 to 2010 and how these affect Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab. First, I introduce the religious elites, who have founded and continue to lead local institutions,\(^{150}\) and the claims they make with regard to religious authority. Second, I lay out the institutional landscape of Sayyida Zaynab: I discuss the historical background of the shrine, the spread of religious aid organizations, especially hospitals and clinics, and finally seminaries and *husayniyyāt*. Third, I examine various notions of learning which underpin Shi‘i seminary education. I analyze local seminaries and seminary education from two aspects/questions: How do seminaries aim to shape Shi’is?\(^{151}\) How have the recent changes in spatial organization influenced the seminaries’

\(^{148}\) This could change very soon, depending how the political situation in Syria.

\(^{149}\) Unlike the other centers of learning, the *hawza* in Sayyida Zaynab was founded because a large number of students had been expelled from Iraq in the 1970s. Seminaries were hence built because there was a demand. The other centres of learning attracted students because they already had established seminaries.

\(^{150}\) While some ayatollahs maintain close control over the schools they have founded, others do not. Some seminaries function autonomously, others contend to honour one particular ayatollah or *sayyid* (by posting their pictures on the wall) without becoming institutionally affiliated.

\(^{151}\) Lara Deeb (2006) links the institutionalization or mediation of religious authority and knowledge to the rationalization and modernization of religious piety. See: Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*. Sophia Pandya has similarly argued that in Bahrain women’s mourning gatherings have increasingly become a tool for social progress and education. In this chapter, I first look at institutionalization and then seminary education. See: Pandya, “Women’s Shi‘i Ma’ātim in Bahrain.”
pedagogical methods? Specifically, I show how seminaries value virtue over discipline, though spatial transformations have newly emphasized discipline as part of Shi‘i piety.

2.1.1 Claiming the Prophet’s legacy

Most seminaries and many husayniyyāt in Sayyida Zaynab are run by networks and families of Shi‘i scholars and sayyids who claim to be the inheritors (al-wirthah) and thus, the representatives of the Prophets and the Imams. But in what sense are scholars and sayyids the inheritors of the Prophets and the Imams? As the Imams (with the exception of ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib) seldom held any political power, Shi‘is have had to distinguish between power (sultah) and authority (wilayah). Sunnis and Shi‘is both consider Prophet Muhammad to legitimately have held both power and authority. However, with the death of the Prophet in 632 CE, disputes arose over who should succeed him and in what capacity. For Sunnis, legitimate political leadership – in other words ‘sovereignty,’ including ‘power’ and ‘authority’ – was passed on to Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman and then, ‘Ali, later called the four ‘rightly guided caliphs.’ In contrast, Shi‘is argued that religious authority passed directly from Muhammad to ‘Ali, making the first three of the ‘rightly guided caliphs’ illegitimate usurpers of power. Moreover, the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE represents a dramatic split between the power of the sovereign, the Umayyad Caliph, and the religious authority of the infallible Imam. The killing of Imam al- Husayn at Karbala seals an irreversible turn in history for Twelver Shi‘is, marking the split between power and authority.

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152 Because of the influx of asylum seekers and a record number of religious tourists over the last decade, there were notable changes in the spatial organization at the shrine and the Zaynabiyya, the largest and oldest hawza cum husayniyya in town.

153 While virtue and discipline are closely related, Foucault explains that the emphasis on discipline arises with the modern nation-state.


As I demonstrate below, I posit that the term wilayah has two important aspects, namely sultah (power) and walayah (closeness).
When the twelfth Imam went into Greater Occultation in 940 CE, the lack of an infallible Imam caused a further crisis of authority among Twelver Shi‘is. Since then, an important Shi‘i view held that in the absence of an infallible Imam, any sovereign power was necessarily illegitimate. Another strand of thought, however, led to the idea that religious scholars, the ‘ulama, are the ‘heirs’ of the Imam’s authority and should take over the Imam’s role of providing religious guidance. At first the ‘ulama were the ‘heirs’ of the imams and prophets only in the sense of transmitting knowledge, what became the corpus of the Islamic sciences. Then, the growing importance of jurisprudence (fiqh) from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, set the stage for twentieth century debates on the notion that fuqahā’ (jurist-consuls) should also take over the Imam’s divinely sanctioned right to political power in addition to the Imam’s religious authority.155

Every contemporary Shi‘i mujtahid begins his fiqh manual, which is the proof of his claim to the marj‘a’iyya, explaining why it is necessary that Shi‘is, as long as they are not capable of ijtihād themselves, must follow a mujtahid and marj‘a al-taqlīd. Each mujtahid stresses different reasons, values, and preferences, which carry wide-ranging consequences for conceptions of authority, leadership, institutionalization, and pious subjectivity. The most important marāj‘a al-taqlīd in Sayyida Zaynab are ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei, Sadiq Shirazi, and Muhammad Husayn Fadhlallah.

Khamenei’s treatise of fiqh, his risālah or manual of law (lit. letter) begins with an elegy on Khomeini whose rulings are “either based on his noble opinion or, in some cases, according to the opinion of the unique scholar of his time and the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Ruhallah Musawi Khomeini.”156 For Khamenei the fact of the modern nation state enables the restoration of Shi‘ism and the Shi‘i ummah. In this sense, modern institutions are necessary for restoration at least to the extent to which it is possible in the Absence of the Imam al-Mahdi.

155 E.g., Ayatollah Khomeini’s concept of wilayat al-faqīh, the rule of the mujtahid or jurist.


For the Shirazi brothers (Muhammad, Hasan, and Sadiq Shirazi), restoration is not impossible in a world of nation-states, but requires particular institutional changes—basically because the Shirazis are currently not on good terms with either the Iraqi scholarly elite or the Iranian government. Instead of linking their religious authority to any particular nation-state, Sayyid Sadiq Husayni Shirazi’s English work, “Islamic Law,” begins its first chapter on *ijtiḥād* and *taqlīd*. The first page sums up his claims:

It is imperative that a Muslim’s belief in the fundamentals of religion (‘*Osool al-Deen*’) be based on reasoning and proof. One may not follow others on these issues; in the sense of accepting someone’s words on these issues without reason, explanation, and rationale. *Osool al-Deen* or fundamentals of religion are five:

1. *Tawheed*, or oneness of Allah.
2. ‘*Adl*, or Divine Justice.
3. *Nobowwah*, or Prophethood.
4. *Imāmah*, or Leadership.
5. *Mi’ad*, or Resurrection.

The same applies to the essentials of “*Foroo’ al-Deen*” or the practices and rulings of Islam such as the obligation of daily prayers (salāh) and fasting (sawm).

As far as the rulings of Islam and “*Foroo’ al-Deen*” are concerned, it is obligatory upon the *Mokallaf* to be a *Mujtahid*, or a *Moqallid*, or a *Moḥtāʿ*. One who is not a *Mujtahid* and is not able to practice *ihtiyāt*, must follow (perform *taqlīd* of) a *Mujtahid*. *Taqlīd* covers all rulings (ahkām) on acts of worship and contracts, on obligatory, recommended (mostahab), discouraged (makruh), and optional (mubah) acts.

This is the duty of the believer during the era of the Greater Occultation as far as obtaining he Islamic rulings are concerned, when there is no specific representative of the Awaited Imam—may Allah hasten his honourable reappearance—as reported in the honourable hadith from Imam al-Hujja [the Mahdi] may our souls be his sacrifice:

“As for current events, refer them to the narrators of our hadiths, for they are my hujjah (proof/authority) upon you, and I am Allah’s hujjah upon them.”

Thus it is absolutely forbidden to refer to anyone else.

First, Sayyid Sadiq Husayni Shirazi highlights independent and individual ‘reason’ by grounding the ‘fundamentals of religion,’ which consist of five beliefs, in personal conviction. In contrast to the ‘fundamentals,’ Shirazi writes that the ‘branches of religion’ (*furu’ al-dīn*), such as praying and fasting, cannot be derived from individual thought or reason. They must be learned from

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157 For an insightful discussion on the Shirazis’ relationship with Iraq, Iran, Syria, and the Eastern Gulf States, see Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics*.

qualified sources, such that every lay Shi‘i must follow the legal opinions of a scholar or become a mujtahid (who is capable of independent legal reasoning or ijtihad). Sadiq Shirazi emphasizes that in the absence of the Mahdi lay (muqallid) Shi‘is must follow a mujtahid. Yet, at the same time, he points out that “there is no specific representative of the Awaited Imam,” and thereby implicitly attacks Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei who not only claim that jurists inherit all of the Imams’ functions (both religious and political), but also that there should be only one supreme leader. The Shirazis call for shura al-‘ulama, a council of multiple marāj’a al-taqlīd (which includes them).

The scholars’ views of and relationships with political powers influences the ways in which they conceive of their relationships with their followers, their muqallidīn. Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi, the current symbolic head of the Shirazi network, bases the need for taqlīd entirely on ‘reason’ and its dogmatic implications. Defensively, he writes that no mujtahid has the right to force the followers of another mujtahid to follow the former if the latter is a legitimate mujtahid (and then he goes on to define who can legitimately refer to himself as a marj’a al-taqlīd). For Ayatollah Fadhlallah, the relationship between a mujtahid and his muqallid is such that the latter accepts the ‘guidance’ and authority of the former in questions of fiqh, bodily comportment, or habitus. In return, the mujtahid takes responsibility (mas‘ūliyya) for his muqallid’s behaviour “in front of God” on Judgment Day. Ayatollah Khamenei is neither defensive nor does he underline responsibility. He bases his authority as a mujtahid in the charisma and power of his predecessor Khomeini and even points out that it is not necessary for Shi‘is to actively seek out the most knowledgeable mujtahid for a relatively common question (thereby implicitly

159 It is, after all, wilayat al-faqīh (guidance of the jurist-consult), not wilayat al-fuqahā (guidance of jurist-consults).

160 Hasan Shirazi founded the Zaynabiyaa in Syria, but died shortly thereafter. Muhammad Shirazi led the Shirazi network until he died under house arrest in Qom, Iran, in 2001.

161 While Sadiq Shirazi stresses ‘reason’ with regard to taqlīd, he follows ‘non-reason’ according to Lara Deeb’s definition regarding ‘Ashura practices.

162 Sadiq Shirazi, Islamic Law, 8-9.


164 Khamenei, Practical Laws of Islam, 9-10.
admitting that he may not be the most knowledgeable mujtahid). Each mujtahid’s risālah, in other words, reflects their relationship with (or, in the case of Khamenei, identity with) political power, which in turn conditions their relationships with their followers with regard to knowledge and responsibility.

### 2.2 Shi‘i institutions

Shi‘i institutions have existed in Syria dating back to at least the fourteenth century. However, the current spread of Twelver Shi‘i institutions in Sayyida Zaynab is a relatively recent phenomenon. The proliferation of religious institutions today, according to Sabrina Mervin, follows two separate directions and traditions, namely Iraqi and Iranian Twelver Shi‘ism. In his work on Iraqi Shi‘ism in the last century, Yitshak Nakash makes a similar point, namely that Twelver Shi‘ism in Iraq must be clearly distinguished from Twelver Shi‘ism in Iran. In Iran, it was the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722 CE) which first introduced and enforced Twelver Shi‘ism. In Iraq, Shi‘ism had prevailed mainly in the shrine-cities of Najaf and Karbala. The Southern Iraqi tribes converted to Shi‘ism as part of the process of sedentarization in the nineteenth century. Nakash characterizes Iranian Shi‘ism as more mystical and Iraqi Shi‘ism as more concerned with tribal values of manhood. In Syria, these two trends have both been present and have both had a great impact on Twelver Shi‘i practices in Sayyida Zaynab.

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165 Ibid., 16-17.
166 Sabrina Mervin, “‘Ashura’: Some Remarks on Ritual Practices in Different Shiite Communities (Lebanon and Syria),” in The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia, ed., Alessandro Monsutti, Silvia Naef and Farian Sabahi (Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag, 2007), 137-147.
166 Mervin, “Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?”
168 Nakash, The Shi‘is of Iraq, 3-9.
The three largest Shi‘i groups in Sayyida Zaynab are Iranians, Iraqis and Iranian-Iraqis. The Iranians in Sayyida Zaynab, for the most part, are short-term visitors. As Mervin points out, coming to Sayyida Zaynab is considered the ‘Hajj of the poor’ and thus, many of the Iranians who come to visit are working-class and rural Iranians and a majority are elderly. The Iraqis in Sayyida Zaynab include both Sunnis and Shi‘is. The first ‘Iraqis’ in Sayyida Zaynab in the 1970s and 80s were Iranian-Iraqis. Many of these have been and continue to be involved in the seminaries consider themselves as Iraqis with Iranian or Afghan affiliations. (Nakash explains that in the Iraqi shrine-cities of Najaf and Karbala, there has been historically a lot of inter-marrying and mixing. Iranian students and clerics would settle in these cities and many have been there for generations.) However, there is also animosity between Iraqi Shi‘is and Iranian (even Iranian-Iraqi) Shi‘is and some Iraqi Shi‘is will not visit the same seminaries or husayniyyāt, where there are too many Iranians for their taste. One elderly Iraqi woman commented to me during a private majlis that hawzāt are an Iranian invention and that no respectable Iraqi woman goes there because Iranians believe in temporary marriage (mut‘a), which she considers a form of prostitution. Yet, Iraqi mullayāt often have Iranian roots and

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169 Iranian-Iraqis are Iraqis of Iranian origins. For instance, many scholars from Karbala, such as the Shirazis, are originally Iranian and still speak Farsi. Shi‘i scholars have migrated frequently in the last five hundred years, thus one could argue that the designation ‘Iraqi-Iranian’ is misleading. The reason I adopt the term here is to draw attention to the specific plight of those Shi‘is whom Saddam Hussein expelled in the late 70s and 80s.


170 Mervin, “Ashura.” It is the ‘Hajj of the poor’ because it is easier to get a visa to Syria than to go to Saudi Arabia and it is much cheaper as well.


172 Given the context of the war in Iraq, the question of ethnic identity has gained importance. Um Ahmad, an Iraqi Shi‘i from Baghdad, for example, disliked attending the Zaynabiyya, because she considered to be Iranians and enemies. Fieldnotes, Thursday, 19 June 2008.

The female administrators of the Zaynabiyya were probably aware of the charge, and it may have been a reason for constantly invoking Iraq, telling stories about their lives in Iraq, and giving examples in classes (such as fiqh or jurisprudence) that were applicable to Iraq.

are still invited to lead Iraqi women’s mourning gatherings. Of course, nationalism always conveniently requires forgetfulness as well as remembrance.

Iranian interests have contributed to the growth of and diversity within Twelver Shiʿi practices and institutions in Sayyida Zaynab and in Syria generally. It has been with the help of Iranian money that shrines belonging to the ahl al-bayt have been renovated and Shiʿi schools have been built. With the renovation of shrines and the flow of religious tourists, new markets have opened, creating jobs for Syrians as well as others. At the same time, Sunni Syrians generally and Palestinians living in Sayyida Zaynab specifically are wary of Iranian money, suspicious of its support for Hezbollah and the propagation of Shiʿism. To what degree it is actually true that Iran funds various Shiʿi activities is hard to determine. Two Palestinian men who live in Sayyida Zaynab (one was the father and the other was the neighbour of Amal, a classmate from the Shirazi seminary) told me on separate occasions that they knew of people who were offered money by Iran in order to convert from Sunnism to Shiʿism. Personally, I never actually met anyone who received financial benefits for converting (beyond perhaps receiving a small stipend for attending a seminary, which all seminarians receive). Yet the existence of these rumors points to a larger issue: a shift in hegemonic power and relationships. While Iran may or may not actually fund individual converts, the Iranian government has funded large-scale building and renovation projects, such as the renovation of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab. Private Iranian and Iraqi investments have allowed businesses to flourish and the shrine-town to grow exponentially. Meanwhile, the Syrian government has done little for the shrine town, except maintain a police force and a small military barracks near the shrine. In other words, while Syria

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174 Notably, though trans-national religious ties exist, they are not generally celebrated as such. While these ties may be important to expatriates or pilgrims who come on short visits, local residents often remain divided with regard to their religious gatherings, their neighborhoods, and their seminaries.

175 As Ernest Renan famously said in a lecture entitled “What is Nationalism?” (1882): “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.”


176 Notably, not all Shiʿi schools in Syria are funded by Iran. Cf. Sindawi, “The Shiʿite Turn in Syria.”

177 Fieldnotes, Friday, 11 December 2009. Both of the men were highly opposed to Shiʿism and Iranians, generally, therefore it is entirely possible that they were simply exaggerating hear-say accounts.
provides security (through an obvious show of force), it is foreign (arguably Shi‘i) capital which has improved the economic and social conditions of the area. Moreover, the sheer number of Iranian pilgrims, other Shi‘i visitors, and foreign residents may have overwhelmed the Palestinian and Syrian inhabitants of the shrine-town both culturally and religiously, making them suspect of Shi‘i conversions.

2.2.1 Zaynab’s shrine

Sabrina Mervin writes that the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab used to be visited by Shi‘is as well as Sunnis.

In the story of his travels, the Andalusian Ibn Gubayr (d. 1217 CE), reports that Shi‘is have a special place in the region and that they outnumber Sunnis. He recounts his visit to the mausoleum of Sayyida Zaynab, where he spent the night for the sake of baraka [blessing]. In the fourteenth century, Shi‘is were most likely the majority of all Muslims in Syria; though they continue to be present in Damascus. At that time, Ibn Batuta (d. 1368/69) refers to the tomb of Zaynab... Other authors refer the mausoleum, but they do not all agree in recognizing that this it is the tomb of Zaynab, daughter of ‘Ali. The Sufi ‘Abd al-Gani al-Nabulsi (d. 1731 CE) reported a grave covered by a huge dome, adjacent to a mosque and a basin and he notes that “one says” it is the tomb of Sitt Zaynab. But for him, Zaynab is buried in Cairo.178

The shrine was renovated throughout the twentieth century. It began under the leadership of Muhsin al-Amin (d. 1952). In 1935, the notable Syrian Nizam family renovated the building by the west entrance. In 1950, following the recovery of his son, a Pakistani businessman, Muhammad ‘Ali Habib, donated the grids which decorate the tomb. Later, an Arab merchant from the Gulf paid for the mosaic, which covers the two minarets of the shrine. The shrine itself was donated by Iran and the golden door, which is now located at the western (women’s) entrance of the tomb was a gift from an Iranian businessman.

178 Mervin, “Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?”

According to Michelle Zimney, there are at least two shrines dedicated to Sayyida Zaynab, one in Damascus and one in Cairo. Iraqis I spoke with believe that Zaynab is not buried at either of these two shrines, but in an unnamed grave in Iraq. Cf. Michelle Zimney, “History in the Making: the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in Damascus,” ARAM 19 (2007): 695-703.
Unlike other religious sites, the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab is not directly run by the Syrian Ministry for Religious Endowments (wizarat al-awqāf). The Murtadha family has managed it since the fourteenth century CE. However, the shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya, who was reportedly the niece of Zaynab and the daughter of Husayn, lies within 100 meters of the Umayyad mosque and is managed by the Ministry. In the last two decades, both mosques have been funded and renovated (and continue to be renovated and expanded) by the Iranian government. Moreover, the Iranian government and its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei control the Friday sermons at both shrines and Khamenei even has offices at the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, where Shi‘i men and women can come to ask legal (fiqh-related) questions.

Source: Google Maps (with additions by the author).

179 Ibid.
2.2.2 Hospitals and charitable organizations

“Health has become *tijārah*” – a matter of commerce, trade or business. Amal said this with an angry tone when she told me about trying to find an affordable dentist after the charitable first-aid station was going give her an appointment a month later. “I will die of the pain!” She finally went to a relatively cheap doctor, though regretted her choice after the fact, because the tooth continued to be painful.\(^{180}\)

It has been through Amal that I became acquainted with the health system in Sayyida Zaynab. As a seminary student-housewife, she and her husband are proud of the fact that they do not owe anything to anyone. Her husband manages to fly and see his family in India once a year. However, they have little furniture. While other *hawza*-related staff and even students if they are registered as full-time and stipend receiving are given heavy discounts at the Khomeini Hospital, Amal’s husband had been part-time and was not receiving a stipend – supposedly refusing it because he was honourable and able to support himself and his two wives. When Amal’s little finger was injured such that the muscle needed to be re-attached, her husband paid in cash downstairs before the operation. He had then left and was still gone, when she was brought back from the operation hall and began to wake up. She was in terrible pain and was screaming. However, the nurse came to administer the shot only after I had run down to the front foyer where I bought Amal (subsidized) pain medication.\(^{181}\)

Amal had gone around to a couple of different doctors, from the Red Crescent, to private ones, she compared diagnostics and prices before deciding on whom to go to for the operation. She was aware of her choices, and took advantage of her possibilities. Each ‘group’ has their own recourses: Palestinians have the added choice of going to UNWRA clinics, while Iraqis registered with UNHCR may hope for some monetary compensation/aid. Clinics specialize in specific kinds of ailments and may not be able to treat other medical conditions.

Until 2006, the Syrian B’ath Party’s rhetorical support of free health care meant that all Arabs, regardless of nationality (thus, including Iraqis) had access to public hospitals which are

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\(^{180}\) Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 17 February 2009.

\(^{181}\) Fieldnotes, Thursday, 24 July 2008.
underfunded and overburdened. However, faced with nearly two million Iraqi refugees, the Syrian government enforced stricter visa regulations, limiting refugees’ stay and access to public services (i.e. health and education). While the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab does not have a governmental hospital, there are Red Crescent facilities and there are two hospitals that were founded by the Shi‘i clerics Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq Sadr (d. 1999) and ‘Ali Khamenei (though it is named after Khomeini). Sadr’s hospital was founded in the 1990s and stands less than 200 meters from the shrine. The hospital of Imam Khomeini lies just south of the shrine-town and was built in the last decade. Both the Sadr Hospital and the Khomeini Hospital are considered charity hospitals, as they are cheaper than other private hospitals. They are not as cheap as government hospitals, though they have a better reputation. Students from the hawza of Khomeini get a discount at the Khomeini Hospital. However, both hospitals employ non-Muslim doctors and treat anyone who can pay.

2.2.3 Seminaries
The first seminary in Sayyida Zaynab was the hawza Zaynabiyya. It was founded in 1973 by the Iraqi Sayyid Hasan Shirazi (1934-1980). A native of Karbala, where his father had founded and led an important seminary, Hasan Shirazi and his brother Muhammad Shirazi had attained the status of marj’a al-taqlīd relatively early in life. The Shirazi brothers, as Laurence Louër explains, claimed religious authority through their learning and their lineage (which includes several important Shi‘i scholars and reaches back to the Prophet Muhammad). Like other scholars in Iraq, the Shirazis were politically active, which led to Hasan Shirazi’s exile in the early 70s. It was then that he came to Damascus and upon finding a group of exiled seminary teachers and students from Iraq in Sayyida Zaynab, he decided to found the Zaynabiyya seminary. Hasan Shirazi himself lived in Beirut. However, he often came to Syria to lecture and

182 According to Khalid Sindawi, hawza students (specifically the ones who attend the Zaynabiyya) receive free health care at the Khomeini Hospital. However, I did not find that this is true. Khalid Sindawi, “The Zaynabiyya Hawza in Damascus and its Role in Shi‘ite Religious Instruction,” Middle Eastern Studies 45 no. 6 (2009): 866.

183 The Najaf establishment, which rivalled the seminaries of Karbala since the 1700s, criticized the Shirazis for this. See: Louër, Transnational Shia Politics, 88-89, 91.

184 Ibid., 90-91.
network until he was assassinated in Beirut in 1983. Since then, Hasan’s elder brother Muhammad Shirazi led the Shirazi network including the Zaynabiyya, though he himself relocated first to the Gulf, and following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, to Qom.  

According to Sabrina Mervin, writing in 1996, the Zaynabiyya had 200 students. According to my own experience, the student numbers vary significantly each year. During the summer of 2007, there were more than a hundred female students, in 2008, there were only around sixty at hawza Zaynabiyya’s summer school. Girls above the age of six are admitted for summer classes, but for normal seminary enrolment, the minimum age is usually 16, sometimes less. Other hawzāt have upper age limits. Many students enrol at a seminary after they have finished high school, but some enrol in their late twenties or later. In recent years, many Iraqi Shi’is (among others) have enrolled in religious seminars such as the Zaynabiyya, some out of boredom, some in order to socialize, others in order to learn while in exile or in transit, waiting for a chance to move elsewhere. Residency cards, small stipends and opportunities for social networking or even prestige may constitute added incentives for studying at a seminary.

As students do not pay for their studies at seminaries, seminaries remain dependant on the founding scholar, his popularity and his revenue, which is directly related to his popularity. According to current interpretations and customs, a charismatic scholar is entitled to \textit{khums}, a fifth of his followers’ net profit, in return for his religious guidance. During the time of the Prophet and the Imams, the \textit{khums} was an income set aside for the Prophet and his family. Today, religious scholars, who are often also descendants of the Prophet, also claim they have a

\begin{itemize}
\item 185 Mervin, “Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?”
\item 186 Ibid.
\item 187 For example, the \textit{hawza} of Khomeini does not accept students above the age of 35.
\item 188 In Syria, young women typically get married between 17 and 20. This means that by the time women reach 30, their children may already be attending elementary school, freeing up time for seminary classes.
\item 189 The Zaynabiyya generally does not pay students stipends. However, they do help students with Syrian residency.
\item 190 Cf. Mervin, “Ashura,” 137-147.
\end{itemize}
right to *khums* as inheritors of the Prophet (inheritors in knowledge and lineage).

As Mervin points out, this is a source of instability because the seminaries’ budgets depend on the popularity of their founding scholars and on these scholars’ ability to appeal to the wealthier among their followers who, according to Islamic Law, are obliged to pay *khums*. While this is a potential point of instability at least theoretically, in practice, religious scholars seldom act alone but in families. For example, when Sayyid Hasan Shirazi was assassinated in 1983, his brother took over the network of religious institutions he established.

In the absence of independent Shi‘i mosques, seminaries have not only become central places of learning, but also important transmitters and markers of doctrinal and political identity. For instance, the followers of Ayatollah Sadiq Husayni Shirazi, the brother of Muhammad and Hasan Shirazi attend Friday sermons and prayers at the Zaynabiyya in ritual and symbolic defiance of Ayatollah Khamenei (in whose name Friday sermons are held at the shrine). The only other Shi‘i group in Sayyida Zaynab which holds independent Friday prayers at a seminary *husayniyya* are the followers of the young Iraqi scholar-politician Muqtada al-Sadr. The main competitors to Khamenei’s claim to religious authority in Sayyida Zaynab are the Shirazis (four brothers: Muhammad, Hasan, Sadiq, Mujtaba) and the Sadrists (Muhammad Sadiq Sadr [d. 1999], Muhammad Baqir Sadr [d. 1980], and Muqtada Sadr). Beyond these major parties, there are, however, many more present on the streets of Sayyida Zaynab.

As of 2009, there were twenty *hawza* or seminaries in Sayyida Zaynab. Outside of Sayyida Zaynab, there are only a few other *hawza* in Damascus and near Homs. The term *hawza*

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192 Mervin, “Ashura.”


194 The late Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq Sadr (d. 1999) was Muqtada Sadr’s father. Muhammad Baqir Sadr (d. 1980) was Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq’s cousin and Muqtada’s father-in-law. Unlike his father and his father-in-law, Muqtada is not considered a scholar or legal (*shar‘i/fiqh*) guide. Instead, he is regarded as an influential political leader.

195 From summer 2007 until the end of 2009, I regularly attended classes at two *hawza*, the Zaynabiyya and the *hawza* Sadrayn, and attended classes once at one other *hawza* (al-Muntathar). I visited another half a dozen *hawza* while attending mourning gatherings there.
literally means ‘corner.’ It refers to the corner of a mosque or husayniyya, where teachers taught students. The husayniyya is still an important part of many hawzāt, though there are hawzāt without husayniyyāt and there are husayniyyāt without hawzāt. Husayniyyāt may consist of awqāf properties. However, hawzāt usually belong to a network of institutions (such as other hawzāt, husayniyyāt and hospitals) linked to a particular marjʿa al-taqlīd.

Theoretically, the hierarchy of Shiʿi religious scholars is one of merit, of morals and learning. However, in practice personal, familial, economic, and political connections as well as charisma are crucial. Thus, the number of muqallidīn or people who follow a particular marjʿa may depend more on his teaching talents and the productivity of his students than his scholastic achievements. Taking on new students and publishing new books are not the only ways in which marājʿa expand their territories. When Sayyida Zaynab became popular as a site of pilgrimage and refuge in the seventies, Hasan Shirazi built the first and to-date largest seminary, while the marjʿa al-taqlīd Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq Sadr, the father of Muqtada Sadr, was the first to sponsor a hospital less than 50 meters from the shrine. Muhammad Sadr had also sponsored hospitals and other institutions in Baghdad’s slums, thus gaining popularity among Iraq’s poor urban Shiʿis.

After Saddam Hussein had Muqtada Sadr’s father and brothers

196 Louër, Transnational Shia Politics, 73-74; Sindawi, “Hawza Instruction and its Role in Shaping Modern Shi’ite Identity,” 833.

197 For example, the husayniyya Abu Fadl ʿAbbas is the transformed former residence of Um Salma who willed her apartment in the basement of a building right off the main square, the Hijira Square, to become a place for women to gather for majālis aza’, ritual mourning gatherings. Um Salma’s picture still hangs in the back of the hall created by knocking down some of the walls in her apartment. The husayniyya has special rules: no children under the age of seven or eight, which effectively rules out all boys, since no husayniyya allows boys above the age of four year-old to accompany their mothers to majālis.

198 Some seminaries also function as husayniyyāt, spaces dedicated to mourning gatherings. For example, the main hall of the women’s section of Shirazi’s Zaynabiyya seminary is used as a husayniyya every Tuesday and on other important religious dates. Moreover, the men’s section of the Zaynabiyya houses offices and the largest library in Sayyida Zaynab. During Muharram, seminaries such as the Zaynabiyya organize food-distribution tents.

199 There are those who claim that there should be only one single, highest and most knowledgeable marjʿa al-taqlīd. In practice, however, there are usually three to six at any given time.

200 Mervin, “Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?”

201 After ‘the Fall’ of 2003, a poor Shiʿi Baghdadī ‘district’ which had been named ‘Saddam City’ was renamed ‘Sadr City’ in honor of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadr. Incidentally, his son’s Jaysh al-Mahdi later became an important force in Sadr City.
assassinated in 2001, his father’s legacy helped Muqtada became an important religious and political figure. In Lebanon, Shi‘is have depended inter alia on Hezbollah, which is explicitly tied to Khamenei, not as a politician, but as a marj’a, for political as well as socio-economic help. The Shi‘i religious elite becomes more influential, in some cases, when the state is relatively weak.

In order to build and maintain large networks of institutions (schools, husayniyyāt, hospitals, and television channels), scholars work together. While the scholarly elite are theoretically an open elite and there are always new scholars who join the ranks of the ayatollahs, the scene is dominated by large scholarly families, such as the Hakims, the Shirazis, the Khu‘is, the Ha‘iris, and the Sadrs. While families such as the Shirazis often produce multiple scholars, not all of them become major ayatollahs. Minor scholars may serve in the administration and other aspects of the (family’s) network of religious institutions. Scholarly families tend to align themselves with other scholarly families and intermarry. Thus, particular religious matters can become questions of alliance in addition to opinion. It is in this sense that Werner Ende argues that scholarly debates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about ritual self-flagellation demonstrated familial, scholarly, and economic alliances rather than actual views on the specific issue. Similarly in Sayyida Zaynab, scholarly debates and even popular participation in self-flagellation rituals is crucially tied to political alliances.


203 E.g. in rebuilding their houses after each periodic round of violence and destruction, etc.

204 Momen, Shi‘i Islam, 199-200; Louër, Transnational Shi‘i Politics.

205 Ende, “Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi‘ite ‘Ulamā’,” 32-33.

206 Ibid., 20-36. As most scholars who have offices in Sayyida Zaynab are not actually physically present, it is unclear whether these scholars align themselves according to views or familial and economic ties. However, the teachers who instruct students at the various seminaries do work for seminaries who are tied to scholars that disagree with the marj’a al-taqlīd whom these particular teachers actually follow. Some teachers, for example Um Zahra, an Iraqi mullaya and sīra (Prophetic biography) teacher, taught at both the Shirazi seminary and at the seminary of Khomeini (and Khamenei). (The Shirazis and Khamenei vehemently disagree on politics, rituals, among other topics.)

207 For more on this topic, please see the first part of the ‘Ashura Chapter.
Seminaries and *husayniyyāt* often show their affiliation or admiration for particular scholars through posters. For example, the Zaynabiyya is decorated with posters of Sayyid Hasan Shirazi, Muhammad Shirazi, and Sadiq Shirazi, as well as stylized drawings of ‘Abbas, which hangs at almost every *husayniyya*. At independent *husayniyyāt*, however, the decorations are not necessarily indicative of close ties, but may express a more generalized admiration or love for a particular religious figure. For instance, at the independent *husayniyya* Imam Zayn al-‘Abidīn, there hangs a heart shaped poster to the left of the *minbar*, which frames Nasrallah’s face in pink. Nasrallah is not a *marj‘a al-taqālīd*, but an important figure in Lebanon’s Hezbollah Party. Despite the pictorial affiliation, the mourning gatherings at the *husayniyya* Imam Zayn al-‘Abidīn are entirely unlike Hezbollah’s ‘rationalized’ rituals and doctrine. In another independent *husayniyya*, *husayniyya* al-Wilayah, there hangs a dusty wooden bas-relief of the state of Lebanon together with the portrait of Musa al-Sadr, the founder of Amal (Lebanon’s other Shi‘i party, beside Hezbollah) on the walls of the women’s section. Ironically, it was not Lebanese, but mainly Iraqi and Iranian women, who frequented the *majālis* there. Other *husayniyyāt*, such as the independent *husayniyya* Abu Fadl ‘Abbas, have no pictures of scholars. This variety of posters at *husayniyyāt* (pictures of scholars, drawings of members of the *ahl al-bayt* and even country maps) means that their content is not necessarily indicative of the ethnic or dogmatic affiliation of the devotees who frequent such places.

Similarly, the teachers and *mullāyāt*, their relationships and views, do not necessarily reflect those of the *‘ulama* which head the institutions that employ them. As there is a shortage of qualified teachers, many seminaries employ the same teachers. The students know this, but they also know who the exclusive teachers are and what views they have and teach. The schools

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208 While the walls of *hawzāt* and *husayniyyāt* may be decorated with numerous posters, they usually only display posters of one or two (ideally related) *sayyids* or *marj‘a al-taqālīd*.


210 The only teachers, which seminaries seldom share, are *fiqh* teachers, because these teachers are trained in the specific *fiqh* rulings of the *marj‘a al-taqālīd* who founded the seminary. For a more detailed discussion on this topic, please see the Carnivalesque Piety chapter.

211 E.g. in 2005 and 2006, Um Zahra used to teach *sīra* at the Zaynabiyya. She taught *khītaba* at the *hawza* Sadrayn in 2008 and continually various subjects at the *hawza* of Imam Khomeini.
vary in admissions criteria, benefits, and stipends that, as Michael Fischer has noted, hawzāt pay to their students and are an important factor in drawing students.\textsuperscript{212} There are other reasons as for why someone may choose to attend one seminary or husayniyya over another. The hawza of Imam Khomeini does not allow children in the classroom, but the hawza Zaynabiyya allows women to bring small children along (which makes class a lot noisier). The Khoja hawza, which is accredited by the British Winchester University, even provides child-care.\textsuperscript{213}

Arguably, the most prestigious seminary in Sayyida Zaynab is the hawza of Khomeini (founded in the early 1980s) because it requires that registering students have high school degrees (Baccalaureate) and reference letters from a shaykh verifying the applicant’s and his or her spouse’s high moral standing.\textsuperscript{214} The hawza of Khomeini offers a year of Arabic instruction to non-Arabs so that they may then continue studying in Arabic. Their teachers are the most qualified; they have the highest degrees (in comparison to the other schools). Khomeini’s hawza is also currently the only school which pays female students a stipend: 2000 Lira (ca. 40 USD) a month (on top of ‘free housing’). Some of the other schools used to provide female students with smaller stipends, but a new administrative decision during the summer of 2008 ended the practice (except for the stipends from the hawza of Khomeini).\textsuperscript{215} To compare: not only does the hawza of Imam Khomeini provide students with higher stipends than the hawza Zaynabiyya, Khomeini students receive discounted services at Khomeini’s hospital, just south of the shrine-town. Khomeini’s hawza’s prestige, in short, is the result of their strict admission criteria and their benefits. Notably, their benefits are extra-ordinarily generous in part because of their

\textsuperscript{212} Fischer, Iran, 80.

\textsuperscript{213} The Khoja are Twelver Shi’is who originally came from South Asia and were brought to Africa by the British. In the latter half of the twentieth century, following various independence movements in Africa, many Khoja resettled to Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. They often follow Ayatollah Sistani. This seminary, however, was not primarily tied to Sistani, but rather to the International Association of Khoja Twelver Shi’is. The seminary did not offer classes to casual students, but rather required students to commit to their entire program and then join Khoja educational efforts elsewhere.


\textsuperscript{214} All schools require their students to conform to certain behavioural norms (e.g. hijāb for women).

\textsuperscript{215} Fieldnotes, Monday, 4 August 2008.
funding. Unlike other hawzāt, which remain independent of the state, hawza Khomeini is funded by Iran. Ironically, Khamenei has argued that hawzāt should not be dependent on the state.216

2.2.4 Husayniyyāt

Husayniyyāt are halls dedicated to mourning gatherings. There are husayniyyāt in Sayyida Zaynab, which are only for men; others are only for women and some try to cater to both. They may be part of some scholar’s office, they may be part of a larger hawza or they may be independent. One of the cleanest women’s husayniyyāt in Sayyida Zaynab (it is generally cleaner and does not allow mothers to bring children under the age of 12), the husayniyya of Abu Fadl ‘Abbas is private. The place used to be a private residence until the owner had the husayniyya established as part of a waqf, a religious endowment. Irrespective of who founded or finances a husayniyya, the maintenance of a husayniyya depends first and foremost on volunteers who clean the place, run the kitchen and serve guests the tea before the ceremony and often afterwards. Cookies, cakes and sandwiches may be served both before and/or after, but only water is served during the majlis. The use of plastic versus glass cups, the quality of tissues and the type and quantity of sweets offered are indicative of class and hospitality in both private and public majālis.

During the majālis of Muharram 2008/2009, in Fadhlallah’s husayniyya and at the independent husayniyya al-Wilayah, it was a man who served qayma to the women. The reason for this is that they fear demands for more food by unruly women; the assumption is that women will be too embarrassed to ask men for more food. And indeed, the distribution of food was more quiet and orderly as compared with other places. Husayniyyāt differ from one another. The Kuwaiti women’s husayniyya al-Muntadhar is less concerned about women asking for extra food portions. Moreover, the microphone at the Kuwaiti women’s husayniyya al-Muntadhar is open an hour before the beginning of its daily majlis to any woman wanting to perform a latm or ziyāra. At most husayniyyāt, there are mullayāt and helper mullayāt and there is fierce competition for each opportunity to perform. Because it is both socially and religiously desirable

216 Sindawi, “The Zaynabiyya Hawza in Damascus,” 838.
to be a *mullaya*, and since women in Sayyida Zaynab have few other options to do something prestigious, there are more aspiring *mullayāt* than opportunities for them to perform. This contest strengthens but also weakens the established *mullaya*’s position. As apprentices compete for the *mullaya*’s favours (because she to some extent controls the performance *majlis* itself), they also compete with each other in learning how to take the place of the main *mullaya*.

A woman aspiring to be or already a *mullaya* may be active at more than one *husayniyya*. Some may even teach at seminaries. It is common for *mullayāt* to lead *majālis* in public and on request in private homes. There, unless the gathering is a joyous one, the walls are usually covered with black cloth and the quality of the cloth as well as the presence or lack of cushions on the floor serve as further indications of the hosts’ socio-economic status. As for the *mullayāt*, though not all are *sayyid*, descendants of the Prophet, it is respectful to call a *mullaya*, ‘ya ‘alawiyyya.’

At larger and public *majālis*, the *mullayāt* sit in order of hierarchy. The most senior ones sit closest to the *minbar*. Other *mullayāt* and ‘*alawiyyyāt*, even if they are not performing, sit near the front, a sign of honour. The rest of the space is not as closely defined. *Mukhadi’rīn* or attendees range from infants to the very old. Mothers breast-feed and toddlers run around freely in most *husayniyyāt*. Older women and some more conservative young women come dressed in the traditional *abaya*, other younger women are clad in tighter, embroidered *abayāt*. A few teenage girls walk around in very tight jeans, and there are both Iraqi and Syrian Shi’i women who wear Syrian style ankle-length coats (or *manteau*). Quite a few of the older women have tribal tattoos on their faces, which is a subtle marker of their rural Iraqi origins. If one looks closely, one can also discern that some of the middle-aged women are also tattooed. In contrast to the older generation, however, who have tattoos with bluish-green dots and designs, middle-aged women have their eyebrows tattooed. Before the *majlis*, attendees are often served tea and sometimes cookies. On special occasions, attendees may be presented with plates of food or sandwiches after the *majlis*. Women chat before, after and sometimes during the ceremony.

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217 The permissibility of tattoos was a debated topic in Sayyida Zaynab. Bluish-green tattoos are still common among some elderly, rural Syrian and Iraqi women. Men often have tattoos on their hands. Men often have words or symbols tattooed on their hands, whereas these older women generally have dots on their faces (especially on their chins) and on their feet. Younger, conservative women will sometimes argue that such tattoos are *haram* because they constitute a visible form of ornamentation. Having eyebrows tattooed is less unanimously condemned, because it ‘looks natural’ and does not constitute added ornamentation. Fieldnotes, Sunday, 24 August 2008.
2.3 Learning ‘tradition’

What constitutes an ‘education’? The Latin root *educere* means to bring or lead out (that which is within). The assumption here is that nothing is added to the self; an educated person is just the polished version of herself. In Arabic, there are a number of terms and meanings, which fall under the semantic field of education, learning: ‘ilm, sha’ar, fiqh, m’arifa, and hikma all share in the general sense of ‘knowing.’ According to the “Encyclopaedia of Islam,” the main philological dichotomy was between ‘ilm and m’arifa whereby the former refers to universals, theological insights and the latter to particulars. The latter, ‘arafa also has the connotation of recognizing or acknowledging; it is an imperfect version of knowing or ‘alima. The root *d – r – s*, to learn, from which the noun madrasa is derived, originally meant ‘studying religious law’ more narrowly but then expanded to learning more generally. Learning implied the object ‘religious law.’

For many Shi‘is I met in Sayyida Zaynab, however, learning exceeds law. For example, Um ‘Ali al-Najafiyya, a mid-twenties Iraqi Shi‘i married to a man 30 years her senior, explained that institutionalized religious learning (*dirāsa hawzawiyya*) is *wājib* (a religious obligation). She finished the sixth grade and learned how to sew from her mother. She attended *majālis* at the Zaynabiyya, but did not take classes. Because she has no kids to occupy her time, she admitted that she has no excuse. “I will pay for it on Judgment Day, I really should know the birth and death dates of the *ahl al-bayt*. To know them allows us to feel with them, it ensures healing (*shifa‘*) and intercession on Judgment Day (*sha‘fa‘a*). The knowledge, which Um ‘Ali found crucial therefore, was not religious law, but hagiography or *sīra*. For her, it is the relationship with the saints (*‘awliya*, pl. of *wali allah* or ‘friend of God’) who include not only the fourteen infallibles, but also semi-infallibles such as ‘Abbas and Zaynab, which is important.

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221 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 31 July 2008.
seminaries, sīra and fiqh are both taught at the elementary level, during the first year and at summer school. By their third year, students typically no longer study sīra, though the study of fiqh continues until students graduate.

At more advanced stages of seminary learning, the question of the nature and value of different forms of knowledge in itself constitutes a course. At the Zaynabīyya, Um Mustafa, a Shirazi herself and wife of the men’s section’s principal, taught a weekly class on different forms of knowledge, notions of learning and reason in Islamic thought, for which she used the book Usūl al-kāfī, a Shi‘i Hadith collection by Muhammad al-Kulayni (d. 329 AH/941 CE). Um Mustafa was a heavyset woman in her later forties or fifties. Similar to the other elder and high ranking women at the seminary, she wore a black abaya over a black dress and a black scarf pulled over her eyebrows and chin. In the fall semester of 2009, Um Mustafa al-Shiraziyya began her course on Usūl al-kāfī by explaining the importance of ‘aql, or reason, sense, and intellect. For her, piety culminates in ‘aql kāmil (or ‘complete reason’).

Navid Kermani explains that the verb ‘aqala is a “process of recognition which leads to belief [and which] is taken in the Qur’ān to include sensory perception and the understanding of the heart, and it relies... on the use of the senses.” Here, ‘aql has an empirical rather than abstract sense. In Usūl al-kāfī, ‘aql is opposed to jahl, ignorance, reminiscent of Jahiliyya, pre-Islamic implicitly barbarian Arab customs. For Um Mustafa, ‘aql is what differentiates humans from animals. Yet only prophets and the infallibles have ‘aql kāmil, ‘complete reason or intellect.’ Imam ‘Ali and his semi-infallible daughter Sayyida Zaynab are nicknamed ‘aqūl (the most reasonable, understanding or wise one) and ‘aqūla (the most sensible woman). As Um Mustafa explained, Mu’awiyah ibn Abu Sufyan, challenger of ‘Ali at the Battle of Siffin (657 CE) and the founder of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus, was intelligent, clever, shātir, but lacked...


223 The younger, unmarried teachers at the Zaynabīyya women’s seminary generally wore black abayāt over plain, but not necessarily black garments (jilbāb or galabayya) which are also sometimes called abayāt, but are to be distinguished from the former dresses. Only Anisa Salma, a Damascus Shi‘i, and Anisa Aya, an Egyptian university student and daughter of an Egyptian Shi‘i scholar, deviated from the standard.


‘complete reason.’ Aql īāmil requires a kind of enlightenment, spirituality linked with a sense of justice. It means doing ihsān, that which is beautiful.

In one of her weekly classes on ‘sabīl,’ telos or purpose, Um Mustafa taught that it should be our intention and our goal to become more sensitive to specific others and their needs. These important others are close loved ones, family, and friends. This kind of openness towards loved ones and fellow Shi‘is is part of ‘aql īāmil. Based on Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi’s book on sabīl, Um Mustafa explained that the reason for the ‘backwardness’ of the Middle East, for civil wars, and corruption, is a generalized lack of ‘aql īāmil among Muslims. If Muslims had ‘aql īāmil they would understand that corruption and civil war hurt all Muslims. Significantly, it means that ‘aql īāmil is more concerned with the practical and the ethical than the metaphysical.

At the hawza Sadrayn, Anisa Aya al-Banna, a young Egyptian university educated teacher, explained her approach to knowledge and learning in an advanced students’ summer course on research methodology (bahth). According to Anisa Aya, there are four types of knowledge or science, which she ranked by the quality of their method of derivation. Divine revelation, wahī, is the ‘best’ kind of knowledge. The next best kind of knowledge consists of ‘ulīm hadasiyya, intuitive forms of knowledge (e.g. Sufi insights). ‘Ulīm ‘aqliyya follow the intuitive grade and are just above ‘ulīm hissiyya, which are purely sensual or empirical forms of knowledge.

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226 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 21 October 2009 and Wednesday, 28 October 2009.

227 Reza Shah-Kazemi, Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam ‘Ali (New York: I.B. Tauris and Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006), 79; Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, The Vision of Islam (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 265-317. Besides these aesthetic and ethical aspects, ‘aql also has more practical or sensible meanings, as in ‘to tie (up), a horse’ or ‘to pay blood money.’ However, according to the “Encyclopedia of the Qur’an,” none of the forty-nine occurrences of the root ‘–q–l take these latter meanings. Cf. Kermani, “Intellect,” 547.

228 Fieldnotes, Fall 2009.

229 Sayyid Muhammad Husayni al-Shirazi, al-Sabīl ila inhād al-muslimīn (Kuwait: Dar al-‘ulum, 2009).


Courses on research methodology were taught at other seminaries as well. Anisa Salma explained that she would be teaching the fourth year students bahth once a week, so they would be able to write and publish. Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 30 September 2009.

231 Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 162.
'Ulūm 'aqliyya draw on logical deduction and analogy (here 'aql carries a much more narrow meaning as compared to Um Mustafa’s ‘aql kāmil). It is the level at which most research is conducted. For Anisa Aya, the purpose of research (bahth) is to arrive at the Truth, which is necessarily divine and inaccessible through human reason alone. Anisa Aya agrees with Um Mustafa that regular (human) cleverness and reason alone are not enough to reach Truth and become an exemplary pious subject (or attain ‘aql kāmil, as Um Mustafa puts it). Secular education is not enough. Lay Shi‘is (muqallidīn) require guidance from the ahl al-bayt who are represented by the 'ulama in order to reach higher levels of Truth and piety.

Where can lay Shi‘is receive this necessary guidance? According to Um Mustafa, as well as the mullaya Um Zahra, the transmission of pious knowledge and the inculcation of ‘aql kāmil occurs in two modes: hawza education and majālis (or ritual mourning gatherings). These two modes engage participants on two different but related and even contiguous levels. Hawza learning includes not only lectures, but also discussions. It requires students to read and pass examinations. In contrast, ritual mourning gatherings may or may not include lectures. At husayniyyāt, the emphasis lies on crying and lamenting. While the former emphasizes cognition, the latter focuses on affect. The two modes are related ideologically and spatially as majālis often meet at hawzāt. Majālis attendance is encouraged at the seminaries. On the birthdays and death anniversaries of the Fourteen Infallibles and on other important dates (e.g. Ghadir Khum), hawza classes are interrupted and substituted by majālis. Seminary teachers and mullayāt often

232 And being socially responsible means active participation in the transmission of knowledge. As a teacher, she transmits knowledge to female students at the hawza Sadrayn. Periodically, she even holds classes in the women’s section of the musallah, the shrine’s prayer hall.

233 Fieldnotes, Spring 2009 and Fall 2009.

234 Similarly to Deeb’s Lebanese interlocutors, mullayāt in Sayyida Zaynab usually do not consider recounting the masā‘īb or tragedies of the ahl al-bayt as lectures.

Cf. Deeb, “From Mourning to Activism,” 241-266.

235 Of course, in a general sense, both affect and cognition are important to both seminary education and mourning gatherings. The reason I distinguish them here is in order to draw parallels to Lara Deeb’s account of Shi‘i women’s gatherings in Lebanon. There, ‘traditional’ majālis emphasize affect, while ‘modern’ ones underline cognition. Notably, one could argue that seminaries emphasize ‘rationality’ (or cognition) because seminaries are more likely to be male spaces, whereas mourning gatherings highlight ‘affect’ (or emotion) because they are female practices (in the sense that they ritually cite Zaynab’s first commemorative mourning ceremony). For more on affect, please see the next chapter on ‘Affective Piety.’
quote an expression (‘ibāra), al-majālis madāris, literally “mourning gatherings [are] schools.” Women, such as Um ‘Ali al-Najafiyya may not make it to seminary lessons. However, she at least tries to attend majālis regularly.

While majālis and hawzāt are both related and crucial in transmitting Shi‘i traditions, I examine them separately in this dissertation. In what follows below, I focus mainly on hawza pedagogy, though I return briefly to husayniyyāt towards the end of this chapter in my discussion of how spatial changes affect the transmission of tradition. The question of how ritual mourning gatherings aid the cultivation of piety constitutes the subject of the next chapter (“Affective Piety”).

2.3.1 Cultivating pious subjects

One morning at the Shirazi seminary, one of the fourth year students, Um Ridha, an Iraqi mother of two in her late twenties, said that people ask her frequently: “Why do you study if they don’t give you money?” “As if everything has to be about money! These people don’t know what traces (athār) the hawza has had on marriage and family with kids! I have become a much more patient parent. And my relationship with my husband has improved.” Sometimes, she tells people that she studies for the sake of an iqāmah, thereby presenting her studies in terms of a legal and political necessity, which she considers an indisputable argument.236

According to Anisa Salma, a young and unmarried half-Iranian and half-Syrian teacher at the Zaynabiyya, the most important goal of education is an eschatological one.237 She considers becoming more pious is a preparatory step for becoming a follower and helper of the Hidden Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi. As the Mahdi is expected to lead an army against the anti-Christ,
becoming a follower of the Mahdi, means becoming one of his soldiers. The focus on the self, in other words, allows Shi‘is to train for a deferred revolution.\(^{238}\)

For both Um Ridha and Anisa Salma, the goal of studying at a seminary is to become a better and more pious Shi‘i. However, there is an important difference between what that means for Um Ridha and what that means for Anisa Salma. For Um Ridha, the purpose of studying at a seminary is to become more virtuous. In contrast, Anisa Salma thinks the goal of studying is to become more disciplined. Discipline and virtue are similar, but they are not the same. By analogy, one may argue that there is a difference between ritual cleanliness and hygiene. ‘Modernist’ Muslims such as Muhammad ‘Abdu, or ‘modern’ Shi‘is, such as followers of Khamenei in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, like to conflate ritual cleanliness with modern notions of hygiene. Even at the Zaynabiyya, teachers and students often discuss ritual cleanliness (tahāra) with a connotation of hygiene. However, after major public mourning events, even teachers sometimes commented cynically about the bathrooms at the Zaynabiyya, noting that tahāra does not require nadhāfa or hygienic cleanliness.\(^{239}\) Um Mustafa’s ideal of ‘aql kāmil encompasses both discipline and virtue, and seminary education in Sayyida Zaynab more generally encourages and fosters both. However, as I show below, the emphasis at least at the Zaynabiyya is on virtue rather than discipline.

Becoming disciplined and becoming virtuous through purification of the self (tazkiyya al-nafs\(^{240}\)) are similar processes in that they are aimed at producing more pious Shi‘is. However, they differ in the ways in which they prepare subjects to relate to the world at-large. Disciplining subjects, especially in the Foucauldian sense, helps governments control and manage populations.\(^{241}\) Discipline implies productivity and progress. Purified or morally refined selves are not necessarily capable of or concerned with economic productivity. The Shirazis’ notion of

\(^{238}\) In that sense, it is both ‘soteriological’ and ‘revolutionary’ and fits into both modes of the Karbala Paradigm. Cf. Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala*; Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*.

\(^{239}\) Fieldnotes, Spring 2009.


a pious self it is a beneficent and grateful self, trained in virtues – not marketable skills. Valuing virtue above discipline helps explain why the Zaynabiyya and many other seminaries continuously offer courses on topics such as *akhlaq* (morals, righteous character), but not English. Notable, there are a few seminaries, which offer courses on more ‘secular’ forms of knowledge (beyond courses, which help cultivate pious subjects). For instance, the Afghan *hawza* Baqir offers morning classes to teenage girls and teaches them English and computer skills. The students at the Zaynabiyya requested English classes on one or two occasions. However, the principal of the Zaynabiyya did not grant them their request.

At the Zaynabiyya, the education of pious Shi‘i women takes four years. Advanced students and graduates are sometimes asked to teach a beginner’s class, but usually there specialized teachers. Most courses, such as *mantiq* (logic), *nahu* (grammar), Qur’an and *tafsīr* (exegesis), *tarbiyya* (children’s pedagogy), *balāgha* (rhetoric), *madhāhib* (comparative monotheistic religions),242 and *tablīgh* (missionary activities), are only taught for a year or two at different stages of the program. Only three courses are part of the curriculum every year. They are *‘aqā’id* or theology (which is taught by Um ‘Ali, who also teaches at the seminary of Khomeini), *akhlāq* or morals (which is taught by Um Haydar, the principal of the Zaynabiyya), and *fiqh* or jurisprudence (which is taught by Anise ‘Aliya whose father is a renowned scholar at the men’s section of the Zaynabiyya). Notably, two of these three courses are concerned with orthopraxy, whereas only one is concerned with orthodoxy. Furthermore, the two classes on orthopraxy, jurisprudence and morals, can be thought of as respectively teaching discipline and virtue.

When the daughter of the late Ayatollah Ridha Shirazi (d. 2008), the son of Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi (d. 2001) and the nephew of Sayyida Hasan Shirazi (d. 1980), visited the Zaynabiyya in August 2008, she gave a lecture in which she argued that *‘aqā’id* is the most important of all *hawza* classes:

> When we die, it is our *‘aqīda* which counts.243 Only having a strong *‘aqīda* guarantees that you will remain a Muslim till the end of your life. When people

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242 In this course, students studied Judaism, Christianity, and Sunnism.

243 *‘Aqā’id* is the plural of *‘aqīda*. 
go to live in the West, it is because their ‘aqīda is not strong enough that they lose their way. When your ‘aqīda is weak, philosophy and other subjects taught at Western universities will make you first doubt (shakk) and then lose your faith, which will lead to kufr (disbelief). However, if your ‘aqīda is strong, studying any subject can only make your imān (or faith) stronger.

Once there was a Christian astronomer. Studying the universe made him more rather than less of a believer. Every Sunday he went to church, his whole being cried out: “Allahu akbar!” One day he was talking to a Muslim, and said: “every time I study more, I become more convinced that there must be a creator.” The Muslim responded by reciting verses from the Qur’an indicating that knowledge leads to faith. The verses affected (yu’aththir ‘ala) the Christian and he became a Muslim.

We need to study ‘aqīda and the Qur’an so that we may become steady and affect (yu’aththir ‘ala) others. These days the world is full of fasād (or corruption). We must combat this corruption. First, we must change and work on ourselves. Then, we can work on others and affect them (yu’aththir ‘alayhum).244

As Ayatollah Ridha Shirazi’s daughter’s lecture suggests, ‘aqīda refers to the content of religious convictions. During their first year, students learn about basic theological principles, the usūl al-dīn (roots of religion) and fiurū’ al-dīn (branches of religion).245 Thereafter, ‘aqā’id lessons delve deeper. In the fourth year, the ‘aqā’id teacher Um ‘Ali explained the concepts of resurrection and final judgement in more detail. Amal, a thirty year old Palestinian convert, found ‘aqā’id lessons especially helpful. Though she had not previously studied at a university, she said that she used to ponder questions such as: Who created God? And how can God resurrect humans for Judgement Day? These questions had led to what she called considered blasphemous conclusions. Studying aqā’id at the seminary engaged her philosophically and provided her with satisfying answers.246

244 Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 5 August 2008.

245 For Twelver Shi’is, there are five roots of religion: tawhīd (divine oneness), ‘adalah (divine justice), nubwawwah (prophethood), imāmah (the necessity of having Imams), qiyyamah (the Day of Judgment). There are ten branches of religion: salah (prayer), sawm (fasting during Ramadan), Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), zakāh (charity), khums (tax of one fifth), jihad (struggle), ‘amr bi-l-ma’rūf (commanding good), nahi ‘an al-munkar (forbidding evil), tawalla (loving the ahl al-bayt), tabarra (disassociating with the enemies of the ahl al-bayt).

246 Fieldnotes, Fall 2009.
Akhlāq is another important subject at the Zaynabiyya. When I showed my weekly schedule to Um Aus, she noted that at the Sadrayn seminary akhlāq is combined with sīra (or biography) because studying the lives of the infallible Prophet and Imams necessarily encompasses the study of morals. At the Zaynabiyya, however, akhlāq and sīra are separate classes and sīra is only taught during the first year. During the normal school year, it is usually the principal Um Haydar herself, who teaches akhlāq. In 2008, however, when I took summer classes at the Zaynabiyya, it was Um ‘Ali the ‘aqā ’id teacher who taught akhlāq.

Um ‘Ali’s akhlāq classes can be divided thematically into three categories. First, she often explained how one should perform particular supplementary prayers. Secondly, she repeatedly spoke about one’s duties towards one’s parents. Thirdly, she would quote pious proverbs and solicit group discussions on these proverbs.

Among the supplementary rituals which Um ‘Ali encouraged her students to perform was the ‘amāl Um Dawud. She explained that it takes around five hours, but that it is very effective. The ritual is named after Um Dawud, an ‘alawiyya whose son was imprisoned. She went to Imam J‘afar al-Sadiq, who told her to perform a specific sequence of prayers on the first Thursday night of the month of Rajab. Um Dawud did as she was told and her son was released from prison. When the son returned, he told his mother that on the night she performed those prayers, he saw a light and knew that he would be released. When Um ‘Ali explained that performing the prayers of Um Dawud can help free loved ones from captivity and trouble, several students started to take notes. As most of the students in class were Iraqi asylum seekers, and many still had family members caught up in the on-going violence in Baghdad, the prayers of Um Dawud were especially relevant and when Um ‘Ali asked whether any of the students would try to perform these prayers, quite a few raised their hands. Unfortunately, I never found out whether the students actually followed through and performed the amāl Um Dawud and whether it worked.

Besides asking how many students would try to perform supplementary prayers, Um ‘Ali also had everyone record and report their weekly deeds in order to instill pious discipline. In the beginning of the term, she handed out sheets of paper, which listed points for performing good deeds and omitting bad deeds. For example, the list allotted 50 points for prayer all five daily prayers on time, 30 points for praying the rosary of Fatima, 20 points for reciting Du‘a Kumayl, 50 points for pleasing one’s parents and husband, 50 points for wearing hijāb, 50 points for refraining from lying, and 50 points for not listening to music. By assigning a numerical value to daily actions and having students report aloud how many points they earned on a weekly basis, Um ‘Ali encouraged both the cultivation of discipline and virtue. While there were quite a few students who simply said that they had forgotten to write down their daily numbers, others reported theirs proudly.

Visiting and pleasing one’s parents was listed on the sheet of weekly duties. However, Um ‘Ali also found it necessary to regularly remind students to respect and treat parents well. Parents should not have to ask us if they need anything, she explained, we should give it willingly with a smile. “Don’t forget the pains your mother went through with you and how all that is good is from your father.” On another occasion, Um ‘Ali said that those who do not pray, give charity, and read Qur’an on behalf of their dead parents will be punished by God for not honouring them. By honouring one’s parents, one purifies oneself.

One of the philosophical sayings and proverbs which Um ‘Ali posited for class discussion was “The world is a prison (sijn) for the believer, and heaven (janna) for the unbeliever.” In the end, she explained that while the believer is bound by rules, the non-believer (kāfir, but then she added that this can also refer to someone without iltizām or discipline/dedication) is not bound by any rules. She argued that following rules is central to piety, as the greatest jihad is the jihad

249 The rosary of Fatima is performed after each of the daily prayers. It consists of saying “Allahu akbar” 33 times, “al-hamdu li-llah” 33 times, and lastly, “subhān Allah” 34 times.
250 Notably, Um ‘Ali is not the only one who gives out such sheets. They are also used at the hawza Sadrayn. Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 8 July 2008.
251 Fieldnotes, Saturday, 12 July 2008.
252 Fieldnotes, Saturday, 2 August 2008.
of the self \((jihad\ al-nafs)\). She went on: “What is the difference between this kid [pointing at her infant] and an animal? Nothing! Both want to eat when they are hungry. And if the baby is not fed, he cries. What thus makes us into humans is that we can control ourselves.” Um ‘Ali implied that since a believer controls himself more than someone who does not observe the rules of Islam, he is more human. In this example, to be human requires discipline.

Though Um Haydar did not teach any courses during the summer of 2008, she came to class a couple of times and addressed the students regarding important \(akhlāq\)-related issues. Specifically, she reminded students of the importance of wearing proper \(hijāb\) and the permissibility of performing \(tatbīr\) (a bloody form of self-flagellation). In her third and fourth year courses, seldom spoke about specific rules and disciplinary regulations. Instead, Um Haydar often read from Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi’s book on \(akhlāq\). Occasionally, she would drift off-topic and give general advice. For instance, one day she discussed the evils of materialism. She warned that materialism can destroy love and happy marriages. As an example, Um Haydar recounted a story where a young woman come and complained to Um Haydar about her husband’s lack of income. This woman had waited six years to marry the man, as her family had opposed the marriage, and now that they were married, the woman allowed her materialism to destroy her happiness.

Of all the courses at the Zaynabiyya, \(fiqh\) is the most often taught class. The reason for this is that \(fiqh\) is not only important for cultivating pious Shi‘is but also for creating and maintaining relationships between followers (\(muqaddāt\)) and \(maraja\ ‘al-taqlīd\). Jurisprudence is the only course that is almost always taught by in-house teachers, related and loyal to the absent ‘ulama who are the ‘spiritual leaders’ of each seminary. These teachers hence become the links between students and \(maraja\’. They become personally known transmitters of knowledge and tradition.

In first year \(fiqh\) courses and during the Zaynabiyya’s summer sessions, \(fiqh\) classes focus on the ‘jurisprudence’ of worship (‘\(ibadāt\)'), including prayer, fasting, and ritual cleanliness. On an elementary level, \(fiqh\) classes focus on Sunni-Shi‘i differences, not intra-Shi‘i differences. For

\(^{253}\) Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 29 July 2008.

\(^{254}\) Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 21 October 2009.
example, Sunnis generally wash their hands, mouths, noses, and faces three times, whereas Shi‘i **fiqh** teachers in Sayyida Zaynab argue that Shi‘is should only wash once or twice, but not three times (as Sunnis do). Moreover, while it is not mandatory that Shi‘is combine the noon and the afternoon prayer or the sunset and the evening prayer, teachers and students often promote combining prayers. Within the prayer, Sunnis and Shi‘is differ over whether or not to recite Surah al-Fatiha while standing in the third and fourth **rak‘a** (unit of prayer) in the noon and evening prayers. Sunnis generally recite Surah al-Fatiha in all **rak‘at** of prayer, while Shi‘is are encouraged to recite the **tasbīh** “subhan allah al-hamdulillah la illaha illallah w-allahu akbar” three times. Um Ahmad was convinced that one of her classmates at **hawza** Sadrayn was a Sunni married to a Shi‘i Iraqi. She never admitted to being Sunni, but Um Ahmad had her suspicions. Um Ahmad herself was the recent widow of a Sunni Iraqi man. Once, she told me, she asked the teacher: “Aren’t we still allowed to recite the Fatiha in the third and fourth **rak‘a**?”

Besides ritual sectarian differences, first year **fiqh** classes often emphasize two specific everyday issues/practices: hijāb and music. ‘Alawiyya ‘Aliya repeatedly pointed out the importance of covering up to the tip of the chin and the jaw-line. This style of covering visibly distinguishes Shi‘i women from Sunnis, the minority from the majority, the ‘outsiders’ from the ‘insiders.’ According to ‘Alawiyya ‘Aliya, **manteaus**, popular long coats worn by urban Syrian women are **shar‘i**, legally acceptable, but less modest than the Iraqi abaya. Giving up music is the other important aspect of becoming pious. At both regular and summer classes, **fiqh** and other teachers often remind students of the prohibition of music. On both matters, students ask and look for exceptions. “Is nationalist music, the songs children sing at school in praise of the President, **halal**? What about classical European music?” Arguing against ‘Aliya, during a summer course, a student spoke up in class: “Ayatollah Fadhllallah allows classical and instrumental music!”

For Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi, even music without lyrics is sinful and leads astray. At the same time, Sadiq Shirazi does not wish to do away with media-technology. After all, he is part of a network of religious institutions, which include recording studios, CD-stores, and even a satellite television channel. As such, the teachers at the Zaynabiyya encourage Shi‘is to listen to

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recorded sermons, *latmiyyāt*, or *mawālīd*. On the ground floor of the Zaynabiyya, an affiliated media centre promotes and sells collections of Iraqi and Kuwaiti *radudīn* (male mourning chanters).

As the Zaynabiyya’s *fiqh* teacher ‘alawiyya ‘Aliya promotes the Shirazis’ views and quotes the scholarly consensus when it is in agreement with the Shirazis. However, she also recognizes other views as principally valid. One day, she was asked about whether or not strictly observant Shi‘is could eat in the homes of Muslims who did not regularly pay *khums* (a “fifth” tax paid by lay Shi‘is to *sayyids* and ideally *‘ulama* and *marāja‘ al-taqlīd*). She affirmed that Shi‘is should avoid eating food for which no *khums* has been given. When Amal, who is a Palestinian convert from Sunnism to Shi‘ism, complained, that this would prevent her from eating at her parents’ home, ‘Aliya told Amal that she should follow Ayatollah ‘Ali Sistani on this point. ‘Aliya explained that Sistani allowed visiting and eating at one’s parental home, even if the latter have not paid *khums*, because maintaining family bonds is more important than avoiding those who commit the sin of not paying *khums*.257

By suggesting that Shi‘i women should follow other *marāja‘ al-taqlīd* on a particular issue, Anise ‘Aliya introduces flexibility into the transmission of knowledge. She is not merely a stereotypical bureaucratic administrator who simply repeats the words of her elders. She constitutes the personal connection between female student followers and Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazis and as such, her presence allows for negotiation.258 She relays questions from the students to her father, who in turn asks the ayatollah, and her own knowledge of decisions by other *marāja‘ al-taqlīd* provides her with resources in her discussions with female students. However, she is also clear that she is not a *mujtahid* and that she remains little more than a mediator and councillor.

One of the issues which the fourth year students and Anisa ‘Aliya had heated debates about was the issue of marriage, polygyny, and the practice of *mut’a* (or temporary ‘pleasure’ marriages).

257 Fieldnotes, Fall 2009.

258 In the ‘Ashura chapter I note that many seminaries have men hand out food during Muharram so that the women do not make extra demands for more food. In other words, Shi‘i women in Syria can negotiate and discuss issues with other women, though they are generally too embarrassed to negotiate with men, especially ‘men of religion.’
One day, Anisa ‘Aliya was trying to explain and justify the practice of polygyny in fiqh class, while Samar, a mid-thirties Iraqi mother of six, was highly opposed to polygyny, because he had seen her father’s second marriage destroy her parental home.259 ‘Aliya argued that polygny (or ta’adud zawjāt) makes things easier for the wife as she has fewer responsibilities. The students, most of whom, unlike ‘Aliya, are married, disagreed. They argued that just because a husband does not come home every night, does not mean that a woman has fewer responsibilities towards the house and the children. Moreover, the thought of not having a man in the house at night, scared them.

During that same lesson, ‘Aliya tried to explain and justify the practice of mut’a, or temporary marriage. She gave two examples of cases wherein the practice could benefit women. First, if a widow has children, but no home or money, she could ask for and attain a house through entering into a mut’a marriage. Samar did not like the example, because she thought that it sounded too much like prostitution. ‘Aliya’s second example was using mut’a as an engagement period. “Instead of getting married properly, Syrians today get engaged. They ‘write a book,’ katab kitāb, and then they can do anything!”260 But socially, they aren’t married!” ‘Aliya was referring to the social practice among Sunnis in Syria who first get engaged for a while before they get married. In order to make their engagement Islamically legal, the couple gets married ‘religiously’ without living together or registering the contract with the state. If the girl loses her virginity during her engagement, she acquires an ill reputation, which may negatively influence her future possibilities or choices. “A temporary or mut’a can therefore help women. If the engagement/mut’a marriage does not end in marriage, and the girl is not longer a girl [i.e. has lost her virginity] at least she counts as divorced [rather than having been deflowered outside of marriage].”261 There are two points however, which speak against Anisa ‘Aliya’s argument. For one, mut’a marriages are illegal in Syria and despised among Sunnis, which means that a girl

259 Fieldnotes, Saturday, 5 December 2009.

260 To ‘write a book’ is short for having written a religious marriage contract, which may or may not have been registered with the courts.

261 During my fieldwork, I met one Shi‘i woman from Homs who became the second wife of a Saudi man. They entered into a one month mut’a marriage as their engagement period. Thereafter, they entered into a permanent marriage contract. Fieldnotes, Sunday, 4 October 2009.
who lost her virginity in a temporary marriage would be seen as little better than having lost her virginity outside of marriage. Secondly, being a divorcee is socially shameful.

Aside from possible benefits to women, Samar pointed out that the institution of mut’a is often abused. “There is a shaykh at the shrine who tries to convince women to sleep with him ‘mut’a is halal!’ even if the woman is actually married.” ‘Aliya and the other students nodded in agreement. Samar continued: “There are women who enter into temporary marriages while the husband is on a business trip or otherwise gone.” ‘Aliya chimed in saying: “Don’t be surprised. This happens in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Lebanon and the Gulf!” She detailed each country with a sizeable Shi‘i minority to show that no community is morally superior to another in this regard. Anisa ‘Aliya ended the class by discussing marriage in Islam and noted that marriage in Islam does not discriminate: wealthy and Hashimi girls (i.e. girls who are descended from the Prophet’s clan) can marry poor men who are not Hashimi. Yet, she herself, along with many other sayyid women rather remain unmarried than marry a non-sayyid.262

‘Alawiyya ‘Aliya is in her mid-twenties. Petite and unmarried, she draws on and supports the Shirazi’s authority as sayyid mujtahids. ‘Aliya’s students respect her for her knowledge of religious law, her rank, and her relationships. Yet they also consider her too idealistic, impractical, inexperienced, and naïve because she lives a sheltered life as the eldest, unmarried daughter of a high-ranking scholar. Rather than engaging in the world, she spends seemingly all her time at the Zaynabiyya women’s seminary as a teacher and a khatībah, preacher at majāls.263 Students often voiced the same critique regarding Anisa Salma. Amal admired Anisa Salma’s knowledge of pop culture and scientific developments, but also critiqued Salma for teaching students about subjects she has no experience in, such as raising children. The seminary teachers’ efforts to inculcate piety, therefore, are not without contestation.

The courses I examined above valued both discipline and virtue. Yet, I distinguish between discipline and virtue, because there were multiple instances during my fieldwork where I found

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262 A sayyid is a descendant from the Prophet, usually on the father’s side.

263 When Amal’s husband married a third wife in the Gulf and did not send Amal money for the hospital when she gave birth to their son, ‘Aliya simply exclaimed: “But he must send her money!” She could not come up with any practical solutions for Amal’s dilemma. Fieldnotes, Saturday, 12 December 2009.
that seminaries such as the Zaynbiyya encouraged virtues (such as patience and modesty), but neglected discipline (such as punctuality, sitting still during class). For example, Amal complained that the Zaynabiyya administration’s inconsistent enforcement of rules was not conducive to discipline among students. In accordance with an often preached but rarely applied rule (which states that if a student is late, she is forbidden from entering the classroom and joining her classmates until the next break), Amal had asked the principal for permission to be late (because her husband was leaving the country) and still enter class the next day. When Amal arrived and stuck her head into the principal’s office the next morning so that her presence could be marked down on the attendance sheet, the principal told her not to go to class and wait until break. The next day, a lazy student came in half an hour late and Um Haydar the principal who was teaching *akhlāq* (morals) did not say a word. Amal was angry: “There is no point in following the rules!”

Amal made these remarks in January 2009 and I left the field towards the end of February. By the time I returned to Syria to continue my fieldwork in September 2009, important transformations had taken place. The teachers at the Zaynabiyya were still lax or at best inconsistent about enforcing the rules. However, spatial modifications had been implemented which engendered discipline in the *hawza*.

2.3.2 Re-orienting ritual space

Over the course of my three years of fieldwork, drastic changes occurred in Sayyida Zaynab. When I first lived there in 2007, the Iraqi refugee population was at its peak. Thereafter, the Iraqi refugee population slowly decreased (and it continues to decrease, especially given the political unrest in Syria during the summer and fall of 2011). These changes in population affected religious institutions which reacted by reorganizing their spatial arrangements and their decorations. In what follows I examine the spatial rearrangements of *hawzāt* and *husayniyyāt* in Sayyida Zaynab and their effects on the pious community, the performance of rituals, and the transmission of knowledge.

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264 Fieldnotes, Monday, 26 January 2009.
In general, the organization of space at hazāt and husayniyyāt in Sayyida Zaynab can be compared with the Lebanese maglis (here: ‘sitting room’), which Michael Gilsenan analyzes in Recognizing Islam.\textsuperscript{265} According to Gilsenan, the maglis used to be an important room in any Lebanese home in the first half of the last century. It was a multi-purpose room where guests sat on cushions on the floor along the walls, forming a circle.\textsuperscript{266} Unlike the French-style salon, which middle and upper-middle class Lebanese have adopted and exchanged for the majlis, and where guests are shown the paraphernalia money can buy, Gilsenan explains that the majlis’s simplicity shifts the attention to the guests themselves. The maglis is about the people, not the things.\textsuperscript{267}

While the maglis maybe have become practically extinct in Lebanon, it is still central to most homes in Sayyida Zaynab, regardless of social class. Moreover, the multi-functionality and relative simplicity of many hazāt and husayniyyāt in Sayyida Zaynab resemble Gilsenan’s maglis. For instance, the same halls, which are used for seminary classes in the mornings, are often used for mourning gatherings in the evenings. The same space is used for learning, mourning, and socialization. Similarly to Gilsenan’s maglis, hazāt and husayniyyāt in Sayyida Zaynab are furnished with cushions lining the walls and thick carpet covering the floors.\textsuperscript{268} They are uncluttered spaces and people take off their shoes before entering. Yet unlike Gilsenan’s maglis, the walls of hazāt and husayniyyāt are often decorated with numerous pictures on the walls, ranging from Husayn and ‘Abbas to Nasrallah, the current face of Hezbollah. Such pictures are less frequently displayed inside private homes in Sayyida Zaynab, but there too the main room is usually called a majlis.\textsuperscript{269}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{265} Gilsenan, Recognizing Islam, 180-191.
\item \textsuperscript{266} Similarly at husayniyyāt, there are cushions on the floor and along the walls for sitting and sleeping. It is uncluttered and people take off their shoes before entering.
\item \textsuperscript{267} Gilsenan, Recognizing Islam, 180-187.
\item \textsuperscript{268} In both apartments and Arabic houses, but not in the hotels, which host Iranian and Gulf Arab tourists, living rooms are furnished with low cushions and can function as bedrooms.
\item \textsuperscript{269} Instead, broad TV screens seated in altar-like wall units orient the guests’ attention to the world beyond the immediate.
\end{itemize}
The most drastic changes I noticed occurred at the Zaynabiyya during the summer and fall of 2009. One late fall morning, it was the day of ‘īd al-ghadīr, the day when the Prophet, according to Shi‘īs, appointed ‘Ali, his cousin and son-in-law as his successor. The seminary’s administration (idārah) had just had the main hall redecorated. These decorations were expensive. Fatima, one of the two unmarried students in the fourth year, was an ‘insider’ in the sense that she was related to the seminary’s administrators. Fatima revealed the large poster, which covered the south wall, cost 5000 Lira (approx. 100 USD). Ikhlās was outraged and condemned the seminary’s administration for spending the believers’ money, the obligatory khums tax, on decorations rather than spending it on seminary students or the poor. They had bought at least nine posters. There were coloured ribbons hanging from the ceiling and there were decorative metal stars glittering with large rhinestones, similar to Christmas-tree decorations. The Zaynabiyya began using these decorations only in 2009. At the same time, they installed a three by five square meters stage at the foot of the minbar. Until the summer of 2009, the mulla at the seminary’s weekly gathering sat on the steps of a lone minbar, at the north end of the hall so that she would face towards Mecca. She was slightly raised above the crowd, yet as she led the circle of mourning, she was also part of it. The new stage sets off the mulla and her closest aides, other sayyid women who usually sat by the mulla’s side, but had also been part of the circle previously. From 2009 on, these sayyid women sat a step above the others. Moreover, the stage was ‘roped’ off by a thin metal link-chain. Symbolically and physically, the chain broke the circle. It created clear spatial and symbolic boundaries between the audience, literally ‘those present’ (mukhadirīn), and the mullāt and sayyidāt.

The stage became a permanent fixture in the Zaynabiyya’s main hall (or husayniyya). However, there were also less permanent new changes. During hawza classes in the mornings, two of which were held in the husayniyya hall (because there were not enough classrooms for every level). Irrespective of whether they were held in a classroom or in the husayniyya, classes were

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270 The entire women’s section consists of a second floor room, a library, and the husayniyya, which is a large hall on the third floor of the Zaynabiyya. Off the main husayniyya, which is approximately 20 * 30 meters large, there are three smaller classrooms, a kitchen, the administrative office, and toilets.

271 Shi‘īs are supposed to pay a 20% tax on certain ‘luxury’ items. Shi‘īs in Sayyida Zaynab are discrete but they do not hide the fact that they are not pleased with how some sayyid ‘ulama, those to whom khums is owed, spend their followers’ hard earned cash.
first conducted similarly to mourning gatherings in that everyone sat in a circle on cushions. In the spring of 2009, desks and office chairs were introduced. Teachers no longer sat on the floor, on the same level, as the students. (Though there was one exception: Um ‘Ali, the ‘aqā’id teacher, simply ignored the desk and chair and sat on the floor alongside her students.)

At hawza Sadrayn, there are two floors with classrooms. On the first floor, there is a kitchen and a husayniyya, a large room, which remains male space. There are four rooms each on the second and third floors. These are used as classrooms. The men have their classes in the building in the mornings, while the women have the space in the afternoon. On the second floor, the walls are lined with cushions. On the third floor, there are chairs with attached writing desks for students and larger tables and office chairs for the teacher. Classes are generally held on the third floor, so that students can take notes using desks. Assemblies, however, are held on the second floor, in one of the rooms lined with cushions, because this way more students fit into the smallish (3 by 2.5 square meters) rooms. Unlike at the Zaynabiyya, the classrooms at the Sadrayn seminary elevate students to the same physical level as the teachers. Either all sit on chairs (as on the third floor), or all sit on cushions on the floor (as on the second floor).

Similarly to hawza Sadrayn, the hawza Muntadhar is used by men in the mornings and women in the afternoon. This hawza is not housed in an entire building, but on the first floor, in what was once a three-bedroom apartment. The centrally located ‘living room’ is furnished with low cushions and sofas. Furthest from the entrance is an elevated armchair where the male shaykh sits and teaches all of the female students for the first hour. Tea is served during the break after the first hour. Then, the second and third year students leave for their respective classrooms, which are furnished only with cushions, not sofas. The first year class stays in the central room, while the third ‘bedroom’ houses the administrative office. At this hawza only the male shaykh remains seated on an armchair. Students sit on low cushions and sofas, depending on their year. Similar to their students, female teachers who teach the second and third year students also sit on cushions on the floor.

The re-arrangement of spaces, especially at the Zaynabiyya, affected ritual gatherings and seminary learning in two ways. First, as noted above, the introduction of a chained-off stage and desks with chairs set mullayāt and teachers visibly apart from their audiences and students. Moreover, the stage created a religious elite during mourning gatherings. At every majlis, there
are a couple of women (or, in the case of the Zaynabiyya, roughly ten to fifteen women), many of whom are sayyidāt or ‘alawiyyāt, who are friends with the mullaya or the sponsors of a particular place or gathering. Before the establishment of the stage, this group of women who sat next to or near the mullaya was an open elite. Afterwards, it became symbolically and physically demarcated and closed-off to others. Mullayāt and teachers became physically more distant, less approachable, and thereby the transmission of knowledge and tradition became less grounded in personal connectivity. Second, the spatial rearrangement created distractions during seminary classes. Small children are usually left to run around and play on their own. They are not disciplined in any particular manner. However, the new spatial re-arrangements necessitated discipline. The children were not supposed to climb on the stage, the minbar, and the teacher’s table and chair, even though these new objects intrigued them. After the changes, mothers (and at least four of the ten students in the fourth year regularly brought at least one small child with them) were constantly distracted from the lesson, as they called their children, telling them not to climb on the stage and yank the thin metal chain.

2.4 Conclusion

Sunnis in Syria often asked me, when I told them that I study contemporary Shi‘ism, “why can’t Shi‘is just forget all that early stuff?” It cannot be forgotten, because the Karbala narrative and its ritual commemoration, along with the split between power and authority have become institutionalized. They form the basis of ‘normative piety.’ In contemporary Syria, the relationship between the ahl al-bayt and Shi‘is is institutionalized through the marj‘a‘iyya, hawzāt, and husayniyyāt. At the Zaynabiyya, students are taught the concept of ‘wilayat ‘Ali’ which differentiates Sunnis from Shi‘is. Female teachers at the Zaynabiyya invoke a simple argument: To be a follower of ‘Ali, (literally) a Shi‘i, requires accepting ‘Ali’s wilayah, his guidance, his leadership, and his religious authority.273

272 Vernon Schubel argues that an important difference between Sunnis and Shi‘is is the latter’s emphasis on loyalty to the Prophet as a person and his descendants. See: Schubel, Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam, 16.

Historically speaking, the twelve Imams held religious authority, but seldom had any political power after the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Said Amir Arjomand, Moojan Momen and others have written about the crisis of authority following the disappearance or occultation of the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi in 940 CE.\textsuperscript{274} At first, scholars claimed to be the heirs of the Imams, but only in the sense that they could interpret the texts, the Qur’an, and the Hadith, and derive laws, pronounce *ijtihād*. Over the centuries, scholarly activity became professionalized, structured, and institutionalized. The so-called ‘Usūli Triumph’ of the eighteenth century led to the centralization of legal authority and the institutionalization of a strict hierarchy peaking in legal specialists, or *marāja‘ al-taqlīd*.\textsuperscript{275} In contemporary Syria and specifically in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, the most important of these legal specialists are ayatollahs Khamenei, Shirazi, and Fadhlallah.

In this chapter, I first examined these ayatollahs’ claim to authority through their legal manuals. Second, I outlined the development of religious institutions in Sayyida Zaynab, including the shrine, seminaries, *husayniyyāt*, and hospitals. Third, I analyzed the kind of education students may receive at local seminaries, especially the Zaynabiyya, the seminary of the Shirazis. I posited that the formation of the pious subject emphasizes both virtue and discipline, which are similar but still different. Lastly, I studied how the rearrangement of space affects the pious community, ritual, and religious learning. I have shown that seminaries and *husayniyyāt* enable the cultivation of multiple kinds of subjects (i.e. virtuous and disciplined selves). Moreover, the processes of subject formation and the transmission of knowledge do not occur without contestation. In fact, one could say that it is because the transmission of knowledge (i.e. tradition) and subject formation do not take place in the abstract, but are situated in relationships, that contestation occurs in the first place. The ideal pious subject, according to Um Mustafā, is neither a docile subject, nor a disciplined subject, but a subject which posses ‘*aql kāmil*, which necessitates understanding, sensitivity, practicality, and ethics.

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Momen, *Shi‘i Islam*, 184-207.}
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Chapter 3
Affective Piety

3 Introduction

“Be careful about what TV programs you watch, they affect you.” Anisa Salma, a teacher at the hawza Zaynabiyya, had diverged from the subject and was explaining how Noor, a dubbed Turkish soap opera, which had been a huge hit in the Middle East during the summer of 2008, confused her niece.²⁷⁶ Salma’s five-year-old niece had asked how one of the actresses had gotten pregnant if she was not married. Moreover, the little girl tried to imitate the soap opera’s signature lovers’ gaze by staring at a little boy from the neighbourhood.²⁷⁷ Foreign TV shows are not the only morally negative influence pious Shi’is should be aware of and avoid, according to Salma. Friends, neighbours and even elder family members who do not pray are to be tactfully advised to change their ways. If that does not work, they should be avoided as much as possible. Further, in order to expose oneself to positive influences, one should regularly attend ritual mourning gatherings, seminary classes, and spend one’s time with other pious Shi‘is. For Salma, other teachers, and mullâyât, the idea that circumstances and other people affect individuals is not something to be fought. Rather, it is something to be acknowledged and worked with.²⁷⁸

In this chapter, I examine pious mourning practices by analyzing their underlying modes of affect and the visceral relationships they create and maintain. I draw on Sara Ahmed’s notion that affect impinges upon surfaces, as well as William Connolly’s notion that there are “multiple

²⁷⁶ Anisa Salma’s still looks young, but also has the sternness of an old maid. Of mixed Iranian-Syrian parentage, she counted as a local, Damascene. Even her clothes reflected her mixed identity, as she would wear the Iranian black chador over her Syrian manteau. Anisa Salma was a righteous, strict young woman, who justified her views scientifically. She had completed her BA, but continued to self-educate by reading books and watching documentaries, which she could share in class. She taught ‘scientific’ and activist kinds of courses such as logic, child rearing, comparative religions, missionization. Her main goal, as long as she remained unmarried, was to rectify lay Shi‘is’ understanding and practice.

²⁷⁷ Fieldnotes, Friday, 18 September 2009.

²⁷⁸ According to Anisa Salma, it means actively seeking pious friends and avoiding those who might hinder one’s path towards God.
registers of subjectivity and intersubjectivity,\textsuperscript{279} which allow individuals to relate and be affected in ways other than reason.\textsuperscript{280} First, I discuss two modalities of affect, their relationship with the Karbala Paradigm, as well as the relationship between affect and truth. Second, I examine how Twelver Shi‘i commemorative mourning gatherings enable affective modes of transmission which inform both aspiring pious subjects and their relationships with Shi‘i saints (i.e. members of the \textit{ahl al-bayt}). Mourning gatherings not only allow Shi‘i women to empathize with Shi‘i saints, but also to understand their own experiences of suffering as a shared experience which connects them to saints. In this context, I also discuss the importance and ethics of waiting, as well as the process by which women become \textit{mulla\breve{y}at}. Lastly, I look at pious media, especially recorded ritual mourning chants, and how they affect pious Shi‘is and their relationships with pious others. Whether mediated or not, this chapter argues that rituals operate (and are conceived of by Shi‘is as operating) in two affective modes which create and maintain their relationships with saints and ultimately, with God himself. Both modes invoke notions and experiences of suffering, such that suffering becomes the shared ground upon which pious lives and relationships can be established.\textsuperscript{281}

### 3.1.1 Affect and pious relationships

According to Sara Ahmed, the acts of speaking, listening, and seeing all ‘affect’ us. Sensations (which she equates with emotions) move between subjects; they are affective because they

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\textsuperscript{280} Other scholars who have thought about affect in Islam include Charles Hirschkind and David Thurfjell who reject the idea that ethics must be rooted in independent reasoning and autonomy and draw attention to the ways in which politics is informed by the visceral. In particular, Charles Hirschkind shows how some Muslims develop the ability to be affected by listening to taped sermons. Hirschkind, \textit{The Ethical Soundscape}.

\textsuperscript{281} For example, the on-going violence in Iraq was often invoked by \textit{mulla\breve{y}at} and participants. \textit{Mulla\breve{y}at} prayed for Iraq in the closing \textit{du‘a}. Female attendees discussed politics, the war and violence before and after mourning gatherings. One day, at the \textit{husayniyya} Zayn al-Abid\breve{in}, an elder \textit{‘alawiyya} explained after the \textit{majlis} that Iraqis are in a better situation than others to understand the suffering of the \textit{ahl al-bayt} because they themselves has suffered at the hands of oppression. Fieldnotes, Sunday, 24 August 2008.
impinge upon surfaces and shape bodies. Drawing on Ahmed’s notion that ‘affect impinges’ subjects, I argue that affect in Sayyida Zaynab can take at least two performative modes. It can ‘perform labour’ (‘amal) in the sense of ‘operate’ [on others and relationships with others] in two ways: It can “stir, be stirred up, be aroused, be excited,” (thāra) or it may “make an impression, have influence” (aththara). The first comes from the root ‘th – ā – r,’ which is also the root for the word ‘revolution’ (thawra). The idea of ‘revolution’ is central to Shi‘ism as it recalls not only the ‘Revolution of Husayn,’ the Battle of Karbala (in 680 CE), but also the ongoing preparation for the Mahdi’s coming revolution. The second, which derives from the root ‘a – th – r’ can, as a noun (athār), designate ‘traces’ or ‘tradition.’ Speech that leaves traces, kalām mu‘aththir, makes listeners reflective.

The duality of aththara and thāra echoes but also elaborates the dual interpretations of the Karbala Paradigm employed by Kamran Aghaie, Lara Deeb, and Sophia Pandya. According to Aghaie, Deeb, and Pandya, there has been a shift from ‘traditional’ or ‘salvific’ interpretations to ‘revolutionary’ interpretations over the course of the latter half of the 20th century. My caveat with their view of the Karbala Paradigm is that the two modes should not be seen as necessarily mutually exclusive. Similarly to the two modes of affect, ‘traditional’ and ‘revolutionary’ interpretations should be seen as complimentary and interdependent. In what follows below (as well as in the next chapter on ‘Ashura) I show how both modes of affect and interpretation

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283 Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 644-645. (‘amal: work, execute, operate)
284 Ibid., 109.
285 Ibid., 3-4.
286 Notably, the concept of rebellion, which the term thawra connotes, differs and overlaps with ‘revolution’ or inqilāb. The difference seems clear, in usage the difference is one of modality and emphasis. To illustrate: in English, the 1979 Iranian Revolution is usually called that – a revolution. In Arabic, the same event is referred to as the thawra Iraniyya, which emphasizes the angry, agitated aspect of rebellion/revolution. In contrast, inqilāb literally means ‘a change of heart,’ which can go deeper than, for example, the agitated rebellion of a teenager. Yet, one wonders if this idea simply echoes a linguistic interpretation, which also happened to be invoked by the Syrian B’ath Party when it referred to the b’athification of Syria.
288 Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala; Deeb, An Enchanted Modern; Pandya, “Women’s Shi’i Ma’atim in Bahrain.”
permeate mourning gatherings, relationships between saints and devotees, and mediated Shi’i latmiyyāt and mawalīd.

I brought up the binary of thāra and athṭara for discussion with Um Muhammad at the Zaynabiyya after class one day. Um Muhammad was a mid-30s mother of three sons, one of whom is in a wheelchair. She was a high school English teacher before she fell in love, married another teacher, and became a stay-at-home mother. Um Muhammad liked the idea: “Muharram mourning rituals encompass both, the lesson leaves traces (athār) and make you think and the nā’i and latmiyyat agitate and ignite (muthīr) participants.”289 For her, the two modalities of affect were like two sides of the same coin.

Similarly emphasizing the role of affect in mourning gatherings, Um Zahra and ‘alawiyya Mardhiya, two important mullayāt who regularly perform in Sayyida Zaynab, explained that the main goal of a mullaya is to affect the attendees, the mukhadirīn, and to make them cry (bukā), or at least pretend to cry (tabāki).290 They claimed that it is an ethical act to cause the audience to respond and cry, because it helps Shi’is to ‘soften their hearts.’291 As mullaya Um Zahra put it, she who has a ‘hardened heart’ can not be convinced or affected by religious speech or advice. The Qur’anic archetypal oppressor is the tyrannical Pharaoh, who is described as having a ‘hardened heart’ twice, in Q 10: 88 and Q 40: 35. Striving to soften one’s own heart and becoming more receptive to affective rituals metaphorically signifies the process of becoming a pious subject. Pious Shi’is, according to this view, must cultivate sensibilities such as being open and receptive to the agitation and the traces of ritual mourning gatherings.292


292 Notably, mawalīd gatherings, held on or near the Islamic date of the birth of one of the Infallibles and Sayyida Zaynab, do not include lectures (to make participants reflect). When I asked Um Zahra about it, she told me that no one wants to think (yufakkir) on happy occasions. ‘Thinking’ has side-connotations of reflecting on and remembering something sad.

Fieldnotes, Saturday, 21 November 2009; Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 724-725.
As noted above, Anisa Salma advised her students to choose friends carefully, as those around us ‘affect’ us, agitate us, and make us think. Salma’s concept of friendship wherein friends help each other on the path to becoming more pious resembles Aristotelian notions of friendship. For Aristotle, there are three kinds of friendship: the first “derives from mutual utility, [the second] derives from mutual pleasure,” and the third, highest form of friendship is one where the relationship “derives from a shared concern for goods which are the goods of both and therefore exclusively of neither.” The ideal form of friendship, thus, is one where the parties share a common telos, a goal, both ‘fi sabīl li-llah,’ (for the sake of God) and the cultivation of pious virtues. Friends, for Anisa Salma, ought to help each other strive to become more pious. Similarly to Shi‘i views, such as Salma’s, ideal Aristotelian forms of friendship and the successful cultivation of particular virtues are necessary for attaining human happiness, satisfaction or contentment. The point I want to draw attention to is that the Aristotelian notion of friendship values the common striving for common goods above ‘getting to know one another.’ In other words, the notion that friends should get to know one another is ideologically tied to particular conceptions of individualism that assume the existence of an essential self, which must be excavated for the attainment of happiness. In Sayyida Zaynab, the emphasis on common pious goals is generally given priority over the notion that one should get to know one another’s ‘secrets.’

3.1.2 Affective (un)truths

Walking home from the seminary, Amal and I would occasionally buy falafel sandwiches or camel kebabs from small shops along the main road. Invariably, shop-owners wanted to engage

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293 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 158.

294 Fieldnotes, class on ‘Usul al-kāfī, Wednesday, 28 October 2009.


us in small talk, and asking where we were from. My default answer was always Germany, which was both true and politically neutral. Amal had a much more difficult time. Since she wore niqāb, the face-veil, people often assumed she was from the Gulf. This assumption generally meant that they would raise prices, so it was in her best interest to tell storeowners that she was from Syria. Yet, she did not want to tell them that she was a local, a Palestinian who had grown up in Sayyida Zaynab, converted to Shi‘ism, and married a non-Arab. She was afraid they would talk, and her family who was not very happy with her conversion or her marriage would hear the gossip and get upset. In order to diffuse the situation, she would generally lie about her identity. She told them she was Syria, from another town known for its Shi‘i population. When I asked her about why she would lie to these storeowners, she explained that she did not want to give anyone an opportunity to talk about her or her family. Moreover, she elaborated that she did not owe these sellers the truth. They had the right to ask, and she had the right to lie.

Put differently, emphasizing the effect of speech over the truthful content of speech means that speaking the truth does not carry the same weight in Shi‘ism as it does, for instance, in early modern Christianity (at least, according to Michel Foucault’s interpretation). As a minority among Muslims, which has at times faced persecution, Shi‘is have had to deny their identity in order to survive. Therefore, they do not consider the truth as that which ‘sets you free.’ This does not mean that religious truth and the quest for religious truth is unimportant. Rather, it positions truth not as that which must be uncovered, but as that (as noted above), which has to be earned. The idea of hiding or even denying one’s Shi‘i identity in case of danger is most widely known as taqiyya or kitmān. In Sayyida Zaynab, Shi‘is and Sunnis, Palestinians, Iraqis, and

297 Had I told them I was from the United States or from Canada, I would probably been drawn into a long debate about the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or even about American support for Israel.


299 While Shi‘ism emphasizes taqiyyah, Foucault focuses on confession.


Notably, taqiyya is etymologically related to taqwa, which roughly translates as ‘piety’ but carries the connotations of ‘preserving,’ ‘safe-guarding,’ or ‘defending.’ Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 1094–1095.
others, guard and keep secrets in order to preserve their privacy, honour, and their safety. Nevertheless, people ask very direct and even detailed questions about one another. As Amal explained to me, “people have the right to ask, and it is rude not to answer people when they ask, but I also have the right to conceal [i.e. lie about] my identity.” It is better to lie, which is polite, than not to answer a question.

“People here force you to lie!” Um Aus, an Iraqi widow and refugee in Syria, was not the only one who said this to me. She had been forced to leave her home in Baghdad by the Jaysh al-Mahdi, a Shi‘i militia headed by Muqtada Sadr, the son of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Sadr and son-in-law of the late Ayatollah Baqir Sadr. They had forced her to leave because her late husband had been Sunni, even though she herself is Shi‘i. She told me her story, though she said she had not told it to anyone in Syria. As if testing her own patience while living in Syria, she attended the hawza Sadrayn (the hawza of the two Sadors: Muhammad Sadr and Baqir Sadr), part of the same organization which had driven her from her home. When asked how she was able to keep silent – ‘to live a lie’ – she explained that as an ‘honourable’ woman and homemaker one has to inhabit multiple roles anyways: cleaning lady, mother, teacher, cook, entertainer, and lover.

Discontinuities do not constitute a problem per se when the ‘truth,’ which people strive towards especially in the context of establishing friendships, is concerned more with ideal goods, a common pious telos, rather than revealing ‘secret’ truths about oneself or loved ones. Shifting the focus of conversations and relationships to religious truths, virtues, and ideals, allows individuals to act ‘as if’ they conformed to particular values and simultaneously maintain privacy, remain silent about their own shortcomings. These conversations are indicative of ethics, hopes, and dreams.

301 Fieldnotes, Friday, 8 August 2008.


303 Lisa Wedeen (1999) explains that everyone in Syria must act ’as if’ they believed in B’ath propaganda.
Lying about oneself is often considered a white lie, a minor sin. Ghadeer, an educated, mid-20s Damascene Sunni, explained, that “it is preferable to lie than to give others occasion to gossip.” For both Ghadeer and Um Aus telling a white lie is morally defensible if it prevents becoming the object of other’s gossip and preserves one’s reputation. As a form taqiyyah (or ‘dissimulation’ in order to protect oneself), telling a ‘white lie’ may leave fewer traces on one’s reputation or relationships; it may agitate individuals and relationships less than the ‘factual truth.’ Thus, the morally reprehensible act for them is gossip, not lying about one’s own identity. Gossip, unlike the appropriation of pious ideals (i.e. lying about one self and denying one’s moral shortcomings), is a destructive form of speech, which can destroy reputations and even lives.

Recognizing the potentially negative effects speech, teachers at the Zaynabiyya seminary’s summer class emphasize the reprehensibility of telling or listening to gossip and music. ‘Alawiyya ‘Aliya, the Zaynabiyya seminary’s women’s fiqh teacher, and Um Haydar, the principal, repeatedly cautioned students by quoting a hadith: “He who gossips, eats the flesh of the one he talks about.” The one who gossips earns the punishment for the act of eating and implicitly killing a human being. ‘Alawiyya ‘Aliya explained that gossip and music are similar in that they affect and agitate. They awaken impious desires (yu’aththir). They are intensities that impress, leave traces (athār). Their speech imprints itself on listeners. She echoed Anisa


Even in the Ten Commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy, believers are told “not to bear false witness” against others, which is commensurable with gossip, but not with lying about one’s own identity.

Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 8 July 2008.

Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 5 August 2008 and Saturday, 9 August 2008.

Fieldnotes, Saturday, 12 July 2008.

The Arabic terms are the terms of my interlocutors.
Salma: TV shows, gossip and music leave traces and agitate. Friends too can leave traces and agitate. A friend, whether fallible and infallible, can help a Shi‘i become more or less pious. By speaking about religious ideals, individuals safeguard their privacy and safety, and expose themselves to pious influences.

3.2 Ritualized mourning

One of the most important ethical and affective practices in Sayyida Zaynab is the weekly mourning gathering (majālis ‘azā’), wherein Shi‘is mourn the oppression and deaths of the Imams (especially Imam al-Husayn who died at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE). According to Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi, the brother of Sayyid Hasan Shirazi, the founder of the Zaynabiyya seminary in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, these mourning gatherings are important because they transmit sha‘ā’ir husayniyya.\textsuperscript{310} Sha‘ā’ir, the plural of sh‘ar, derives from a verb meaning to know, realize, perceive and feel.\textsuperscript{311} As a noun, it refers to both intuitive knowledge and poetry. In both pre-Islamic Arabia and early Shi‘ism, the recitation of poetry carried the weight of history – or may even be considered a ‘modality of history’ – by reminding listeners of past events and their resulting responsibilities.\textsuperscript{312} In this vein, Sayyida Zaynab spread the news of the killing of her brother Imam Husayn, by reciting sha‘ā’ir husayniyya (which Shi‘i women in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab claim to be re-enacting today). By using a specific style of ‘recitation’ (qirā’a), the poetic lament (nā‘i), Zaynab not only transmitted (athar\textsuperscript{313})

\textsuperscript{310} Muhammad Shirazi, \textit{Al-sha‘ā’ir al-husayniyya} (Beirut: Dar al-Sadiq, 1998).

\textsuperscript{311} Wehr, \textit{A Dictionary of Modern Arabic}, 473-474.


\textsuperscript{313} The term is derived from ‘a-th-r,’ \textit{yu’athar}, to transmit or report; note that traces and impressions, \textit{athār}, are derived from the same root verb. Wehr, \textit{A Dictionary of Modern Arabic}, 3-4.
news (in)forming her pious listeners, but also moved and agitated her listeners (athāratahun), reminding them of their duties towards the Prophet and the Imams, and establishing an affective relationship between them. Mourning and crying for Husayn, thus, converts a historical account into a deeply affective kind of knowledge which makes particular demands upon Shi‘is.

According to mullaya Um Zahra, the mullaya affects those who listen (ideally, with a trained ear) and respond to the emotional (‘abra) and ethico-philosophical content (‘ibra) of her performance. Writing on similarly affective and aesthetic performances, Jonathan Shannon explains that in classical Arabic music (tarāb) performers and audience must respond to one another for the gathering to be deemed successful. Similarly to a successful virtuoso of classical Arabic music, a mullaya must be able to read her audience and respond appropriately through improvisation. Mourning gatherings are comparable to other performative arts that rely on improvisation. As ‘alawiyya Mardhiya, the main mullaya of the Zaynabiyya, explained during one of her khitaba lessons: the different parts can be elaborated or shortened depending on the occasion and the audience.

Participation in commemorative ritual is both a means for attaining and an expression of piety as the mullaya compels her audience to respond and further exemplifies how this should be done. Mullayāt regularly address the issue of how one should properly respond: attendees should feel saddened and cry at mourning gatherings. Mullaya Um Zaynab told her audience often: “If you can’t cry, pretend to cry (tabāki)! Performing tabāki carries the same divine reward as crying and will, insha allah, help you to cry effortlessly one day.” Pulling one’s abaya (black over-garment) or scarf over one’s face, or simply hiding one’s face in one’s hands and acting ‘as if’ one cried is not only acceptable, but a necessary step towards becoming a better, more pious

314 The term is derived from ‘th-a/w-r,’ yathūru, to incite; note that revolution and revolt, thawra, are derived from the same root verb. Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 109.

315 Um Zahra told me more than once after a majlis: “Edith, don’t forget that the majlis is both ‘ibra and ‘abra.” Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 21 January 2009 and Sunday, 1 February 2009.

316 Cf. Shannon, Among the Jasmine Trees.


318 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 1 January 2009 and Saturday, 14 November 2009.
Shi‘i. *Tabāki* does not mean to ‘pretend’ to cry in the sense that one cries without feeling any sorrow over the deaths of the *ahl al-bayt*. It does not imply insincerity. It is not a lie. Rather, *tabāki* as Sayyid Hasan Shirazi writes “approximates crying and there is voice and the disturbance of facial muscles, in movement and the beating of one’s chest.” It displays a desire for the external expression of grief to conform to the internal grief, which Shi‘is are expected to feel when listening to the Battle of Karbala. Pretending to cry is expected to affect not only the individual performing *tabāki*, but also those who hear *tabāki*. It is an affective practice, that helps produce the truth it simulates.

Beyond concentrating on the *mullaya*’s heart wrenching performance, it also helps to have lived through difficult times. For example, after a particularly moving *majlis* (it literally ‘moved’ the participants: there was practically no *khutba*, but the *mullaya* performed several *latmiyyāt* which ‘moved’ many women in the audience to stand up and forcefully slap their faces), an elderly Iraqi woman came up to the *mullaya* and told her: “*Rahmallah wāldaych!* (May God have mercy on your parents [for raising such a talented *mullaya* as yourself]!) But if it were not for our suffering, our tragedies (*masāʿ ibna*), the tragedy of [the siblings] Husayn and Zaynab would not affect us (*yu’aththir ‘alayna*).” Having suffered through several wars and having lost loved ones, therefore, helps Shi‘is empathize with the *ahl al-bayt*. It also means that while it is important that a *mullaya* has a sad voice, it is equally important that listeners are able to imagine and feel the pain of others which is easier if they have themselves experienced loss.

As mourning gatherings are the most important means of becoming for pious for Shi‘is, scholars, ayatollahs, *marāj‘a al-taqlīd* try to help Shi‘is by sponsoring *majālis* at their offices and seminaries. The Zaynabiyya, for instance, hosts weekly *majālis* for men and women separately. On special occasions, during Ramadan or Muharram, the Shirazis hold daily ritual gatherings as well. Fadhllallah’s Haydariyya has weekly men’s *majālis*, which women may listen to from a balcony. Minor *hawzāt* (such as the *hawza* Bani Hashim and Tabrizi’s *hawza* Imam Jawad) allow women to watch the men’s *majlis* during Muharram live on television screens hung from the ceiling. There are some *husayniyyāt* which are *awqāf*, religious endowments, and which host

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319 Shirazi, *Al-shaʾāʾir al-ḥusayniyya*, 60. All translations unless otherwise noted are my own.

weekly women’s majālis. The thawāb, reward of the majālis held at waqf husayniyyāt benefits both participants and the deceased who made the endowment. While a mullaya may perform at more than one husayniyya and in private homes, at the end of her majlis, in her final du‘a, she acknowledges the patrons and dedicates the majlis and its thawāb (reward) to the hosts. Ambitious ‘ulama gain legitimacy through hosting ritual gatherings and this allows them to direct if not specify the content of the majlis.

3.2.1 Majālis ‘Azā’

The majlis begins when the mullaya ascends the minbar. At private homes, this means that the mullaya takes her seat on a chair covered with a black cloth, while the others sit on the floor or on low cushions. At husayniyyāt, halls specifically dedicated to mourning gatherings, the minbar often has several wide steps. Generally, the mullaya will not sit on top, but on one of the lower steps. Um Isa, a mullaya in training, explained that because the minbar symbolically belongs to Husayn, sitting on the steps symbolizes the mullaya’s status as a ‘servant of Husayn.’ Yet, the fact that male religious leaders do sit on the top step of the minbar, further means that the mullaya’s seating also signifies her lower rank (in contrast to male mullahs or shaykhs). Case in point, at the hawza Zaynabīyya there is a portrait of the current leader of the Shirazi network, Ayatollah Sadiq Shirazi, on the top step above the mullaya.

The mullaya may begin with reading a ziyārah, a ‘visitation prayer’ for the particular member of the Prophet’s family to be mourned during the gathering. Ziyarāt are standardized prayer-formulas, which can be found in the two most important Shi‘i prayer books: Mafātīh al-jīnān and Diya’ al-sālihīn. Alternately, a mullaya may begin with a slow latmiyya, a mourning chant accompanied by rhythmic chest beating (though many women will slap their hands on their knees or thighs instead of their chests). Following this introduction, the mullaya reads salawāt,

321 The following description is a generalized account based on five khitāba (preaching) and khitaba husayniyya (lamentation) courses and dozens of mourning gatherings I attended in Syria. On a weekly basis, I attended three to four mourning gatherings (outside of Muharram).


greetings to the Prophet’s family, the *ahl al-bayt*, which includes a short formulaic description of their oppression and ends with the wish “*ya laytana kunna ma’kum fa-nafuzu fawzan ʿadhīman*” (literally, “we wish we had been with you [at the Battle of Karbala], then we would have won a glorious victory”). The *salawāt* are usually chanted in the manner of a dirge. They set the mood melodically and pre-shadow the *nāʿi* lament, which follows later. Though this *nāʿi* is short, many women pull their *abayāt*, black outer garments, over their faces as if practicing, readying themselves for the mourning to come later in the ritual gathering.

Next, the *mullaya* introduces the topic of her lesson by either quoting a verse from the Qur’an or a relevant hadith (saying by the Prophet or one of the Twelve Imams). As part of her talk, the *mullaya* may address doctrinal or legal questions. For example, during Muharram 2009, Um Haydar, the principal of the Zaynabiyya, addressed the permissibility of women entering Zaynab’s shrine while menstruating, during *majlis*.

In one of her *khitaba* classes, *ʿalawiyya* ‘Aliya, a teacher at the Shirazi seminary, explained that the preacher or *mullaya* should keep the lesson short. She should engage her audience through interesting stories and she should talk about something useful. For example, it is useless to tell an audience of veiled women to veil. When preaching to a pious congregation, one should talk about the importance of praying on time, rather than simply on the necessity of praying. Ideally, *mullayāt* and preachers should adapt their sermons or lessons to interests of her audience. To further illustrate this point, ‘Aliya related the following story: “There was once a shaykh who went to hold ritual mourning gatherings in a rural community. To his surprise, his audience did not respond to his lamenting chant as he held his first *majlis*. Disappointed, he asked his hosts whether his voice was lacking. The host assured the shaykh, that his chant was beautiful. The shaykh thought for a while and then asked the host: what are the main occupations in the town. The answer was animal husbandry. The next day, the shaykh retold the Karbala story in a local idiom. He explained that the cattle of Yazid killed the animals of Husayn. And the audience

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324 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 12 February 2009.

325 In a sense, ‘authenticated and modern’ mourning gatherings are simply gatherings where the talk has become central and the other parts have been reduced to a minimum.

326 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 30 July 2008.
wept almost immediately!” When ‘Aliya finished the story, the seminary students laughed. The ‘comic’ intercession of animals, in a metaphorical and narrative sense, established a perceived superiority among seminarians by equating those ‘other’ audiences with their beloved livestock.327 Ironically, it is usually the students and teachers of the Zaynabiyya who are labelled ‘backward’ and ‘irrational’ by others, such as those ‘following’ (muqallidīn) Ayatollah Khamenei and Fadhlallah.

Muqtada Sadr’s followers in Sayyida Zaynab use nationalist rhetoric to discredit the Shirazis among Iraqis. At the Zaynabiyya, many teachers and mullayāt know Farsi, and sometimes speak it amongst themselves, establishing a linguistic elite. When addressing their audience, however, they adopt shrūġī, a southern Iraqi Arabic dialect, and thereby lay claim on ‘Iraqiness.’ This is not to say that the entire majlis is recited in shrūġī. For example, the mullaya recites hadith and Qur’anic verses in classical Arabic. According to ‘alawiyya ‘Aliya, the khutba may be lengthened or shortened and should be delivered in a mix of fusha (Modern Standard Arabic) and shrūğa.328 The khutba is usually delivered in fusha, though interjected short stories in the khutba may be retold in either shrūģī or the local (Syrian) ‘amiyya (colloquial Arabic) in order to be more affective. The lament following the khutba becomes increasingly shrūģī. In a sense, fusha denotes that which is rational, official, objectified, and other. The khutba in fusha is a message from above, a patronizing order. In contrast, the lament, recited in the voice of Sayyida Zaynab (who is lamenting the death of her parents and her brothers), identifies with Shi‘i women, with the down and out, the suffering masses.

After the khutba, the mullaya chants a poetic narrative describing a particular saint, a qasīda, and then to the musība, the tragedy. Through reciting a poetic story, the mullaya explains how a particular member of the ahl al-bayt exemplifies a particular virtue. Then the mullaya chants in fusha about the musība, how this particular saint suffered unjustly, undeservedly using nā‘ī, a melodic lament.329 The structure of the majlis evokes feelings of moral outrage. It stirs up

327 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 9 July 2008.
328 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 30 July 2008.
outrage, provoking listeners, prompting them to take sides, and to follow the ahl al-bayt’s moral examples.

The nāʿī, which conveys the musība, covers a range of lament styles, which follow a set order (wanna, tahlīs, muthaqqaqal), but allows for improvisations within the parameters of this form. An accomplished mullaya has memorized stories and thousands of lines of mourning poetry, which help her improvise. Yet few improvise entirely and most continue to use collections such as “Majmuʿa masāʾ ib ahl al-bayt” by Shaykh Muhammad al-Hindawi. In contrast to the khutbah, the nāʿī is generally in shrūgī, the Southern Iraqi colloquial Arabic.

For mullaya ʿalawiyya Mardhiya a good, strong, and implicitly affective and popular mullaya evokes softness (hanān), tenderness, and yearning (hanīn) in listeners. In order to do this, a mullaya must have mastered the language of her audience, in this case fusha as well as ʿamiyya. She needs to be able to respond appropriately to her audience, she needs to speak to them in their specificity. Moreover, she must train and maintain her voice. In her khitāba class, Anisa ʿAliya explained that mullayāt and khatībahāt, for instance, should not drink milk before their performance, because it causes phlegm. They should not smoke cigarettes. They should drink lots of water, with lemon and honey.

Though the emphasis lies on the mullaya, she is not solely responsible for the felicitous performance of majālis. Participants are expected to noisily, actively lament and cry during the


331 Fieldnotes, Summer 2008. ‘Alawiyya Mardhiya used this collection to teach khitaba classes to interested women. Even for writing a khutba, there are manuals, which are for sale at local bookstores. However, most mullayāt eventually write their own talks or pair up with a dedicated khatibah (a woman preacher), who writes her own speeches.

332 In this, the majālis in Sayyida Zaynab differ from the self-consciously ‘modern and revolutionary’ majālis in Lebanon, which use Modern Standard Arabic. See: Deeb, Enchanted Modern, 144-146.


334 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 6 August 2008.
nā’i in response to the mullaya’s chant. As noted above, mullayāt occasionally remind attendees that tabāki (to ‘cry without producing tears’) carries the same heavenly reward as crying (bukā’) does.335 A Shi’i practicing tabāki bodily imitates crying in order to become able to cry, in order to produce tears. The audience learns how to properly respond to a mullaya with practice.336 Each constantly responds to the other, the mullaya and her attendees. In this sense, the mourning gathering constitutes a participatory act, an aesthetic and ethical project.337

The majority of women who attend majālis regularly wear abayāt, wide black cloaks.338 When the time comes for crying, many pull their abayāt over their faces. In this way, women cannot see each other cry, though they can hear each other, sigh and moan. When I participated, I felt that sitting covered in my black abaya, away from lights and prying gazes, enhanced my hearing. The visual privacy enabled me to focus on the aural, the poetic imagery and the emotion in the mullaya’s voice.

To signal the end of her nā’i, the mullaya invariably recites the formula usually invoked when hearing the news of someone’s death: “Inna li-llāh wa inna ilayhi rā’ji’ūn,” (“we are from/belong to God and to him we return”). As if on cue, women cease their lament, dry their tears, pull back their abayāt, and uncover their faces. There are some with teary eyes; many others however have dry eyes. The transition into latmiyya allows for a few poetic lines of improvisation. To set the beat, the mullaya herself or her helper may clap her hands, or clap the cover of a book she used for the story or the nā’i.


336 Similarly to Walter Benjamin’s Storyteller, the mullaya helps ‘fashion experience’ through a process of ‘sedimentation.’ Hirschkind, Ethical Soundscape, 26.

337 It is an aesthetic project in Susan Buck-Morss’s sense. Reflecting on Walter Benjamin’s “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Buck-Morss notes that aesthetics comes from “the ancient Greek word for that which is ‘perceptive by feeling.’ Aisthikos is the sensory experience of perception… It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell – the whole corporeal sensorium.” (Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” October 62 (1992): 6.) In other words, majālis constitute an aesthetic project because they aim to produce a particular kind of sensory experience and hone the participants’ perceptions.

338 These abayāt are worn as outer garments and extend from head to toe. The Iraqi abaya (which is considered to be the more ‘traditional’ one) is made of eight square meters which makes it quite heavy and wide. The trendier Gulf style abaya requires less cloth; it is narrower and lighter.
During weekly majālis, a mullaya may limit herself to two or three latmiyyāt, while during specific death anniversaries or during Muharram she may chant more latmiyyāt. The first latmiyya following nā’i is usually slow and each subsequent latmiyya is faster in tempo. If the majlis is held during Muharram or on the exact death anniversary of an Imam the latmiyyāt may be elaborated. On ordinary days, the women in the audience will beat their chest and perhaps during the last latmiyya, some will slap their cheeks lightly while kneeling in a circle. During Muharram and other important dates, the mullaya may ask the women to stand and form a circle. In this circle, women may hop up and down while slapping their cheeks and foreheads, or beating their chests. Younger unmarried women often remove their scarves and swing their hair back and forth as an act of mourning. These bodily acts of mourning which Shi‘i women participate in are not (usually) bloody, though they are physically demanding and very much opposed to particular modern notions of physical discipline.339

The mourning gathering culminates in a du‘a, that ‘turns around’ the majlis in a number of ways: The mullaya’s minbar does not necessarily have to face any particular direction. At the Zaynabiyya’s women’s husayniyya (and at the husayniyya Abu al-Fadhl ‘Abbas), the minbar is located at the northern most point of the hall. Hence, the mullaya faces south, the direction of the qibla, but many in her audience sit with their backs to Mecca. The first few words of these du‘a are thus accompanied by a shuffling, by a physical as well as temporal re-orientation. The majlis commemorates a continuous past. The du‘a signals the future, the coming of the Mahdi and unites the congregation in their affirmation of loyalty and allegiance (bay‘a) to the Mahdi. Finally, the mullaya asks her audience to “salli ‘ala Muhammad” (“pray for/bless Muhammad”) to which the audience responds by saying: “allahumma salli ‘ala Muhammad wa āl-i Muhammad,” (“oh God, we pray for Muhammad and the family of Muhammad”). Then she asks everyone to recite Surah Fatiha for the benefit of the founders/sponsors of the majlis and for themselves, for the sake of healing and for the fulfillment of their needs. Sometimes women

339 During Muharram mourning gatherings at the Zaynabiyya and at Um Zahra’s private Muharram majālis, teenage girls and young women regularly pulled off their scarves and joined the frenzied circle, which formed in front of the mullaya. Such circles in which women slapped their cheeks formed at other gatherings occasionally, but it was only during Muharram or other important death anniversaries that women stood up and moved around the circle while slapping their cheeks. At the Zaynabiyya, one or two women fainted during Muharram majālis, yet the volunteer ‘servants of Husayn’ tried to calm ecstatic participants. Passionate self-flagellation and devotion were both encouraged and controlled.
with pressing needs, such as a loved one in critical health, may ask the mullaya to ask everyone to respond to another “salli ‘ala Muhammad” and recite Surah Fatiha. As the women whisper and mumble the Fatiha, some leave or move around, but most sit down to wait for tea and dry biscuits. The mullaya may make a few announcements, and the women start chatting with neighbours and friends.

Weekly mourning gatherings go through cycles of affect. They begin with a slow, ‘heavy’ chant. After this initial ‘impression,’ the mullaya transmits a lesson, which ends in nā’i. Through nā’i, devotees descend into crying or tabāki, an emotional, cathartic low. Then, they ascend via latmiyyāt to a rhythmic crescendo. Finally, the ritual ends in a sudden stillness, a redirection, and a plea for the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam, to return.340

3.2.2 While waiting
Before and after the majlis, women talk, sit, and wait around. They spend time at the husayniyya.341 They wait for their friends, for tea and ka’ak, plain dried biscuits. They wait for maghrib (sunset), to pray at the husayniyya. On a larger scale, as many of the women are Iraqi asylum seekers and live in uncertainty, they wait for a better future. They wait for the war to end. They wait to be resettled and to find out how their lives will continue.

For Shi’i women like Um Muhammad waiting takes on religious meanings. “There is useless waiting. Some Iraqis simply sit at home and pass their time with watching TV. Then there are those who spend their time studying and attending religious gatherings. But let us say that you

340 In her work on Shi’i women’s mourning rituals in Lebanon, Lara Deeb juxtaposes ‘traditional’ and ‘modern and authenticated’ majālis. She explains that in ‘traditional’ mourning gatherings the mullaya lays more emphasis on emotion, on crying and aesthetics. The ‘modern and authenticated’ majlis in contrast emphasizes clarity, understanding, and historical accuracy. My caveat with this binary is that it implicitly accords higher pedagogic value to authenticated majālis and hold that both styles can be pedagogically affective. Both ‘traditional’ and ‘authenticated’ mourning gatherings can leave traces, agitate, and transmit discursive traditions. However, their effects may differ. ‘Modern and authenticated’ gatherings differ from ‘traditional’ ones in their bodily practices, in the somatic modes of attention they require. Both are examples of religious pedagogy, albeit informed by different conceptions of what bodily hexis should accompany, indeed, constitute learning. Cf. Starrett, “The Hexis of Interpretation,” 953-969.

341 At the Zaynabiyya, female students tended to take off shortly after seminary classes were over at 11:30 am. Most of my classmates rushed off to reach home before their children returned from school and start lunch.
are sitting and waiting for a majlis to happen, even if the majlis never happens, God yusajjiluh (records it) as if you had attended the majlis. Thus, it was still not useless waiting.” Um Muhammad, an Iraqi mother of three and a fourth year seminary student, illustrated her point with a story. “Once upon a time, there was a man who wanted to hold a majlis, but none of his friends had time. He finally convinced his closest friend to come and they started. The friend complained that no one had come. Nevertheless, the man said: ‘Let us start the qirāya (the reading of the masāʾib, the majlis).’ As soon as they began, they heard the crying of a woman. Fatima Zahra [the infallible daughter of the Prophet] had joined them.” Um Muhammad went on explaining that even waiting at the hawza means that you have added to the number of those who follow the ahl al-bayt. Then, she emphasized her point through another story: A man woke up blind one day. He had seen a dream and in his dream, he was at Karbala and saw himself on a hill on the side of Yazid. He was scared and so he did not take part in the battle but stayed back and watched from the hill. Then Husayn came to him: “Why did you fight against me?” “But I didn’t!” “By the very fact that you stayed on that side, you added to their number.” Then Um Muhammad asked me: “Didn’t Yazid have 70,000 and Husayn only 70 men? Husayn was outnumbered, but nevertheless, every single one counts.”

According to Um Muhammad, waiting, sitting around, and spending time at seminaries and husayniyyāt is not a ‘waste of time’ in itself. “For example, my sitting with you, counts insha allah towards thawāb (or reward) because we are speaking about religious matters. The value of waiting depends on your niyyah (or intention).” For her, waiting is part of life and it necessarily affects her life. As such, the central questions for her are first, how pious Shi‘is ought to spend their time waiting and secondly, what is it that Shi‘is ought to be waiting for? Even beyond returning to Iraq or resettling elsewhere, it is crucial according to Um Muhammad for Shi‘is to realize that they are actually waiting for the return of the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, who will return at the end of time. Moreover, Um Muhammad noted that waiting for the Mahdi requires adab or etiquette, which is similar to a student’s etiquette when she is waiting for her teacher. For instance, a student should wipe the board or go over the notes from the last class

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while waiting for the teacher. Similarly, Shi’is must actively prepare while waiting for the Mahdi.

While discussing and learning about religious topics may be an ideal, I found that Shi’i women often talked about much more mundane matters. For example, topics, which women would frequently discuss at majālis included: immigration, NGOs, politics, and violence. It is even a common discussion among non-Iraqis. Many Syrian Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab have family in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, or Kuwait. At a private majlis during the arba’īn of 2009, I met several Syrian women married to Iraqi men. One woman had married an Iraqi man who had lived in the USA for several years. He had promised to take her with him, but she has been waiting now for five years. He comes to visit and they have three children. There are others: they became the second wives to Iraqi men who needed residency permits in Syria (which also allow them to work in order to provide for all of their wives and children). If these men are then recognized as refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, their entire family receives stipends until they are resettled to a third (usually Western European or North American) country. As these re-settler countries do not recognize polygamous marriages, the second, Syrian wife is left behind. If she remains married, she receives a base monthly stipend and a small per-child allowance. This keeps her in a limbo. She is unable to join her husband and yet financially enticed to remain tied to him and have children.

While waiting for food after a private, Syrian style majlis, one of the older women approached the mullaya: “Can you do istikhāra (a halal form of divination) for my appointment with

344 For example, the women at the hawza Sadrayn often discussed their UNHCR visits before and after class. (Most of the students at Sadrayn were Iraqi women applying for resettlement to Europe or North America). At the Zaynabīyya, women students would talk about NGOs and their services during the breaks.

345 Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 13 January 2009 and Thursday, 5 February 2009.

346 It was Syrian style, according to Amal, because it did not include any latmiyyāt. Also, the mullaya spoke in the a Syrian dialect. In Sayyida Zaynab, ‘Iraqi majālis’ are more common than ‘Syrian majālis.’

347 There are different methods that one can use for istikhāra. The two most widely used methods which I encountered in Sayyida Zaynab were bibliomancy and with the use of prayer beads. For bibliomancy, one can either use the Qur’an or special istikhāra booklets that are for sale at seminary bookstores. When using the Qur’an for bibliomancy, one should first be ritually clean and recite the Fatiha. Then, one should open the Qur’an at a random page and interpret whether the first verse on the top right hand corner is a favourable or an unfavourable sign. For
UNHCR tomorrow?\textsuperscript{348} The next woman asked about her daughter’s fertility. Through these questions about subjective truths Shi‘i women seek hopeful answers, as rhetorically and ritually promised in pious mourning gatherings.\textsuperscript{349}

Among Iraqi women, one may hear stories about the war, crime stories about kidnappings, killings, and rape. Once, while attending a private majlis, I overheard a loud conversation wherein a woman was recounting how her husband killed a man in the context of the war and that he is currently in prison.\textsuperscript{350} At another majlis, a middle-age woman said: “We came to Syria because we couldn’t stay in Iraq. Though we are Shi‘i, we were not safe from groups such as the Jaysh al-Mahdi (“the Army of the Mahdi,” Muqtada Sadr’s militia). One day, while I was alone at home with my daughters (i.e. there were no men in the house), a group of armed young men came to my door. I told them to take (i.e. rape) me, but to leave my daughters alone.”\textsuperscript{351} The woman did not say what happened afterwards. Presumably, the men went away, otherwise she probably would not have told us the story. Women rarely told entire stories, perhaps because they were too painful or maybe in order to achieve a more dramatic effect. Despite their instance, verses about heaven are generally considered favourable, whereas verses about hell are considered unfavourable. When using istikhāra booklets, one should similarly open them to a random page (after having recited the Fatiha and having blessed the Prophet). The page will explain whether the action is going to have a positive outcome or not (Khīra al-Sadiq alayhi salam [Beirut, Lebanon: Mu’assasat al-Balagha, 2002]). When using prayer beads, one begins with any random bead and then counts two at a time. If the seeker arrives at the large tassel with one bead to go (i.e. there were uneven numbers of beads) then the action should be performed, otherwise it should be avoided. Notably, at the above mentioned majlis, the mullah used prayer beads in order to perform istikhāra.

\textsuperscript{348} Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 13 January 2009.

\textsuperscript{349} Unlike in Sunni practices of istikhāra, the two above noted Shi‘i methods do not issue warnings. They merely encourage believers to either pursue or refrain from a particular course of action.

\textsuperscript{350} Fieldnotes, Saturday, 5 December 2009.

\textsuperscript{351} Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 21 January 2009.
incompleteness (or perhaps because of it) the stories served as proof of the narrator’s righteous and self-sacrificing suffering.  

Besides simply sharing their pain, complaining about their difficulties, and thereby demonstrating their piety, women also seemed to compete with one another as well as with outsiders. For example, during the spring of 2009, Israel was bombing Gaza while Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab mourned the Battle of Karbala. The topic came up repeatedly at both private and public mourning gatherings. At a private gathering two upper middle class Iraqi women, Miami and Um Hasan, whom I had been talking to at other mourning gatherings as well, were discussing the bombardment of Gaza which had stopped just three days earlier, though humanitarian aid still could not reach the wounded and the needy. There were more than 1200 dead and 5000 wounded. Amal, a Syrian woman who had joined the conversation, felt especially sad for the wounded, many of whom are now blind. “What will they do now?” Miami and the Iraqi woman complained that the news focused on showing wounded, weak children as the main victims of the bombardment of Gaza. When displaying the war in Iraq, they felt, the media had not given poor Iraqi children their fair share of prime time television.  

By talking about their difficulties and even traumatic experiences in Iraq and elsewhere Shi’i women not only bonded with each other, but also demarcated the pious and suffering community. As Emile Durkheim proposes, ritual gathers not only produce community (or communitas, according to Victor Turner) but also mark exclusions. However, exclusions are not absolute. Rather, there are degrees of exclusion and inclusions. In the above mentioned case, Palestinian children are juxtaposed with Iraqi children. Palestinians are doubly outsiders as they are non-Iraqis and non-Shi’is. Militant Iraqi Shi’is who oppress and harass civilians were more problematic. They are Shi’is and they are Iraqis, yet they are clearly not righteous and pious.

352 In his book, “Redemptive Suffering in Islam,” Mahmoud Ayoub writes that the family of the Prophet has the power to intercede with God on behalf of their followers because of their great suffering. Their ability to endure hardships is a mark of their piety. Cf. Mahmoud Ayoub, Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of “Ashura” in Twelver Shi’ism (New York: Mouton, 1978).


The following Syrian proverb aptly conveys the way in which lines are drawn: “It is me against my brother. However, it is my brother and I against our cousin. But when an outsider comes (to create trouble) my cousin and I will stand against the outsider.”

Shi’i women do tell positive stories as well. For instance, conversion stories, miracle narratives, and stories of moral reformation through piety are popular and always welcome before and after mourning gatherings. At the husayniyya Wilayat ‘Ali, attendees sometimes receive plates of food before and sometimes long after the majlis is over. Um J’afar wanted everyone to stand up so that she would lead her last energetic closing latmiyyāt, or mourning chants. However, as the women were just being served bowls of harisa, an older woman spoke up: “No, let us sit!” and so everyone remained seated on the floor. The mullaya recited the closing du’a, and as everyone started laughing and talking, the mullaya’s main helper mullaya pulled out a cigarette. A rare sight! This Iraqi helper mullaya who smoked decided to take over the microphone and share stories. In one story, a woman was handed a glass of water. The woman who was handed the glass of had been sick and when she went to the doctor the next day, there was no illness. She knew the woman who had handed her the water was Zahra.

In another story, a woman needed a leg operation, but was terribly scared of the operation. She had a dream where a woman came to her and said a du’a (a prayer) for her legs. The ill woman felt better the next day and did not go for her operation. When the doctor called and she went, she told him she was all better and the illness was gone. Someone else recounted a story about a young man in prison. His mother received water from Zahra in her dream and gave it to him. He was released the next day. The mullaya herself recounted the last story, which she claimed had happened to her personally. Years ago, after she had given birth to her daughter, she did not have milk. Her mother went to visit ‘Abbas in Karbala to pray for her daughter to have milk and brought her some water from ‘Abbas’ shrine. The next day her breasts filled and she had milk.

354 Harisa is a specifically Levantine dish which is usually served during mourning gatherings and sometimes by Muharram hospitality tents. It consists of chicken and noodles cooked in milk with cinnamon.
After she finished telling her wondrous story, the helper mullaya read a little nāʿī about Fatima Zahra to finish off the story-telling.355

Sharing stories about miracles makes impressions on listeners (athār). They encourage hope and trust in the divine and in the saints. Other stories, such as those about the war in Iraq, stir up anger (thāra), even if they do not necessarily call to action. In either case, they affect listeners and allow listeners to relate viscerally to one another and to the saints through miracle stories.

3.3 Following Shiʿi saints

Stories about saints, whether retold in the context of majālis (as discussed above) or outside of them, can leave traces (athār) and can incite devotees to action (thāra). They can make pious Shiʿis think and feel, and they can arouse Shiʿis, cause them to flagellate and cry. Beyond telling stories, however, how do Shiʿis relate to saints? In a recent article regarding Shiʿi saints as role models, Lara Deeb argues that while men ‘embody’ Husayn, women are called upon to ‘emulate’ Zaynab.356 For her, the accent lies on the male-female distinction. I begin with Deeb’s distinction, but I also elaborate it. Specifically, I argue that gender is not the only analytical difference, which should be taken into account. It is also important to consider a saint’s fallibility or her lack thereof. In other words, if the given role model is an infallible saint, then Shiʿis may aim to ‘embody’ the saint. If the saint is fallible, then Shiʿis ‘emulate’ that saint.357 Moreover, as Shiʿis also devote themselves to saints of the opposite gender, I claim in such cases saints tend to function as patron-saints, rather than role-model, though it is of course also possible to devote oneself to a patron saint of one’s own gender. Unlike in the case of role-models, Shiʿis do not emulate or embody patron saints, but rather relate to them through gifting

355 Fieldnotes, Friday, 9 January 2009.
357 In the case of women, the issue is more complex. The only female infallible saint is Fatima, who died young. Moreover, in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, Zaynab (a fallible saint) tends to be favoured above Fatima. As such, Deeb’s distinction that men seek to embody infallible saints, whereas women seek to emulate fallible saints could hold if it were not for ‘Abbas. In Sayyida Zaynab, ‘Abbas (a fallible saint) is more popular that Husayn or ‘Ali, who are both infallible. And Shiʿi men generally seek to emulate rather than embody ‘Abbas.
practices or, specifically in the case of women, by becoming a *mullaya*. In this section, I first discuss how the issue of infallibility affects the ways in which Shi‘is related to saints, and the ways in which male and female devotees embody and emulate saintly role models. Secondly, I examine the ways in which devotees relate to patron saints. Thirdly, I recount the stories of three *mullayāt*; I look how and why they became *mullayāt*, and how they relate to patron saints.

According to Lara Deeb, Shi‘i men in Lebanon are encouraged to embody the infallible Imams (especially ‘Ali and Husayn) by going into battle. I would even go so far as to say that Shi‘i men can only fully embody ‘Ali and Husayn in death, through martyrdom.\(^{358}\) In Sayyida Zaynab, men were not generally encouraged (at least not officially) to go embody the saints by going into battle (whether in Lebanon or Iraq). The women I spoke to admired infallible saints like ‘Ali, but they did not wish their husbands to embody ‘Ali and die as a martyr. For example, Um Isa, a 30-something year old childless but married woman from Basra, whose story is discussed below (under “On becoming a *mullaya*”) feels strongly connected to ‘Ali. She admires ‘Ali for his selflessness, asceticism, and uncompromising idealism. However, being married to a very disciplined and formerly high-ranking military officer, she does not want her lose her husband in war. Moreover, she does not want her husband to become ‘Ali as ‘Ali married multiple women and because he was a notoriously poor man.\(^{359}\)

Unlike in Lebanon, where Husayn and ‘Ali are important male saints, there is another male saint who is much more popular in Sayyida Zaynab: ‘Abbas. According to Yitzhak Nakash, Southern Iraqi tribesmen (like many Shi‘is in Syria, who are for the most part Iraqi Shi‘is,) favour ‘Abbas, a half-brother of Husayn who died at Karbala, because he was loyal and just, but also quick to anger, which reflects ideal Iraqi tribal manhood. ‘Abbas is regarded so highly, that an entire ‘cult’ has developed around him and tribesmen make oaths in ‘Abbas’ name, which are considered binding because ‘Abbas, unlike Husayn, is neither forgiving, nor patient. Should someone break an oath in his name, ‘Abbas reacts quickly since he is “famed for the swiftness of

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\(^{358}\) Embodiment and emulation do not perfectly map onto the modalities of *thāra* and *althara*. However, in a looser sense, one can argue that pious men are ‘aroused’ into action (*thāra*) when embodying infallible saints (and going into battle). In contrast, pious women emulate female saints by become receptive and open to impingement (*athār*) and only by becoming *mullayāt* do Shi‘i women become active in leaving traces on other women.

his vengeance.” Many Iraqi Shi‘is even call ‘Imam ‘Abbas. Yet unlike the other Imams, such as his father ‘Ali and his half-brother Husayn, ‘Abbas is fallible. This means that Shi‘is can both admire him, but they can also question him. ‘Abbas is thus a malleable role model, whose fallibility allows for conversations about loyalty, belonging, piety, and healing. His ideal is not one that Shi‘is seek to embody. I never encountered anyone who claimed that Shi‘is should aim to become ‘Abbas. Rather, Shi‘is generally sought to emulate his positive attributes.

The two most important female saints and role models in Twelver Shi‘ism are the Prophet’s daughter and granddaughter, the infallible Fatima and her daughter Sayyida Zaynab. Both are roughly equally popular as names. Kamran Aghaie and Lara Deeb, among others, argue that there was a shift in both Iran and Lebanon in the latter half of the twentieth century from Fatima to emphasizing Zaynab. The infallible Fatima represents the silent obedient ideal of pious femininity. In contrast, Fatima’s daughter Zaynab is fallible whose behaviour at and after the Battle of Karbala offers a wider range of interpretations regarding ideals of pious femininity.

In Syria, Fatima and Zaynab are both important female saints. However, Shi‘i women differ in the ways they approach one versus the other. Both are role-models, but as Lara Deeb points out, women tend not to speak about becoming (or ‘embodying’) female saints. Instead, as I show below, Shi‘i women ritually invoke Fatima, while they ritually represent and emulate Zaynab. Fatima and Zaynab are symbolically and structurally opposed in majālis. For example, the

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360 Nakash, The Shi‘is of Iraq, 178.

361 Fieldnotes, Monday, 26 January 2009.

362 Deeb and Aghaie argue for a discursive shift from Fatima to Zaynab, from passive (‘traditional’) feminine piety to (‘modern’ and) ‘revolutionary’ piety.

363 Since Fatima is portrayed as a silent and obedient infallible saint, wanting to ‘embody’ her would not ‘incite’ devotees to revolutionary action (thawra).

364 In Lebanon, Shi‘i women differentiate between a ‘traditional’ and an ‘authenticated’ interpretation of Zaynab’s story and character. According to the traditional model, Zaynab was lost in her grief after Husayn’s death. However, the ‘authenticated’ version emphasizes how Zaynab stood up to Yazid, disseminated the tragic story of Karbala and took care of the other women and children. Deeb, “From Mourning to Activism,” 242, 255-258.
mullah narrator often speaks in Zaynab’s voice (but does not ‘embody’ Zaynab in the sense of becoming Zaynab beyond the majlis) in order to invoke Fatima and address her audience.

In a summer course on khitāba husayniyya, ‘alawiyya Mardhiya told the students that a mullah should imagine the ahl al-bayt generally and especially Fatima across the hall, above the audience, looking down at the majlis. Fatima (d. 632 or 633 CE) was not alive at the time of the Battle of Karbala (680 CE). Yet, as a mourning mother, she is central to mourning gatherings. One day during Muharram, the question arose about the realistic possibility of the idea that Fatima is present at all mourning gatherings. Um Haydar, the principal of the Zaynabiyya, explained that Fatima should be thought of like the sun that shines on everyone, thus Fatima presides over every majlis. The mullah addresses Fatima. She ritually invokes Fatima’s presence by speaking in the voice of Zaynab. In a sense, the mourning gathering sets the stage for the ritual performance of an affective, reciprocal relationship. It is reciprocal in multiple senses. It is reciprocal emotionally: Fatima attends majālis, she sympathizes with and intercedes on behalf of Shi‘is who empathize and cry with her.

In Sayyida Zaynab, ‘taking the side of Fatima’ is a divisive discursive issue similar to the debate about tatbir. The Shirazis along with most other scholars in Sayyida Zaynab promulgate and promote the ‘passion of Fatima.’ The Zaynabiyya, which has the largest women’s husayniyya in town, organizes a week long ‘Fatimiyyāt,’ daily mourning gatherings for a week dedicated to the commemoration of Fatima’s death. Meanwhile, Ayatollah Fadhlallah and Khamenei downplay the common Shi‘i belief that the companions of her father mistreated her after her father’s death. Based on their views, one may assume that Sunnis, particularly local Sunnis

367 See chapter on ‘Ashura.
368 Fieldnotes, majālis 3-7 June 2008.
would align themselves with Ayatollah Fadhlallah and Khamenei. Yet, local Sunnis are often more comfortable with the Shirazis. They have lived side-by-side for more than three decades. A generation of children has gone to school together.

At the Zaynabiyya’s Fatimiyyāt, the mullaha extolled Fatima’s virtues of ‘aql (mind or reason) and khush’u (modesty), both of which are closer to the affective modality of aththara than thāra. Interestingly, the virtue of ‘aql differs from ‘reason’ in the sense of ‘rationality.’ According to Hans Wehr, the semantic field of the term ‘aql includes blood-money, the idea of remaining ‘sensible’ in the face of tragedy (not ‘rational’ in the sense of logical). In other words, when Fatima and Zaynab are said to have mastered ‘aql, they are described as patient, as mindful, reasonable, and sensible.

During the Fatimiyyāt, as on other important days, there are theatrical performances of the story (tashbīh) during the majlis. As the mullaha re-tells the narrative surrounding Fatima’s death, six women dressed in black abayāt and face-veils and green scarves carry a box (symbolizing the coffin) covered in a green sheet. As the pallbearers make their round slowly, women halt them to make knots in the long green veils of the pallbearers. They tie knots for every hājah or need, for recovery from illness or safety. After reciting the tragedy (masā‘īb) of Fatima, the pallbearers leave the husayniyya hall. Tears are dried, and the last section of the majlis, the latmiyya begins. The number of latmiyyāt a mullaha performs depends on her willingness, the interest of the audience, the specificity of every majlis. Majālis, such as those held on the first ten days of ‘Ashura and the Fatimiyyāt, even have specific items which are related to the commemoration narrative. For Fatima’s death anniversary some majālis use a wooden pole (ca. 5-7 cm in diameter, at least two meters tall), from the top of which a green skirt flares open each time the other end of the pole is rhythmically stomped on the ground. When the mullaha at the Zaynabiyya announced that a green umbrella-like object was going to be used, women got up

370 E.g. Amal.

371 Fieldnotes, Friday, 18 September 2009.

372 Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 630-631.

373 Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 239. Fieldnotes, majālis 3-7 June 2008.
from the audience and crammed underneath it. Others tied knots into the cloth.\textsuperscript{374} I asked about the meaning of the pole, but no one seemed to know. “It is just an Iraqi tradition,” Miami said.\textsuperscript{375} One could speculate that the women under the cloth are taking the place of the \textit{ahl al-bayt} as the ‘people of the cloak.’ The women under the skirt of the pole and the audience chant the refrain, responding to the \textit{mulla}’s \textit{fā’iziyya latmiyya}, “\textit{dhhel ya Zahra, dhhel},”\textsuperscript{376} “I implore you oh [Fatima] Zahra, I beg you.” The verb \textit{dahal}, the Modern Standard Arabic for the colloquial \textit{dhhel}, means literally ‘to enter, pierce.’\textsuperscript{377} The women under the green umbrella enter (\textit{dahhal}) the inside (\textit{dāhil}) of Fatima’s mediatory beneficence. The loud thumps of the poll, accompany the last fast, intensive \textit{latmiyyāt} of the \textit{majlis}, which precede the \textit{du’a} that ends the ritual gathering. Notably, none of the women at these \textit{majālis} seek to ‘embody’ Fatima. Rather, they invite her and visualize her when performing \textit{majālis fatimiyya}.

In contrast to Fatima’s death, Zaynab’s death is not commemorated with as much energy. I suggest that there are three reasons for this. First, she is not one of the fourteen infallibles. The only other semi-infallibles who are mourned on set dates are the martyrs of Karbala. Second, the greatest tragedy in Zaynab’s life was not the way she died.\textsuperscript{378} Third, she is already part of every mourning gathering. By lamenting in the voice of Zaynab, \textit{mulla} not embody Zaynab (in the sense that she does not become Zaynab beyond the \textit{majlis}). Rather, the \textit{mulla} emulates and represents Zaynab especially in her relationships to others. Through speaking from the place and in the voice of Zaynab, the \textit{mulla} addresses both her audience and the ever-present and simultaneously absent Fatima. The relationship between Zaynab and Fatima is reciprocal on multiple levels. It is reciprocal poetically. For example, in a popular anthology entitled “the

\textsuperscript{374} Fieldnotes, Thursday, 22 January 2009.

Also, during the Fatimiyya, women not only slapped their faces, they also took off their scarves and swayed their heads back and forth. The face-slapping occurs more frequently than other hair-shaking rituals. Often, the hair-shaking ritual is done by younger women up to maybe later 30ies.

\textsuperscript{375} Fieldnotes, Thursday, 22 January 2009.

\textsuperscript{376} The \textit{fā’iziyya latm} is a fast-paced \textit{latmiyya}. Further, “\textit{dhhel ya Zahra, dhhel}” is the colloquial version of “\textit{dahililk ya Zahra, dahilik}!”

\textsuperscript{377} Wehr, \textit{A Dictionary of Modern Arabic}, 273-274.

\textsuperscript{378} Zaynab’s greatest tragedies were losing her parents, brothers, and sons.
Pains of Zahra,” the poet speaks in the voice of Zaynab and laments the loss of her mother, Fatima. Every line of poetry moves back and forth between bemoaning her own sorrow and that of her mother. In the first lines of the book, Zaynab cries over her mother’s deadly injuries, her own status as a lonely orphan and complains, “rāḥit al-rabatīn” (“she left, the one who raised me”). By describing her mother in terms of herself, “the one who raised me,” Zaynab’s lament emphasizes their deep inextricable connectedness. In both the poem and the majlis, love, relationality, and piety are inextricably fused.

Through performing mourning gatherings, women invoke the affective presence of saints. The mullaya speaks in Zaynab’s voice, but she does not embody Zaynab in the sense that she does not seek to become Zaynab (and lose her family members in battle). Unlike Lebanese men who are encouraged to embody Husayn (especially through seeking a martyr’s death), Shi’i women merely seek to emulate female saints, though infallibility does complicate the gender divide. When Shi’i women cross the gender divide by becoming devotees of male saints, then the saints tend to function more as patron saints who make specific demands on their devotees, for example, by encouraging them to relate to them through gifting practices and by becoming mullayāt.

### 3.3.1 Relating to/through patron saints
Aside from emulating and embodying saints, it is important to relate to saints because, as ‘alawiyya ‘Aliya explained on more than one occasion, the ahl al-bayt constitute a wasta or a personal connection, similar to the wasta one needs to be heard by high officials, kings. Like other relationships, it must be established and maintained (in this case, ritually through mourning majlis and making vows or nidhr). “The benefits of a successful relationship,” ‘Aliya promised, “include shifā’, physical, metaphysical and social healing or restoration and shaf’a, intercession

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380 The love and relationality are not generalized, of course, but remain focused on the ahl al-bayt.

381 Though there are also women who become mullayāt in order to better emulate Sayyida Zaynab.

382 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 10 July 2008.
in both this-worldly and otherworldly matters.”\textsuperscript{383} Shi‘is may relate to saints, as noted above, by attending mourning gatherings and listening to stories about saints. Other means through which Shi‘i women in Sayyida Zaynab relate to saints is by reciting special prayers and carrying these prayers with them, and by making vows (\textit{nidhr}) through which Shi‘is ask saints for favours.

Shi‘i women like Um Muhammad relate to the \textit{ahl al-bayt} by keeping a \textit{hirz} in her pocket.\textsuperscript{384} It is a piece of paper with writing on it. She copied it from “\textit{Mafāțīh al-jinān}” (literally, “the keys to the heavens,” a famous Shi‘i prayer compilation). It is supposed to keep you safe and she simply keeps it in her pocket. She sees no problem with this – it is proper and orthodox, from the \textit{“Mafāțīh, after all.”} “Each Imam has a \textit{hirz} and a special ring he wore,” she explained. “We wear \textit{aqiq} and turquoise and quartz because God created mountains of those first. Thus, they are beloved by the \textit{ahl al-bayt} and so we wear them too. Don’t you read the \textit{Mafāțīh}?“

Making a religious oath (\textit{nidhr}) is another way to relate to the \textit{ahl al-bayt} and attain \textit{shifā‘}, in the sense of healing a sick loved one or restoring their well-being in school or at work. A common form of \textit{nidhr} is to hold a \textit{sufra}, which is a particular kind of \textit{majlis}: When making the vow one must host two \textit{sufra} meetings on consecutive Tuesdays. A \textit{sufra} is a women’s ritual wherein the woman making the vow hosts a gathering at her home or at the seminary. There must be lit candles. A reading of the story of \textit{‘bībī thulathā}’ (‘the three ladies’) is followed by a \textit{latmiyya}.\textsuperscript{385} Then sandwiches made of something green (usually parsley) and something white (i.e. some kind of spreadable cheese or strained yogurt) are given to all those present, along with spoonfuls of a thick cooked sweet paste. Once the \textit{sufra} is officially over, women fight over the remaining candles, which they blow out making new vows.\textsuperscript{386} If a woman does not receive what

\textsuperscript{383} Fieldnotes, Saturday, 31 October 2009 and Saturday, 26 December 2009 – 9 Muharram 1431.

\textsuperscript{384} Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 15 December 2009.


she asked for, the third *sufra* remains deferred. If she receives that which she has asked for, she offers a third *sufra* on an upcoming Tuesday just before the noon prayer.

In popular literature, available for purchase in the handful of bookshops in Sayyida Zaynab, the productive relationships between Shi’is and the *ahl al-bayt*, their patron saints and role models, are described and informed. Sayyid Husayn Najib Muhammad (2008) and Sayyid Hashim al-Naji al-Musawi al-Jiza’iri (n.d.) both explain how ritually enacted relationships leave traces, *athār* and bring this as well as next-worldly blessing, *barakāt*. Sayyid Muhammad writes:

> In contemplating the benefits, traces and blessings of mourning gatherings [*fawā’id wa athār wa barakāt al-majālīs*], we find that they leave beneficial traces [*athāran ijābiyyan*] on the individual members of society, and these [the benefits] are: the remembrance of God *ta’āla*... As long as the *majālis* of God *ta’āla* continue, they are comforting [*tasahum from iswa*]387 in the spreading of religion and rationality and love [*al-dīn wa-l-wā’yi wa-l-mahabbah*], and there is no (sinful) innovation [*bid‘a*] which harm in [the practice of] religion.388

These blessings, traces, and benefits further encompass the revival of the order (or decree, authority389) of the *ahl al-bayt*, the revival (and softening) of hearts and the forgiveness of sins.390 Mediating between his discussions of the more ‘spiritual’ and ‘physical and social’ benefits, Sayyid Muhammad explains that *majālis* invite the mercy of God and the metaphysical presence of saints (the *ahl al-bayt*) and angels.391

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389 [Wehr](#), *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, 26. (*a-m-r*)


391 Ibid.
3.3.2 On becoming a mullaya
Lara Deeb explains Shi‘i women in Lebanon do not ‘become’ and therefore do not ‘embody’ Zaynab in the same way men are encouraged to ‘become’ Husayn through fighting and seeking to die as martyrs. Further, Lebanese Shi‘i women emulate Zaynab, for instance, by volunteering at charitable organizations. In Syria, few Shi‘i women volunteer at charitable organizations. Rather, women mark their piety (besides wearing conservative clothing, which many do anyways) by becoming mullayat. Some women feel called and compelled by visions and dreams of both fallible and infallible saints. Others become mullat out of a desire to serve particular patron saints.

3.3.2.1 Ikhlas
Ikhlas, a mid-thirties Iraqi (Baghdadi) mother of five, is both mullaya and talibat hawza, a fourth year student at the Zaynabiyya seminary. After listening to an especially moving performance of hers, I asked her how she had decided to become a mullaya. She said that about a year before she left Iraq in 2005, she had a dream. In her dream, she saw Sayyida Zaynab, whom she considers her personal favorite ‘saint’ – mawlâtî. Zaynab told her that she will become a mullaya: “We will take you, but not now.” After she saw the dream, she bought a book of latmiyyat. Then she ‘read’ [i.e. performed and led] a majlis at her own home and thus started becoming a mullaya! “So, you’ve been a mullaya for about five years?” Ikhlas: “Well, I had my daughter one year and then I was sick, so I didn’t participate in two Muharrams, so really I’ve only served the ahl al-bayt for three years.” For Ikhlas, therefore, being a mullaya is co-terminus with actively serving the ahl al-bayt. On the one hand, it is something that can be turned off and on. It is a personal, flexible, spontaneous form of worship. On the other hand, becoming a mullaya is a process, which requires continuous effort.

Becoming pious may mean becoming a mullaya who performs khidmât ahl al-bayt, service of the ahl al-bayt. She serves all of them, but often she also has her special mawla or

392 Fieldnotes, Friday, 25 December 2009.
A mullaya may choose her mawla, but she may also be chosen both by a particular saint and as a mullaya, as Ikhlas was chosen in her dream.

### 3.3.2.2 Um Isa

Um Isa could not wait to be chosen. She actively sought to ‘see’ the ahl al-bayt through visions. She told me, “if you want to see Imam ‘Ali, you have to recite ‘nādi ‘Aliyun mudhharan...’ seventy times every night. I see the ahl al-bayt whenever I have problems, hardships, and they help me, guide me, and give me strength.”

Um Isa is an early thirties Iraqi woman from Basra. Her husband used to be an engineer in the Iraqi military, and he carried his military discipline home. Um Isa is a full-time wife. She has no kids. She misses her own family, and tells me in painful detail that she has not seen her family for a year and two months. She does not attend seminary classes. Unlike Ikhlas, Um Isa does not sponsor and hold majālis in her own home. She wants to be a ‘career mullaya.’ Um Isa explained: “I speak with the minbar, from my heart and consider it a blessing and a miracle (mu’jizah) that I am now a mullaya. Whenever the mullaya of this husayniyya [husayniyya Zayn al-‘Abidīn] is sick or out of town, I cover for her.” She showed me on her mobile phone how she performed on ‘Id al-Ghadīr. She said she was offered the position of a helper-mullaya in Damascus, but the commute would have been too far and her husband would not allow it. Thus, she only performs at the husayniyya Zayn al-Abidīn and Um Baniyīn. Um Isa said “I have no empty or useless time since I began with the khidmāt ahl al-bayt!” For Um Isa, becoming a mullaya is both the result of her own desire and the desire of the ahl al-bayt. Her mother and grandmother had been mullayāt, but both quit when Saddam banned a range of Shi‘i ritual activities. Um Isa herself had not thought about following in their footsteps until a few years ago following the fall of Saddam Hussein, after she had come to Syria.

Though Imam ‘Ali is her favourite patron saint, it was Fatima who ‘called’ her in a dream to become a mullaya. Um Isa said she saw Fatima Zahra sitting on a minbar, calling her to come

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and perform a majlis. For Um Isa as for Ikhlas it was a visionary invitation by a female saint, which legitimized their wish of becoming mullahāt.

The legitimating force of dreams does not take sides. During Muharram 1430 (December 2008/January 2009), Um Isa had found a new husayniyya where she could chant two latmiyyāt, one before and one after the main lesson. During the lesson, however, another woman came and explained she had just had a dream that morning in which Fatima Zahra told her to chant and this was going to be her first time. On account of this dream, the woman was given Um Isa’s place and was allowed to chant the final latmiyya. Um Isa was not pleased, but she yielded.394 In this case, dreams served to legitimize the claims of two amateur mullahāt, and also opened up a space for competition and contestation.

3.3.2.3 Um Zahra

Um Zahra, one of the most popular mullahāt in Sayyida Zaynab, is a mid-forties mother of three girls. She came from Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and her husband works for Ayatollah Ha’iri. Um Zahra said she wanted to become a mullah after she lost a child at the age of twenty-seven.395 She was not alone in her decision and quest to become a mullahāt. Her older sister, who is now a mullahā in Sweden, began this journey with Um Zahra. She says she needed to make her sadness meaningful and productive. Her older sister specialized in khutbat, while she focused on nā’i and latmiyya.

In short, Um Zahra became a mullah to mourn and to create relationships, connections. Her story, as well as the stories of Ikhlas and Um Isa, demonstrate the importance of establishing and maintaining reciprocal relationships is to Twelver Shi‘i piety. Reciprocal relationships span over time and place. Shi‘i mourning majālis maintain relationships between the ahl al-bayt and

394 Fieldnotes, Sunday, 8 February 2009.

395 Fieldnotes, Saturday, 7 November 2009.
A family may decide to sponsor a majlis mainly in order to find a groom for a daughter. Holding a majlis allows a large number of potential mothers-in-law to see and be served cookies by the marriageable girl, while also affirming social ties. Performing, hosting and attending mourning gatherings as mullayāt and as participants in the audience is a reciprocal practice. To call and be called upon as a mullaya, relating to the ahl al-bayt, and mediating between them and lay Shi‘is, requires responsiveness and relationships, Aristotelian friendships.

‘Alawīyya Mardhiya and Um Zahra, two of the most important and most popular mullayāt in Sayyida Zaynab, both tell their students, aspiring mullayāt, to read about the ahl al-bayt and to listen to majālis by high-ranking clerics on television. Through learning about and reflecting on the lives of the ahl al-bayt, junior mullayāt learn to relate to them. An accomplished mullaya recites hagiographic poetry and affects her audience. “A good mullaya has hanīn in her voice, she makes people cry,” ‘alawīyya Mardhiya told her students. A talented mullaya has emotive agency. On another occasion Samar, a fourth year Syrian student at the Zaynabiyya, made a comment to me regarding the first-year Iranian-Iraqi mullaya in glasses at the Zaynabiyya’s women seminary: “It is out of my hands! [Mu bi-īdī!] She makes me cry!” At least in the context of rituals, mourning is a virtuous act. It validates the expression of grief, which for those in Sayyida Zaynab is often caused by loss, poverty, and violence in the region.

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396 If a death occurs in the family, it is customary to sponsor several mourning gatherings in one’s private home. These mourning gatherings do not differ from other ‘normal’ mourning gatherings, and the deceased is not mentioned except in the last ḍu‘a.

397 According to Aristotle, there are three kinds of friendships, the best of which presumes a common pursuit of goods.


398 They both perform at the Zaynabiyya and at other husayniyyāt. Um Zahra even teaches courses other than khitāba at the hawza of Imam Khomeini, and she used to teach sīra (hagiography) at the Zaynabiyya in 2006-2007.


400 Fieldnotes, Friday, 25 December 2009.

401 For example, the on-going violence in Iraq was often invoked by mullayāt and participants. Mullayāt prayed for Iraq in the closing ḍu‘a. Female attendees discussed politics, the war and violence before and after mourning gatherings. On day, at the husayniyya Zayn al-Abidīn, an elder ‘alawīyya explained after the majlis that Iraqis are in
Um Zahra, pious Shi’is should cry over Gaza and visit graves.\textsuperscript{402} It is part of being human. The Prophet used to the battlefields where his friends and family died and he supposedly did \textit{ziyārah} for his uncle Hamza. To be able to cry is to have a soft heart. It is the first step to becoming pious. Yet, cultivating a soft heart is not enough. Um Zahra, herself a seminary teacher, often reminds her audience of the importance of education.\textsuperscript{403} For her, being in exile, poor, oppressed, is not an excuse to compromise on children’s education. In her \textit{majālis}, she explicates how the Imams lived virtuous lives while being oppressed: “They lived under house arrest and spent years in prison and nevertheless did not neglect their children and followers. They taught Qur’an, the difference between right and wrong!” What kind of education is Um Zahra promoting? For her, education is not just about abstract facts and figures. It is about \textit{kabbar ‘aqālak}, literally ‘to increase or grow your mind,’ your awareness of relationships and responsibilities.

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One thing virtually all \textit{mullayāt} share is ownership of a portable microphone and loudspeaker set. Whether ‘traditional’ or ‘revolutionary,’ a ‘real’ \textit{mullaya}, according to Amal, owns her own equipment (which further includes ‘proper attire’ and a collection of laments to read, and ideally notes for her \textit{majlis}).\textsuperscript{404} Seminaries and \textit{husayniyyāt} are usually furnished with speaker sets, but private sponsors who would like to hold \textit{majālis} in their own homes, generally request that the \textit{mullaya} bring her microphone-speaker-set. This makes life difficult for the aspiring \textit{mullaya} Um Isa who complains that owning a set is more important than your sincere desire to serve.\textsuperscript{405} It is the ownership of a means for mechanization and mediation, which makes you a ‘real’ autonomous \textit{mullaya}.

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\textsuperscript{402} Fieldnotes, Sunday, 18 January 2009.

\textsuperscript{403} Fieldnotes, Saturday, 23 August 2008.

\textsuperscript{404} Fieldwork, Thursday, 10 July 2008.

\textsuperscript{405} Fieldwork, Wednesday, 7 January 2009.
3.4 Media(ting) piety

There were three sins Um Haydar, the principal of the Zaynabiyya seminary, repeatedly warned her students about: not covering appropriately, gossiping, and music. The latter two, in particular, relate to the question of affect. As gossiping has been addressed above, this last section focuses on the question of music and singing, especially recorded performances.406

At the seminary, the issue of music was addressed repeatedly during both summer classes and normal seminary classes. Everyone agreed that both Western and Arabic pop music by singers such as Nancy Ajram and Amr Diab constitutes forbidden music. And everyone agreed that Shi’i religious songs, such as the ones sung at commemorative birthday gatherings (majālīs farah or mawālīd) and latmiyyāt, do not constitute music or forbidden singing (ghinā‘). However, there were debates about both Western and Middle Eastern classical music and about Sunni religious songs, which are accompanied by instruments (such as the songs by Sami Yousuf). “Nationalist songs” (such as national anthems) were carefully addressed. One day during summer classes, Um Muhammad, an Iraqi Shi’i from Tikrit, asked about patriotic songs (ughniyya wataniyya) which her son was forced to sing in school. ‘Alawiyya ‘Aliya told her that the marāj’a disagreed on the matter. Ayatollah Shirazi dislikes such songs, however Ayatollah Sistani allows them. Since Um Muhammad’s son had no choice in the matter, the ‘alawiyya said they should simply follow Sistani on that matter.407

In explaining why music and singing (ghinā‘) is forbidden, ‘alawiyya ‘Aliya explained that it makes people go crazy. It awakens lust and illicit passion. In contrast, she said, listening to recitations of the Qu’ran or mawālīd soothes the soul.408 While ‘alawiyya ‘Aliya’s distinction may work if one were to compare hip hop with Qur’anic recitation, latmiyyāt cannot really be

406 Both religious and non-religious CDs, VCDs, and DVDs are widely available in Sayyida Zaynab. The prices range from 25 Lira to 100 Lira (approximately 50 cents to two dollars).

407 Generally, it is frowned upon in Shi’ism to follow multiple marāj’a. However, in the case of necessity, the Shi’i women I met did in fact refer to rulings by different scholars in order to justify their course of action.


408 Ayatollah Fadhlallah argues that Western classical music calms the nerves and stimulates intellectual thought and thus, allows it. In contrast, Shirazi forbids all forms of music.
considered soothing if they are intended to make listeners cry and self-flagellate. Moreover, what are we to make of religio-nationalist songs, such as those sung by Hezbollah and Muqtada Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi?

Though there is no clear-cut pattern according to which music can be categorized as either permissible or forbidden, I argue that drawing and elaborating on the dual modalities of affect (aththara and thāra) can shed light on the distinction which both Shi‘i scholars and Shi‘is debate. Further, I argue that aththara and thāra can be helpfully linked to Walter Benjamin’s distinction between art which allows individuals to ‘concentrate’ and art which ‘distracts.’ According to this scheme, music, such as the mawalīd and latmiyyāt of Basim Karbala‘i, which allows individuals to concentrate and which leaves traces (aththara) on listeners, is more likely to be religiously acceptable. In contrast, music which distracts and excites (thāra) is less acceptable, though it depends on the scholar and on the goals which listeners are being excited about. If the goal of a particular song is to simply distract and incite lust it is, of course, prohibited. However, if the goal of particular songs, which may even be accompanied by instruments, is to arouse Hezbollah troops or to excite lay Shi‘is to support Shi‘i armed groups, such as Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi, then it may be permissible. In such a case, the issue also becomes a question of politics.

3.4.1 Haram and halal music in the “Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

In writing about “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin distinguishes between two modes of perceiving art. He writes that original art, such as the art which was produced before the “age of mechanical reproduction,” possesses ‘aura’ and invites viewers to ‘concentrate.’ In contrast to this original form of art, he argues, mass produced art ‘distracts’ viewers. The first art form connotes “[a] man who concentrates before a work of art is

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410 Ibid.
absorbed by it. He enters into this work.\textsuperscript{411} The second term, ‘distraction’ is tied to modern technological developments, because the “[m]echanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art.”\textsuperscript{412} As an example, Benjamin identifies film as something, which fosters distractedness, because it does not allow viewers to contemplate passing scenes and images.\textsuperscript{413}

In terms of affect, Benjamin’s notion of concentration maps onto the affective modality of aththara as both imply and require a reflecting, thinking spectator. They leave impressions on the audience and enable ‘ethical listening.’ While the first pair goes together well, one might object that the second pairing is more problematic as that which distracts does not necessarily incite to revolution (thawra). After all, even revolutions may require concentrated efforts rather than distraction. Yet, in the sense that thara implies excitement and restlessness it can still be linked to Benjamin’s notion of distraction.

The concept of ethical listening has been discussed fruitfully by Charles Hirschkind.\textsuperscript{414} According to Hirschkind, Sunnis in Egypt practice ethical listening by attending to religious forms of media in order to cultivate virtuous subjectivities. Similarly, there are Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab who seek to become more pious by participating in mourning gatherings, watching pious videos, and listening to religious CDs of mawalid and latmiyyat by renowned rawadid (male latmiyyat performers) such as Basim al-Karbala‘i, using these as Foucaultian ‘technologies of the self,’ or means for cultivating pious sensibilities.\textsuperscript{415} These listeners allow themselves and even seek to become affected, which in turn takes concentration.

As indicated above, there are also Shi‘i media forms that are not necessarily meant for ‘ethical listening.’ For example, Muqtada Sadr’s supporters display and sell video CDs of songs that are

\textsuperscript{411} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{412} Ibid., 234.
\textsuperscript{413} Ibid., 238.
\textsuperscript{414} Hirschkind, Ethical Soundscape.
set to the rhythmic sounds of *latmiyyāt* (the sound of men beating their chests). The videos use religious imagery and language, as well as amateur film-footage of explosions, the war in Iraq. In the market place, they ‘distract’ passersby, who stop and gaze at the screen mounted on top of the vending booth. Whenever I passed the booth, there were people standing and watching. The audience always constituted an eclectic crowd including Shi‘i pilgrims, as well as Syrian police men in uniforms (who were most likely Sunnis). Yet, I seldom witnessed anyone buying the video CDs. Hence, they only served to distract, rather than deeply engage their audience. The videos compelled viewers to associate Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi with visiting Zaynab viscerally (rather than philosophically or intellectually) by distracting and legitimizing the Jaysh al-Mahdi through combining religious aesthetics (in the sense of sensory perception\(^{416}\)) and images of militant resistance against American forces in Iraq.

Notably, political aspirations or applications of particular songs do not necessarily make such songs religiously unacceptable, as revolutionary interpretations of Shi‘ism and the political uses of Shi‘i rituals (including ritual chants) have existed prior to the “Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”\(^{417}\) The specifics, such as the question in whose service the songs are employed, are much more relevant to debates about their permissibility than the mere fact of their politicization. In this point, Shi‘i media differs from Benjamin’s conception of art when he writes that “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual [allowing art] to be based on another practice – politics.”\(^{418}\) For Benjamin, mechanization allows for politicization. In the case of Shi‘i *mawalīd* and *latmiyyāt*, mechanization (in the sense of mass producing CDs and broadcasting) cannot itself be credited with the politicization of religious songs. However, Benjamin’s point does remain valid if one asserts that mechanization allows for a particular kind of politicization: a distracted politicization, wherein the audience accedes to the legitimacy of a particular group or

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\(^{418}\) Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 224.
interpretation not through deep reflection, but through distracted exposure to mass mediated songs which arouse and excite the audience viscerally.

3.4.2 Basim Karbala’i and ethical listening
One of the most popular \textit{latmiyya} chanters among Shi’is world-wide is Basim al-Karbala’i, a professional chanter from Karbala. He was part of the wave of Iraqis who left Iraq in 1980 when Saddam Hussein first purged forty thousand Shi’is suspected of Iranian descent. Together with his family, Basim moved to Isfahan, Iran, where he studied the art of performing \textit{latmiyyāt}.

Support from religious institutions, such as in the form of sponsored concerts and promotions, has helped Basim’s career. During the summer of 2007, I attended Karbala’i’s live performance at Shirazi’s seminary in Sayyida Zaynab. I saw him on screen, as I was upstairs in the women’s section of the seminary while he performed downstairs in the men’s section. It was a free concert and as a result, it was very crowded.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 8 August 2007.} I saw Karbala’i at another performance in the fall of 2009, when he chanted at the independent Husayniyya Mustafa.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 14 October 2009.} At this particular husayniyya, the organizers did not allocate spaces for women, and so the women ended up sitting on plastic sheets on the street outside of the husayniyya. Even though it was cold and the women had to breathe in exhaust fumes from passing cars, they put up with all of that in order to hear Basim’s performance broadcast by loudspeakers. In the \textit{sūq} (market), Basim’s popularity translates into sales. Images of his face cover various forms of merchandise, such as key-chains, wallets, pillows, and CD covers.

Basim’s voice is sad and strong. It can be heard in the market, as vendors of religious items often play his \textit{latmiyyāt} and \textit{mawālūd} (depending on the occasion). In the videos, which are for sale right beside the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, his voice accompanies the audience on virtual visits to Shi’i shrines in Iraq, Iran, and Syria, or to historically distant events via theatrical
performances of the Karbala narrative. Other standard videos depict Basim at a *husayniyya*, leading a crowded ritual gathering of male devotees.

Though Basim’s chants are not political per se, they can be described as politically relevant. For instance, in July 2008, for the death anniversary of the eighth Imam, Musa al-Kadhim, Shirazi’s regional satellite TV channel aired a live performance by Basim Karbala’i. He was chanting live in Khadhimiyah, Iraq, shortly after the triple bombing of pilgrims on the road to the Imam’s shrine in Khadhimiyah.\(^{421}\) In this case, the fresh memory of fatal explosions helped his audience to feel Basim’s pious lament and made his performance relevant to ongoing affairs.

Though few Shi’is actually cry or self-flagellate while listening to recordings or watching videos, listening to Basim’s performances nevertheless affects his audience.\(^{422}\) His responsiveness to current affairs enables Shi’is to concentrate and reflect upon the wider significance of particular events, as well as the religious content of Basim’s chants. Basim’s chants can both leave traces (*aththara*) on listeners (by making them reflect) and arouse and excite (*thāra*), especially if the audience is practiced in the art of ethical listening and familiar with Shi’i mourning gatherings. Basim’s recorded chants and videos are arousing and exciting aesthetically in that they resonate with sensory perception (even if they do not inspire actual tears or self-flagellation in listeners). The sound of dozens of hands forcefully clapping on bare chests maintains the rhythm of Basim’s melodic lament. The pious listener is thereby reminded of her bodily senses; her bodily possibilities of relating to Zaynab and Husayn.\(^{423}\)

Yahya, a local convert from Sunnism to Shi’ism, said he likes to listen to Basim Karbala’i when he is tired, frustrated or angry.\(^{424}\) Yahya described Basim’s *latmiyya* as energetic, yet soothing, and even relaxing. When listening to Basim’s lament, Yahya reflects upon his own life and is

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\(^{421}\) Fieldnotes, Monday, 28 July 2008.

\(^{422}\) Fieldnotes, Thursday, 26 June 2008.

\(^{423}\) According to Charles Hirschkind (2006), pious listening affects listeners. While listening to Basim Karbala’i certainly affects listeners, it does not replace mourning rituals in their entirety.

\(^{424}\) Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 17 June 2008.
reminded that his problems are minor compared to those of Zaynab and Husayn.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 17 June 2008.} Um Ahmad, an Iraqi widow and seminary student, agreed with Yahya. Listening to Basim and concentrating on the afflictions of the Prophet’s family relativizes her own pain, though it does not distract her from losses she can never forget.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Friday, 22 August 2008.}

However, not all Shi‘i media impinges upon the sensory perception of the pious listener or viewer in the same way.

### 3.4.3 Muqtada Sadr’s distracted sympathies

As noted earlier, there was an unusual genre of Shi‘i media which one could buy at Sayyida Zaynab’s annual summer book fair until 2009, after which a dispute between Muqtada Sadr and a local official forced Sadr’s supporters to withdraw from public spaces.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Thursday, 29 October 2009.} During the annual book fair, a row of tent-shops is set up facing the Southern wall of the shrine compound for three months during the summer tourist season, when the Shi‘is from Arab Gulf countries come to visit the shrine and enjoy the relatively cool weather in Syria.\footnote{In Sayyida Zaynab, tourism is a year-round industry with visitors from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and countries. However, during the summer, the increase in visitors makes this time especially profitable. For example, hotel prices triple.} Located strategically between two of the three public entrances of the shrine, a 20 inch screen serves as the display of a small tent-shop at the end of the row and distracts passersby with uncanny videos.\footnote{Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 239.} The imagery is surreal and the voices are digitally altered, soaked with religious and nationalist terminology. The videos are shown by the Sadr Foundation on behalf of Muqtada Sadr.

Muqtada Sadr is not an ayatollah himself, though he is important politically as he has a vast following of armed, young men which he has organized into an army called the Jaysh al-Mahdi (the army of the Mahdi, the Hidden twelfth Imam). Muqtada is the third son of the late...
Muhammad Sadiq Sadr, an ayatollah who was killed in 1999 by Saddam Hussein’s agents. Muqtada’s father-in-law Muhammad Baqir Sadr was also an important Iraqi ayatollah who opposed the government and was killed by the Iraqi government in 1980. The Sadr family traces its lineage back to the Prophet through the fifth Imam and draws its support base from among poor Shi’is, especially from the slums around Baghdad. The Sadr network of charitable organizations and their vocal politics appeal to unemployed urban youth.

The videos begin with advertisements for the cameraman/editor. Then husayni chanters are introduced as radūd So-and-so, thus granting the performers religious titles. The display is constantly moving and quickly changing. Scenes are spliced together, and from one moment to the next, layered images twist into new ones. Watching these videos, reminded me of Benjamin whose prime example of distracting art was film. In a video entitled “Bi-ismak ya Muqtada,” Muqtada Sadr first appears on the minbar, then beside his deceased father, among other religious clerics. Next, the scene fades and a new one depicts re-enactments of Karbala, likening Sadr’s struggle to that of Husayn. Then, the camera shifts from protesting Iraqis to news pictures of the American President George W. Bush, emphatically proclaiming a unified Iraqi stance against foreign armed forces. In another scene, an American soldier is exposed, desperate and afraid, in a foetal position. The camera meanwhile moves from one explosion to another, celebrating ‘feats of glory’ by Muqtada Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi.

Sadr’s videos present viewers with a vision that is religiously legitimated by verbal and pictorial references to the Karbala narrative. The videos emphasize the strength of the Jaysh al-Mahdi and the powerlessness of the Americans. Thereby, the videos desensitize, anaesthetize viewers from other stories, which fall outside Sadr’s socio-ethical imaginary, which denounces foreign involvement and highlights nationalist and sectarian identities. Sadr’s videos do not demand non-Iraqis join the Jaysh al-Mahdi, or even donate money to their cause. As I only ever saw a

430 Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite Religious Factions in Post-Ba’thist Iraq.”

431 Ibid., 544.

432 Benjamin, Illuminations, 238.

few people purchase video CDs from Sadr’s booth, the videos cannot be describes as inviting concentration. Instead, the videos distract passersby, who look at the screen, which displays the videos, but eventually leave. As profit is not the main goal of this booth, the purpose is most likely the improvement of public relations. As such, the goal of the Sadr Foundation which sets up the booth is to make passersby acknowledge – even if only unintentionally and viscerally – the legitimacy and force of Muqtada Sadr’s endeavour. One of the *husayni* chanters even prophesizes that the Jaysh al-Mahdi will go down in history as the heroes who liberated Iraq.434

I asked several Shi‘i women what they thought about Sadr’s videos. Amal, a local Syrian convert to Shi‘ism and a student at the Zaynabiyya, considered the videos to be non-religious, despite their rhetorical claims, though she was unsure whether or not to call them *haram* or forbidden.435 When I asked Um Aus, an Iraqi widow who attended the Hawza Sadrayn (the seminary associated with Muqtada Sadr and his family), about the videos, she called them ‘*anashīd wataniyya*’ (or “nationalist songs”). Importantly, Um Aus used the term *anashīd* which usually demarcated religiously permissible singing, which is generally contrasted with *ghinā‘*, which implies sinful singing. When I told Um Aus that another Shi‘i had been more ambivalent about calling Sadr’s videos permissible, she said: “Whoever said that must have been a non-Iraqi or a Sunni!”436 However, both Amal and Um Aus agreed that Sadr’s videos are not suitable for religious reflection and for calming frayed nerves.

### 3.5 Conclusion

To recount, I have posited that there are two modes of affect: *aththara* and *thāra*. They impinge upon subjects in slight different ways. While *aththara* makes you think, feel, reflect, *thāra* implies arousal, excitement, and even anger. Focusing on the two modes when looking at Shi‘i mourning rituals allows me to first reconcile the dual and often divergent interpretations of the Karbala Paradigm. Secondly, it allows me to draw attention to the visceral modes in which pious

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434 Album 1, Song 9, “*Huna waqafū, huna fa’falū*.”


relationships between Shi‘is, as well relationships between Shi‘i saints and their devotees are created and maintained. Thirdly, it enables me to analyze the differences between various forms of religious media. Notably, these affective modes are both rooted in mourning, which enables Shi‘is to view their own individual experiences of suffering (whether caused by war or illness) in relation to the suffering the *ahl al-bayt* endured at Karbala. Suffering, in other words, becomes the basis for affective relationships and for the process of becoming pious.

Finally, I’d like to reiterate that I conceive of the Karbala Paradigm, with its distinction between ‘revolutionary’ and ‘soteriological’ interpretations, as allowing for differing but not mutually exclusive modes of affect parallel to the notions of ‘*athara*’ and ‘*thāra*.’ While *athara* and *thāra* are distinct, they can work in tandem, especially in the ritual setting of the commemorative mourning gathering. In a sense, Michael Gilsenan’s distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ modes works well. For him, revolutionary interpretations are active, whereas soteriological modes are passive. While this distinction can be useful, I hold that it judges interpretations by their political and historical success in actually mobilizing people. It deems only that which has been politically successful as ‘active,’ and does not recognize the ‘activity’ of the ‘passive’ mode. Moreover, both modes are ‘traditional’ in that they transmit tradition. As with mediated *latmiyyāt*, that which distracts agitates and excites, while that which invites concentration also invites reflection. Through these two modes, I have shown that mourning rituals constitute forms of pedagogy, such that pedagogy and training to become a *mullaya* becomes the ideal path to becoming a pious subject.

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438 Talal Asad’s thoughts on pain aptly critique Gilsenan’s distinction: Asad writes that the equation of ‘passive’ with something negative, in contrast to ‘active’ as something ‘positive’ necessarily equates pain with passivity. (For a more detailed discussion of ritual pain and ritual, see the following chapter.) Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 67-97.
Chapter 4
‘Ashura: Carnivalizing Piety

You take the Faith and a horse – reasonably Arab looking one – feed him rusgullas and milk for a year. While you fatten him you terrorize him with different Asiatic techniques into mildness and meekness.

Then you take a procession or two out in the month of June with the horse leading properly bedecked with buntings and ribbons. You mourn and cry your heart out in the heat. Those of us who have faith then crawl under the belly of the horse whenever it comes to a stop.

Between the four brown hooves take refuge from the sun.

Raza Ali Hasan, “Mourning and Other Activities” 439


Syria presents a fascinating case study for thinking about ‘ulama politics and controversial ‘Ashura practices through Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, because it is one of the few countries where the government interferes little in ‘ulama politics and officially tolerates even extreme and transgressive Shi‘i practices. 440 They are ‘tolerated’ in Wendy Brown’s sense, wherein a minority and its practices are allowed to exist and practice its traditions by an arrogant majority and a government, which establish their moral superiority over the minority by being ‘tolerant’. 441


It is ironic that Muharram practices, including bloody self-flagellation processions, are tolerated in Syria because it was there that Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (d. 1952), the most important Shi‘i mujtahid of Damascus of his time, published a tract condemning flagellations in the 1920s, sparking a regional controversy (the ‘great fitna’) over bloody flagellation rituals. Amin’s concerns about the representation of Shi‘ism emphasize the importance of primarily the visual, but also the audible, in the age of the spectacle, mechanical reproduction, and finally, television. The concern with these senses and perceptions helps explain for instance, why Amin opposed the participation of unveiled women in passion plays. Amin did not want to abolish all Muharram rituals. Rather he wanted to reform and discipline them so that they would portray a rational and modern image of Shi‘ism. To this end, Amin delegitimized self-flagellation processions (i.e. tatbīr) by arguing that they are an early nineteenth-century ‘invented tradition.’ As Amin thought of Shi‘i Muharram processions, passion plays, and other rituals as primarily demonstrative, he hoped to make them into more efficient tools for proselytizing by removing visually offensive spectacles from Shi‘i Muharram practices. Meanwhile, in the Iraqi shrine-cities, opponents accused Amin of acquiescing to Sunni views. Since the time of the ‘great fitna,’ Amin’s arguments have been taken up by Twelver Shi‘i political powers such as Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, who have both banned bloody forms of self-flagellation. Similar to Amin, both claim that bloody Muharram processions will disgust and repel potential converts, and must therefore be discouraged.

Though Syria has been more tolerant of public ritual self-flagellation than Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran, it does not mean that Syrian authorities do not try to manage and control the rituals. The

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444 In a sense, Amin tried to rid Muharram practices of their carnivalesque attributes.


Syrian government is well aware that Shi‘i public rituals are controversial and has not shied away from making ‘pragmatic’ decisions such as downscaling and ‘disciplining’ Muharram mourning practices. For example, in 2008 and 2009, the rituals were spatially regulated for the sake of governance. In the first half of the decade, the main street was lined with hospitality tents serving religious visitors during Muharram. After 2007, however, Syrian authorities prohibited tents be set up on the main road. By refusing to shut down the main road for the sake of the religious pilgrims, the state made a show of power, which was felt and encountered by all those moving in, around, and through the shrine-town.

The three most significant scholars for Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab are Ayatollahs Khamenei, Shirazi and Sadr, each of whose representatives hold separate Friday prayers, thereby competing for and claiming independent religious authority for their charismatic founding figures (i.e. Sayyid Hasan Shirazi, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadr, and Ayatollah Khomeini447). They compete in other ways as well. They sponsor hospitality tents and they debate bloody forms of self-flagellation (i.e. *tatbīr*). The debate on self-flagellation involves the Shirazis (especially Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi) and Ayatollah Khamenei, while the largest ‘hospitality tents’ are sponsored by the Shirazis and by the followers of Muqtada Sadr.

In this chapter, I analyze Muharram practices by highlighting acts of gifting and competing among scholars, institutions and individuals, and while reflecting on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the carnival has several aspects, such as the market, the banquet, and the grotesque body. Muharram practices and doctrines in Sayyida Zaynab are carnivalesque in the sense that they establish, celebrate, and ‘transgress’ bodily and communal boundaries. For example, ‘hospitality tents’ are carnivalesque in that they offer a banquet in remembrance of those hungering at Karbala (i.e. Hussayn and his followers). Khomeini and Khamenei oppose, while the Shirazis support bloody flagellation processions (*tatbīr*) because of its grotesque bodies. Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque is helpful for thinking about Muharram practices and discourses because it draws attention to the interplay between power and authority, piety, and irreverence. The first half of this chapter focuses on the ‘ulama and

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447 Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed by Ruhollah Khomeini to be his successor and it is widely considered that Khamenei may not have become a *marj‘a al-taqlīd* in his own right.
their discourses about and involvement with Muharram rituals. The second half centers on public performances themselves. More specifically, I first examine the politics of hospitality tents and the debate on *tatbīr*. Next, I analyze Shi‘i notions of salvation and miracles, as well forms of transgression in ‘Ashura practices. Specifically, I argue that the Judeo-Christian conception of salvation is incommensurate with the ‘soteriological’ interpretations of the Karbala Paradigm. It is incommensurate because for Shi‘is it involves Maussian gifting. Lastly, I look at the performance of ‘Ashura self-flagellation processions in Sayyida Zaynab. In this section, I compare Bakhtin’s carnival with Guy Debord’s spectacle by comparing early morning *tatbīr*-processions with the carnival, and afternoon *zanjīr*-performances with the spectacle. Overall, by analyzing Muharram rituals with reference to Bakhtin and Debord my work speaks back to the dominant understanding of the Karbala Paradigm, which dictates that Muharram rituals and symbols are either revolutionary or salvific.

4.1.1 Muharram hospitality tents
With the Islamic New Year, the first of Muharram, the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab undergoes a radical makeover. Overnight, green and black flags decorate store signs, balconies, and doorways. Hospitality tents spring up along the Shari‘a al-‘Iraqiyān and the narrow street which connects the Shari‘a al-‘Iraqiyān with the Iranian market and runs alongside the eastern wall of the shrine’s compound. Sponsoring the operation of Muharram hospitality tents is a public act of piety. It is a demonstration of identity, allegiance to Shi‘ism in general

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449 According to Erich Fromm, Roman Catholicism used to view ‘salvation’ as part of an exchange, whereas post-Martin Luther, the dominant understanding became that salvation is a mercy to be received. For Fromm, this change reflects a wider cultural and economic shift towards capitalism (from ‘being’ to ‘having’).

Erich Fromm, *To have or to be* (New York: Continuum, 1996).


451 Needless to say, Shi‘is do not ‘celebrate’ the Islamic new year, because it marks the beginning of Muharram, the month of mourning.
and to a particular group of people or project. In Sayyida Zaynab, specifically, those who sponsor and organize the operation of tents are often affiliated with specific seminaries or husayniyyāt. Regardless of who funds and contributes behind the scenes, it is young men and even early teen boys, who run the public show.

The Shirazis’ Zaynabiyya seminary runs a kitchen from a tent by their back-entrance. On the side of the tent, an approximately 1.5 m * 6m poster read: “junūnī bi-l-Husayn, dālīl ‘aqīlī bi-l-Husayn” (“my craziness is in Husayn, the proof of my reason is in Husayn”). It combines claims to reason with claims to passion. In the kitchen-tent, male volunteers cook rice and a bean paste with traces of meat in large 200-liter metal pots. Since the Zaynabiyya’s Muharram kitchen has regular opening hours, people wait in lines, ready with pots, pans and plastic bags. Tents that provide water are rarely out, while those that make tea or juice may not always be fully stocked. Many venues that give out food, such as the Zaynabiyya, only do so at certain times, such as directly after the day’s most important commemorative mourning gathering (majlis ‘azā’). Some businesses or individuals will donate food only once or twice during Muharram. In such cases, tents may be dispensed with and a simple table is temporarily set up on a side-walk, just so long as it takes to hand out packages of rice and beans and/or meat. Some individuals will give their one-time donations to a tent, which then distributes the food on the donor’s behalf. The standard Muharram food is qayma: rice topped with a bean-sauce, which ideally contains either chicken or beef. Occasionally, tents hand out sandwiches, such as the sandwich of ‘Abbas, in clear plastic bags with a piece of fruit, a banana or an orange.

Muqtada Sadr, the son of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadr and son-in-law of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Sadr, and leader of the Iraqi armed ‘Army of the Mahdi’ has a particularly visible presence on the streets of Sayyida Zaynab. During Muharram 1430 (December 2008/January 2009), a large tent on the main road leading up to the shrine bore Muqtada’s portrait. In October of 2009, Muqtada Sadr’s representative was expelled from Syria after a public dispute with a Syrian official. The following Muharram (December 2009/January 2010), tents were banned from the main road. Therefore, Sadr’s followers opened two tents off

452 A sandwich of ‘Abbas consists of bread with parsley or mint and yoghurt. The naming and the act of donating of this particular sandwich will be discussed below.
the main road: one by the Zaynabiyya, just off the main street and one along the east end of the Iraqi street. The tents still used the same signs from previous years, but had blacked out Muqtada Sadr’s face and name.

Unlike the Shirazis, Sadr’s tents do not hand out food daily. Sadr’s tent by the Zaynabiyya serves non-stop sweet milk-tea with cardamom. The tent along the Shari’a al-‘Iraqiyīn never seems to serve food. Instead, the tent opens up to the inside of a storefront-style room. Arabic style seating, which requires only a carpet and some cushions, invites young men to spend time in the company of Sadr’s followers. Muqtada Sadr’s two tents symbolize a double claim to legitimacy. The first claim is nationalist. Sadr’s followers set up a cushioned ‘guest room’ (dhayyafa) for male visitors on the Iraqi street, signifying that they (unlike the Shirazis and Khamenei) care about Iraq generally and Iraqis in Sayyida Zaynab specifically. Moreover, placing Sadr’s tent beside the Shirazis’ Zaynabiyya equates Sadr’s religious legitimacy with that of the Shirazis. Besides seminaries, wealthy individuals and institutions in Sayyida Zaynab also commonly fund the setting up of smaller tents, which provide refreshments or display scenes from Karbala. As in Bakhtin’s carnival, social ranks are relativized, if not inverted. Wealthy men who would never make tea at home, serve passersby including Shi’i women, children, religious tourists from Iran, South Asia, and the Gulf, and even Sunnis and nawar (gypsies). For instance, the daughter of Abu Mustafa, whom I met at the Zaynabiyya seminary, told me how her father, a successful businessman and long-term Iraqi resident in Sayyida Zaynab, takes off the first ten days of Muharram in order to serve Iraqi milk-tea from a tent. “You wouldn’t know that he can actually brew tea. He never does it at home!”

Muharram hospitality tents are carnivalesque because they aid the inversion of norms regarding women’s public visibility. In the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, as in Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan, the first ten days of Muharram are the time when women even those who otherwise

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453 Though Muqtada Sadr is not a mujtahid, he commands authority over a seminary-based militia. He claims legitimacy through his sayyid genealogy and the fact that his father and uncle were not only marj’a al-taqlīd, the highest rank any Shi’i jurist can reach, but also martyrs (as they were killed by the Iraqi regime at the time).


stay home, leave their houses (together with their daughters and infant or toddler sons) to visit husayniyyāt, seminaries, the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab and partake in the refreshments offered by the men’s tents. It is a ritual of inversion, thus, in the sense that it is usually women who stay put and men who go around ‘visiting.’ This does not mean however, that all are comfortable with the carnivalesque practice of women’s tent visitation. Though no tent denies refreshments to women, some discourage women in more or less subtle ways. For example, some tents serve their beverages in plastic or glass cups, while others offer their guests paper cups. The use of small glass cups guarantees that visitors stay close and thus encourages small talk. Paper cups may not be ecologically friendly, but they are preferable in the eyes of more reserved women, because they can be taken away and thus minimize their contact with unrelated men. The Sadrists are inconsistent with regard to gender: at the tent, which neighbors the Shirazi seminary, they serve tea in small glass cups. At the other tent, they serve tea only to those sitting inside their cushioned and carpeted guest room, which by definition is considered a male space. In contrast, the Shirazis are more gender neutral by providing no tea and by handing out food without providing containers. Thus, men and women both come with their own pots and pans in order to receive family-sized portions, which many then take these containers of food home in order to supplement dinner. But not everyone is as concerned with their families and there are those who simply stand on the side of tents and distribution centers, eat the bean and meat paste on the rice and then throw the rice on the ground. Similar to the Bakhtinian carnival, abundance and poverty here clash with charity and waste. Towards the end, Bakhtin’s carnivalesque banquet imagery describes the roads behind the Zaynabiyya: littered with big piles of garbage. Thus, the feast and the gifting are necessarily tied to the grotesque.

The seminaries follow different strategies to deal with the mess. For example, during the majālis or mourning gatherings of Muharram 2008/2009, it was a man who served the qayma to the women at Fadhlallah’s husayniyya and at the independent husayniyya al-Wilayah. When I inquired about it, I was told that men hand out the food so that women do not demand more food out of embarrassment. Not all husayniyyāt seek to discipline their attendees. The Kuwaiti women’s husayniyya al-Muntadhar, for example, is less concerned about women asking for extra

456 Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 22 December 2009.
food portions; they plan for it.\textsuperscript{457} In short, rather than simply producing an undifferentiated community, different forms of participation, gifting and competition, which Muharram hospitality tents establish, promote, and sustain are best understood as carnivalesque forms of piety which also have the potential effect of bolstering the sponsors’ claim to piety, religious authority and even political legitimacy.

4.1.2 Debates on tatbīr and the construction of religious authority

In Sayyida Zaynab, tatbīr’s greatest supporters are the Shirazis (i.e. Muhammad Shirazi [d. 2001] and Sadiq Shirazi, who became the head of the organization after the death of his elder brother, Muhammad Shirazi).\textsuperscript{458} Muhammad and Sadiq Shirazi’s father, Mirza Mahdi Shirazi (1884-1960) had established an important seminary in Karbala in the 1930s, which his son Muhammad Shirazi took over at his death. Muhammad Shirazi, had declared himself a \textit{marj’a al-taqlīd}, or ‘point of emulation,’ already in his twenties, making him the head of the family’s network of institutions (which today consists of several \textit{husayniyyāt} and seminaries in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Bahrain, and a TV channel based out of Sayyida Zaynab). The scholarly elite of Najaf actively disapproved of Muhammad Shirazi declaring himself a \textit{marj’a al-taqlīd} so early in life and accused him of lacking academic rigor.\textsuperscript{459}

The Shirazi brothers’ political activities in the 1960s and 70s eventually forced them to leave Iraq and live in exile. In Syria, Sayyid Hasan Shirazi (d. 1980), Muhammad Shirazi’s elder brother, was the first to build a seminary in Sayyida Zaynab in 1973, setting a precedent for others to follow. Though Hasan Shirazi regularly visited Sayyida Zaynab, he mainly lived in Beirut, Lebanon until he was shot and killed there in 1982. When Muhammad Shirazi (d. 2001) left Iraq, he first built a base in Kuwait and then relocated to Qom after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Yet, even in Iran, Muhammad and his younger brother Sadiq Shirazi remained outsiders

\textsuperscript{457} Further, their generosity extends to the aural: the microphone at the \textit{husayniyya} al-Muntadhar is available for an hour before the beginning of its daily mourning gathering to allow any woman to chant a \textit{latm} or \textit{ziyārah}.

\textsuperscript{458} The Shirazi brothers in Sayyida Zaynab are related to but are not the direct descendants of Mirza Shirazi, the famous cleric who called for the Tobacco Rebellion in 1891.

\textsuperscript{459} Louër, \textit{Transnational Shia Politics}, 90-91.
and grew increasingly marginalized. Their transnational revolutionary ideology was no longer useful and at times problematic for the Iranian leadership. Whatever their actual differences may have been, in Sayyida Zaynab, these disputes are all hidden behind the debate on bloody forms of self-flagellation. Muhammad Shirazi’s promotion of bloody forms of self-flagellation, especially tatbīr (where the pious cut the top-front of their heads with swords) on the day of ‘Ashura, in commemoration of the Battle of Karbala, reflects his claim to being populist. Echoing ‘Ali Shari’ati, who lies buried in the cemetery adjacent to Sayyida Zaynab’s shrine complex, the Shirazis implicitly set up a dichotomy between the “pure, just, and populist” Shi‘ism (of ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib), the first Imam on the one hand and “the corrupt and worldly Shi‘ism” of the established (i.e. Najafi) scholarly elite.

Questions regarding Zaynab’s semi-infallibility are central to the debate around tatbīr, because her example is invoked as having committed the first act of bloody self-flagellation. According to the principal of the women’s section of the Zaynabiyya and according to Mahdi Ma’ash, whose family are known supporters of Muhammad Shirazi, Sayyida Zaynab cut the top-front of her head with a spear in distress about Husayn’s death. Though Sayyida Zaynab is not technically infallible, as the sister of the two Imams Hasan and Husayn, daughter of Imam ‘Ali and the infallible Fatima, and grandchild of Prophet Muhammad, Zaynab is considered to be as close to infallibility as anyone can come, both in terms of nature and nurture. For those who, like Muhammad Shirazi, promote tatbīr, Zaynab’s minor infallibility (al-‘usma al-sughra) constitutes sufficient evidence for the practice’s religious legitimacy or appropriateness. By promoting tatbīr as an act of respect, love, and loyalty to Zaynab, the Shirazis derive their own claim to legitimacy as religious authorities from Zaynab. They claim closeness to the ahl al-bayt, the family of the infallible Prophet, through the semi-infallible Zaynab. Moreover, the

461 Louër, Transnational Shia Politics, 94-95, 214-216.
462 Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala, 100-103.
Shirazis’ appropriation of the Karbala narrative tries to preserve and embody both Zaynab’s revolutionary stance (vis-à-vis illegitimate political power) and her ‘salvific’ sympathy for the suffering masses. In a sense, the Shirazis promote a Shi‘i ‘liberation theology.’

Khamenei’s counter-argument is that this particular hadīth or narration is weak and thus, potentially inauthentic. Khamenei, who has doctrinal control over the shrine, does not encourage the idea that the shrine is not Sayyida Zaynab’s authentic resting place. Yet, in the case of tatbīr (publicly visible bloody ritual flagellation processions), Ayatollah Khamenei takes what Lara Deeb has called ‘a modern and authenticated’ stance against the practice. First, he opposes tatbīr, because the practice is a supposedly relatively recent (nineteenth century) invention. Second, Khamenei is against it, because he thinks that the public practice of tatbīr portrays an unfavourable image of Twelver Shi‘ism to Sunnis and the world. Paradoxically, even those who oppose ‘spectacular’ self-flagellation and claim to be ‘modern and authenticated’ appropriate the ‘irrational’ force of the grotesque. For example, the office of the Khamenei distributed a pamphlet against tatbīr. The pamphlet was a chapter-by-chapter, point-by-point rebuttal of Shirazi’s booklet – with a twist. The last three pages contain black-and-white photographic images of tatbīr. Among the images, one picture portrays a young boy who is crying; the implied meaning is that the boy was scared and was not a willing participant in the flagellation, which clearly hurt him. In these images, tatbīr is not only equated with supposedly religiously sanctioned violence. They are intended to viscerally affect readers who, until that moment, may not have been completely convinced by Khamenei’s condemnation of bloody forms of self-flagellation. It is important to note that those opposing bloody forms of self-

465 For further discussions of ‘revolutionary’ vs. ‘salvific’ interpretations, see Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala; Deeb, An Enchanted Modern.

466 al-Shammari, Ikhbār al-faqīr fi-ithbāt ḥurmat al-tatbīr, 22-23.

467 al-Shammari, Ikhbār al-faqīr fi-ithbāt ḥurmat al-tatbīr, 10; Deeb, Enchanted Modern; see also Ende, “Flagellations of Muharram,” 26-27.


469 A year after these pamphlets were first distributed free of charge by Khamenei’s office, they were for sale for 100 Lira (or 2 USD) at bookstore inside the shrine compound.
flagellation are not necessarily Lebanese or the followers of Ayatollahs Fadhlallah and Khamenei.

At the same time, the claim of conforming to ‘authenticated’ and ‘modern’ sources does not guarantee religious legitimacy as legitimacy also has to do with populist notions of justice. For example, it was not so much Khamenei’s actual political power, but his blatant partisan employment of power to back Mahmud Ahmadinejad in the 2009 Iranian presidential election, which cost Khamenei his religious authority and legitimacy in the eyes of some Twelver Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab. Amal, a local convert from Sunnism to Shi’ism, married to a South Asian Shi’i seminary-student and merchant, explained that perhaps a dozen or so of her husband’s colleagues usually do not participate in tatbīr because they have chosen to follow Ayatollah Khamenei as their marj’a al-taqlīd. However, following the 2009 Iranian election, disgusted with the Iranian leaders, these Shi’i men participated in the tatbīr processions in Sayyida Zaynab.470 Through tatbīr, by cutting themselves with swords on the top-front of their heads, these men ritually inscribed their protest onto their bodies.

Muqtada Sadr is also against tatbīr, but not vocally so. The followers of Muqtada Sadr in Sayyida Zaynab are in a curious position as Sadr promotes a fiercely nationalist ideology and thereby opposes both Khamenei and the Shirazis on ethnic grounds (even though Sadr’s ancestors also resided in Iran for centuries).471 Yet, Muqtada’s own unconventional claims to authority and leadership in Iraq and among Iraqis abroad put him more at odds with Khamenei than the Shirazis,472 which may help explain why Sadr has not vocally sided with Khamenei and Hezbollah against tatbīr. Instead of weighing in on either side of the tatbīr-debate, Muqtada Sadr’s followers have organized an alternative method for endearing (male) Shi’is during Muharram through displaying the virtue of hospitality and generosity by sponsoring the largest hospitality tents.

470 Fieldnotes, Monday, 28 December 2009.

471 Muqtada Sadr has slowly changed his mind over the last decade. At first, he opposed Iran, but has now turned into an Iranian ally.

472 For a brilliant discussion of Muqtada Sadr, his family’s recent history and their role in various scholarly and political disputes, see: Cole, The Ayatollahs and Democracy in Iraq; Cole, “The United States and Shi’ite Religious Factions in Post-Ba’thist Iraq.”
4.2 ‘Ashura – a soteriological interpretation

In the academic literature on Twelver Shi’ism, the question of how ‘Ashura mourning practices relate to various conceptions of ‘salvation’ has not been adequately examined. Published before the Iranian Revolution, in 1978, Muhammad Ayyoub’s book is an older, but still relevant and commonly referenced work. His examination of Shi’i Muharram mourning practices remains a-historical and un-situated/un-contextualized. Ayyoub’s analysis of redemptive suffering in Twelver Shi‘ism does not explain how Shi‘i ‘redemptive’ (or ‘salvific’) suffering differs from Christian conceptions of ‘redemptive’ suffering. After the Iranian Revolution, scholars of South Asian Shi‘ism, such as David Pinault and Toby Howarth, wrote on ‘salvific’ Shi‘i mourning practices drawing on various conceptions of communal identity. More recent academic works on Shi‘i mourning practices and discourses, such as those by Kamran Aghaie (2005) and Lara Deeb (2006), have shifted their analytic gaze westward, to Iran and Lebanon respectively. Both of these scholars go beyond the concepts of *communitas* and identity by discerning a recent, late-twentieth century shift in Shi‘i mourning rituals from emphasis on the soteriological value to underlining its revolutionary potential. Both Deeb and Aghaie elaborate on the revolutionary aspects and neglect the soteriological, which becomes a blanket term for any interpretation that remains politically quietist. In what follows, I excavate a distinctly local and gendered Shi‘i form of ‘redemptive suffering.’

In “Formations of the Secular,” Asad writes that even in early modern English, there was no “supposedly universal opposition between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane.’” The French “word *sacré* was not part of the language of ordinary Christian life in the Middle Ages and in early modern times.” The more important and popular term, Asad suggests, was *sainteté*, which implies “a

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473 David Pinault goes even further by drawing strong parallels between Shi‘ism and Catholicism. See: Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*.

474 Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*; Howarth, *The Twelver Shi‘a*.


477 Ibid., 32.
beneficent quality of certain persons and their relics, closely connected to the common people and their ordinary world.”

Asad’s concept of sainteté is especially helpful when thinking about Sayyida Zaynab as a ‘saint’ with the saintly abilities to ‘heal’ (shifa’) in this world and ‘intercede’ (shafa’a) on behalf of her devotees in the next world.

Zaynab’s abilities to heal and to intercede derive from her personal suffering. They are not directly the result of a ‘sacrifice.’ In his latest work “On Suicide Terrorism,” Asad cautions against the use of the concept of ‘sacrifice’ in relation to Islam, because he thinks it is too closely linked to the Judeo-Christian notion of ‘atonement’ and unrelated to the Latin etymology meaning to ‘make sacred.’

While I do not seek to discard the concepts of atonement, sacrifice and salvation, I aim to complicate the ways in which Muharram practices are ‘salvific.’ I posit that for Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab, the ‘salvific’ aspects of Muharram mourning practices should be linked to the ways in which these practices constitute economies of gifting between Shi’is and saints rather than sacrifices for the sake of atonement. To this end, I draw attention to the ways in which Shi’is bargain with saintly mediators such as Sayyida Zaynab and to the precise ways in which Shi’is themselves understand salvation as both this-worldly and other-worldly benefits: this worldly healing, restoration and satisfaction (shifa’) and ‘intercession’ (shafa’a) on Judgment Day.

In the rest of this section, I first examine the ways in which the practice of tatbîr is re-presented and discussed in women’s seminary classes and mourning gatherings at the Zaynabiyya through

478 Ibid.

479 Talal Asad, On Suicide Bombing (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 87-89.

480 Ibid., 43-44.

481 Cf. Betteridge, “Gift Exchange in Iran.”

As I discuss Shi’i conceptions of relationality and the establishing of relationships (especially between ordinary Shi’is and members of the Prophet’s family) in my chapter on mourning gatherings, I will not discuss it in further detail in this chapter.

482 Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 478.

483 Ibid., 479.
miracle narratives. Second, I look at how the practice of making vows relates to miracles and how it helps Shi‘i women relate to saints.

4.2.1 Tatbīr: a miraculous performance
For many of the women I met in Sayyida Zaynab, soteriological or traditional interpretations of the Karbala narrative focus less on abstract or otherworldly salvation, than this-worldly miracles. As Anne Betteridge explains, there are two kinds of miracles in contemporary Shi‘ism: mu‘jizāt and karamāt. The former are “rare and earthshaking,” while the latter “are more modest miracles.” When visiting shrines, writes Betteridge, Shi‘is tend to ask for karamāt, such as the recovery of a loved, finding a spouse or a job. The kinds of miracles which tatbīr is associated with in Sayyida Zaynab fall under this latter category of minor wonders because it is linked to healing.

Not all teachers or students at the Shirazis’ Zaynabiyya seminary necessarily agree with the Shirazis on the issue of tatbīr. However, even when students and/or teachers disagree, there is a tacit understanding that the seminary is not a neutral ground because it belongs to a particular marj‘a al-taqlīd. The only women’s teacher who is not hired from outside is the Islamic law or fiqh teacher. ‘Alawīyya ‘Aliya, the main fiqh teacher at the Zaynabiyya, is the eldest of the Musawi girls, the daughters of an important ‘ālim (or scholar) and sayyid who is part of the Shirazi network. On the one hand, ‘Aliya personifies rationality. On the other hand, she can also be described as occupying an ambiguous position. In terms of the Shi‘i scholarly/ clerical hierarchy, a woman can attain the rank of a mujtahid and arrive at her own legal conclusions. However, convention has it that lay Shi‘is, muqallidīn or followers cannot follow the legal opinions of a woman. As a highly learned and respected fiqh teacher, therefore, ‘Aliya

484 Parts of this subsection have been submitted for publication with Brill as part of an article in an edited volume on sainthood (Sainthood in Fragile States, eds. Andreas Bandak and Mikkel Bille).


486 Ibid.

487 For example, there are teachers who work for both Khomeini’s and the Shirazis’ seminary.
practically holds the most authoritative position in the women’s section of the seminary. At the same time, there are many students, who shrug off her Islamic legal advice regarding marriage and children, because she is unmarried. Some students even noted that as an unmarried teacher, ‘Aliya defies the social norms of femininity which she herself teaches and promotes.

Besides *fiqh* lessons, ‘Aliya gives regular lessons at the Shirazis’ seminary *husayniyya*’s weekly mourning gathering (*majlis*) and other special events. At these gatherings, ‘alawiyya ‘Aliya is one of the foremost spokeswomen in Sayyida Zaynab regarding *tatbir*. On the seventh, eighth, and ninth days of Muharram 1430 (January 2009), ‘Aliya gave three lectures on *tatbir*. In her three talks, she addressed three different aspects of self-flagellation: reason (*’aql*), Islamic law (*shari’a*) and spirituality (*ruhaniyya*).

‘Aliya’s first talk was on the day dedicated to commemorating the death of ‘Abbas, the half-brother of Husayn. She began by explaining that the practice of *tatbir* is a miracle because it does not cause permanent damage. After cutting the top-front of their heads with swords, flagellants continue to walk around normally. Despite the loss of blood, ‘Aliya emphasized, the flagellants’ continued ability to function constitutes a miracle. While other head wounds require immediate medical care, *tatbir* wounds do not require treatment. She pointed out that the loss of blood in itself does not cause harm because the human body is able to produce more blood. She implicitly countered the notion that that which is visually grotesque must be irrational. ‘Aliya spoke about *tatbir* and questions of health by citing Prophetic examples: She argued that the Prophet had both endorsed and practiced cupping as a medical procedure. ‘Aliya claimed that the practice of *tatbir* existed at the time of the Prophet under the name *hujamat al-ras*, or cupping from the head. She explained that cupping drains ‘bad blood’ from the body.

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488 Fieldnotes, Saturday, 5 December 2009.


490 The first ten days of Muharram are dedicated to mourning a particular martyr who died at Karbala. As the martyrs all died on the day of ‘Ashura, the particular order in which these martyrs/saints are commemorated reflects local preferences.

491 For many Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab, moral refinement for the sake of healing does not imply rationalist or disciplined self-cultivation. Rather, it connotes a cleansing. Modern reformers have often equated hygiene (or *nadāfa*) with ritual cleanliness (*tahāra*). Yet, for understanding Shi’i attitudes regarding cupping and self-
comparison of the blood of *tatbir* to the ‘bad’ or ‘corrupt’ blood (*damm fāsid*) of *hujāmah* portrays the former as something abject and grotesque, which must be ejected from the body of the believer.492

As noted above, the day’s mourning gathering had been dedicated to ‘Abbas, the heroic half-brother of Imam al-Husayn, who died serving the children of Husayn at the Battle of Karbala. According to Shi‘i narratives, the Umayyad army had cut off Husayn’s camp from the Euphrates, their only source of water. Husayn’s daughter Sukayna has been complaining of thirst, and so her uncle ‘Abbas ventured into the enemy territory to get her water. To heighten the tragic effect of the story, the *mullaya* (the woman leading the ritual mourning gathering) insisted that ‘Abbas did not drink when he arrived at the river, though he was thirsty as well. He would not drink as long as Sukayna was thirsty. He filled his camel-skin flask and was on his way back to the camp, when the enemy army attacked him. The *mullaya* then chanted mourning poetry describing the gory details of how Umayyad soldiers first cut off ‘Abbas’ right hand and then his left hand, and how ‘Abbas finally, supposedly for the first and last time in his life, called out for Husayn, “ya akhī, oh my brother!” ‘Aliya’s talk about *tatbir* and flagellants who are not hurt by *tatbir* practices, thus implicitly compared *tatbir* flagellants to ‘Abbas, in his loyalty, his willingness to offer himself, his blood, endure pain.

‘Aliya’s juxtaposition of *tatbir* and ‘Abbas brings together elements which Yitzhak Nakash describes as having originated in two communities. He writes that *tatbir* was originally introduced to the Iraqi shrine-cities by Persian Shi‘is and that *tatbir* flagellants (or *mutathirīn*) were known as the ‘lovers of Husayn.’ Further, Nakash explains that Persian ideals of masculinity are more closely tied to and reflected by the Infallible (and more forgiving) Husayn,

flagellation during the Islamic month of Muharram, it is important to insist on an analytical difference between hygiene and ritual cleanliness. Generic dirt does not invalidate prayer, but ritual uncleanness (or the lack of *tahāra*, caused, for example, by passing gas or drinking wine) does invalidate prayer. To posit a difference between *tahāra* and *nadāfa*, moreover opens up space to think about healing beyond the western medical model and focus on Islamic notions of healing.

492 In contrast, Hezbollah sees this blood as wasted, and therefore argues that Shi‘is should rather donate blood than self-flagellate. See: Norton, “Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon,” 147-49.
whereas Iraqi tribal notions idealize ‘Abbas. By comparing ‘Abbas with the mutabirīn ‘Aliya ties together Iraqi and Iranian symbols and practices, overcoming political differences through love for the Prophet’s family, including semi-infallibles such as Sayyida Zaynab and ‘Abbas.

The next afternoon, dedicated to the remembrance of ‘the wedding of Qasim’ (‘urs Qasim), ‘Aliya lectured on the legal aspects of tatbīr. Employing the scholarly juristic method, she began by examining the supposed roots (usūl) or origins of the practice. ‘Aliya explained that Sayyida Zaynab herself performed tatbīr with a spear upon seeing the severed heads of her loved ones mounted on spears. Like Sunnis, Twelver Shi’is derive Islamic laws primarily from the Qur’an. For Sunnis, the second source includes prophetic traditions and sayings, which Shi’is widen to include all of the fourteen infallibles: the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, her husband ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, their sons Hasan and Husayn and another nine male Imams, descendants of Husayn. According to a strict view, Zaynab is not infallible (m’asūm). Yet, as the sister of the two Imams Hasan and Husayn, daughter of Imam ‘Ali and the infallible Fatima, and grandchild of Prophet Muhammad, Zaynab is considered to be as close to infallibility as one can come, both in terms of nature and nurture. Moreover, since Imam Zayn al-Abidīn was present, ‘Aliya reasoned, he would have told his aunt Zaynab to stop if the practice were unacceptable for him as an infallible Imam and to God.

When ‘Aliya finished, Um Muhsin, the director of the women’s section of the seminary, addressed the question of whether or not Qasim actually got married at Karbala just before the battle. Um Muhsin explicated that, “no, there was no wedding at Karbala. But seeing her son’s wedding is what every woman desires and thus, we are fulfilling the wishes of Um Qasim (the mother of Qasim) which earns us the benevolence of the Infallibles.” The ‘wedding of Qasim’ is carnivalesque because it is simultaneously celebrated and mourned; it unites opposites and thereby relativizes them. The ritual commemorates the death of a pubescent son of the second Imam al-Hasan. Qasim wanted to join his uncle Husayn in battle, but Husayn was reluctant to

493 Nakash, The Shi‘is of Iraq, 144-54.
495 The Shirazis call hers a minor infallibility (‘usma sughra).
call on Qasim because he was not a grown man and thus, would surely be killed. Imam al-Hasan was not alive by the time Husayn went to Karbala, however, the mother of Qasim, according to the story, claimed that Hasan had foretold that Qasim should be sent into battle with his uncle Husayn. Shi‘i women empathize with Um Qasim and the other women at Karbala and ritually relate to them by mourning Qasim. Mullayāt usually emphasize how young and weak Qasim was, how he was unfit for battle. Moreover, at seminaries such as the Zaynabiyya, women’s mourning gatherings generally include a ‘wedding’ which constitutes of two or more women dressed in black abayāt and black and green face-veils walking around carrying large plates with candles, incense, and henna. Then the items on the plates, which are believed to carry baraka, the beneficent powers of the saints, are distributed.

The symbolic juxtapositions and discontinuities are carnivalesque: ‘Aliya derives her legal argument from the silence of an Infallible in a riwāyah, a narrative centered on an ‘almost infallible’ female saint, Sayyida Zaynab. Further, these gaps or shortcomings are framed by carnivalesque contradictions and juxtapositions: The story of a mother’s loss, her always deferred and never actualized desire for the impossible and Shi‘i women’s empathic performance of a ‘mourning wedding’ – a contradiction in terms, symbolic of an impossibility to be mourned and yet celebrated.

On the third day of ‘Aliya’s trilogy, the ninth day of Muharram, Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab commemorate the death of baby ‘Ali Asghar (or Tifl Radhiy’). According to Shi‘i hagiography the infant son of Husayn died of thirst because his mother no longer had milk. The mullaya usually explicates that Husayn pleaded with the Umayyad army to give his infant water. Yet when Husayn tried to approach the river, the Umayyad army shot ‘Ali Asghar with an arrow. The Zaynabiyya’s mullaya herself begins sobbing as she chants the last lines: “And as the arrow

\[496\] Cf. Ma‘ash, Mashru‘iyya al-sha‘ā’ir al-husayniyya, 177-78.

\[497\] They are gaps or shortcomings in the sense that they always approach, but never meet the generally agreed upon standards of authenticity. For example, Sayyida Zaynab is not actually an infallible and usually, laws are valid and binding only if the traditions and sayings which they draw on go back to the Fourteen Infallibles. Khamenei’s followers will further point out that the hadīth about Sayyida Zaynab and the spear is a weak and therefore not credible.

\[498\] Fieldnotes, Tuesday 6 January 2009.
slit open the baby’s neck, the baby smiled. The baby thought he was finally getting something to drink.” At larger husayniyyāt, such as the one at the Zaynabiyya, ‘Ali Asghar’s death is represented by a woman who carries around a real baby. The woman generally wears men’s clothes and a white face-veil; representing Husayn as he beseeches the Umayyad army for water. Generally, husayniyyāt (similarly to hospitality tents) serve their guests, the women who come to participate in mourning gatherings, tea. On this day, however, Shi‘i women are usually served sweetened boiled milk (with or without cardamom) in memory of the baby who died of thirst. Often, there are artefacts that accompany the commemoration of ‘Ali Asghar, such as cradles covered in green sheets and dolls with bleeding necks and arrows. The sheets covering the cradle are important for making vows: Shi‘i women tie a knot for every vow (or nidhr).

Framed by the tragic story of a baby’s death, ‘Aliya’s talk about the ‘spirituality’ (ruhāniyya) of tatbīr actually constituted of two miraculous narratives. According to the first, there was once a man who usually participated in tatbīr but he was sick one year. He knew his illness was serious and thus had decided not to perform tatbīr. As he was outside though and saw the others, he thought about it again: “Should I or should I not participate?” Finally, he decided to go ahead and perform tatbīr, and when he cut his head, black blood dripped from the wound. He hurried to the hospital and by chance the doctor was a Shi‘i. After doing some tests, the doctor told him that he had been lucky. Had he not performed tatbīr, had this black blood not come out, the man would have died. In this case, the practice tatbīr, a bloody and supposedly saved a life. The difference here with Hezbollah’s ‘life-affirming’ view of blood, however is that here it is the flagellant’s life, which is saved. Hezbollah encourages potential flagellants instead to save others’ lives through donating blood.

‘Aliya’s second story was about a pharmacist in Kufa. On every ‘Ashura, this pharmacist would sell medication to flagellants for their wounds. One year he was going on a journey and thus left his son in charge of the pharmacy. He told his son which white powder to sell to the flagellants. However, when the father came back from his journey, he saw that the powder for the tatbīr wounds lay untouched. Had the son not sold any of it to the flagellants? The son admitted had

499 It is noteworthy that ‘Aliya equates spirituality with the miraculous. As I demonstrate in the following chapter on ‘Transgressive Healing,’ the Arabic term for spirituality has a similarly vague meaning as the English term does. Both designate the influence or beneficence of a divine or at least super-natural power (i.e. either jinn or angels).
accidentally sold the wrong powder. Yet, strangely enough, the flagellants returned to the pharmacist later and told him that the powder his son had sold them worked better than the powder they had used in previous years.

In the majlis, ‘Aliya’s lesson on the miraculous healing powers of tatbīr – a wound that produces life for the one who is hurt – is juxtaposed to the untimely death of an infant. Both can be described as ‘irrational’ and in that sense, they are ‘miraculous.’ Moreover, the two acts are also reciprocal: a member of the ahl al-bayt, in this case ‘Ali Asghar, gives his life, while the infants’ devotees gain life and health. They establish a relationship between a saintly figure and his followers.

4.2.2 Muharram vows
Shi’i popular conceptions of their relationships with saints could not be more different from the illustrated pamphlets handed out by Baptist and other Protestant churches today. According to the Christian pamphlets, Jesus Christ offers everyone a ‘free gift,’ his death as ‘salvation,’ understood as a gift to be accepted. Shi’i saints, as Anne Betteridge describes them, demand that devotees ‘return the favor.’ Such Twelver Shi’is have affective gifting relationships with the members of the ahl al-bayt. One of the important ways in which both Shi’i men and women in Sayyida Zaynab establish pious relationships with saints is through the practice of making a vow or nidhr. These vows differ from the Judeo-Christian notions of sacrifice and atonement because they involve what could be termed bargaining. By making a nidhr a Shi‘i promises to sponsor or perform a particular act of piety in return for the fulfillment of a particular this-worldly desire or need (hājah). Anne Betteridge explains that the nidhr-gift which Shi‘is give in return for a fulfilled desire is an ideal gift, because it celebrates the successful interaction and relationship between a devotee and the saint.  

There are different kinds of vows which Shi‘is may engage in. The practice of holding a sufra was discussed in the previous chapter (entitled “Affect Chapter”). In this sub-section I discuss the performance of nidhr, as well as the practice of qadha’ hāja. Generally, in the practice of

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**nidhr** or making vows, women promise to do something, such as sponsoring a mourning gatherings or contributing something to some else’s mourning gathering if their desires are fulfilled. For example, Shi‘i women in Sayyida Zaynab commonly promise that if a daughter finally gets married, they will sponsor a mourning gathering during Muharram commemorating the wedding of Qasim. If a woman is concerned with the health (or educational or economic well-being) of one of her children, she may promise to sponsor a ritual gathering dedicated to ‘Ali Asghar or at least to contribute milk to be distributed at a Muharram gathering for Husayn’s infant son.

Often, the things exchanged in such a vow resemble and yet are symbolically juxtaposed one another. If a woman desires her child to recover from illness, she promises to give that which would have saved the life of ‘Ali Asghar (i.e., milk). May, an elderly well-educated Iraqi Shi‘i woman living in Sayyida Zaynab, whom I met at a private women’s Muharram mourning gathering, explained that she had made a vow regarding one of her children sometime in 2008.\(^{501}\) Grateful that her vow had been fulfilled, she went into great trouble to bring eight litres of fresh cow milk directly from a farmer. She then brought the milk to a friend’s private mourning gathering where she made sure that the children (who are also symbolic of ‘Ali Asghar) were all served before the milk ran out.

There does not necessarily have to be symbolic resemblance between a devotee’s desire and the gift she promises. For example, Shi‘i women may ask for a range of different things (including recovery or marriage) when they promise to make and distribute sandwiches called ‘the cut-off hand of ‘Abbas’ (kaff ‘Abbas). These sandwiches must be prepared in multiples of seven and consist of pita rolls stuffed with parsley or mint and yoghurt. The sandwich is a carnivalesque symbol: it signifies the Iraqis’ special love and devotion to ‘Abbas\(^{502}\) by making edible his severed hands. As with May’s above-noted example, women only make the sandwiches once their wishes have been fulfilled.\(^{503}\) Thereby, the practice of making vows, bargaining with saints and sponsoring or contributing to mourning gatherings makes Muharram mourning a


\(^{502}\) Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, 143-48.

\(^{503}\) Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 21 January 2009.
participatory and ongoing project. Some desires and promises remain deferred and unfulfilled. However, if a wish remains unfulfilled, if the saint does not hold up her end of the bargain, then the worshipper is not bound to fulfill her vow either.

The practice called qadha’ hāja, meaning the effectuating, consummation or performance of a desire or need, resembles but also conceptually differs from nidhr.504 While making a vow or nidhr can be described as bargaining, the act of qadha’ hāja could be equated with making a prepayment. As ‘alawiyya Um Husayn explained, if a woman desperately wants to get pregnant she should contribute milk, or even better sponsor an entire mourning gathering in the name of ‘Ali Asghar as soon as possible.505 Um Husayn recounted how she had helped a girl who wanted to get married but who had not been pleased with the suitors who came asking for her hand. There was something wrong with each of them. So the ‘alawiyya performed a majlis – labsat fustān ‘urs Qāsim, a ritual in memory of the wedding of Qasim (which, paradoxically, never happened). Within two weeks, the ‘alawiyya claimed, the girl was engaged! On a surface level, the difference between nidhr and qadha’ hāja is the order in which the rituals are performed. In the case of nidhr, part or even the whole of the promised deed (whether it is sponsoring or contributing to a majlis or a sufra) remains deferred until the desired outcome (a wedding, success at work, or a recovery) materializes. In qadha’ hāja the order is reversed. Through the practice of nidhr, Shi‘i women bargain with saints. In qadha’ hāja Shi‘i women, in a sense, try to coerce the saints to grant their followers’ desires.506 Yet both cases are similar in that the devotee establishes an ambivalent relationship with a particular saint: There remains an incommensurable hierarchical divide between Shi‘is and saints and the risk of failure. The wish may remain unfulfilled.

504 Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 771, 221.


506 According to Rudi Paret’s definition, this practice could qualify as magic: “[Die] zwar unter Bezugnahme auf die offiziell geltende islamische Religion ausgeübt werden, die aber doch etwas anderes sind als blosse Frömmigkeitsübungen, weil sie nämlich der Erfüllung eines mehr oder weniger egoistischen Zwecks dienen sollen.”

According to Augustus Richard Norton, there are women in Lebanon who make vows (*nidhr*) and promise to perform *tatbir* if their wishes come true.\(^5\) I did not meet anyone, man or woman, who made such promise in Sayyida Zaynab. Interestingly, David Pinault writes that in South Asia there are men who perform bloody forms of self-flagellation in order to be forgiven for not praying.\(^5\) In Pinault’s case, self-flagellation sounds like *qadha’ hāja*, except that it focuses on otherworldly salvation, rather than this-worldly miracles.

4.3 Carnivalesque spectacles

The first time I observed live performances of *tatbir*, a bloody form of self-flagellation, was on ‘Ashura 1430 (which was in January 2009). Right after the dawn prayer, on the day of ‘Ashura, the tenth of the Islamic month Muharram, Shi’i men cut themselves on the top-front of their heads with mid-length swords. I spent the night at the Shirazi women’s seminary, which remains open only on this night, talking with Um Muhammad. She is a mid-30s educated Iraqi seminary student from Baghdad and mother of three boys. She used to teach English to Elementary schoolchildren before she got married and before ‘The Fall’ (as Iraqis refer to the ‘Fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003’). Her husband was also a former English teacher. Now he works as a cook, while she spends her mornings at the seminary and her afternoons with her three boys, one of whom is in a wheelchair. “Can you bear the sight of it?” She asked me when I told her I wanted to go out to see the men’s *tatbir* processions in the morning. She was concerned how I would react to the ‘visual excess’ of this ‘carnivalesque spectacle.’

Um Muhammad is not the only one who worries about the visual excess or the grotesque spectacle, which *tatbir* offers. For instance, Ayatollah Khamenei banned *tatbir* precisely because of this reason.\(^5\) Khamenei’s ban, moreover, lends credence to the theory, which a number of scholars have put forward, that that the visual has become our privileged sense over


the last two centuries.\textsuperscript{510} It is thus to no surprise that the ‘modern’ emphasis on visual representations of identity in particular caused self-flagellation processions (along with ‘temporary marriage’) to become one of the most controversial topics in and about Twelver Shi’ism. Concurrently, as the visual became the more dominant of the human senses, the debate over processions and other visually impressive rituals among Twelver Shi’is has also taken center-stage.\textsuperscript{511} It was first this emphasis on the visual, which led me to consider theories concerning grotesque imagery. Then I noticed that in the existent academic literature, Shi’i Muharram rituals have been described both in terms of the ‘carnival(esque)’\textsuperscript{512} and the ‘spectacle.’\textsuperscript{513} As yet, however, Shi’i Muharram rituals have not been analyzed via the concepts of the ‘carnival’ and ‘spectacle’ with the possible exception of studies on syncretic Muharram rituals in the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{514} The concepts ‘carnival’ and ‘spectacle’ must be distinguished because they carry separate theoretical genealogies.

Bakhtin argues that the primary difference between the ‘carnival’ and the ‘spectacle’ is the lack of passive ‘spectators’ in the former. “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.”\textsuperscript{515} The ‘carnival’ emphasizes community. Moreover, Bakhtin argues that it fosters “an attitude towards the world which liberates from fear, brings the world close to man and man close to his fellow man.”\textsuperscript{516} It “counteracts the gloomy, one-sided official seriousness which is born of fear, is dogmatic and

\textsuperscript{510} Cf. Debord, \textit{Society of the Spectacle}; Hirschkind, \textit{Ethical Soundscape}.

\textsuperscript{511} See, for example, the sizeable amount of literature on Taziye performances. Cf. Chelkowski, \textit{Ta’ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran}.


\textsuperscript{513} Ende, “The Flagellations of Muharram,” 20; Mervin, “Ashura,” 142.


inimical to evolution and change, and seeks to absolutize the given conditions of existence and
the social order.” Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival is similar to Victor Turner’s *liminality* in
its emphasis on ambiguity, and it opposition to or limitation of ‘official’ structure. The
ambivalence, which characterizes both Turnerian *liminality* and the Bakhtinian carnival is
expressed in Shi‘i Muharram practices such as the dual celebration/mourning of Qasim’s
wedding and his martyrdom. Yet, while Turner’s notion resembles the carnivalesque, it lacks
the latter’s emphasis on the visual, which as I have noted above is crucial for thinking about
bloody flagellation processions the controversies surrounding these processions in the Levant.

The ‘spectacle,’ Michel Foucault implies, was more ‘carnivalesque’ until the early nineteenth
century. Specifically, he writes that the ‘spectacle’ of execution in eighteenth century Europe
had “a whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and
criminals transformed into heroes.” “The public execution allowed the luxury of these
momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or to punish. Under the protection of
imminent death, the criminal could say everything and the crowd cheered.” Already by the
early nineteenth century, however, the spectacle of execution had morphed into strict disciplinary
prison regulations and architectural designs such as Bentham’s Panopticon designed “to induce
in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning
of power.”

Guy Debord carries Foucault’s line of thought further and considers the ‘spectacle’ in the late
twentieth century, where it reappears in new forms. According to Debord, “the spectacle is not a
collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by

517 Ibid.

518 Vernon Schubel has productively used Turner’s notion of *liminality* in his analysis of South Asian ritual self-

519 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 61.

520 Ibid., 60.

521 Ibid., 201.
Debord describes a late-capitalist society, which no longer has a community. Subjects “are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only in its separateness.” In short, the spectacle has become more conceptually differentiated from the carnival. The spectacle has become part of an arsenal of disciplinary power, and the idea of the carnival has become primarily associated with reversing and relativizing structures of power.

Through the two concepts, ‘carnivals’ and ‘spectacles,’ the following analysis shows how Muharram rituals challenge the accepted wisdom regarding the ‘Karbala Paradigm,’ which states that Muharram practices are either politically ‘quietist’ (and ‘soteriological’) or ‘revolutionary.’ The problem with these binaries is that they reduce all ‘Ashura practices and discourses, such as those in Sayyida Zaynab, to the mere adjectives, ‘apolitical,’ ‘quietist,’ ‘salfivic’ and ‘soteriological,’ simply because they have not revolted successfully and publicly against the Syrian government. By focusing instead on the notions of carnival and spectacle, it becomes possible to transcend the dichotomy of the Karbala Paradigm and analyze the relationships between performers and their audiences.

4.3.1 Transgressive piety and the grotesque

In his essay on ‘transgression,’ Michael Taussig criticizes Victor Turner for bleaching out the “erotic, obscene, sadistic, cruel, and licentious features” when examining the liminal phase of ritual. On Bakhtin’s carnival, Taussig writes:

The pathos of the Cold War ensured that Bakhtin’s “message,” once translated decades later into English, would be purified in scholarly reflections on laughter,

523 Ibid., 22.
while the horror of the gulag would remain unexamined as no less a mark of transgression than the carnival.\textsuperscript{526} 

Taussig’s critique could easily apply to the study of Shi’i ritual as well. For example, Vernon Schubel (1993) and David Pinault (2001), though writing about bloody self-flagellation rituals, do not theorize excess as such, but rather focus on the sense of fraternal \textit{communitas} that the rituals supposedly create.\textsuperscript{527}

I complicate this romantic conception of \textit{communitas} by looking not only at the performance but also at various reactions to grotesque spectacles of bloody flagellation. Moreover, I examine ‘transgressive piety’ by looking at the sensory, bodily aspects of mourning on the one hand, and by thinking about the issue of ‘excess’ and the doubt (rather than belief) it produces. Having already discussed the ‘market’ and ‘banquet’ aspects of the carnival, I now turn towards the grotesque, the bloody, the bodily especially in its visible – indeed ‘spectacular’ forms as in the case of bloody self-flagellation processions.

On ‘Ashura, as in Bakhtin’s carnival, the physical body, its fluids (blood and semen), and the transgression of its boundaries take center-stage.\textsuperscript{528} On the morning of ‘Ashura, just after sunrise, parallel rows of men dressed in white \textit{dishdasha}s (long-sleeve robes that reach to their ankles) emerge from various \textit{hawzat} and \textit{husayniyyāt} (excluding the \textit{hawza} of Imam Khomeini

\textsuperscript{526} Ibid., 160.

\textsuperscript{527} Seminaries, \textit{husayniyyāt}, guilds and neighborhoods organize tents, where young men distribute tea, water, coffee, juice and \textit{qayma}, a dish of white rice crowned by a thick yellow sauce of smashed chickpeas and beef. Muharram rituals thus unify Shi’i efforts, create \textit{communitas} – but notably, they also foster competition between the different groups and can even lead to violence.


\textsuperscript{528} During one of the lectures on \textit{tatbīr}, just before ‘Ashura (in 2009), the \textit{mullaya} at the \textit{hawza} Zaynabiyya explained that \textit{tatbīr} is really a form of \textit{hujāmat al-ras}, ‘cupping’ on the head. Cupping, where the skin is cut in order to let ‘bad blood’ (\textit{dam fāsid}, lit. ‘corrupt blood’) flow into a pre-heated cup is considered a medical practice which the Prophet Muhammad supposedly approved of. Moreover, cupping is still practiced in Sayyida Zaynab by ‘spiritual doctors’ (i.e. ‘magicians’).

of course). In groups they walk south along the eastern side of the shrine, around its walls to the southern gate, in front of which they remain for several minutes and then turn around the way they came. Rotating flagellants flank the procession with flags, while others announce it with trumpets and drums, which according to Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi mimic battle [i.e. the Battle of Karbala] and according to Bakhtin symbolize sex. Some flagellants carry their own swords while walking, hitting themselves on their freshly shaved heads with the flat side in preparation for tatbir. The older more experienced men then cut themselves. Others let a practiced elder hit them once or twice. This they do while their processions stops every 50 meters for a couple of minutes. In a sea of mourning Shi‘is dressed in black, the mutathirin in their bloodstained white dishdasha stand out. The bleeding men march proudly around the shrine, paying their respects to Sayyida Zaynab by stopping at the shrine-complex’s eastern and southern gates, waving their flags, blowing trumpets and drumming and yelling “Haydar, Haydar!” promising and demonstrating to her, the gathered crowds and to themselves that they stand by Husayn. “Ya laytana kunna m’akum, fa-naفز fawzan adhīman! Oh, how we wish we would have been with you [Husayn, at the Battle of Karbala], we would have won a great victory!” The men’s ages range from around 5-year-olds, whom their fathers carry on their shoulders to elderly men. The majority, however, who perform this rite of masculinity, are young men from their late teens to their early forties. They include Iranians, Afghans and South Asians – but the majority are Arab.

In anticipation of the flagellation processions, crowds form consisting of women – the flagellants’ mothers, wives, sisters and daughters – and other men, both Sunni and Shi‘i. Often, the women cry while watching the men. The atmosphere is both sad and yet energetic. In some ways, it is even festive. There are women who cry both out of sadness and out of pride in witnessing their male kin’s devotion. Seeing their own relatives bleed helps Shi‘i women sympathize with Zaynab. Fewer critics and cynics come to see the flagellants just after sunrise. Most come in the afternoon. Nevertheless, on the morning of ‘Ashura (1430/2009), I happened to stand next to a group of young Palestinian men showed up along the eastern wall outside the


530 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 204.
shrine of Sayyida Zaynab – in order to make fun of the Shi‘i men performing tatbīr. The young Iraqi Shi‘i man who was standing in front of the Palestinian Sunni, felt personally offended. Both were roughly in their early twenties. The Iraqi took his sword, which is not sharp, and is not the one used for actually cutting the top-front of the head, and mockingly pretended to hit the Palestinian on the head. The Palestinian jerked back, making the Iraqi the winner. The latter was only pretending, while the former got scared. Then the Shi‘i man continued with the procession, while the Sunni recovered as his friends made fun of him.

In 2007, Sabrina Mervin writes that tatbīr was at first forbidden in Syria, but was then permitted in the early mornings, just after the sunrise prayer. Since at least 2008, however, bloody forms of self-flagellation have also been taking place in the afternoons on ‘Ashura albeit to a lesser extent. In 2009, there were two small tatbīr groups, which flagellated in the afternoon. However, the majority of those who performed bloody flagellation in the afternoon performed zanjīr. Notably, unlike the tatbīr, which is mainly performed by Arabs, zanjīr is mainly performed by South Asians.

After the noon prayer, barefoot and shirtless South Asian men (ranging from their early twenties to their forties) take out their zanjīr, hand-held devices that consist of wooden handles, five metal-link chains attached to approximately seven centimeters long blades at their ends. Unlike the mutatbirīn, these men do not all perform their flagellations at the same time. Like the mutatbirīn, they arrive in groups (but they do not emerge visibly from nearby seminaries and husayniyyāt) and then gather along the southern wall of Sayyida Zaynab’s shrine. First, they perform latmiyyāt: one of them chants rhythmic Urdu mourning poetry into a loudspeaker (but without accompanying drums) while the other men stand in two rows, clapping their hands on their bare chests and exposing their backs already marked by thick scar tissue from last year’s flagellation. Then, in twos or threes (but not as a whole group), the men are handed zanjīr which are consequently shared among the men one after another. The mutatbirīn repeatedly, rhythmically and slowly shout “Haydar! Haydar!” (Haydar is an epithet for Imam ‘Ali, Husayn’s father), only while actually cutting their heads but also while walking. The South

531 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 7 January 2009.
532 Mervin, “Ashura,” 142.
Asians arrive silently, then chant and finally, the crowd parts around those men who, one after another, begin to swing their *zanajīr* yelling “*ya Husayn*” with every accelerating stroke. Unlike the blood from *tatbīr*, which stains white *dishdashas*, the blood from *zanjīr* squirts. Splashing droplets of blood on the ground, on others’ clothing (my own *abaya*, my hands and face and even my camera lens) impress, leave traces (*athār*) and make Karbala immediate.

Those who come out to see the *mutathbirīn* right after the dawn prayer differ from those watching the flagellants in the afternoons. In the latter case, the flagellants’ wives form a minority in the more mixed, haphazard crowd which includes more Sunnis, general passersby and Shi‘is who come to visit Sayyida Zaynab on ‘Ashura but who do not necessarily hold favourable opinions of the flagellation. For example, on the afternoon of ‘Ashura 1431, I was standing to the left of a policeman looking at the southern gate of the shrine watching South Asian men flagellate with *zanajīr*. Beside me, a woman from Homs loudly proclaimed her distaste and then added that it is really her husband who is a Shi‘i (implying she is a Sunni and thus better, more rational). Some of the other women too vocalized their disgust.

Generally, both praise and cursing belong to the Bakhtinian carnival. Yet, there is also an important difference between the above-mentioned Palestinian Sunni youth and the latter Syrian women is that in the former case, both the flagellants and their scoffers were local residents. In the latter case, both the Humsi women and the South Asian flagellants were temporary visitors, they had fewer commonalities. Moreover, in both cases the interactions between flagellants and observers occurred in different registers of intersubjectivity. In the case of *tatbīr*, for example, there is a procession and thus flagellants and observers along with potential cynics walk together, encircling the shrine. In the case of *zanjīr*, observers are involved mainly only through the visual sense, though those in the front rows surrounding the flagellants are sprayed with blood. The juxtapositions are more extreme in the afternoon.

It is not only the crowd that reacts differently to these spectacles of mourning. The flagellants too react differently in each instance (i.e. *tatbīr* in the morning versus *zanjīr* afternoon). The flagellants, who participate in *tatbīr* at dawn walk, chant and largely even cut themselves more

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533 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 165, 212.
slowly and in unison. For these men, the highlight is not only the act of cutting the top-front of their heads, but the act of marching accompanied by instruments – the point is to make noise (as in battle\textsuperscript{534}), to be heard and to be seen in blood-stained white clothes. Consequently, few \textit{mutatbirīn} enter into frenzy. Moreover, the \textit{mutatbirīn}’s observers march along with the procession, creating a communal experience, though it may not be an experience of community. A large number of the South Asian men who perform flagellations with \textit{zanajīr}, in contrast, enter into frenzy and must be calmed and stopped by other flagellants from their group. I posit that for these men it is not so much about the communal experience of demonstrating their willingness to stand by Husayn, but more about individual demonstrations of pious loyalty. Furthermore, as these flagellants simply appear, flagellate and then leave, they involve their observers less than the \textit{mutatbirīn}. In short, if one were to distinguish the ‘carnival’ from the ‘spectacle’ based upon their effects, then \textit{tatbīr} would fall under the category of the ‘carnival,’ while \textit{zanajīr} flagellations would fall under the ‘spectacle.’

4.3.2 Doubting excess
Interestingly, while it is the very intensity of the men’s devotions, which draws doubt, the question which Shi‘is debate is not about ‘too much-ness,’ too much love for Husayn, but rather about whether the flagellants’ devotions are ‘real.’\textsuperscript{535} For instance, Huda, a university mid-twenties single from Baghdad, told me she honestly doubted that those who are willing to bleed on ‘Ashura would actually stand by Husayn at the Battle of Karbala if given the opportunity.\textsuperscript{536} If the flagellants’ devotions are ‘real,’ which implies that the flagellants are otherwise pious and virtuous, they do not require ‘atonement.’ However, if the flagellants are otherwise lax in their ritual duties and social manners, then their public performance of flagellation are considered ‘fake.’ Can ‘fake performances’ be productive of atonement and salvation? The question

\textsuperscript{534} Shirazi, \textit{Al-sha’ā’ir al-husayniyya}, 125.


\textsuperscript{536} Cf. Fieldnotes, Monday, 11 August 2008.
remains open to debate. Huda further ties the question of ‘fake performances’ with her concern for the visual representation of Shi‘ism. Huda opposes the public performance of tatbir, because she thinks it negatively influences the view outsiders have of Shi‘ism. If tatbir were performed privately, beyond the visual reach of the public’s eye, she further reasoned, only those who are ‘really’ devoted would flagellate. Besides Huda’s form of scepticism, there are also other forms of pious doubt.

Another mid-twenties, unmarried teacher at the Shirazis’ seminary, Anisa Salma, even addressed this issue at the seminary the week before Muharram 1431. Anisa Salma ended her lesson on comparative religion early that day and said she wanted to speak about something important: “Have you ever wondered about feeling both happy and sad at the same time during Muharram?” The students thought about it and some nodded. Without pausing, Anisa Salma went on to ask rhetorically:

And why do you think it is so? You see there are actually two kinds of laughter during Muharram. There is the irreligious and even sarcastic laughter of cynics – and you should all stop such people especially during mourning gatherings. However, there is also a natural happiness, which follows having attended a mourning gathering. This form of happiness is deeper (than the ‘superficial’ happiness of cynics) and comes from the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam. It comes from being close to the ahl al-bayt during this time.

4.4 Finale

After the morning tatbir processions, the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab closes for cleaning. The shrine remains open all night (similarly to the husayniyya of the Zaynabiyya) only on the night preceding ‘Ashura and the night of the Mahdi’s birthday. While the shrine is closed in the morning, the story of the killing of Husayn (maqtal Imam al-Husayn) is recited in husayniyyat.

537 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 21 August 2008.

538 Though she disagreed with the Shirazis on the issue of tatbir, she attended summer classes at the Shirazis’ seminary.

539 Fieldnotes, Monday, 14 December 2009.

and for ‘Ashura 1430 (January 2009) there were where independent groups (hiʿāt) that set up microphones for preachers and lay out straw mats for people to sit on and listen outside. These open-air mourning gatherings were prohibited the following Muharram.

Just before the noon prayer, there is another important carnivalesque spectacle, which takes place in the Square of the Iraqis: The night before a hiʿa sets up five large tents in the football field which constitutes the center of the square: one large white tent in the middle, surrounded by four smaller gray ones. Women bring and light candles inside these tents. Though the floor of these tents is uncovered, women take off their shoes before entering them. At noon on ‘Ashura, surrounded by thousands of Shiʿi men, women and children, the tents are then set on fire as part of a passion play (tamthīl). First, a group of women emerges from the main tent, dressed in black abayāt and green face-veils, representing Zaynab and the other women and children of Husayn’s camp (sabaya). Notably, these women used to be played by men (and in other public passion plays women are still commonly portrayed by men), but in recent years ʿalawiyāt, or women descendants of Imam ʿAli, volunteer to play the part of Zaynab and the other women-folk. These ʿalawiyāt themselves were exiled from Iraq and thus, resemble and represent the sabaya in terms of their lineage and in terms of their role in the passion-play. Similarly to the play which Michael Gilsenan observes in Lebanon in the 1950s, it “is a confirmation of the social order incarnated by the Learned Families [including ʿalawiyīn and sayyids].”

Then, men in red, representing the Umayyad army, implicitly capture the women forcing them to flee first from tent to tent and finally off the square, off stage. As the crowd curses the Umayyad soldiers, the latter set the tents ablaze. The tents burn down in seconds and crowd rushes in to stamp out whatever is left of the fire and to pick up burnt scraps of tent-material, which they believe carries baraka. This carnivalesque spectacle of dismemberment used to mark the end of ‘Ashura public mourning rituals until the practice of afternoon zanajīr was introduced recently.

Mourning gatherings continue to take place in many husayniyyāt until the thirteenth day of Muharram, the day Husayn was supposedly finally buried. However, the number of women

541 Gilsenan, Recognizing Islam, 69.

542 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 211.
attending drops drastically and even the hospitality tents are disassembled by then. The tents are re-assembled just before the *Arba‘īn*, the fortieth day after ‘Ashura, which marks the end of the mourning period. Except for the re-building of hospitality tents and an increased attendance at mourning gatherings in seminaries and *husayniyyāt*, no bloody spectacles or tent-burnings are performed on the *Arba‘īn*.

Following William Connolly’s call for scholars to pay more attention to the non-rational aspects of politics and political discourse, I have shown how for those Shi‘is who follow Zaynab’s example and perform *tatbīr*, piety and politics both reach across “multiple registers of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity.” I have demonstrated how Muharram mourning practices and discourses undo what Susan Buck-Morss following Walter Benjamin has described as “the sensory alienation [which] lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics.” Grotesque Muharram flagellation practices such as *tatbīr* and *zanjīr* counter sensory alienation, though as I have indicated above, the excess also undermines its credibility and renders it ambiguous politically and religiously. ‘Ashura mourning gatherings make you more aware of certain relationships but also reinforce particular boundaries. According to Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi (d. 2001), mourning gatherings give meaning and life to Shi‘ism. Shirazi’s call for revolution is not a national or domestic one. This is the difference between Shirazi and Khomeini and Sadr. Shirazi conceives of his revolution as an *ummah*-wide revolution, while the others invoke nationalism and promote the modern nation-state. According to Um Mustafa al-Shiraziyya, change begins with how Shi‘is think. She calls for a moral grassroots revolution. The sacrifices she asks for are miracles; they demand more than a gift in return. They promise healing, but unlike other forms of healing available in Sayyida Zaynab, they operate within the framework of (at least some of) the seminaries.

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Chapter 5
Spiritual Healing

Didn’t death recede, and we sighed with relief
as the magician from Shiraz
threw a fistful of rice up in the air
and a white flock of red-whiskered bulbuls
cut across the dark blue sky
arc ing westwards towards Shiraz.

Raza Ali Hasan, “Magician from Shiraz”,546

5 Introducing heteropraxy
Frederick Denny has famously argued that Islam is concerned with practices rather than
doctrines, that it values ‘orthopraxy’ over ‘orthodoxy’.547 One broad objection might be that this
view essentializes a religious emphasis for which there are important historical and political
reasons. Moreover, emphasizing that which is canonically deemed as correct doctrine or
behaviour also implies but overshadows both the existence and the importance of heterodoxies
and heteropractices.548 In this chapter, I examine ‘spiritual healing’ practices, which are
significant forms of Twelver Shi’i heteropraxy in the Syrian shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, on
the outskirts of Damascus. I argue that healing practices are considered as both a valid part of
religion and as potentially subversive. For many Muslims, healing practices verge on magic and
thus, a careful analysis of these practices allows for a re-thinking of the distinction between


547 For Denny, the term ‘orthopraxy’ acknowledges the centrality of Islamic law in the lives of Muslims. This
centrality, I argue, is not the result of some inherency within Islam. Frederick M. Denny, “Islamic Ritual:
Perspectives and Theories,” in Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies, ed. Richard C. Martin (Oxford, UK:
Oneworld Press, 1985), 63-77.

548 As a form of heteropraxy, magic continues to play an important role in the life of Muslims in the Middle East.
The Iranian president Ahmadinejad, for instance, was accused in 2011 of participating in black magic in order to
win the election.

Mike Shuster, “Ahmadinejad Seen as Loser in Iranian Power Struggle,” National Public Radio website, 10 May
21 March 2011).
magic and religion in contemporary Twelver Shi‘ism. The following chapter is divided into three sections: I begin the first section by discussing the literature on ‘Islam and magic’ and by introducing shaykh Abu Ahmad, a Shi‘i ‘spiritual doctor’ who lives and works in Sayyida Zaynab. In the second section, I examine Abu Ahmad’s practices as ‘marginal sciences.’ In the third section, I analyze miracles, which are neither part of orthodoxy nor of heterodoxy and argue that they bridge both ‘religion’ and ‘magic.’

Similarly to the preceding chapter on ‘Ashura rituals, this chapter answers Michael Taussig’s lament of the academic neglect of ‘transgressive’ forms of religion. The healing practices examined below are ‘transgressive’ in the sense that they are disputed in the name of religion. While a few works on Islam and magic emphasize that ‘sihr’ and Islam have not always been at odds with one another, the disregard for heteropractices, which is the norm in academic works, implies the opposite. What I argue below is that there are healing practices which are both Islamic and Islamicate. They are part of the ‘discursive traditions’ which constitute the analytical categories through which, according to Talal Asad, anthropologists of religion should

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549 Shaykh Abu Ahmad, the spiritual healer described below, does not consider himself a magician, as he associates the term magic (sihr) only with black or maleficent magic. However, many of those who visit him do not draw such sharp distinctions. For Shi‘i women and customers such as Amina and her sister Amal, magic includes both benevolent white magic and black magic. Since there is an overlap between how many of my interlocutors (including the apprentice shaykh Salih, who also went by the name Abu al-Hasan) define magic and spiritual healing, I preserve the messiness in my discussions below.

550 According to Hermann Reinfried, it is impossible to completely separate miracles from magic. For him “the miracle is a more highly developed form of magic” (“das Wunder ist eine höhere Entwicklungsstufe des Zaubers”). Hermann Reinfried, Bräuche bei Zauber und Wunder nach Buchari (Freiburg, 1915). The translation is mine.

551 Taussig, Walter Benjamin’s Grave, 159.


553 Marshall Hodgson came up with the distinction between Islamic and Islamicate in order to differentiate the latter as that which “would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.” Marshall G.S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59.
approach Islamic doctrines and practices.\textsuperscript{554} Within academic works, it is notable that the question of the permissibility of ‘magic’ and the debate over the relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘magic’ (\textit{sihr}) is relatively commonly subject to debate in German academic literature, in works on medieval Islamic medicine,\textsuperscript{555} astronomy and astrology,\textsuperscript{556} special stones,\textsuperscript{557} and magic.\textsuperscript{558} The English and North American academic community, however, remains unconcerned with the question, at least in that formulation. Many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, as well as lay Muslims, argue that magic was and continues to be a social reality, documented in the Qur’an and Sunnah.\textsuperscript{559} For example, Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 CE), an important fourteenth century Muslim historiographer, wrote in his \textit{Muqaddima} that intelligent humans cannot deny the existence of magic.\textsuperscript{560} Yet, there were also sceptics, such Abu Hanifa and the Mu’tazilis did not believe in it.\textsuperscript{561} Moreover, while Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE) condemned magic categorically, others have argued that since there is a Prophetic tradition of believing in the evil eye, practices that counteract the evil eye must be permissible.\textsuperscript{562}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{554} Asad, \textit{The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam}.
\item \textsuperscript{557} Schönfeld, \textit{Über die Steine}.
\item \textsuperscript{559} Sabine Dorpmüller, \textit{Religiöse Magie im “Buch der probaten Mittel”: Analyse, kritische Edition und Übersetzung der Kitāb al-Muğarrabāt von Muhammad ibn Yūsuf as-Sanāsī} (gest. um 895/1490) (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrossowitz Verlag, 2005), 4-5.
\item \textsuperscript{560} Dols, “The Theory of Magic Healing,” 95.
\item \textsuperscript{561} Ibid., 96.
\item \textsuperscript{562} Dorpmüller, \textit{Religiöse Magie im “Buch der probaten Mittel,”} 4-5; Dols, “The Theory of Magic Healing.”
\end{itemize}
According to Emile Durkheim, magic is not only closely related to religion, but also stands in opposition to it. The magician has clients, but not followers. Durkheim writes that magic does not create community, “there is no church of magic.”\(^{563}\) Shaykh Abu Ahmad does have regulars, and even fans – but does he have followers? His customers form a momentary community as they often sit in the same room and talk while waiting. He does not mind having an audience for \textit{istikhāra}, a form of divination on which I will elaborate later. For more intimate consultations, however, he asks others to sit and wait in the hallway. The wife of one of the neighbors comes by almost daily to complain about her back-pains and her headaches, and shaykh Abu Ahmad says a prayer for her. Yet, she does not bring her family and friends. Abu Ahmad is hence more a therapist than a priest for her. She is his fan, but not his follower.

If we define religiosity as the process of becoming more pious, then we may distinguish religion from magic by considering the question of \textit{telos}, or the moral aim. Loosely formulated, if the goal of religion is to cultivate a virtuous self, then the purpose of magic is to attain ‘comfort,’ to become \textit{murtāh}. For Rudi Paret, these goals are radically different. He write that magical acts “are practiced with reference to official Islam, yet they are more than simply acts of piety, because they serve more or less egoistical purposes.”\(^{564}\) Yet, even the cultivation of virtuous selves could be seen as egotistical. Moreover, it would be problematic to designate all practices not conducive to piety as impious and ‘magical.’ One might even argue that Paret’s division overlooks how both magic and religion are related to notions of healing and restoration. As Michael Dols explains, in Muslim societies “magic was usually a more forceful method of supplication or a supercharged prayer.”\(^{565}\) Similarly, R. Schmitt calls magic “a ritual action, which is performed in an adequate situation through the use of divine means (symbol, word, action) and cosmic knowledge, in order to attain a particular goal through symbolic anticipation


\(^{564}\) “[Die] zwar unter Bezugnahme auf die offiziell geltende islamische Religion ausgeübt werden, die aber doch etwas anderes sind als blose Frömmigkeitsübungen, weil sie nämlich der Erfüllung eines mehr oder weniger egoistischen Zwecks dienen sollen.” Paret quoted in Dorpmüller, \textit{Religiöse Magie}, 4. The translation is mine.

of divine intervention.” Though Schmitt writes about magic in the Old Testament, he reflects a common Islamic view when he emphasizes the dependence of magic or of magic’s effectiveness on God’s will. Echoing Schmitt, shaykhs Salih and Abu Ahmad often emphasize that any particular therapeutic measure can only bring about healing if God wills – *bi-ithn-Illah*! For spiritual doctors as well as scholars, hence, the restoration of the world, healing, religion and magic remain dependent on the will of God.

Another way in which one could distinguish magic from religion to the extent that they remain spatially segregated and confined. For example, in order to attend a *majlis*, one must visit a seminary or a *husayniyya*. In order to obtain ‘spiritual healing,’ one must visit the shaykh. Yet, there are other practices such as wearing talismans, which are not confined to any location and cross boundaries. Furthermore, academic discussions on Islamic heteropraxies often emphasize gender. For example, Janice Boddy *inter alia* writes on spirit possession (i.e. *zār*) in Sudan and examines it as a gendered alternative to ‘orthopraxy.’ The Syrian case both differs from and mimics institutionalized gender dynamics. On the one hand, the spaces differ as shaykh Abu Ahmad receives both male and female customers, though the number of female customers far exceeds their male counterparts. Also, while there are female ‘spiritual healers,’ I never encountered any female spiritual healers and even Katja Sündermann who studied (with) more than a dozen spiritual healers, enumerates few women among them. On the other hand, shaykh Abu Ahmad’s store mirrors that of institutionalized piety. The man, shaykh Abu Ahmad and his assistant, Abu al-Hasan (or Salih), are dispensers of healing, while the customers are mainly women. The spiritual doctor’s herbal store (*mahal ‘ashb*) is a principally feminine space.

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566 In German, Schmitt writes that magic is “eine ritualsymbolische Handlung, die durchgeführt in einer adäquaten Situation, durch Nutzung bestimmter göttlichen Medien (Symbol, Wort, Handlung) und kosmischen Wissens, ein bestimmtes Ergebnis vermittels symbolischer Anticipation der göttlichen Intervention erzieht.” Schmitt quoted in Dorpmüller, *Religiöse Magie*, 3. The translation is mine.

567 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 28 October 2009.


569 Sündermann, *Spirituelle Heiler im modernen Syrien*.
It is feminine in that it is curtained off, though the front door remains open.\textsuperscript{570} During my fieldwork, shaykh Salih worked to remodel the space from an ‘\textit{ayyada} which refers to a consultation room or clinic, and has institutional and medical connotations to a \textit{dhayyafa}, a guest room.\textsuperscript{571} Both of those designations justify and allow for the intermingling of members of the opposite sex.

In order to gather ethnographic data for this chapter, I spent several afternoons each week during the fall of 2009 with shaykh Abu Ahmad who spends his days with his apprentice and partner (in business) at his ‘herb store’ (\textit{mahal ‘ashb}) at the Western end of Hijira, to the northeast of the shrine, between the Palestinian and the Golani areas. I met shaykh Abu Ahmad and his apprentice by accident when I came to Sayyida Zaynab in 2008 and wandered the streets looking for real estate agencies. Shaykh Abu Ahmad’s apprentice Salih was also a real estate agent, and when I told him about my interest in religious rituals, he invited me next door, and introduced me to shaykh Abu Ahmad. During the summer of 2008, I did not pursue the topic of spiritual healing further. However, when I returned the following year, and asked Salih to help me find an apartment, I again met the shaykh and he asked me to visit him. At the same time, two acquaintances shared their stories with me regarding spiritual healing, and thus I decided that the topic could complement my study of institutionalized piety and Muharram mourning rituals. Moreover, as I watched Abu Ahmad perform his craft, I noticed that some of his customers were students at seminaries. In other words, they were otherwise presumably religious individuals. I also gathered data by reading books in Arabic about spiritual healing which I bought at seminary bookstores. Given the amount of attention that religious scholars pay to the topics of magic generally and spiritual healing specifically, as well as the fact that religious Shi‘is do seek out spiritual healers, means that these heteropraxies are an important aspect of Muslims’ every-day lives and that they deserve to be analyzed as part of popular Islam.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{570} Unless accompanied by related women or as customers themselves, men generally remain standing at the curtain. Should they come in, the shaykh Salih ‘shoos’ them out.
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\textsuperscript{571} In writing about space, Michael Gilsenan (1982) compares Arabic (or ‘traditional’) sitting rooms with European-style salons and argues that the traditional arrangement enables socializing while the new one emphasizes the host’s decor. See: Gilsenan, \textit{Recognizing Islam}, 180-187.
\end{flushright}
5.1.1 Encountering the spiritual doctor

Getting what one wants from God or a saint with a religious vow (nidhr) can take time, months or even years. When Shi‘is are desperate and cannot wait for divine goodwill, they may decide to visit a ‘spiritual’ doctor, a tabīb ruhani. The following example illustrates this sense of urgency:

On the third day of my second fieldwork visit, I was talking with Amal, a seminary classmate, at Amal’s parents’ home. (She lives down the street from her parents.) As we were about to leave, her mother came to share some bad news: “Abu Muhammad wants to divorce Amina [her other daughter and Amal’s sister]! Do you know a shaykh, a magician who can stop him?” By chance, I knew that my landlord was also an apprentice with an older shaykh and magician, so I took my classmate to their ‘consultation room’ right away. We chatted with the apprentice, Abu al-Hasan, over coffee. The next day, Amina came with her two small children to my
classmate’s apartment, where their dad agreed to babysit the toddlers so that Amina, her mother, her sister Amal and I could go to the ‘spiritual’ doctor.

At the doctor’s ‘ayyada (consultation room), shaykh Abu Ahmad welcomed us, seated us and then left us to make Arabic coffee. He was being a hospitable host. Cigarettes were offered. Incense was lit. His long moments of absence encourage guests to talk, to reveal their troubles and their stories. The shaykh listened as he came and went. When he finally settled down in his chair, he carefully constructed his assessment. He spoke with Amina about her own character, her past, her husband, their life, and their problems. He always did this slowly, in generic terms so as to evoke comments – leading, correcting, and backing up his broad assertions.\(^{572}\)

In his ‘revelation,’ the shaykh examined Amina’s social and familial relationships and came up with an explanation: her mother-in-law hates her and laid a curse on Amina and her husband. To test his hypothesis, the shaykh uses the client’s body to see if she has been bewitched in a procedure, which he calls kashaf, or research, revelation, examination, and exposure.\(^{573}\) By making her own body react, her own body proves the truth of the shaykh’s revelation. First, he asked them to stretch out their right hand. Then, the shaykh began reciting incantations, which he claimed were in Syriac, the language of the jinn. Yet, these incantations included episodes of Arabic: Qur’anic verses and the names of the ahl al-bayt, including each of the fourteen Infallibles individually. From its hanger on a wall, shaykh Abu Ahmad takes a 30 cm sword, rather blunt – but usable, when sharpened as a tatbir sword. He taps his client on the head with the side of the blade. Then he traces right and then left, the body from top to bottom. He explained to me that the jinn dislike metal (hadīd) and would then leave the body of client if there were any. He moves back and forth, and commands jinn to move the hand if magic has been cast on the client. If that were the case, the therapeutic procedure consists first of extracting (ikhrāj) the ‘amla, the evil deed. Most hands move, though there are those whom Abu Ahmad after a few minutes of work (‘amal) declares to be free from the spells of others. Often, however, the hand moves, and after a moment of intense observation, the shaykh and his client

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\(^{572}\) ‘Concealment’ is also crucial to the practice of magic and Abu Ahmad admitted to me that he does not ‘tell it all.’ He claims this would be counter-productive and would embarrass both him and his clients.

begin to discuss who could be the perpetrator. In a less extreme case, the shaykh sometimes tells women they are *mahsūd*, others of jealous, envious of them. He tells them they are afflicted by the evil eye. He tells them their fears, affirms their suspicions and convinces them that their own body works against them. Shaykh Abu Ahmad’s practice is meant to let one’s body and one’s own sensations convince one of his claims. Thus, the client comes to bear witness, she sees, and feels the proof. She is the proof.574

Once the shaykh had convinced Amina of the cause of her troubles (which she readily believed), he went on to ameliorate the effects of the curse, by writing a *hijāb*, a magic-formula on paper with a red pen, which he then put in a glass. He poured water over it and made her drink it and take the paper in a plastic bag, to be soaked in water her husband will drink for three days. He told her to read specific verses from the Qur’an and warned her not get angry at anything her husband may say to her. She is to remain calm no matter what.575 The husband did not divorce her as he had threatened to, but the idea that her mother-in-law did *'amal* (work; also a Levantine euphemism for magic) continued to prevent her from relaxing (*tirtāh*) entirely. While shaykh Abu Ahmad solved Amina’s most immediate problem, there is a part of the work of a ‘spiritual doctor’ always remains deferred, open. In this way, the relationship between the patient and her doctor remains ongoing. She must always wait and come back.576

Taussig’s theory that the power of magic resides in both its secrecy and its skilled exposure helps in thinking about the ‘truth’ of magic, dreams and miracles in Sayyida Zaynab.577 During their


575 Fieldnotes, Monday, 21 September 2009.

576 Amina’s sister Amal told me after this incident that she had previously tried magic to solve her own marital problems. However, unlike shaykh Abu Ahmad, of whom she generally thinks very highly of, she thinks that the previous magician she consulted earlier practiced black magic, because it led to her divorce. According to Amal, she had gone to a woman doctor who told Amal that she would solve her marital problems. The female doctor told Amal to bring her the head of a sheep and a chicken (black with white feather on head) and *kafan* (cloth used for wrapping corpses). Amal was instructed to wrap the head and the chicken in two ends of the wrap and bury them in the cemetery about two meters separated from one another. Following this, she was divorced within a month. Amal’s marital problems had been solved, but not the way she had hoped. Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 28 October 2009.

wait, patients reveal themselves, only to again be revealed by the magician, who as part of his therapy ‘veils’ them, gives them a ‘hijāb’, a talisman. The hijāb veils the wearer from harm. It is a rectangular piece of paper with writing, folded into a triangle, and taped shut. Once shut, a hijāb should never be opened, the writing inside should never be revealed. Notably, wearing a hijāb in the sense of amulets is not always considered as going beyond the scope of religion. They can resemble and often enclose formulas listed as prayer formulas or charms (haraz, sg. hirz) in religious manuals such as the ‘Mafātiḥ al-jīnān.’

5.2 Defining ruqya shari’yya (or permissible magic)
According to his card, shaykh Abu Ahmad and his partner Abu al-Hasan are listed below the heading: “Research and Information regarding Natural Herbs.” They list ‘women’s fertility problems, and other illnesses, cupping and ruqya shari’yya.’ Ruqya, according to Hans Wehr, can mean anything from “spell, charm, magic [and] incantation.”578 What Abu Ahmad and Salih advertise is thus ‘religiously legal (shari’) magic.’ Ruqya, Sabine Dorpmüller confirms, is a generally permitted form of ‘magic’ as it uses Qur’anic verses for incantations, in order to heal patients and loved ones. This permissible form of magic, moreover, includes herbal homeopathic treatments, istikhāra (a term which includes a number of practices aimed to help someone decide a course of action), and the use of ‘natural magic’ (wearing rings with special stones), all of which will be discussed below.

The question of what constitutes sihr thus becomes the question of where one draws the line. In Europe, modernity brought about the standardization of discursive concepts such as ‘enlightened religion’ as contrasted with ‘superstition.’ Similar changes occurred throughout the Arab and Muslim world. However, as the campaign against shrines and saint-veneration has been taken on by extremist Sunni groups, Shi’is have become especially fond or at least defensive about practices such as wearing special stones on rings. To oppose such practices is to risk being called a ‘Wahhabi,’ a curse word among Shi’is. Simultaneously, this does not mean that Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab embrace ‘irrationality’ in reaction to conservative Sunnis.

578 Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Arabic, 355.
Shaykh Abu Ahmad often tells his clients that there is magic which is harām and that there are ‘performances’ or ‘works,’ ʿamlāt, which are halāl. To prove his point, he cites the Qur’an. First, he begins with the premise: “We are not alone in this world. In the Qur’an, the Lord says that he created ‘men and jinn to worship him.’ Ah ha! Jinn and humans!” Abu Ahmad then explains that magic exists, and that it was taught by (albeit fallen) angels. He cites verse 102 of the second Surah of the Qur’an, Surah al-Baqara:

They [the people of the Book] followed what the evil ones gave out (falsely) against the power of Solomon: the blasphemers were, not Solomon, but the evil ones, teaching men Magic, and such things as came down at Babylon to the angels Harut and Marut. But neither of these taught anyone (Such things) without saying: “We are only for trial; so do not blaspheme.” They learned from them the means to sow discord between man and wife. But they could not thus harm anyone except by Allah’s permission. And they learned what harmed them, not what profited them. And they knew that the buyers of (magic) would have no share in the happiness of the Hereafter. And vile was the price for which they did sell their souls, if they but knew!

For shaykh Abu Ahmad, the verse proves that magic is an ancient, originally divine practice, which carries ethical responsibilities. He explains that harām (or prohibited) magic, according to the Qur’anic text, is the performance, which separates man and wife. However, he argues that it is morally acceptable, even commendable to reunite a couple or a family. Through reciting Qur’anic verses, he establishes first the reality and then the permissibility of his craft. Shaykh Abu Ahmad invokes the names of Fourteen Infallibles in his prayer-spells. He prays regularly and visibly, wears the clothes of a tribal (interestingly, not religious) elder. He listens to Basim Karbala’i as well as to Iraqi ‘classics’ (i.e. nationalist songs and folk songs) on his almost-smart phone. The posters on the wall depict the infallibles, with the Mahdi’s and the women’s faces covered. Shaykh Abu Ahmad sits behind a desk, lined with books, measuring

579 Fieldnotes, Sunday, 1 November 2009.
580 Q 2:102, Yusuf Ali’s translation.
581 In this sense, he is similar to the ‘alim who is responsible for his muqallid. See Edith Szanto, “Pedagogies of Piety: Shi’i Children’s Books, Ethics and the Emergence of the Pious Subject,” Symposia: The Graduate Student Journal of the Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto 1 (2009): 62-78.
cups, pens, measuring tapes and for a while, there was even a malfunctioning computer (which was, as Abu al-Hasan admitted, for show). The shaykh thus claims legitimacy as a Shi‘i Muslim ‘spiritual doctor’ through material culture, ‘professional’ accessories, as well as ritual, physical performances. He claims to have visited most of the Infallibles; he has been to Iran, Iraq and has gone on Hajj. Rather than envy, however, he invites belief, agreement, and hope as he takes out pieces of green cloth, which he took with him on his pilgrimages, and from which he cuts pieces for customers to keep as lucky charms. Thus, he uses both religious language and religious forms of material culture to make a claim to legitimacy and even religious authority.

Concurrently, the shaykh also claims secular forms of prestige by using modern technology and referencing Western medical practices. For instance, he uses cell phones to divine and cast spells for customers from abroad on his cell phone. He assigns Omega 3 pills for knee pain, thereby claiming authority through reference to both modern medicine and Islamic medical traditions. Moreover, he claims to be a ‘modern’ and ‘rationalist’ Shi‘i by decrying tatbīr (see previous chapter).  

5.2.1 Invoking jinn

Though shaykh Abu Ahmad places great emphasis on the permissibility of white magic, this does not mean that he does not also participate in more religiously reprehensible acts. For example, he occasionally invokes jinn when performing love magic. On one occasion, Abu al-Hasan told me that I had missed an exceptional event the night before. A store owner had come complaining that money kept on disappearing. Though Abu al-Hasan refused to go into detail, he said that shaykh Abu Ahmad had invoked jinn in order to find out that an employee had been stealing from the cash register.  

He also diagnosed jinn-possessions and curses. As noted above, shaykh Abu Ahmad did so by performing a kashaf and letting the clients’ bodies convince them. Another method he was by

583 Cf. Deeb, An Enchanted Modern.

584 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 10 December 2009.
interpreting clients’ dreams. For instance, some female clients would complain of seeing inappropriate sexual scenes in their sleep. Usually, clients themselves admit to these dreams. The exception is the case when a mother is worried about her daughter who does not want to marry, it is also generally assumed that the daughter is having or seeing sexual intercourse (of course, with jinn), that she is in a relationship with a jinn who thus prevents her from marrying.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 17 November 2009.}

Occasionally clients or guests tell other dreams as well. For example, one afternoon while I was at home writing notes about that morning’s seminary, Abu al-Hasan called me, as he wanted to introduce me to Um George, a Christian who lives for six months out of the year in the United States, and six months in Syria. Abu al-Hasan wanted to prove to me that he had ‘international’ clientele and called me asking me to come to his store.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Friday, 2 October 2009.} Um George has come to consult shaykh Abu Ahmad regarding the question of her divorce and the marriage of her daughter. He divined that she had been acted upon after testing whether her hand would move ‘by itself.’ He had her hold still a pen touching a piece of paper while he recited in Arabic and Syriac, commanding her hand in Arabic to reveal the name of the maleficent. Deciphering the marks she made, he decided she had written the name ‘Salim’ which represents a Jewish man. Um George agreed: her husband had a Jewish partner who had been interested in her romantically. She and Abu Ahmad suspected he was also to blame for the daughter’s continued state of bachelorhood.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 17 November 2009.} Unwilled bodily movement, oneself and yet not oneself, are at the root of this practice. The client was herself the witness and the performer. She is the means and the end. She reveals (tikshif) what is hidden.

Um George repeated her visit to the shaykh one week later and brought her daughter, 22-year-old Rana, to the shaykh’s herbal store. This time, we got on to the topic of dreams and so she wanted to share her dream-story.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Friday, 2 October 2009.} Years ago, when she had only had her two daughters, she
had wanted to bear a boy. One night, she dreamed she saw St. George, on his horse, with his spear. She went to him, called him and he waited for her: “what do you want?” She asked to have a son and he said she would get her wish. Less than a month later, she found herself pregnant with a son. Inspired by her dream, she felt she had to name her son George, after the saint who had visited her in her dream. When she mentioned this to her husband, however, he did not like the idea at all. He wanted her to name him after his grandfather. Then she had another dream: She saw St. George carrying a child, she asked him to give her the child, but he wanted to take it away. In her dream, she swore that the boy would be named George, if he gave the child to her. Thus, she fought her husband and became Um George (the mother of George). Her dream triumphed over the ‘tradition’ of naming the son after the paternal grandfather. The dream could also be described in terms of a miracle. Moreover, she made a religious vow, a nidhr in her dream. She promised St. George she would name her son after the saint. Later on that evening, she made another vow: She vowed if her daughter got married in the next two weeks, then she would have two sheep killed by the shaykh’s store, and distribute the meat among the poor. Rana did not end up getting married, so Um George did not have to sponsor two sheep’s killing.

Um George was one of the few Christian clients who came to visit the shaykh. The shaykh and his partner handed out their cards generously, and thus reached customers. Nevertheless, the most frequent visitors were local residents, Iraqi, Palestinian and Syrian women. Many, if not most, were Sunni, many Shi’is, few Christians, and ‘Alawis. On the topic of religion and the benefits of Shi’ism, shaykh Abu Ahmad explained to Um George the matter of mut’a or temporary marriage. According to the shaykh, a man may marry four women in permanent marriage (nikah) and could additionally marry any number of mut’a marriages. Um George was baffled. Shaykh Abu Ahmad quickly added: “Of course, I would love to marry you as a temporary wife. This way we could just get to knock one another!” Um George laughed and changed the topic. Shaykh Abu Ahmad’s ‘interfaith dialogue’ had turned into a carnivalesque scene, where the emphasis on sexuality as part of Shi‘i piety concurrently undermined and inverted normative, pious notions of marriage.

589 Betterige (1985) comments how it is common to place a time limit on religious vows.
My fieldwork at shaykh Abu Ahmad’s herbal store was not always carnivalesque. On regular days, he was most often performing various kind of white or permissible magic including bibliomancy (a form of *istikhāra*) and natural magic, which he learned from a variety of sources.

5.2.2 Books and bibliomancy

Whenever he is asked, Abu Ahmad proudly explains that he is originally from Iraq, where he still has two wives and more than ten children, each of whom is married and ‘settled.’ He is proud of this, as it marks him a successful and accomplished man. He implies that his families’ flourishing means that his income is *halāl*, as *harām* money would corrupt them and make them fail in life. He says that he learned his craft at a ‘college,’ reflecting the recent fashion wherein ‘*kulliya*’ or ‘college’ is added to every possible form of learning for the sake of prestige. However, he also draws his knowledge from books. He once asked me to try to find ‘*Shams al-shumūs*’ (‘The Sun of Suns’), a mystical text. When I found various other texts such as ‘*Shams al-maʿārifā*’ by the famous Ahmad al-Buni, the shaykh commented that they were good, but ‘*Shams al-shumūs*’ was better. Besides sitting with him in the afternoons, often bored and waiting for customers, I brought in books I had bought at the seminaries’ bookstores or under the Jisr al-Ra’is, the President’s Bridge.

He himself also used books obtained from the seminaries’ bookstores, such as the booklet entitled ‘*Khīra al-sādiq*’ (‘The Choice of Truth/Wisdom’). He used this book for *istikhāra*, which could be seen as a kind of divination if it were not firmly rooted in ‘orthopraxy.’ Specifically, *istikhāra* is practiced in both Sunnism and Shi‘ism, though the forms differ slightly. In Sunnism, *istikhāra* is primarily a prayer of two *rakʿa* (or units) at night with the intention of receiving guidance from God in one’s sleep. Whatever dream one sees that night is considered to be a form of guidance. Another form of seeking guidance which Sunnis and Shi‘is share is a form of bibliomancy. On the second page of ‘*Khīra al-sādiq*’ readers are told what to do and what to say:
1) Right intention. Three *salawāt* [greetings and blessings on the Prophet and his family].

2) Recite Surat al-Hamd [Fatiha] one time.

3) Recite: Oh he who knows, guide the one who does not know.

Then the reader is told to open the book on a random page. In ‘*Khīra al-sādiq,*’ each page on the right quotes the Qur’anic verse that would appear on each right hand page of what has now become a standard edition. On the left hand, the verse is interpreted as either positive (‘go ahead’), negative (‘don’t do it) or undecided. The interpretation, which the reader would have derived from the actual verse here, is predetermined. Women could technically perform this kind of *istikhāra* themselves, but they are unaware and prefer to see the shaykh. *Istikhāra* is but one service he provides. Sitting in the guest room, listening to the troubles of others, chatting, and drinking coffee is part of the experience.

Shaykh Abu Ahmad generally does not perform only *istikhāra*. For example, when Noor, a young Iraqi *mullaya* from Basra asked whether she should marry a particular suitor, he used both *istikhāra* and geomancy where numbers are used for divination. Abu Ahmad added up Noor’s and her suitor’s names to determine their compatibility. Unlike orthopraxis, their names here emphasize matrilineal descent. Thus, in this case divination and religion (*dīn*) ‘mirror’ one another.

Shaykh Abu Ahmad also consults astrology when he tells his patients whether or not a particular match is a good one, and whether or how many children the proposed couple would have. Abu Ahmad also derived their horoscopes from the numerical value of their name including their mother’s first name, and thus matched them doubly based on the numerological values of their

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590 *Salawāt* in Twelver Shi‘ism refers to the following phrase: “Allahumma salli ‘ala Muhammad wa āl Muhammad.”

591 “1 – Al-niyya. Thalāth salawāt. 2 – *Qirā’ah* sūraht al-hamd marrah wāhida. 3 – *Qirā’ah*: ya man ya’lam ahdi man lā ya’lam.”


names. For the shaykh, one’s ‘true’ horoscope must be derived from one’s name and not by birth-date. Moreover, for Abu Ahmad, the zodiac and astrology here are not seen as contrary to religion. There are not counter to rational piety. They are part of a physically and sensually aware form of piety. They are seen as objects in existence, in plain sight, which athara and thāra – which affect us: leave traces and excite. Astrology, especially among Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab, but also generally among Arabs, is considered a science – as inexact as other sciences.

Books such as the above mentioned ‘Shams al-shumās’ (‘The Sun of Suns’) and ‘Shams al-ma‘ārifā’ (by the famous al-Buni) are not available at the bookstores in Sayyida Zaynab, presumably because they explain how to perform both harmful and beneficent outcomes. Yet seminary bookstores do offer a wide variety of books on topics such as astrology, reading palms, istikhāra, how to interpret dreams, healing stones, hujāmah and other non-mainstream sciences. These sciences, interestingly, count as a subcategory of the natural sciences. They constitute a mujarrabāt literature, which Sabine Dorpmüller, citing Ullman describes as “empirica, durch Erfahrung bestätigte Rezepte.” For the two Hijira shaykhs, the mujarrabāt include istikhāra (the istikhāra Qur’an is entitled “istikhāra mujarraba of the Qur’an al-Kareem”) and herbal treatments (for yeast infections, for example).

5.2.3 Natural magic: stones and rings
As Emilie Savage-Smith explains, earlier Muslims thought of natural materials, such as stones, as having different properties. Jutta Schönfeld writes about khawass literature from the fourteenth century. Khawass refers to the ‘specificities’ or ‘unseen’ characteristics, the ways in which semi-precious stones effect those who wear them as rings or otherwise as jewellery.

595 Dorpmüller, Religiöse Magie, 39.
596 There are also mujarrabāt prayer books. The Shirazi seminary sells mujarraba prayers against financial ruin. Also, customers would sometimes ask: “Is the treatment mujarraba?” Of course, the shaykh always answered in the affirmative. However, I also noticed, that he would use the same generic facial cream to treat various skin diseases.
597 Schönfeld, Über die Steine.
Um Jasim, a late twenties mother of two, explained to me her views on *hirz* and stones. She was an Iraqi, married to her cousin, conservative Shi’i from Tikrit. She is one of the few Arab Iraqi women I have known not to curse Iran and even appreciate Iranian forms of piety. She explained that during Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic calendar, people with ‘needs’ or ‘desires’ (*hajāt*) buy silver rings with semi-precious stones, especially *aqīq* (carnelian) and *fayrūz* (turquoise), and had them engraved with *hirz* from books such as *Mafāṭīh al-jinān*.

The Imams, according to popular belief, wore rings with stones and encouraged their male and female followers to do the same. There are *riwayāt* (‘stories,’ often Hadith) how particular stones such as the *aqīq* (carnelian) and *fayrūz* (turquoise) were among the first mountains, which were created. Whoever wears a ring with *aqīq* (carnelian) while making *du’a* or supplication, her prayers will be accepted. The ‘ulamā’ and older men wear such rings with stones. Rings and pendants with stones, some engraved, are for sale around the shrine, and formerly within the shrine-complex. They can be expensive. Wearing such rings can signify piety, wealth or simply aesthetic preference. It is part of ‘the big tradition’ or the literate and learned tradition since it is scholars who mainly wear such rings.

Seminary bookstores sell books on the ‘healing’ powers of precious and semi-precious stone are for sale at the seminary bookstores. These books consist of two sections, so to speak. One describes the effects of various stones and metals, usually accompanied by glossy pictures. The

598 Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 15 December 2009.

599 Women, such as Um Ahmed at the Hawza Sadrayn would always turn around her gold ring, which had an *aqīq*, hoping angels would accept her prayer when seeing the stone. Fieldnotes, Summer 2008.

600 Until the summer of 2008, there was a small vendor inside the shrine complex, between the courtyard of the tomb of Sayyida Zaynab and the *musallah*. The vendor sold silver rings with religious writing, books, CDs, and small cards with prayers. After 2008, the stall disappeared and instead, a smaller store has opened in what used to be a janitor’s closet next to the *musallah*. At the same time, an office opened across from this new store. This office offers religious guidance according to the sign outside according to the legal advice of Ayatollah Khamenei.

601 Interestingly, even Lebanese Shi‘is do not consider the ‘tradition’ of wearing rings ‘irrational’ or ‘backward.’


other advises readers on how to choose a specific stone. The reader is offered multiple methodological choices: a chart assigns numerical value to each letter in the Arabic alphabet and explains how to derive a particular number from one’s name (using one’s first name and one’s family name or the father’s name – not the mother’s as in other heteropractices) which then corresponds to particular stones. Another method includes adding up the digits of one’s birthday and, depending on the final number, choosing a stone. Moreover, each sign of the zodiac is advised to wear a specific stone.

These stone-rings, silver and golden rings, and pendants with hirz and magic squares can be bought at jewellers everywhere in town, along the Shari'a al-'Iraqiyin, Hijira and along the western wall, along the main road. Across the western gate of the shrine compound there is one store, which sells only silver rings, stones, and pendants. The pendants are each marked with a sticker announcing its ‘power’ or aim: hafaz (safety), shifa’ (healing from illness), rizq (finances), mahaba (love), and zawāj (marriage). Just north of the western gate, there are usually two men with larger tables and a handful of stores, which offer a small selection of rings and pendants. North of the western wall, beyond its shade, a dozen men sit on the ground, like beggars by the road, selling a few rings and stones laid out on tissues on the ground before them.

Annemarie Schimmel wrote on the mystical importance and symbolism of the numbers and squares engraved on these stones. Schimmel and others argue that numbers arranged in squares represented both ‘mathematical games’ and powerful symbols, whose mystical aspects reached the West, but by then had left behind its mathematically innovative aspects. These magic squares are written on paper hijābs, on stones worn as jewellery, even on gold rings. Different squares, Schimmel explains, serve different purposes. “Certain squares were shown to

\[603\] For example, if someone’s birthday is 23 October 1981, then \(2+3+1+0+1+9+8+1 = 25\) and further, \(2+5 = 7\). The recommended stone for such a person is carnelian, which is also known among Shi‘is as the stone of the Prophet.


a woman in labour and then placed over her womb to facilitate the birth. Other squares numerically symbolized various names of God (e.g. Hafiz, the Preserves). The most common kind of square is the 3 x 3 square, which uses all the digits 1 – 9 and whereby each horizontal, diagonal, or vertical set of three numbers add up to 15. Abu Ahmad uses the 3 x 3 square, as well as the 9 x 9 square. He uses the latter one especially for his ‘love magic,’ for example, to bring back an estranged husband or wife. Schuyler Cammann writes that different cultures favor different numbers in magic squares. Notably, Abu Ahmad and his clientele never mentioned the number 786, which for South Asian Muslims is the numerical value of the basmala (bismillah al-rahman al-rahim) and thus an auspicious number to wear as jewellery or to paint on walls. Instead, Abu Ahmad had written 66 in the middle of each of his four walls with the explanation that the number 66 represents the numerical value of Allah.

Along with and besides such magic squares, there are also short prayers, often taken from classical prayer manuals such as ‘Mafātīh al-jinān’ (lit. ‘the Keys to Paradise’) which are sometimes written on hijabs or jewellery. ‘Mafātīh al-jinān’ lists prayers, which supposedly various members of the ahl al-bayt used and these may be written on paper to be carried in a pocket or purse, or on semi-precious stones to be worn as rings or pendants. When shaykh Abu Ahmad gives customers such rings or hijabs, they count as part of ‘marginal sciences.’ However, when such items are bought near the shrine or when healing occurs in or around the shrine, then it is considered a miracle, which bridges orthopraxy and heteropraxy.

606 Schimmel, The Mystery of Numbers, 32.
607 Ibid., 33.
5.3 Miracles

According to Anne Betterige, there are two kinds of miracles. There are larger miracles or *muʿjizāt* and there are smaller miracles or *karamāt*, which are tied to certain saints or members of the *ahl al-bayt*. While saints may dispense miracles as a form of generosity (*karāma*), miracles cannot be ‘bought’ in the same way that customers buy a cure or advice from shaykh Abu Ahmad. Like magic, miracles can happen outside of institutionalized religious settings. However, the latter may also take place in sacred spaces, at seminaries, in and around the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab. Though different, ‘magic’ and miracles can both constitute forms of spiritual healing. In this section, I will first examine a miraculous healing narrative. Then, I will analyze Shiʿi women’s dream narratives. Lastly, I will look at visions and miracles which do not help physical healing, but which are considered by many as ‘proofs’ from God, and they thus aid ‘spiritual healing.’

One day during the fall of 2009, after I had just renewed my visa for Syria, I walked by the nearby Iranian Cultural Centre, and thought to myself: I should go and look at their library and see what books they have on Muharram mourning flagellation. As I entered the building, a large portrait of Imam Khomeini looked down at me – I could not tell if Khomeini was looking at me with approval or reproach. I was told the library was in the basement, and made my way down there. The library consisted of a large room, lined with shelves and a desk in the middle. Behind the desk sat Dr. Samir al-Husayni, a Syrian convert from Sunnism to Shiʿism, who had obtained his PhD in Comparative Religion in France. He asked what I was looking for and I told him I wanted to see what books they had on Shiʿi mourning rituals. He said they did not have too much, and that I would have more luck at the Asad library. “But why are you interested in the topic?” I explained that my research topics are Shiʿi mourning rituals, sainthood, and notions of healing and that I was studying at various seminaries. He stiffened up when I told him that I studied at the Shirazis’ seminary. “They are populist and don’t care about proper scholarship. Also, their conceptions of self-flagellation are all wrong.” Then he offered to tell me his own personal miracle story.

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609 Parts of this section have been submitted for publication with Brill as part of an article in an edited volume on sainthood (*Sainthood in Fragile States*, eds. Andreas Bandak and Mikkel Bille).
It happened in 1998, while he was giving his first conference paper in Iran. Suddenly, Samir felt that his throat hurt. He felt as if his vocal cords had been cut. He wrote to his friend, the organizer, on a piece of paper: ‘Please take me home.’ His friend was bewildered, but when he saw that Samir could not talk, he took Samir home. Samir was then taken to the best doctors in Iran. They told him: “We’re sorry, but you will never speak again.” The doctors gave him painkillers but could not do any more than that. Samir’s wife cried, of course. He was supposed to go to Syria a week later and he still could not speak. When he and his wife arrived at the airport in Damascus, his friend was waiting for him in the arrivals area. His friend saw Samir’s wife crying and thought she was crying out of happiness to be back in Damascus. Then the wife talked for him: “Samir cannot speak anymore!” The friend had organized a talk for Samir to give the next day at 7 pm. Samir had not known about this – his friend invited some forty professors and doctors. His friend was upset that his plans would not work out. The next day, the friend took Samir to a well known (and, he noted, coincidentally Shi’i) doctor in Damascus, who was an ear-throat-nose specialist doctor. Again, the doctor told him: “I’m sorry, you will never speak again.” Around 5 pm, Samir wrote to his friend: ‘Take me to Sayyida Zaynab.’ So they drove to the shrine-town. At the door of the shrine, Samir sent his friend away to do his own thing. The friend went to read the ziyāra (ritual visitation prayer) and Samir went straight to the center of the shrine, where the ‘grave’ stands. There, he hung to the grid and said in his heart: “Ya Sayyida Zaynab (oh Sayyida Zaynab), there is an important talk tonight. If my words have any importance to you – let me speak. Otherwise, let me remain silent.” Then he heard himself praying louder and louder: “Allahuma salli ‘ala Muhammaad wa ali Muhammad! Allahuma salli ‘ala Muhammaad wa ali Muhammad! Allahuma salli ‘ala Muhammaad wa ali Muhammad!” He then went to his friend and said: “We can go!” His friend was surprised, to say the least! That evening, Samir talked for two hours. His friend sat across from him to make sure everything was fine because he could not believe it. Samir had no more pain and could talk just fine. When Samir got back to Iran, the doctors asked him: “The doctors in Syria must be better than in Iran! Who was it?” And Samir said: “It was a tabība (a female doctor).” So they asked: “Where did she study? In America, Europe?” Samir told them: “No! It was Sayyida Zaynab! Allahuma salli ‘ala Muhammaad wa ali Muhammad!”

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610 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 1 October 2009.
For Samir, it was not only the fact of the miracle, which was important, but also the place where it happened. By emphasizing that the miracle occurred at the Syrian shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, he reaffirmed Zaynab’s authenticity and expressed pride in Syria’s Shi‘i heritage. Thus, his story mixes nationalist pride with sectarian feelings of devotion. Similarly to shaykh Abu Ahmad, Samir emerges as a modernist through the telling of the miracle narrative as it references doctors and academics. Yet, it also posits that contested Shi‘i traditions exceed modernist rationality as they defy the limits imposed by modern medicine. According to Dr. Samir al-Husayni, miracles are supra-rational processes. He explained himself with an analogy that while under normal circumstances, A leads to B leads to C, in a miracle, A leads directly to C. A miracle is a good outcome, despite the odds.

Not all miracles are as impressive and widely witnessed, as the story of how Samir miraculously regained his voice. As will be discussed below, many Shi‘is also discuss and interpret smaller miracles, such as visions and dreams, and some even search out the miraculous in their everyday lives.

5.3.1 Interpreting dreams
As discussed in earlier chapters, dreams are an important part of making vows, relating with the *ahl al-bayt* (or family of the Prophet). Sometimes, as in the above-mentioned case of Um George, dreams provide dreamers with opportunities to negotiate healing or giving birth to a son. In what follows below, I examine dreams, which Shi‘i women described to me as productive of miracles. Some of these dreams brought about healing, one foretold the future, and another one was seen as a bad omen, the effects of which could still be alleviated. Notably, most of these dreams, like other ones examined earlier, involve symbolic forms of reciprocity. As Amira Mittermaier aptly explains,

> in a time of war, emergency laws, and social disintegration [dreams matter] not because they provide dreamers with a protective blanket of false consciousness of
hallucinatory wish fulfillment, but because they insert the dreamer into a wider network of symbolic debts, relationships, and meanings. 611

A common basic dream-story of which I heard a number of versions relates that a Shi‘i is critically ill and dreams of Zahra (Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet). Zahra always appears in a black abaya and her face is always covered either in black or in green. She then either touches the wound or the sick body-part or gives the dreamer water to drink. By asking to be healed in their dreams and my drinking the water, an exchange takes place, which in turn allows for the healing to begin. One elderly Iraqi woman told me about her mother who was a Christian before she married and converted to Shi‘ism. The mother has been afraid of giving birth, but then had a dream wherein Zahra came and touched her belly, ensuring an easy birth. 612

Another elderly woman, whom I met at a husayniyya during Muharram 2009, got on the minbar after the majlis and told the following dream-story: The narrator’s mother had been sick and needed an operation on her leg. However, being afraid of doctors, the mother had delayed the operation as much as possible. The night before she was supposed to go to the hospital for the operation, she had a dream wherein she found herself at a shrine of one of the members of the ahl al-bayt. In her dream, there was a woman who came up to her at the shrine with a glass of water in her hand. The woman’s face was veiled, but she told the dreamer to drink the glass of water, which the latter did. Then the veiled woman recited a prayer for the dreamer’s leg. When the dreamer woke up the next day and went to the doctor, the doctor told her that she had been healed and no longer required an operation. 613 In her dream, as in the case of Samir’s miracle narrative, visiting the shrine, even in one’s dreams, established a reciprocal bond and constituted a prerequisite for healing.

Dreams can accompany or foreshadow healing or restoration for the dreamer or a close beloved. After a Muharram mourning gathering, Salma, an elderly Iraqi woman, recounted a dream


612 Fieldnotes, Thursday, 22 January 2009.

613 Fieldnotes, Friday, 9 January 2009.
wherein she saw Fatima al-Zahra, the mother of Zaynab. Salma’s son had just been imprisoned and she had been very worried about him. In Salma’s dream, she saw both her son and Fatima Zahra, who handed her a glass of water, which Salma was to give to her son. The next day, Salma’s son was released from prison.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Friday, 9 January 2009.} As in the above-mentioned dream narrative, the transference of a pure substance (i.e. water) from a saint to a devotee heals, or in this case, frees the devotee. Specifically, the transference binds the body of the devotee to a saint, which then allows for healing.

There are also other kinds of dreams, which make other demands on dreamers. As the following example will show, even dreams which are not about (and thus sent from) the Infallibles, may demand action. In the spring of 2009, I was spending the afternoon with Amal talking about men, illness, and her studies, when her mother and sisters came to visit.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Sunday, 8 February 2009.} The topic changed to dreams and Amal’s mother said that some friend who had a lot of trouble getting pregnant had a dream where a \textit{jinn} entered her. She became afraid that the \textit{jinn} would harm her child. A curious point is that the \textit{jinn} will only harm a particular gender, depending on the dream. The question up for debate was what to do in such a case? Do you tell your dream or keep quiet? The woman ended up going to a shaykh who read Qur’an over her and probably gave her a verse to wear. Amal however argued that the woman should have kept the dream to herself, not said anything, and then she should have given \textit{sadaqah} (or charity) in order to avert her fate.

Not all dreams, even dreams of the \textit{ahl al-bayt}, necessarily demand action. Some provide comfort. For example, an elderly woman, who identifies as a Syrian-Lebanese Shi‘i, explained that when she was a young wife, she used to worry about her husband’s soul because he is Sunni. One night, she dreamt that she saw Zaynab in a house and asked to enter.\footnote{Fieldnotes, Sunday, 4 October 2009.} She prayed and saluted Zaynab and kissed her three times. Zaynab asked her what she wanted. The elderly woman emphasized that she did not want anything. She just wanted to know whether her
husband who is Sunni go to hell for being Sunni. Sayyida Zaynab told her that each will be judged according to their deeds. This made her relax (murtāḥ).

5.3.2 Proofs from God
Along with miracles narratives of healing, Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab told stories, which did little more than strengthen their faith and re-enchant their lives by emphasizing that tradition exceeds rationality.

Some dreams are simply there to inspire awe. Between classes at the Zaynabiyya seminary, I asked if someone had a story about a miracle at the shrine. Um Muhammad said she saw a thāhirū – a vision, which is not exactly a mu‘jīza but it is similar. She said this happened during Ramadan three years ago (2007). It was during one of the layāli al-qadr – for Shi‘is, laylat al-qadr is not specified but in the last ten days of Ramadan. It was between the 17th and the 21st of Ramadan, between the injury and death of Amīr al-Muminīn (Imam ‘Ali). She and her husband, her sister in law and brother had been at the shrine and prayed fajr there. Then, as she came out from the musallah she saw a streak of light in the sky and the clear figure of a rider on a horse (this being Imam ‘Ali). Then the image doubled and then there were two and then three and under each, there was a beam of light. Her sister in law wanted to leave, but Um Muhammad insisted on staying until it faded into daylight. Um Hasan cut in: “People say that this is only the lights from the shrine itself.” Though Um Hasan has voiced skepticism, Um Muhammad remained firm. “No! Shuftuh bi-ayni! (I saw it with my own eye!)”

According to Faddak, a young mulla from Basra, Muharram and other religious holidays are often marked by visions. Just a few days before our conversation, she explained that had seen a vision at the shrine. It was late at night when a column of light descended upon the shrine from nowhere. The shrine was filled, but even more people tried to come as they too noticed that there is a mu‘jīza – a miracle. According to Faddak, the column of light was none other than

617 Fieldnotes, Sunday, 1 November 2009.
Imam ‘Ali who had come to visit his daughter Zaynab. In both Faddak and Um Mustafa’s visions, they identified the saints with the appearance of lights. They found the visions to be soothing, spiritually healing.

On another occasion, Um Mustafa brought a miracle with her to class at the seminary. She brought in an off-white sandwich carton and then revealed a piece of Syrian hibs or flat round bread. As flat bread is made in stone ovens heated by uneven flames, there are often discolorations and even burn-marks on the bread. The burn-mark on this particular piece of bread spelled out “Allah,” the name of God. Less clearly, a smaller burn-mark on the side, spelled out “Muhammad” in Arabic. As she showed it around, Um Mustafa explained to everyone (i.e. teachers and classmates) that her husband promised he would have the miracle authenticated (muhaqaq) by high-ranking male scholars. What does authentication mean in this case? Um Mustafa wanted to hold on to a miracle, which similarly to other miracles was fragile because dreams and visions pass and bread rots. She hoped to legitimize that which is necessarily ambiguous and questionable by telling others about her miracle, showing it to pious women at the seminary, and asking her husband to obtain the approval of religious scholars.

5.4 Conclusion
In this chapter, I have followed Dorpmüller’s call for studying not only the differences between religion and magic, but also their interplay. For Shi‘is, such as shaykh Abu Ahmad, ‘spiritual healing’ or licit charms (tibb ruhani or ruqya shariyya) count as fields of knowledge, like theology and mathematics. Yet, his craft can be considered a form of heteropraxy in the sense that it lies outside of institutionalized authority, though it draws on the same books, symbols, and language. But what does it mean to believe in magic or in spiritual healing? The question

618 Fieldnotes, Sunday, 8 February 2009.
619 Fieldnotes, Saturday, 26 December 2009.
620 Dorpmüller, Religiöse Magie, 1.
621 Cf. ibid., 23-32.
bothered me throughout my fieldwork and so I asked the apprentice shaykh Abu al-Hasan. Instead of answering me, Abu al-Hasan told me a story.622 A woman was getting beaten by her husband. Abu al-Hasan sensed that she is ‘asabiyya, that she gets upset easily. In turn, Abu al-Hasan reasoned, her husband gets upset and beats her. So, he gave her a hijāb and told her it will solve her problems. She became calm (hādi‘a) and in turn, her husband became calm and their problem was solved – for the moment.

In the case of Amina, Amal told me later that the experience made Amina believe in magic. Amina changed her mind after shaykh Abu Ahmad helped prevent her husband from divorcing her.623 Further, her stomach felt better as soon as she drank the water the shaykh gave her.624 Before visiting Abu Ahmad, Amina had thought of magic as offensive to God. Afterwards, she wished the shaykh did not charge 8000 Lira for further treatments. Amal said: “If it were not for the money, all of Amina’s problems could be solved and she could live happily ever after!” In this matter, spiritual healing resembles the process of becoming pious: it is an ongoing process, which requires sustaining particular kinds of relationships, which aid healing.

In this chapter, I have highlighted both the similarities and the differences between institutionalized Shi‘i piety and heteropraxy. On the one hand, they draw on the same set of symbols. On the other hand, scholars have argued that they differ with regard to their aims.625 Magic, in contrast to religion, supposedly serves predominantly selfish purposes. My theoretical contribution lies mainly in pointing out that it is difficult to distinguish the aims of religion and magic, as both can serve selfish goals. Moreover, both institutionally sponsored rituals and those performed by spiritual healers can turn carnivalesque. Concurrently, Durkheim’s important observation, that “there is no church of magic,”626 continues to hold true.

622 Fieldnotes, Tuesday, 27 October 2009.
623 Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 28 October 2009 and Sunday, 8 November 2009.
624 Notably, she was not actively complaining of stomach pains at the time.
625 Cf. Paret, Symbolik des Islam, 86.
626 Durkheim quoted in Dorpmüller, Religiöse Magie, 2.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

6 Re-thinking tradition

Like freedom and respect, tradition is an elusive term. It is often used as proof or as a reason for justifying a certain chain of actions. Also, it is often contrasted with modernity. However, while the latter, modernity, as many recent works of scholarship have argued, should be viewed as plural and diverse, the former often remains in the singular. At the same time, simply noting that there is internal diversity in every ‘tradition’ and that even tradition can be a catalyst for change does not adequately explain what tradition means for contemporary Shi‘is in Sayyida Zaynab, Syria.

In this dissertation, I have emphasized three points with regard to tradition. First, I have pointed out that the concept of tradition is often used rhetorically in order to claim legitimacy. For instance, it has been used by the Shirazis to justify their stance on bloody forms of self-flagellation. Secondly, I have drawn on both Talal Asad and William Graham to highlight the relational or inter-subjective aspects of tradition, or transmitting ways of becoming virtuous. Thirdly, I have drawn attention to the fact that not all Islamic traditions, broadly conceived, aid the cultivation of piety. Some traditions contribute to heteropraxy, which I have taken to include carnivalesque mourning practices, as well as spiritual healing practices.

Traditions, hence, are not only a set of means of becoming a better, more pious Muslim. They not only engage Muslims in chains of discourses about piety, but also about possibilities for healing which are not necessarily ‘pious’ in a strict sense, such that they foreclose any self-

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To restate Talal Asad’s famous theory, therefore, I conclude that an anthropology of Islam (at least in the case of contemporary Twelver Shi’is in Sayyida Zaynab) should more broadly be conceived of a chain of discourses which ties Muslims back to founding texts and founding individuals (such as saints, prophets, and imams). It is crucial to note that Shi’i discursive traditions demand a strong sense of relationality and a stress on affect. Shi’i discursive traditions include education and ritual mourning gatherings which enable and reinforce the relationship between members of the ahl al-bayt (the family of the Prophet) and their followers (i.e. Shi’is) on the one hand, and the pedagogic relationships between mullayāt, teachers, and marj’a al-taqlīd and Shi‘is on the other hand. Further, both Islamic law and heterodoxy presuppose the creation and maintenance of particular relationships. Given the emphasis on affective pious relationships, I have argued that the cultivation of piety is not the only goal of these discursive traditions. Rather, the cultivation of piety is one of many possible goals, which can and often do include much more ‘selfish’ goals, such as healing a loved one or the marriage of a daughter.

My analysis of tradition extends to the concept of the Karbala Paradigm, wherein revolutionary interpretations have hereto often been juxtaposed to traditional interpretations. In particular, the ‘Ashura chapter shows that traditional interpretations can be far from quietist and otherworldly in their orientation. Rather, the traditional here functions as a rhetorical device that emphasizes hope that exceeds the narrow constraints of rationality. It offers the possibility of healing in a world scarred by violence, poverty, oppression, and desperation. Yet, beyond a nostalgic longing for the past, as noted above, tradition is also used, for instance, by the Shirazis, as a rhetorical device, and thus serves as a language of both protest and authority. In short, Shi‘i tradition in Sayyida Zaynab is a malleable notion, which serves multiple functions, and multiple and differing authorities. It serves orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the self and the other, the

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629 Rudi Paret, for instance, in his discussion of orthodox Islam versus magic, describes the latter as using religious language and symbols for selfish ends. Paret, Symbolik des Islam, 86.


631 Cf. Aghaie, The Martyrs of Karbala; Deeb, An Enchanted Modern; Pandya, “Women’s Shi‘i Ma’atim in Bahrain.”
downtrodden and the elites. It serves the scholar, the academic, as well as Iraqi refugees, who are now returning to Iraq because Syria is becoming too violent, only in order to create new traditions.

6.1 Beyond the field: Shi‘ism and the Arab Spring

The fieldwork for this dissertation began during the height of the war, which resulted from the 2003 American invasion. There were millions of refugees in neighboring countries and as many internally displaced persons. In this context, an analysis of tradition necessarily has to look at practices outside and beyond the cultivation of pious subjects. More pressing issues include the maintenance and healing of social, familial, and religious relationships. Affect, though it is central to Shi‘i rituals and discourses, has taken on a new significance. Stories of personal experiences of suffering have become the basis for piety and for building relationships with the *ahl al-bayt*. Scholars such as David Pinault have compared Shi‘i notions of suffering and salvation with Catholicism.\(^{632}\) In the case of war-torn Iraq and neighboring Syria, however, these concepts take on a unique significance and specificity. As an elderly Iraqi woman noted one day after a women’s ritual mourning gathering: “If it were not for our suffering, our tragedies (*masā‘ibna*), the tragedy of Husayn and Zaynab would not affect us (*yu‘aththir ‘alayna*).”\(^{633}\) In other words, suffering enables individuals to become pious.

The accent on miracles is crucial when studying Shi‘ism in the contemporary Middle East. Rationally seen, the situation looks awful. It is hope and trust in God, which allows many to keep on living virtuous lives. Miracles here do not imply that Shi‘is have lost touch with reality. Rather, they permit Shi‘is try to remain hopeful. While attending Shi‘i Muharram mourning gatherings in Northern Iraq (or Iraqi Kurdistan) in December 2011, I noticed that women once again emphasized the importance of miracles and healing. Similarly to the Shi‘i women in Syria, whose stories I recount and analyze in the chapter on affect, Shi‘i women in Iraq told dream-stories which brought about miraculous healing. Though Northern Iraq is currently safe in the

\(^{632}\) Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*.

sense that the social and political order is being upheld, Shi‘is were not allowed to perform public processions in Sulaimani for fear of sectarian violence flaring up. Even in Northern Iraq, therefore, women are still concerned with pious affect, tradition, and salvation beyond the cultivation of pious selves.

According to Vali Nasr, the deposition of Saddam Hussein by American forces in 2003, brought about a Shi‘i revival.\footnote{Vali Nasr, \textit{The Shia revival: how conflicts within Islam will shape the future} (New York: Norton, 2006).} Shi‘is became politically stronger particularly in Iraq, which emboldened Iran and Shi‘is in Lebanon, where in 2006 Hezbollah fought against Israel. The war of 2006, like Hezbollah’s earlier campaigns, led to an increase in their popularity, and there were even rumors of Sunnis converting to Shi‘ism, because they were inspired by Hezbollah’s actions.

With the Arab Spring, however, the “Shia Revival,” as Nasr terms it, seems to have ended. While Shi‘is still dominate Iraq, they are not without a strong opposition. As mentioned above, Shi‘is still cannot publicly perform Muharram processions in Northern Iraq. In Bahrain, Shi‘i demonstrators are killed almost daily, and while the media has and continues to pay detailed attention to Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria, Bahrain is left out. As for Syria, the conflict is slowly but surely turning into a sectarian civil war. The Sunni majority, which has previously risen up against Hafiz al-Asad’s ‘Alawi regime in the 1970s and early 80s, has once again taken up arms. The Shi‘is examined here are currently sidelined, as they constitute only a small minority and many Shi‘is in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab are not even Syrian citizens. Moreover, the fact that the Syrian government has supported them in the past now hurts them. In January, Iranian Shi‘i pilgrims to the shrine-town were kidnapped.\footnote{Mitra Amiri, “Iran says 11 Iranian pilgrims kidnapped in Syria” <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-iran-syria-kidnapping-idUSTRE8100PW20120201> (accessed 20 April 2012).} In April 2012, the head of the Zaynabiyya was shot and killed on his way to the Zaynabiyya.\footnote{“Head of Hawza e Zainabia Martyred By Target Killing in Syria,” 15 April 2012 <http://jafrianews.com/2012/04/16/head-of-hawza-e-zainabia-martyred-by-target-killing-in-syria/> (accessed 20 April 2012).} In light of these rapid developments, it is important to examine religious practices and discourses in their specificity. The notion of tradition can no longer serve as a blanket term, which covers the histories, lives, beliefs, rituals, and hopes of any given group of people.
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Appendix A: Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abaya (pl. abayāt)</td>
<td>a black overcoat worn by Muslim women in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Abbas</td>
<td>half-brother of Hussayn, died with his hands cut off in Karbala</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘adāt</td>
<td>tradition in the sense of cultural habits</td>
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<tr>
<td>ahl al-bayt</td>
<td>literally “people of the house”; it refers to the descendants of the Prophet: his daughter, Fatima, her husband ‘Ali who was also the first Imam, their children Hassan, Hussayn and a line of male descendants through Hussayn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘alawīyya</td>
<td>an honorific title for a woman who is a descendant of Imam ‘Ali</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Ali</td>
<td>the first Imam, Muhammad’s son-in-law and father of Hassan, Hussayn and Zaynab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘amiya</td>
<td>colloquial (Arabic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arba’īn</td>
<td>forty day mourning period, also the fortieth</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘ashūra</td>
<td>tribe, clan</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Ashūra</td>
<td>the tenth day of Muharram, the day Hussayn was killed</td>
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<tr>
<td>athara</td>
<td>to leave traces, the root of athār or ruins, traces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayatollah</td>
<td>honorific title for a high-ranking Shi‘i scholar of Islamic Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>bayt ‘arabi</td>
<td>a house which has not been divided into apartment internally, but may be physically attached to neighbouring houses on the outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>du’ā</td>
<td>non-obligatory prayer, supplication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fadīla (pl. fadā’il)</td>
<td>virtue, talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiqh</td>
<td>Islamic jurisprudence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fusha</td>
<td>Modern Standard Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghuslaw</td>
<td>extremists, usually in the sense of extreme devotion to ‘Ali to the point of worshipping him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hijāb</td>
<td>modest dress for Muslim women generally and the scarf in particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hijira</td>
<td>market street in Sayyida Zaynab, ‘Golani’ area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hawza</td>
<td>religious seminary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husayn</td>
<td>the third Imam, brother of Zaynab; he died on ‘Ashūra at the Battle of Karbala ca. 680 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husayniyya</td>
<td>halls specifically dedicated to mourning gatherings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**ijtihād**  the deduction of legal rulings through independent reasoning

**Imam**  in Twelver Shi’ism, there are twelve Imams beginning with ‘Ali; all are male descendants of ‘Ali and Fatima; they are considered infallible and the rightful heirs of Muhammad

**Infallibles**  Twelver Shi’is believe God has protected the following fourteen from sin:

the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and her husband ‘Ali, their sons Hassan and Hussayn, and nine other male descendants, the last being the Mahdi (the Hidden Imam)

**insāniyya**  civility

**istikhāra**  using the Qur’an or prayer beads in order to determine the desirability of a certain course of action

**Karbala**  a desert plain in Iraq, where Hussayn and his followers fought the army of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid

**khataba husayniyya**  the art of reciting mourning gatherings

**khums**  a 20% tax on newly acquired wealth which is paid to scholars and sayyids

**khutba**  sermon

**Kufa**  city in Southern Iraq

**latm**  (pl. latmiyyāt)  chant accompanied by rhythmic chest-beating

**Mahdi**  the Twelfth Imam, also referred to as the Hidden Imam; he entered into Occultation around 940 CE and is expected to return one day

**majlis**  (pl. majālis)  mourning gathering

**manteau**  a coat worn by Syrian women over their clothes, it is a modern fashion which has been inspired by European-style dress

**maqām**  shrine

**masā’ib**  (sg. musība)  misfortunes, tragedies

**minbar**  podium at religious gatherings

**Muharram**  the name of the Islamic month during which Hussayn died

**mullaya**  a woman who leads mourning chants in remembrance of the ahl al-bayt

**mukhadhirīn**  attendees

**muqallidīn**  followers, lay Shi’is

**musalla**  prayer hall

**mustahabb**  non-obligatory acts that are liked and rewarded by God
muta temporary marriage
mutrib a performer of tarāb (classical Arab music)
na‘i lament, also a ritual mourning lament
nadḥāfa cleanliness; hygiene
niqāb a face-veil
niyya intention
qasad intention
qayma rice dish with a meat-chick pea paste
riwāyah a story, also: a hadith of the Prophet and/or the Imams
sadaqah charity
salawāt ritual salutation
sayyid an honorific title for a descendant of the Prophet
Sayyida female honorific (i.e. Lady)
shafa’ healing, in both the this worldly and other-worldly sense
shrugi Southern Iraqi dialect
shura consultation, especially in law and politics
sibha rosary
sufra a women’s gathering, often done as part of a religious vow
tabāki crying without tears
tabīb ruḥānī spiritual doctor	
tatbīr cutting the head with a sword on ‘Ashūra
tahāra ritual cleanliness
taqālīd emulation, especially in legal and ritual matters
taqsīr lit. to be short, to not give the Imams their due respect
tarāb classical Arabic music
tasbīh rosary
tashbīh passion play of Karbala
thāra to ignite, excite; the root of thawra or revolution
turāth cultural heritage
‘ūrf local custom, can be a source of Islamic law
wudhu’ ritual ablution, cleanliness
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yazid</td>
<td>the second Umayyad Caliph, he ruled from 680-683 CE and was based in Damascus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>zanjīr</em></td>
<td>whips, often with blades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaynab</td>
<td>the sister of Hussayn, daughter of ‘Ali and Fatima</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ziyāra</em></td>
<td>ritual visitation of the <em>ahl al-bayt</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: List of Ritual Leaders

**List of mullayāt**

The following is a list of all the mullayat I met in Sayyida Zaynab. Most of them appear in the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>‘Alawiyah</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Age &amp; began at age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Um Zahra</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>husband with Ha’iri, Husayniyya Abbas</td>
<td>40s, began at 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mardhiya</td>
<td>Afghan/Irani</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>father with Shirazis, Zaynabiyya</td>
<td>late 30s, began as a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryam</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>helper at Um Baniyin and Zayn al-Abidin</td>
<td>33, began at 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isra (Um Muhammad)</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>helper at Haydariyya Qadima</td>
<td>mid 30s, began in last three or so years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ikhlas</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>freelance</td>
<td>early 30s, for 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um Ali</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>helper at Zaynabiyya and freelance</td>
<td>mid 40s, for 10 to 15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um Haydar</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Haydariyya and freelance</td>
<td>age early 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um Jassim</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>helper at Zaynabiyye &amp; freelance</td>
<td>age 50ish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um Husayn</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Zayn al-Abidin</td>
<td>age 50ish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaynab</td>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>helper at Um Baniyin, Zaynabiyya</td>
<td>mid 20s, for maybe 5 years (does it in Iraqi style – student of Mardhiye)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Saudi</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Um Baniyin</td>
<td>age 30, since 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um Husayn</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>helper at Abbas, Zaynabiyya &amp; freelance</td>
<td>mid 30s, since 5 years min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayyat</td>
<td>Iraqi/Iranian</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>helper at Zaynabiyya &amp; freelance</td>
<td>age 23-25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**List of khatibāt (female preachers)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>‘Alawiyya</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Age &amp; began at age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iman</td>
<td>Palestinian</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>freelance</td>
<td>30, since 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anise ‘Aliya</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Zaynabiyya</td>
<td>mid-20s, since mid-teens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um Haydar (Zaynabiyya)</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Zaynabiyya</td>
<td>mid-50s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Religious Institutions in Sayyida Zaynab

List of Hawzat and Husayniyyat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Hawza/Husayniyya</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abu Fadhl Abbas</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>women</td>
<td>independent, northeast of Hijera circle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbas</td>
<td>Hawza &amp; Hus.</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, east of al-Kitab wa-l-Otra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A’ima al-Baqiya</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, Urdu, north of Ali Wahsh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ali (Imam)</td>
<td>Hus. &amp; Madrassa</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Shirazi, Urdu, Hijera</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ali (Imam)</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, near Sistani’s office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amir al-Muminin</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Khorasani, across Modaressi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baqir</td>
<td>Hawza/Hus.</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>Shirazi, north of Hijera</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima al-Zahra</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, northeast of the shrine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima al-Zahra</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, east of Husayniyya Mustafa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatimiyya</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>both (men)</td>
<td>independent, Shari’a Teen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haydariyya</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Fadhllallah, north of Shari’a Iraqiyin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haydariyya Qadima</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>women</td>
<td>Fadhllallah, south of Shari’a Iraqiyin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husayniyya Hindiya area</td>
<td>Hawza/Hus.</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, unofficially Khamenei, Golani area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jama’a Ahl al-bayt</td>
<td>Hawza (University)</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jawad (Imam)</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>Tabrizi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jawad (Imam)</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Tabrizi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khomeini</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>Khamenei, southwest of Shari’a Teen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khomeini Javad</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>women</td>
<td>Khamenei, north of Sitt Zaynab, west of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitab wa ‘Utra</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Tabataba’i, northeast of the shrine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahdi parallel street</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, Urdu, north of Hijera on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mujtaba</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>independent, Hijera</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muntadhar Iraqiyin, by the Cafeteria al-Sa’a</td>
<td>Husayniyya</td>
<td>women</td>
<td>independent Kuwaitis, north of Sahat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murtadha</td>
<td>Hawza</td>
<td>both</td>
<td>Fadhllallah - ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Scholar</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amili Makki (Shahid al-Awwal)</td>
<td>southeast of Sahat Iraqiyin, southeast of Husayniyya al-Kitab wa-l-Otra</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burjardi</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fadhllallah</td>
<td>north of Shari’a al-Iraqiyīn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha’iri</td>
<td>west end of Shari’a al-Iraqiyīn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hakim</td>
<td>southeast of the Shari’a al-Iraqiyīn, by Husayniyya Abu Fadh al-‘Abbas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karanzani</td>
<td>north of Zaynabiyya/Main Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of Religious Scholars with Offices
Khamenei southeast of Hijera
Khaqānī near Sadr
Kh’oi n/a
Khorasani across the street from Modaressi
Modaressi behind the Zaynabiyya, south of Shari’a al-Iraqiyyīn
al-Najafi, Basheer on the south side of the Zaynabiyya, Shari’a al-Ahramat
Ruhani east end of Shari’a al-Iraqiyyīn
Shirazi Zaynabiyya/Main Street, north of shrine
Sadr north of Shari’a al-Iraqiyyīn
Sistani next to Sadr, north of Shari’a al-Iraqiyyīn
Tabataba’ī east of the shrine
Tabrizi north of Shari’a al-Iraqiyyīn

Notable Exceptions
Khomeini and Khamenei have no husayniyya, however, as the shrine and its attached musalla (prayer area/mosque) follows Khamenei’s orders, it could be considered their unofficial husayniyya.
Sistani has no hawza and no husayniyya, though he has an office here and is the main marja’ for Iraqi Shi’is.

List of Charitable Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospital Khomeini</td>
<td>South of the shrine-city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital Sadr</td>
<td>near the shrine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustawsaf al-Zahra (Zahra Clinic)</td>
<td>next to Husayniyya Abu Fadhl Abbas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustawsaf Sayyid al-Shuhada (clinic)</td>
<td>next to Husayniyya Zayn al-Abidin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association for poets of the ahl al-bayt, Rabita Sha’ar Ahl al-bayt</td>
<td>(two centers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>