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Marei, Fouad Gehad; Shanneik, Yafa

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Lamenting Karbala in Europe: Husayni Liturgy and Discourses of Dissent amongst Diasporic Bahraini and Lebanese Shiis

Fouad Gehad Marei and Yafa Shanneik

Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT The presence of Shii communities in Europe is increasingly felt, especially as they establish independent religious and social infrastructures. Supporters of different Shii–Islamist political parties have established transnational links connecting diasporic communities with their countries of origin. These links have shaped and been shaped by religious, political and social dynamics in the Middle East. This article examines how lamentation poetry performed in Shii ritual gatherings is used to articulate political dissent among diasporic communities. The lachrymal expressions and descriptions that characterize Shii lamentation poetry have the ritualistic function of metaphorically identifying participants with Imam Husayn and his cause. Organizers of these gatherings, however, use lamentation poetry to narrate and give meaning to geopolitical developments in the Middle East, especially since the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003. This article constitutes the first attempt to examine the political contextualization of Shii lamentation poetry, embedded within the political discourses of two Shii Islamist parties, the al-Wefaq Movement in Bahrain and Hizbullah in Lebanon. Unlike other studies on Shii ritual practices, it is informed by a

multi-sited ethnographic study of female-only and male-dominated ritual spaces in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain.

Introduction

Writing elegies (sing. *marthiyya*; pl. *marāthī*) and recitations commemorating and mourning the dead is a time-honoured Arab tradition dating back to the pre-Islamic period (Stetkevych 1993; 2010). Research has thus far not sufficiently acknowledged the influential contributions by Shii women and men who write and recite lamentation poetry commemorating and mourning the killing of Imam Husayn and his family (*Ahl al-Bayt*). We therefore understand Husayni lamentation poetry, or Husayni liturgy, as a poetic school and ritual practice drawing on older Arabic – both Islamic and pre-Islamic – poetry traditions. Our research among various Shii communities in Europe and the Middle East demonstrates that Husayni liturgy is used not only to keep alive the memory of Imam Husayn and *Ahl al-Bayt*, but also to address current socio-political issues.[1]

How does Husayni lamentation poetry narrate and imagine political transformations and conflicts in the contemporary Middle East? What emotional and affective impact does it have on diasporic Shiis and how does it inform their understanding of geopolitical developments there? These are some of the questions we investigate in this article, informed by ethnographic research conducted between 2014 and 2018, a time when the Middle East was experiencing major political unrest and instability, sectarian and state violence, and popular

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[1] This article contributes to the growing research on Shii Islam, particularly Ashura ritual practices (see, for example, Ende 1978; Aghaie 2004; 2005; D'Souza 2014; Khosronejad 2015), their transnational dimensions (see, for example, Scharbrodt 2019), political functions and aesthetic representations (see, for example, Shanneik 2015; Funke 2017); and on Bahrain and the Gulf (see, for example, Louër 2008a; 2008b; 2013; 2014; Fibiger 2010; Matthiesen 2013; Gengler 2015).

uprisings. The major focus of this article, however, lies on our literary examination of Husayni lamentation poetry written by and/or recited amongst diasporic Shii communities in the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain. Our investigation is particularly concerned with diasporic Shiis of Bahraini and Lebanese origin, focusing on followers and supporters of two major Islamist political movements in Bahrain and Lebanon, al-Wefaq National Islamic Society (al-Wefaq) and Hizbullah, respectively.

Despite the difference between the political and historical contexts of their emergence in Bahrain in the early-2000s and Lebanon in the mid-1980s, respectively, al-Wefaq and Hizbullah share some important features. Both movements emerged as Shii communities in Bahrain and Lebanon underwent dramatic demographic and socioeconomic transformations, which forced them to 'confront the perils and promise[s] of newfound visibility' and 'to navigate a fraught relationship with the state' (Weiss 2010, 186). The two movements reflect the emergence of a Shii milieu in Bahrain, Lebanon and the Middle East at large, where Shiis are 'more self-assured, more capable of articulating political demands, and more integrated' in their national societies and political economies (187). Moreover, while their contexts and trajectories differ in significant ways, al-Wefaq and Hizbullah draw on a similar history of Shii ideation and political activism, linking them to a network of prominent clerics and political figures of the global Shii milieu as well as to (Shii and non-Shii) Islamist movements throughout the Middle East (Shaery-Eisenlohr 2008; Mervin 2010; Louër 2017). In particular, they draw on legacies of political activism and partisan organization inspired by the political theologies of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and the Daʿwa Party in Iraq in the 1950s, as well as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Al-Wefaq and Hizbullah are therefore embedded in a transnational 'web or network of linkages' (Clark 2004, 942), connecting them to one another and to a coterie of reform-oriented and revolutionary Shii seminarians.

Established in 2001 with its spiritual leader, Sheikh Issa Qassim (b. 1937), al-Wefaq[2] is the largest Shii political party in Bahrain; it constituted the largest parliamentary bloc in the Bahraini Parliament from 2006 until its withdrawal in 2011 and the government's dissolution of the legislature in 2016 (Moore-Gilbert 2019). Other Shii political movements in Bahrain, such as Haqq[3] and the February 14 Youth Coalition, were more critical of the monarchy, choosing to operate outside the Bahraini political system. Al-Wefaq, however, is considered a pragmatic faction of the Shii opposition in Bahrain (Machlis 2016, 981), which tends to 'mitigate its sectarian affiliation' and work within a national framework (982). This changed after the uprisings in Bahrain in 2011, during which a shift towards an exclusively Shii agenda could be identified with a clearer expansion of Bahraini activism to diasporic communities in Europe.

Hizbullah on the other hand emerged during Lebanon's 15-year civil war (1975–1990) and against the backdrop of Israel's repeated invasions of Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s. The 'Party of God' capitalized on the militant activism of a coterie of junior seminarians politicized and radicalized during the crackdown on the Daʿwa Party in Iraq and the revolutionary fervour accompanying the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The party also inherited a considerable network of wartime community- and faith-based welfare organizations (Saad-Ghorayeb 2002; Harik 2004; Mervin 2008; Cammett 2014). Throughout the civil war and beyond, Hizbullah ensured that the network of organizations affiliated with it should serve two functions: first, to mobilize resources towards the provision of social services to Lebanon's Shii population, and, second, to effect desirable social change by diffusing the moral rubrics and cultural symbols associated with the party's worldview. Although Hizbullah drew

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[2] *Jamʿiyyat al-Wifāq al-Waṭanī al-Islāmiyya*, or National Islamic Accord Society. For more see Moore-Gilbert (2019).

[3] *Ḥarakat al-Ḥurriyya wa-al-Dīmūqrāṭiyya*, or Movement for Liberty and Democracy, which is also associated with *Wafāʾa* (*Tayyār al-Wafāʾ al-Islāmī*, or the Islamic Loyalty Party). For more, see Moore-Gilbert (2019).

extensively on the 'Islamo-Leninist' organizational model of the Daʿwa Party (AbuKhalil 1991), it adhered to a political theology closely aligned to the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini (Faḍlallāh 1985; Kūrānī 1985; Qassem 2002).

Despite Hizbullah's initial rejection of the Lebanese political system and its commitment to 'revolution', it has participated in national and local elections, and has been represented in parliament since 1992 and in the government since 2005, but without surrendering its paramilitary wing or its willingness to use violence for political ends (Alagha 2006). It has thus consolidated its position as the dominant political actor, claiming as its prerogative the representation of the Shii community in Lebanon alongside the Amal Movement, Hizbullah's predecessor and competitor-turned-ally. Regionally, Hizbullah's importance is attributed to its armed struggle against Israel, its ties with the Iranian government, and its multifaceted entanglements in regional conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the Gulf.

In addition to their specific national contexts, the political activities of al-Wefaq and Hizbullah are demonstrative examples of the effects of 'sectarianization', an 'active process […] that involve[s] the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular (religious) identity markers'. This process is embedded in a 'geopolitics of sectarianism' (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 3), marked by 'turning points' (6). In particular, sectarianization in Bahrain and Lebanon was exacerbated by reverberations of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the social upheavals that followed the popular uprisings of 2011. This has been expressed not only locally and transnationally, but has also had a discernible diasporic reach. Bahraini and Lebanese Shiis in the European diaspora embed narratives of contemporary conflicts and political upheaval within Husayni lamentation poetry, conflating political activism and religious ritual practice.[4] By doing so, they articulate a 'translocal' Shii

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[4] For the role of social media in representing the Bahraini conflict globally but also its role in shaping Bahrain's opposition, see Moore-Gilbert (2018; 2019).

narrative. This translocalization allows them to de-contextualize and re-contextualize sectarianized politics in a European diasporic context, rendering conflicts 'back at home' not 'Lebanese' or 'Bahraini', but part of a seemingly global Shii discourse of dissent.

This article will illustrate how political discourses in the Middle East are emotively narrated in Husayni lamentation poetry recited amongst European diasporic Shiis, resulting in a process of translocalization. Husayni lamentation poetry addresses, both explicitly and implicitly, current socio-political issues, thus acting as a medium for the translocalization of the political. This allows for the negotiation and re-contextualization of the political in new local and translocal discourses. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out by Yafa Shanneik in Bahrain and the UK between 2014 and 2018 and by Fouad Gehad Marei in Iraq, Lebanon and Sweden between 2015 and 2018 as well as amongst Lebanese Shii pilgrims to Iraq in 2015. We carried out numerous interviews and participated in various public, semi-public and private religious gatherings, in which a plethora of lamentation poetry types were recited and religious practices performed. Our analysis is further informed by a *longue durée* ethnographic familiarity with Shii ritual cultures in the Gulf, in Lebanon, and amongst diasporic communities in several European countries. First, we present an overview of Shii communities in Europe, focusing on Shiis hailing from Lebanon and Bahrain. We then present and discuss Shii ritual gatherings and the role of lamentation poetry in translocalizing the political and cultivating a 'translocal' Shii field.

Shii communities in Europe

Perhaps with the exception of South Asian Shiis in the UK, the majority of Shiis in Europe arrived on the continent in the second half of the twentieth century, especially after the early 1980s, as either students, immigrants or refugees and asylum seekers. Consequently, Shiis in Europe represent a wide diversity, variegated in terms of their national, cultural and ethnic

origins, their denominational affiliations, political ideologies and ritual cultures, and their educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

Congruent with the growing number and visible presence of Shii communities in Europe, particularly since the mid-2000s and in the aftermath of the popular uprisings of 2011 in the Middle East, the number of Shii institutions in Europe increased noticeably. London, for example, emerged as a European-Shii hub: religious authorities and political movements established headquarters and liaison offices in the British capital and commissioned the building of Shii community centres and ritual congregation halls (sing. *ḥusayniyya*; pl. *ḥusayniyyāt*), representing various denominational and political factions (Scharbrodt 2020). Shii community centres and offices in London developed into an 'infrastructure' catering for the needs of diverse communities throughout Europe (for more on 'Muslim infrastructures' in Europe, see, e.g., Gerholm and Lithman 1988; Allievi 1999; Nielsen 1999; Grillo 2004).

Although infrequently acknowledged by researchers and surveys commissioned by European government agencies, the Shii presence in northern and western Europe dates back to the mid-twentieth century. For example, in Hamburg, Germany, Iranian merchant-migrants embarked on the establishment of an Islamic centre in the mid-1950s, leading to the inauguration of the Imam Ali Mosque in 1963. This was concomitant with the formation of the *Ettehadiyyah* (the Union of Islamic Students Associations in Europe), an umbrella organization for opponents of the then-incumbent Iranian government and a support base for what would become the Islamic Revolution in Iran (van den Bos 2012). As the number of Shiis in Germany increased with the country's intake of immigrants and refugees hailing from Middle Eastern countries with large Shii populations, so did Iranian patronage for the *Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg* (Islamic Centre Hamburg), transforming it into a major reference for Shiis in Germany. Today, the Centre, which maintains close links with the Al-Mustafa University in Qom, Iran, as well as with Iranian-supported institutions in London, offers accredited degrees

in Islamic studies and theology and serves as a host institute for leading Iranian theologians and politicians (Langer and Weineck 2017).

Sweden took in the second largest number of immigrants and refugees from countries with large Shii populations. According to recent estimates, Sweden is home to 250,000 Shiis of Iranian, Iraqi, Afghan and Lebanese backgrounds, as well as Shiis from India and Pakistan (Larsson and Thurfjell 2013). As the number of Shiis in Sweden increased in the 1990s, so did the demand for independence and self-organization, resulting in the establishment of several Shii community organizations. In 2003, the *Islamiska Shiasamfunden i Sverige* (Islamic Shii Communities in Sweden), a nationwide umbrella organization representing Shiis in Sweden (with the exception of South Asian Shiis), was established and officially recognized by the Swedish authorities (Larsson 2007; 2017). A survey commissioned by the Swedish government pointed out that, concomitant with processes of differentiation and institutionalization, tensions between Shii and Sunni Muslims in Sweden had increased, echoing sectarian conflicts in the Middle East (Larsson and Thurfjell 2013). It is in light of this newfound visibility that Sweden's largest Shii mosque, the Imam Ali Centre in Järfälla, Stockholm, was set ablaze by yet-unidentified arsonists[5] (Batchelor 2017).

Lebanese and Bahraini Shiis in Europe

European Shiis of Lebanese and Bahraini backgrounds are few in number. This is due to the fact that their countries of origin are home to total populations of approximately 6,500,000 and 1,500,000, respectively. Although Shiis make up around half of the total population in Lebanon and almost three-quarters of the population in Bahrain, they account for less than 2% and 0.25% of the world Shii population (Pew Research Center 2009).

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[5] It remains unclear whether the attack on the Imam Ali Centre was perpetrated by IS sympathizers or far-right Swedish terrorists.

Lebanon and Lebanese Shiis play an important role in the cultural and political life of the broader Shii world, out of all proportion to the size of their community in relation to the world Shii population. In contrast to Iraq and the Arabic-speaking countries of the Gulf, Lebanon is home to a vibrant Shii milieu made possible by its consociational political system and sectarian political culture. Coalescing this Shii milieu in Lebanon is Hizbullah, arguably the most established Shii movement and political party in the Middle East. Lebanon is also a hub for Shii institutional and ideational networks and its capital, Beirut, has emerged as a cultural-artistic epicentre for a vibrant and transnational Shii mediascape (Appadurai 1996b, 33–35).

Moreover, diasporic Lebanese communities customarily retain strong socioeconomic ties to their ancestral hometowns (Peleikis 2003), incentivized and nurtured by the dominant Shii political parties, state institutions, clerical networks, philanthropic associations, and translocal community associations. Even though their numbers are often too small to sustain congregations of their own, Shiis of Lebanese background are inclined to regroup with fellow Lebanese in larger cities, rather than attend pan-Shii and trans-ethnic local mosques and community centres. European *ḥusayniyyāt* catering to Lebanese Shiis regularly invite reciters, scholars and politicians from Lebanon and organize social and political activities echoing the politics in their native country.

Bahraini Shiis also establish their own community centres. The Dar Alhekma Trust and Abrar Islamic Foundation in London are both run by Bahraini students, former politicians and political activists, and businesspersons. However, both centres are also visited by other Arab Shiis. Dar Alhekma and Abrar regularly invite speakers from the wider Shii community in London as well as academics, political and human rights activists and representatives of other religious communities, with the aim of raising awareness about the political situation in Bahrain.

It must be noted here that Shii communities and their institutions in Europe retain close ties with their countries of origin, particularly with clerical authorities, political movements and philanthropic institutions. This is due both to the transnational mobilization of scholars and ritual reciters frequenting European-Shii institutions from the Middle East, particularly during important religious events such as Muharram and Ramadan, and the transnational mobilization of resources necessary for European-Shii religious institutions, often financed through the Shii religious tax, *khums*.[6]

With political instabilities in the Middle East growing since the 1970s, Europe has been an important space where oppositional political parties have taken refuge, regrouped and organized dissent. Migrants' transnational links have, in various ways and degrees, impacted political, social and religious dynamics in the Middle East (see, e.g., Al-Ali and Koser 2002). London in particular has become an epicentre for various political movements forming oppositional parties against various governments in the Middle East, including the Bahraini Freedom Movement (BFM).[7] Graham Fuller and Rend Fracke (2001, 133) note that exiled Shii political activists in Europe, such as members and supporters of the BFM, often dedicate much of their political activism to the media struggle:

> The BFM leadership in exile in London has devoted considerable attention to the media struggle and an information campaign against the al-Khalifa regime. For several years, it has been producing a short daily newsletter distributed to a wide variety of addressees both in Bahrain and abroad to keep the realities of the struggle prominent in people's minds. The newsletter, distributed both by fax and through the internet, is soberly written, presenting information about riots,

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[6] Shiis are obliged to pay to their clerical authority, *marjaʿ al-taqlīd*, a religious tax known as *khums* which the *marjaʿ* redistributes for charitable and educational purposes.

[7] The BFM is also referred to as the Bahrain Liberation Movement. The movement is commonly known in Arabic as *Ḥarakat Aḥrār al-Baḥrayn al-Islāmiyya* (the Free Bahrainis' Islamic Movement).

incidents, police brutality, the state of various trials, and the condition of the imprisoned.

Remembering the past and imagining the future through poetry

Like their co-religionists in Asia and the Middle East, European Shiis perform commemorative rituals of mourning, particularly pertinent during the first (Muharram) and second (Safar) months of the Muslim lunar calendar. This period commemorates the rebellion of Husayn, the Prophet's grandson, against the Umayyad caliph, Yazid, the former's tragic martyrdom in the epic battle of Karbala (ca. 680), and the ensuing saga of his captive sister, Zaynab, and her family members in Damascus. Michael Fischer (1980, 19–26) terms this metanarrative 'the Karbala paradigm', a narrative central to the Shii creed across times and geographies. Premised on 'remembering' the past and imagining the future, however, this metanarrative is transformed into a lived, performed and embodied experience only through its deconstruction and thus (re)construction of several sub-narratives. These sub-narratives reflect the subjective memories of hagiographic pasts and imaginations of eschatological futures, which, in turn, correspond to the particularities of different historical contexts, sociopolitical cleavages and religious and ideological orientations (Shanneik 2015). Shii ritual cultures employ dramaturgical and theatrical commemorations of the injustices committed against *Ahl al-Bayt*, the household of the Prophet Muhammad. These injustices are seen not merely as historical events from a distant hagiographic past, but also as an embodiment of injustice understood in its most abstract sense, transcending time and space. In other words, Shii ritual cultures 'remind' faithful Shiis of a certain past and shape their imagination of the future in light of and in relation to the present.

European Shii communities convene ritual mourning sessions (*majālis al-ʿazāʾ*) in congregational halls (*ḥusayniyyāt*), in the homes of community members, or in purposely leased spaces such as assembly halls and warehouses. During these *majālis*, congregants

perform a rhythmic and reticent chest thumping (*laṭam*) against the low-pitched rhythm of the poetic elegies (*nadbāt*) written in the form of lyrical stanzas (*qaṣīda*).[8] The *qaṣīda* is performed by a reciter (*rādūd* [male], *rādūda* [female]) whose command of vocal, musical and poetic talents is crucial in igniting the passions and emotions of the congregation. On the Day of Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram and the peak of the Shii ritual commemoration, congregations typically depart from their *ḥusayniyyāt* and regroup in public processions (*masīrāt*) featuring symbolic representations of the ensign and coffin of Husayn, passion plays, and reticent forms of ceremonial chest thumping. In recent years, Ashura processions in European cities have gained momentum and grown in number and size, especially in London, Berlin, Essen, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Cologne. Shiis also commemorate *al-Layālī al-Fāṭimiyya* (Fatimid Nights) during which they emotively recount what is believed to be an injustice done to Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, by her husband's antagonists in the struggle for the succession to the Prophet (ca. 632). In addition to Muharram and the Fatimid Nights, remembrances of the births and deaths of revered Islamic figures punctuate the Shii liturgical calendar. These are customarily commemorated in smaller *majālis* hosted by local *ḥusayniyyāt*. Shii community centres also host weekly rituals of supplication (*duʿāʾ*) and recitations (*qirāya*), as well as salutations (*ziyāra*)[9] performed throughout the year on specific days and evenings mandated by the early Shii imams.

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[8] Customarily, Shii Muslims express grief over the tragedy of *Ahl al-Bayt* by rhythmically beating their chests. In the communities we observed, ritual expressions of grief were limited to restrained forms of chest thumping and weeping. For example, congregants strike their chests with slightly cupped hands, producing a low-pitched thump without inflicting pain. Some, especially women, were instructed to hit their chests only lightly and symbolically. We therefore describe this as reticent chest thumping, which amplifies the audial expression of lamentation. This foregrounds the performative aspect of the ritual over the infliction of actual bodily injury and pain. Other communities and congregations employ more dramatic forms of chest beating, which may involve the use of chains and other paraphernalia or self-injurious flagellation using knives, swords and blades (see Deeb 2006, 134–140).

[9] *Ziyāra*, Arabic for 'visit' or 'visitation', refers to pilgrimages made by Muslims to sites associated with the Prophet Muhammad, his descendants, his Companions, prophets and other venerated figures. Sites of pilgrimage include mosques, gravesites, battlefields, and mountains and caves associated with Islamic history and hagiography. The term also refers to forms of supplication made by Muslims, in which they send their salutations to venerated Islamic figures (Nakash 1995).

Customarily, a ritual mourning *majlis* commences with a recitation from the Qur'an followed by a sermon delivered by a trained cleric. Following the sermon, the *rādūd(a)* recites a *qaṣīda* narrating and lamenting the tragedy of Husayn and *Ahl al-Bayt*. The *rādūd(a)* may or may not have received training in classical poetic forms, recitation techniques and musical scales. However, it is increasingly common for ritual eulogy reciters to be laymen and women with little formal training, who are influenced more by pop culture than by the traditional poetry and music of ritual lamentation.

Traditionally, in pre- and early Islamic lamentation poetry, an integral part of the *marthiyya* is to call for blood vengeance for the unjustly killed and the fallen in battle. Theoretically at least, this function comes to an end when vengeance for the fallen kinsmen is achieved. Women are particularly instrumental in fulfilling this, as their incitement, according to a gendered understanding of honour and chivalry, ignites the passions of the menfolk and 'shames' them into achieving blood vengeance (Stetkevych 1993). Since Shiis believe that no vengeance was taken, Shiis – and Shii women in particular – are religiously obliged to perpetually mourn the death of Imam Husayn and *Ahl al-Bayt* until the appearance of al-Mahdi, Husayn's descendant and the twelfth and final Imam, who is believed to have gone into a Major Occultation in ca. 941. According to Shii millennialism, al-Mahdi's second coming will usher in an era of justice and promises to avenge Muhammad's household, thereby restoring universal justice. The permanence of the Karbala paradigm is thus central in commemoration ritual practices and is articulated through lamentation poetry highlighting the maltreatment and ultimate killing of Imam Husayn and of *Ahl al-Bayt*. According to tradition, Imam Jaʿafar al-Sadiq, the sixth Shii imam and great-grandson of Husayn, urged the composition of poetry in remembrance of Husayn (Ibn Qawlawayh 1417 AH, 104–106). Husayn himself is also believed

to have urged his followers to commemorate and mourn his martyrdom. The following poem, attributed to Husayn, is an example (Jazāʾirī 1998, 144):[10]

شيعتي مهما شربتم ماء عذب فاذكروني   . . .   او سمعتم بشهيد او غريب فاندبوني

My Shiis (partisans), whenever you drink fresh water, remember me;

or when you hear of a martyr or a stranger, bewail me.

وانا السبط الذي من غير جرم قتلوني   . . .   وبجرد الخيل بعد القتل عمدا سحقوني

I am al-ṣibṭ,[11] the guiltless, whom they killed,

and after the murder, with their horses they ponderously crushed me.

ليتكم في يوم عاشورا جميعا تنظروني   . . .   كيف استسقي لطفلي فأبوا ان يرحموني

May you all, in the Day of Ashura, evoke me,

pleading water for my thirsty child when they had no mercy on me.

Contemporary sub-narratives of the Karbala paradigm are influenced (directly or indirectly, in varying degrees, and to different effects) by intellectual revisionist movements of the mid-twentieth century. One of the outcomes of Shii revisionism and political activism has been the emergence of a political theology premised on the belief that injustice and oppression are not predestined to remain for the duration of al-Mahdi's Major Occultation, but that justice and equality can be restored through human effort – that is to say, through resistance and revolution. In terms of ritual commemoration, this has entailed a gradual and not uncontroversial shift away from *lamenting* the murder of Husayn and his companions and, instead, igniting the passion to *avenge*. Whereas, traditionally, men avenge by sacrificing themselves and shedding their blood in battle, women avenge their fallen martyrs by reciting lamentation poetry (Stetkevych 1993). This echoes the opinion of one Bahraini woman who claimed that 'women

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[10] The poem, attributed to Husayn, was recited at a *majlis* in London. The locations of the *majālis* referred to in this article are not specified in order to provide anonymity to those attending.

[11] Muhammad's two grandsons, Hasan and Husayn, are often referred to as *al-ṣibṭayn* (dual form of *al-ṣibṭ*), literally 'the two branches' or 'tribes' of the Prophetic lineage. In the Qurʾan, the word refers to the 12 tribes of biblical Israel, descendants of Jacob's 12 sons.

are not supposed to participate in battle, but we participate in keeping the memory of Imam Husayn alive through the *majālis* in which we cry blood'.

The expression 'crying blood' can be found in Husayni poetry of the Umayyad period, immediately following Husayn's killing. For example, a poem, entitled *Salāmun ʿalaykum* (Peace Be upon You), is attributed to Husayn's sister, Zaynab, who is believed to have recited these words of lamentation following her brother's murder (Sipihr 1427 AH, vol. 3, 10–11):[12]

<div dir="rtl">

وداعاً فإنَّ الجسمَ من أجلكم مُضنى   . . .   قِفوا ودِّعونا قَبل بُعدكم عنـــــــا
</div>

Stand and bid me farewell before your departure, as my body is withering from grief.

<div dir="rtl">

عَلَيَّ فُجاجُ الارضِ من بعدِكُم سِجنا   . . .   فقد نُقِّضت مني الحياةُ وأصبحت
</div>

My life is wasted, and I have become a prisoner of the earth after you.

<div dir="rtl">

فيا ليتنا من قبلِ ذا اليومِ قد مِتنــــــا   . . .   سلامٌ عليكم ما أمرَّ فِراقِــــــــكُم
</div>

Peace be upon you. How bitter your parting is! If only I had died before that day.

<div dir="rtl">

بَكَـــــيْنَا على أيَـــامِنا بدَمٍ أقـــــــنى   . . .   زمانٌ نَعِمْنا فيهِ حتى إذا انقـضى
</div>

Once our pleasurable days came to an end, we bemoan them, shedding tears of blood.

Informed by revisionist political theologies, contemporary Shii ritual practices transform this lament into an expression of resistance and revolution, emotively realized through a sensory-affective experience of collective excitement cultivated by the poets and ritual eulogy reciters — the 'setters of the scene' (see, e.g., Rahimi 2012). To achieve this, the poet and the *rādūd(a)* intertwine ideation with emotion through sensationalist rituals. At their disposal are myriad tools including language and forms of expression, recitational techniques, and the production of sounds and melodies attuned to the objectives of the ritual. The strongest form of poetry that fuses the *rādūd(a)* with the audience and makes them one is called the *wanna*, meaning 'fatigue'. In performing the *wanna*, the *rādūd(a)* urges the audience in the room to 'help'

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[12] Recited at one of the *majālis* in London.

her/him and thereby 'help' Imam Husayn and his supporters at Karbala to overcome their suffering by participating in the recitation of the *qaṣīda*. This metaphorically unites the congregation with Husayn and allows its members to 'partake' in the tragedy of *Ahl al-Bayt*. Participants experience a 'state of trans-individual fluidity' (Hsu 2005, 87): They collectively repeat a rhyming passage consisting of two or three consecutive lines in the same metre. It is repeated after each stanza and usually linked through a *wanna* expressed through sounds of wailing – e.g. *ḥa-ḥa-ḥa* or *āh-āh-āh* – which carries the sonic and emotive meaning and expression of pain. The length and intensity of these sounds depend on the description and the emotional attachment of the scene narrated in the poem.

The social construction of affect is an expression of subjectivity that resists certain ideologies (Wilce 1998, 122) and contributes to the 'formation of collectivity [that] can be characterized as the expressive self-assertion of marginals' (Seremetakis 1990, 508). The link between ritual practice and public political processes is not a new phenomenon and has been observed in other religious systems by anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (2000, 171–184). What is, however, ubiquitous and distinct about Husayni liturgy and Shii ritual practice is the extent to which Husayni lamentation poetry links the saga of Karbala with mourners' everyday lives and socio-political contexts:[13] A Bahraini participant in a Shii *majlis* in London insisted that

Our revolution, the revolution of Shiis standing against injustice, discrimination and oppression, is talked about in this poetry. Listen to it! Feel it! It all starts here. Whether Bahraini, Iraqi or Lebanese. It does not matter we all fight for justice.

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[13] The saga of Karbala is not always politicized and linked to socio-political contexts (see, e.g., Hudaid 2020a; 2020b). For an extensive volume on Shii materiality, see Funke, Shanneik, and Marei (forthcoming). Participants in the *majālis* we examine in the context of this study, however, repeatedly emphasized their politicized understanding of Karbala.

Remembering Karbala becomes more about commemorating Husayn's revolution and the inevitable 'victory of the blood over the sword', and less about helplessly lamenting the brutal persecution of Husayn and his partisans. The Shii identity espoused in these ritual commemorations of Karbala is thus transformed from one centred around notions of displacement and maltreatment to one centred around resistance to disenfranchisement and oppression. Similarly, an 'activist' eschatology, premised on the belief that faithful Shiis must pave the way for al-Mahdi's second coming and his millennialist restoration of justice, is elevated over notions of passively and patiently awaiting divine intervention. This revisionist reading and the subjective narration of Shii hagiography and eschatology have become particularly pertinent among Shii communities in the Middle East and the diaspora in recent decades (see, e.g., Deeb 2006, 145-154).

How is Husayni poetry in the European diaspora used as a tool to link believers with on-going socio-political discourses in the Middle East and accentuate their emotional affect? And, how are complex processes of translocalization articulated and performed by female and male reciters through sensorialized ritual cultures and experiences?

Mawkeb Shabab al-Amir Ali: Translocalizing the Lebanese-European Shii field

In Malmö, Sweden, Yehia Afara is emerging as a young up-and-coming Lebanese-Swedish reciter with a growing following amongst young Scandinavian and German Shiis of Lebanese descent, as well as in their country of origin, Lebanon. Fouad Gehad Marei was first acquainted with Afara during a research trip to southern Iraq, where he observed the annual Arbaʿin pilgrimage. There, Marei encountered a small group of pilgrims sitting in a circle in a corner of the Alawi sanctuary in Najaf. The young men, identifiably Lebanese, were accompanied by a *rādūd* to the melody of whose elegiac recitation they performed a reticent chest-beating thumping. The congregation and the reciter were unknown to Marei, but the melody of the

recitation caught his attention as a somewhat unusual melody for an Arabic recitation. The fast-paced melody did not resemble the rhythms or traditional melodies of Arabic-language eulogy recitations from Iraq, Lebanon or the Arabic-speaking countries of the Gulf. Rather, it resembled the faster-paced Iranian *shūr*, a ritual form of poetic recitation inspired by the customary mourning practices of Iraqi women. The *shūr* was introduced to Iranian ritual cultures in the 1980s during an exodus of Iraqi Shiis – especially women – to Iran as a consequence of the Iran–Iraq war. This form of lamentation poetry and the recitational style is deliberately intended to arouse an emotion of extreme excitement and ignite a sensory-affective experience of passion and ecstasy.

During the 88-kilometre ritual walk from Najaf to Karbala, Marei encountered the pilgrims again at a roadside hostel managed by and catering exclusively for Lebanese pilgrims. He learned that they were Lebanese Shiis, many of whom were based in Sweden and affiliated with *Mawkeb Shabab al-Amir Ali* (Youth of Amir Ali Association), a local Shii community association in Malmö. For the most part, the *rādūd* of their association, Yehia Afara, recited poetry written by a fellow Malmö-based Lebanese poet, Hussein Ali Shoeib. Accompanying his *shūr* recitations, another Lebanese-Swede, Hassan Shoeib, performed the *tasbīḥ*, a repetitive chant of monosyllabic gasps of heavy breathing, usually repeating the name Husayn. The *tasbīḥ* is characteristic of the Iranian *shūr* as it punctuates the congregants' ritualistic chest thumping and keeps them in-sync with the fast-paced recitation. Hassan Shoeib is also responsible for the production of video material for Afara's and the association's online social media portals.

Afara regularly performs in ritual mourning *majālis* organized by Mawkeb Shabab al-Amir Ali at the Lebanese Ḥusayniya (*al-Ḥusayniyya al-Lubnāniyya*) in Malmö and at a Lebanese community centre in Helsingborg, Sweden. As he has progressively gained popularity beyond the Lebanese diaspora in Sweden, however, Afara has been invited to

perform ritual recitations in Shii community centres in Germany and London, especially during Muharram and the Fatimid Nights. Since 2017, he has performed at some of the larger and more established Shii community centres in Mannheim, Dortmund, Essen and Cologne, attended by a pan-Shii congregation, as well as at the Lebanese Youth Association in London. He has also appeared more frequently in ritual and political gathering organized by Hizbullah in Lebanon to commemorate the births and deaths of revered Shii figures as well as to honour Hizbullah fighters killed in Syria. Furthermore, he takes part in the annual Arbaʿin pilgrimage to Iraq. In the context of the annual pilgrimage in 2018, organized pilgrimage tour operators featured Yehia Afara alongside Lebanese reciters closely associated with Hizbullah's Islamic milieu in ritual *majālis* catering to Lebanese pilgrims in Iraq.

In what follows, we present an analysis based on Marei's attendance and observation of recitations by Yehia Afara at *majālis* in Iraq, Sweden and Lebanon in 2016, 2017 and 2018. It is also based on a close observation of audio and video material published by Mawkeb Shabab al-Amir Ali and sister associations in these countries, as well as by Afara's own social media portals. The analysis presented also draws on longstanding experience and study of Shii ritual cultures and the sociopolitical transformations affecting Shiis in Lebanon and the region. Marei's inquiry into Afara's recitations is informed by informal discussions with *majlis* attendees as well as by interviews with experts and practitioners familiar with the poetry and music of Shii ritual practice.

More specifically, a detailed account and description of the staging, poetry and sounds of ritual recitations by Yehia Afara are provided, thus examining the remit and function of the particular messages they convey, as well as a consideration of the recitational techniques employed and the interplay between poetry and sound in the making of a popular culture attuned to the objectives of the ritual and the worldviews of the actors who practise it. The

inquiry places specific emphasis on the cultivation of a Lebanese-European Shii field embedded in the broader politics of the global Shii community.

Defenders of Zaynab in Helsingborg, Sweden

As a guest of Mawkeb Ali al-Akbar in Helsingborg, Sweden, in October 2016, Afara recited a *qaṣīda* entitled *Shahīd Karbalāʾ* (Martyr of Karbala) during Muharram commemorations. The elegiac ode lamented not Husayn's tragic martyrdom or the injustices committed against him, but the faithful's inability to sacrifice her/himself in Husayn's place or avenge the captivity of his sister, Zaynab, by Yazid's army. Strictly speaking, the *qaṣīda* made little contribution in way of *rithāʾ* (elegiac lamentation). Instead, it made a sombre and solemn pledge to support the cause of Husayn in contemporary and future iterations of Karbala and thus prevent another tragedy akin to that of Husayn and his companions. In other words, the eulogy is a literary work that explicitly promotes active opposition and resistance to contemporary incarnations of Yazid. In this particular *qaṣīda*, the attributes of Yazid and those of anti-Shii *takfīrī* protagonists in the Syrian war are deliberately obfuscated. In line with the theme of the *qaṣīda*, Afara opted for the *shūr* as a recitation form better suited to ignite passion and excite members of the predominantly Lebanese congregation.

The melody of the *shūr* Afara performed in Helsingborg – and in Najaf a year earlier – was an appropriation from a recitation by the then-unknown Esfahani *madāḥī* (reciter[14]), Sayyid Reza Narimani. More specifically, the melody belonged to Narimani's now-acclaimed *shūr*-made-music video, *Manam bāyad beram* (I [too] Must Go [to Syria]) or *Vaseyat-nāmeh* (Last Will). The eulogy recitation took place in Esfahan, Iran, in 2015 at the annual ceremony organized by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and attended by the Supreme Leader to commemorate the martyrs of the Iran–Iraq war (known in Iran as *Difaʿa-ye moghaddas*, or the

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[14] In the Farsi-speaking world, a ritual eulogy reciter (*rādūd* or *mulla* in Arabic) is referred to as *madāḥī*.

Holy Defence). The poem Narimani recited was written by fellow Esfahani poet, Davoud Rahimi, inspired by the last will of 21-year-old Lebanese Hizbullah fighter, Ahmed Meshleb, better known by his *nom de guerre*, Gharīb Tūs. Meshleb had lost his life earlier that year in the war against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, a war also dubbed the Holy Defence.

Narimani's recitation in Esfahan thus created a sense of oneness and continuity between the two Holy Defences: the Iran–Iraq war and the ongoing war in Syria. Essentially, Narimani's ritual recitation of Meshleb's poetically reinvented last will brings the warriors of the Holy Defence in Syria, honorifically referred to as 'Defenders of the Shrine' (a reference to Zaynab's shrine in Damascus) closer to the collective memory of Iranian families who lost loved ones in the Iran–Iraq war. To achieve this, the *shūr* is quite explicit and, with very little abstraction, promotes the values of the Holy Defence of the 1980s and incentivizes Iranian youth to enrol in or support its most contemporary iteration in post-2011 Syria.

Afara's commitment to the same political theology and to shifting the Karbala paradigm from lamentation to activism, revolution and resistance is also evident in his recitation of another lyrical ode by Hussein Ali Shoeib, entitled *Fa-innī ḥāris-u Zaynab* (I Am a Defender of Zaynab). Dedicated to the martyrs of Hizbullah and the Holy Defence in Syria, the *qaṣīda* drew a correlation between the Karbala paradigm and contemporary events in the Middle East. The poem is a short literary text composed of three stanzas. Each stanza is made up of four lines (*bayt*) and, as per custom, each *bayt* is divided into two halves (*shaṭr*). The text of the poem was inspired by the last will of yet another fallen Hizbullah fighter and is written in the form of a monologue addressing his comrades-in-arms, whom he calls 'brothers'. Afara recited the poem in the more traditional *laṭmiyya* form, where each stanza is performed in short intervals against the low-pitched, rhythmic chest thumping. Customarily, the reciter repeats selected lines of the stanza twice or thrice for emphasis. Unlike the *shūr*, the *laṭmiyya* is a recitation form that places greater emphasis on the subject of the *qaṣīda* than on the emotive

experience of collective excitement. In other words, it deliberately shifts performative emphasis from the 'feeling' to the 'message' of the lyrical ode. Further emphasizing this sobriety, congregants perform the ritual *laṭam* while seated.

In transition between the stanzas, the congregation recites a simple one-line chorus projected, for convenience, on a mounted screen:

<div dir="rtl">

ألا بشهادتي مرحب   . . .   فإني حارس زينب

</div>

I welcome my martyrdom, for I am a defender of Zaynab.

The *qaṣīda* offers a detailed and vivid account of the poetically imagined transcendental experience of martyrdom, narrated in the first-person by the metaphorically immortalized martyr:

<div dir="rtl">

أخي سأخبرك بما حصل   . . .   عند صعود أنفاسي

</div>

Brother, let me tell you what happened as my soul arose:

<div dir="rtl">

رأيت طيف حيدرٍ   . . .   بكفه يمسح راسي

</div>

I saw the ghost of Haydar.[15] He patted my head with his hands.

<div dir="rtl">

وقد قال : ألا أهلا   . . .   فأنت حسيني عباسي

</div>

He said: 'Welcome! [Today], you are my Husayn and my ʿAbbas.'

<div dir="rtl">

وزينب خلفه قالت   . . .   ألا أهلا بحراسي

</div>

And behind him, Zaynab stood: 'Welcome, my defender.'

The poem then brought the congregation back from the imagined moment of transcendence to the here-and-now with an imperative appeal to remain faithful warriors of the Holy Defence:

<div dir="rtl">

وأوصيك مع الأخوة   . . .   كونوا لزينبٍ حراس

</div>

I appeal to you and the brethren: be defenders of Zaynab!

<div dir="rtl">

فقد عاد بنو هندٍ   . . .   وآل زياد والأنجاس

</div>

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[15] An epithet of Imam Ali.

For the descendants of Hind[16] and āl Ziyad[17] and the infidels have returned.

أخي أوصيك بالنصر   . . .   تفرح خاطر الزهرا

Brother, I appeal to you: be victorious; make [Fatima] al-Zahra happy.

فإن حررت أرض الشام   . . .   بضلعها تجبر الكسرا

For, if you liberate the land of al-Sham [Syria or Damascus], you will have avenged her broken ribs.

Defenders of Zaynab in Sharqiyeh, Lebanon

In August 2017, a few months after Afara's recitation in Helsingborg, Hizbullah announced the negotiated release of prisoners taken captive by insurgents in Syria. Mhammad Mahdi Shoeib, a relative of the Shoeibs of Malmö was amongst those released. Celebrating the event, Afara travelled to Lebanon to feature in a *majlis* at *Ḥusayniyyat Umm al-Banīn* in the Shoeibs' ancestral hometown of Sharqiyeh in south Lebanon. Convened as a community and partisan meeting to celebrate the release as a military and political victory, the *majlis* commenced with a recitation from the Qur'an followed by speeches by the released prisoner and Hizbullah representatives. However, the *majlis* then proceeded much like a traditional ritual mourning ceremony: the lights were dimmed, chairs were removed, and a podium was set up for the *rādūd*, and to his side the recently-released 'defender of Zaynab', Mhammad Mahdi Shoeib.

Afara recited *Allāhuma taqabbal minna hādtha al-qurbān* (O Allah, Accept Our Offering!), a *qaṣīda* written by Hussein Ali Shoeib specially for this *majlis*. The poem is oxymoronic in that it is written and recited in the form of an elegiac ode whereas the text of the *qaṣīda* speaks of a people (*sha'b*) that make God and the Prophet Muhammad proud by

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[16] A reference to Hind bint ʿUtba, a staunch opponent of the Prophet Muhammad and the killer of his paternal uncle and key aide, Hamza ibn ʿAbd al-Muttalib. Hind is also the mother of Muʿawiya, the first Ummayyad caliph, whom Shiis accuse of usurping power from Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali.
[17] A reference to ʿUbayd-Allah ibn Ziyad, governor of Kufa and commander of Yazid's army at Karbala.

offering their most precious prize, their lives, in the way of God and *Ahl al-Bayt*. On the one hand, the lyrical form, recitation style and ritual chest thumping are those of lamentation. The poem praises Hizbullah and Holy Defence fighters, takes pride in the resilience and persistence of the Shii community in Lebanon, and promises not to let Zaynab be taken captive again, a metaphorical reference to anti-Shii militias in the vicinity of Zaynab's shrine in Damascus. Quoting words attributed to Zaynab in lamentation of her brother's murder in Karbala, the chorus, which members of the congregation recite with the *rādūd*, is a two-line stanza summarizing the message of the *qaṣīda* and the purpose of the *majlis*:

اللهم تقبل منا هذا القربان   . . .   إنّا قومٌ قدمنا أغلى الأثمـان

We are a people who offer our most precious prize.

O Allah, accept our offering! [18]

Concluding the *majlis*, Afara performed another *qaṣīda* in the recitation form of a *shūr* set to the now-popular melody of Narimani's acclaimed recitation, *Vaseyat-nāmeh*. Intended to ignite the passions of the attendees, the *qaṣīda*, entitled *Ka-Zaynab anā* (Like Zaynab, I am), compares the third act of the Karbala saga, the capture of Zaynab and Ali Zayn al-ʿAbidin, with the capture of Hizbullah fighter, Mhammad Mahdi Shoeib, by insurgents in the Syrian war:

صرت نحيلا وأسير   . . .   كزينب أنا

Like Zaynab, I am weak and captive.

مقيد عند المسير   . . .   كما زين العباد

Like [Ali] zayn al-ʿibād, I am enchained.

Power and resistance in Bahraini recitations

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[18] It is reported that Zaynab stood by her slain brother's body in Karbala and pleaded in lamentation: 'O Allah, accept our humble offering.'

According to hagiographic narratives of the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Karbala, Yazid's troops decapitated Husayn and his companions and took their heads to the Umayyad caliph in Damascus. The description of this scene is the focus of numerous Husayni poems, vividly depicting a scene of blood-stained bodies left unburied on the plains of Karbala in clear violation of Islamic tradition.[19] Several Bahraini women described to me how the Bahraini secret services kidnapped demonstrators during the 2011 uprising, interrogated and tortured them, and killed many. In their accounts of how corpses were 'given back', they recount a scene similar to that of a decapitated Husayn in Karbala. As one woman explained:

> [Secret service agents] came to the edge of our village as they would not dare to enter. They came in the middle of the night, just before dawn prayers. They drove their large vans, opened the doors, and dumped the corpses. In the morning, while our men made their way to the mosque, they would find the blood-stained corpses lying on the ground smudged with dust and sand. (interview with the authors)

Women in one of the *majālis* Yafa Shanneik attended in Bahrain, made a link between the saga of Karbala and their experiences of political and sectarian violence in Bahrain through the recitation of the following poem by Ḥajja Khadīja Karam Norūz (1951, vol. 15, 165–166):

فلما سمعن النساء جئن إليه وأحطن به هذه تسأله عن أخيها وأخرى تسأل عن ولدها تقدمت اليه ليلى وهي تبكي وتقول:

عـــلّم للـــــدين خله الحـكم بيدك	...	يا ضنوة حسين اللي يريدك
علي الأكبر أو حصل له كبر زين	...	ما مريت كلي يم عضـــيدك
اوصلت لهلك رضيعي اشلون عفته	...	اجت ليه الرباب اتصيح منته
دمها ايسيل بعده اعلى الوريدين	...	ناداها اندفن لاجن ركبته
يعمه ما رحت للعلكمي اهناك	...	اجتي صارخه ام جلثوم مناك
اجفوفه او ياه لو من غير اليدين	...	امه وادفنت عمك على اهواك
يم العلكمي جثه بلا راس	...	ناداها يعمه ادفنت عباس

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[19] In Islamic tradition, a dead body is honoured by being properly buried as soon as possible after death.

When they heard the news, the women came to him wondering where their brothers and sons

were. In that moment Layla came towards him crying:

Oh, son of Husayn! He wanted you to rule and to be a symbol of religion.

Haven't you passed across your follower Ali [the elder] and did he get a good tomb?

He cried out: he was buried but blood was still flowing out of his knee over his veins.

Umm Kalthum came out crying: 'My nephew! Have you been to al-ʿAlqami over there?'

Did you bury your uncle as you wished? With the palm of his hands or without them?

He cried out: oh, aunt! I buried the beheaded corpse of al-ʿAbbas close to al-ʿAlqami.

I carried his corpse down to his grave myself and I gently placed his cut-off hands on his arms.

Khadīja Karam Norūz is a famous Kuwaiti female poet and eulogy reciter, whose Husayni lamentation poetry is recited in Shii ritual congregations throughout the Gulf. The poem quoted above is translocated by the *mullāya* and the women in the *majlis* from Kuwait to Bahrain and re-contextualized in a new political locality to reflect the suppression, discrimination and violence as experienced by women and their families during the uprising in Bahrain. During the recitation of the stanza, the *mullāya* asked the women attending the *majlis*: 'What did you do with your [unburied corpses]?' In unison, the women replied: 'We buried them.'

The poem redefines and performs power as perceived by the women congregants themselves: it allows them, on the one hand, to recount and describe the violence inflicted on Husayn and his supporters by the Umayyad troops, and, on the other, to narrate the dynamics

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of violence between the Bahraini government and anti-government demonstrators in the 2011 uprising. The performativity of the poem allows the *rādūda*, by asking her listeners 'What did you do with them?', to redirect power from the state to the people, who respond, collectively, 'We buried them.' The mobilization of the individual in a collective resistance is demonstrated through self-representation within existing power structures, then through the generation of new political orders in which women acquire agency by claiming collective responsibility for the burial of their slain menfolk. In other words, those attending these *majālis* are able to acquire and intensify a self-awareness of their subaltern and oppressed position through Husayni lamentation poetry, in which the Battle of Karbala is recalled, Husayn's plight is narrated and the historical continuation of the seemingly timeless battle against injustice is emphasized.

Estranged in London: Performing lamentation and the translocalization of dissent in Bahrain

As the examples presented above show, the inter-discursive (Wilce 2005) characteristics of Husayni lamentation poetry allow Shii ritual mourners and the reciter – the *rādūd*(*a*) or the *mulla*(*ya*) – to de-contextualize the Karbala paradigm and re-contextualize it in relation to different times, geographies and political contexts. This is pertinent in the case of Khadīja Karam Norūz's elegiac poem and its recitation in the Bahraini *majlis*. Conversely, as the recitations by Yehia Afara in Sweden and Lebanon demonstrate, Husayni lamentation poetry also allows poets and reciters to translocate, embed and narrate regional and local political conflicts in the Middle East in the form of ritual cultures and the spaces (in Europe and the Middle East) in which they are performed. In other words, written and recited with the intention of cultivating an affective experience that transcends time and space, Shii lamentation poetry is used as a literary tool to create a *mise en abyme*: members of Afara's congregations gathered

not only to commemorate the tragedy of *Ahl al-Bayt*, summon their imaginal presence and cultivate an intimate relationship with them (Marei 2020), but also to cultivate a literary and affective connection with multiple locations: with their ancestral hometowns in Lebanon, with Syria, where a Holy Defence against IS assumes an eschatological relevance, with Europe, their new diasporic home, and with the historic places and pilgrimage sites where the lives and deaths of *Ahl al-Bayt* took place.

Junūnī (My Madness), a lamentation poem authored by the Bahraini poet, Hussein Faisal, is another example of how Husayni liturgy serves to translocalize political discourses and give ritual commemorations of Karbala new relevance and meaning. Written in the first person, the poem speaks of an 'insane' love and affection for Imam Husayn, a love described as the most sacred feeling that ever existed. In a subversive twist, the *qaṣīda* refers to love for Husayn as insanity, a twist addressed in puritan movements and theologies, which condemn Shiis for practising 'excessive' adoration of Husayn and *Ahl al-Bayt*. Instead of rejecting these accusations, the elegiac poem subversively accepts the 'charge'.

Faisal's *qaṣīda* gained popularity amongst several Shii reciters, who performed it in ritual *majālis* throughout Europe and the Middle East, especially those attended by diasporic Shiis hailing from Bahrain and other Gulf countries. Each time *Junūnī* is recited, however, its meanings and emotive functions differ, depending on the identity, grievances and political agendas of the reciter and members of the congregation. Showcasing this, we shall present an analysis of a recitation of Faisal's *Junūnī* in a women-only *majlis* attended and observed by Shanneik in London, and attended primarily by first-generation immigrant women from Bahrain and neighbouring Gulf countries.

It must be noted here that a main concern for many Gulf Shiis residing in London has been the plight of Bahraini Shiis, especially after the Bahraini government decided to revoke the citizenship of hundreds of diasporic Bahrainis (Human Rights Watch 2018). In particular,

the decision targeted members of the Shii opposition movement, al-Wefaq, as well as Bahraini human rights activists, many of whom were in *de facto* exile and were thus left stranded and estranged, unable to return to their homeland, families and businesses. Several of those affected reside in London and regularly participate in ritual mourning gatherings during Muharram. In one of the *majālis* Shanneik attended in London, the wives and female family members of several Bahrainis whose citizenship had been revoked were present.

Implicitly, the translocalization of the plight of these Bahrainis whose citizenship was revoked was recounted in the *majlis* through a recitation of Hussein Faisal's poem, *Junūnī*. In the *qaṣīda*, the poet describes the estrangement of Husayn at Karbala:

وارتبط قلبي بهواه ومن دمائه يرتوي

My heart is connected with [Husayn], and lives from his spilt blood

اعشقه فطرة واصل ورابطي بحبه قوي

His love is in my instinct, and the connection is ever strong.

لو يطاردني الزمن الحسين اهوا الوطن

If I was haunted by time, Husayn is my homeland.

القى بمحياه روحي روحي اذا جار الدهر

I find him residing in my soul, if time turns against me.

وراحتي لو زاد نوحي نوحي على قطع النحر

I find comfort when mourning his slit throat.

و يا دمع يكفي جراحا تكفي همومه

And what tears are enough for his wounds and worries.

وهذا نهجه ابن السما ضل يمطر دمومه

When his pouring blood represents the Lord Almighty.

The third and fourth lines of the stanza were crucial in this particular *majlis*, so they were repeated around five times; each time, members of the congregation responded with an outcry directed, as was explained to me, against the Bahraini authorities: '*Tell them, tell them!*', '*Let them hear!*', '*Let them know!*', '*Don't be afraid!*', '*Speak out!*'

Essentially, the recitation incited resistance against the Bahraini state, which is accused of inflicting injustice and violence upon the country's Shii community. It also cultivated a sense of pan-Shii solidarity – at least between Gulf Shiis who were present during this *majlis* – in which Bahrainis and non-Bahrainis are united in their struggle against injustice. This bond-building and the cultivation of a sense of togetherness between individuals who believe that they have experienced structural and political violence is a particular form and mechanism of meaning-making, central to the construction of a collective Shii identity. The sectarian conflict in Bahrain is translocated to and transformed in London through the lyrics of the poem and through the flexibility and versatility with which they ignite passions and conjure political realities and discourses.

The presence of Bahraini women who are directly affected by their government's exercise of power through the revocation of their or their husbands' citizenships gave the poem particular relevance. The *mullāya* used the richness of the Arabic language, expressed through the different meanings associated with various terms, to articulate the message she conveyed in the *majlis*. Quite explicitly, the line '*law yuṭāridnī al-zamān, Ḥusayn huwa al-waṭan*' refers to the state of being estranged, exiled and displaced – i.e. deprived of the *waṭan*, the homeland. According to the *mullāya*'s contextualization of the poem, the line is presented to mean: 'If I become estranged, Husayn is my homeland', referring concretely here to the evocation of Bahraini citizenship as expressed in this particular *majlis*.[20] If Shiis become 'haunted by time',

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[20] Shanneik attended another *majlis* by the same *mullāya* for a non-Bahraini audience who spoke of being 'haunted by time' when referring to this line of the same poem. *Majālis* she attended in Bahrain and Kuwait also referred

as the same line suggested, they seek and find refuge in Husayn. The loss of their homeland is thus replaced by the 'insane' love of Husayn – a love that becomes a symbolic home, source of security and support. Essentially, these lines redefine the meaning of being Shii: unlike their revoked Bahraini citizenships, 'being a Shii of Husayn' is eternal, 'irrevocable'.

Like Yehia Afara's Swedish-Lebanese *majālis*, this Bahraini *majlis* served as a medium for the 'performance' of the Karbala paradigm through Husayni liturgy. It sought to cultivate a translocality and a sense of global interconnectedness and solidarity between Shiis of various origins. Although the recitation of Faisal's poem in this *majlis* speaks to the Bahraini listener and addresses her political context, the elegiac poem may also ignite passions related to other grievances and contexts. Indeed, the power of Husayni liturgy lies in that it allows for the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of grievances and political discourses – thus, addressing the multiple spatiotemporal dynamics relevant to a variegated audience. Indeed, *Junūnī* may refer to Bahrainis' revoked citizenships, to Iraqis who have lost their homeland to dictators, invaders and sectarian militias, or to second- and third-generation diasporic Shiis feeling 'estranged' between their European and ancestral homelands. The text is flexible and therefore encompasses individual listeners in the *majlis*, allowing each one to relate to the text and emotionally connect with it on her/his own terms. The reciter, in this case, the *mullāya*, creates interludes to facilitate this process, linking the poem to her listeners even more. She employs her voice, charged with emotions and passions, as well as the emphasized use of local dialects, to deliberately connect the text to the personal experiences of her listeners.[21] By doing so, she addresses her congregation on two levels: on the collective level, she translocates and

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to the line as meaning 'being haunted by time' rather than 'being estranged'. It is within this particular context and this specific audience that the lines were used to mean estranged.

[21] Lara Deeb's (2006, 147) ethnographic account of ritual recitations in Lebanon offers a similar account of the use of voice and dialect to ignite the passions of Lebanese Shiis: 'traditional reciters were generally praised for their ability to move people with the tone of their voices, sacrificing clarity for emotionality. For this reason, they sometimes used Iraqi poetry during their lamentations. Listeners may not have understood every word, but the style, tone, and symbolism alone were moving, as Iraqi was often characterized as the dialect of compassion and longing and the Iraqi tradition of Karbala poetry as richer than the Lebanese.'

transforms current sectarian tensions in the Middle East to London, and on the individual level, she contextualizes these wider socio-political discourses in the listeners' ancestral homelands in the Gulf within the personal life experiences of *majlis* attendees in London. Through this process of translocalization of the socio-political context, new meanings are generated and made applicable and relevant to Bahraini Shiis in the diaspora.

Lamentation redefined: The poetry and sonics of power and resistance

The various recitations discussed above convey a political message whose moral is unambiguous. First, 'every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala', a tenet central to the Shii creed. Accordingly, the Karbala paradigm is 'remembered' not only as a subjective reading of the past in relation to the present, but also as the only 'true' way to understand and *be* in the present. Second, activism and resistance inspired by this reading of the Karbala paradigm provide the otherwise disempowered with an opportunity for change and transformation, achieved through human effort. As has been demonstrated, the supporters of two very similar yet different political movements, the Lebanese Hizbullah and the Bahraini al-Wefaq, use the performativity (Wilce 2005) of Husayni lamentation poetry as a space and medium for the articulation of discourses, enabling the translocalization of socio-political realities from the Middle East to Europe and vice versa. Language, imagery and metaphor, as well as sound and rhythm, are tools that help the *rādūd(a)* to ignite the passions and incite emotions interwoven and interlinked with various political and religious discourses relevant to the contemporary Middle East. Husayni lamentation poetry 'remembers' the murder of Imam Husayn and the injustice committed against *Ahl al-Bayt* through the very emotions resulting from structural state and group violence inflicted upon Shiis in the Middle East today (Shehabi and Jones 2015). This projection articulates a form of transnational collective grief expressed through a certain affect produced by the text and its recitation by the *rādūd(a)*, as well as by congregants'

embodiment of the Karbala paradigm through forms of self-inflicted acute pain customary in Shii ritual commemoration. Through this, a global Shii community is 'imagined' and its socio-political concerns and grievances are interrelated with broader questions of state power, hegemony and resistance.

In pursuit of this, elegiac poetry inspired by revisionist readings of Shii hagiographies is complemented with more activist recitation techniques, shifting the emphasis of Shii ritual cultures from lamentation to resistance. The recitations presented in this article are examples of this specific transformation initiated by the communities and the organizers of the *majālis* themselves. In addition to the unambiguous political messages they convey, they also demonstrate features associated with what we consider to be an emerging pop-culture scene, especially popular among Shii youth from Lebanon and the Gulf. On the one hand, these recitations obfuscate, perhaps not unintentionally, the purpose of Shii *majālis* as ritualized expressions of grief and mourning. The *majlis* in Helsingborg, for example, was convened to commemorate the death of Imam Husayn. The recitation in the aforementioned *majlis* features a poem better classified as *qaṣīdat ḥamāsa* (enthusiasm poetry) (Ibn Jinnī 1983; Esposito 2004, 106; Orfali 2012, 42–43), rather than a *marthiyya* (lamentation poetry). Yet, the *qaṣīda* is written in the lyrical form of a lamentation stanza, which, instead of lamenting the plight of Husayn at Karbala, ignites enthusiasm and immerses participants in the paradigms of resistance and revolution. By contrast, the *majlis* convened in Sharqiyeh to celebrate a socio-political community event – the release of a Hizbullah prisoner held captive by IS militias in Syria – is infused with recitations of poems also written in the lyrical form of an elegiac *qaṣīda*. In Sharqiyeh, the *rādūd* even employs the *laṭmiyya* and *shūr* recitational styles traditionally associated with ritual mourning. The ritual *laṭam*, which initially evolved as a performative act of passionate lamentation, now assumes a different function: It provides a sensationalist low-pitched sonic intended to ignite passion and enthusiasm (*ḥamās*). In other words, the traditional

poetry and sonics of lamentation are transformed into mobilizational tools, eliciting active resistance to contemporary forms of injustice likened to the injustices committed against *Ahl al-Bayt*.

What is also significant about *laṭmiyyāt* belonging to this nascent Shii pop-culture scene is that they make considerable compromises and, at times, do away with classical linguistic and poetic processes and established recitation traditions. Instead, they feature brutally simplified lyrical forms, with lyrics made submissive to a catchy rhythm, rather than a melody composed to fit a poem written in traditional structure and through classical poetic processes.

For example, the poems presented in Yehia Afara's four recitations suffer from a weak rhyme (*qāfiya*) and incorrect metres (*waẓn*).[22] To make up for this and ensure rhyme, Afara resorts to artificially prolonging vowels or adding nunation[23] where it should not occur grammatically. In their musical qualities, *laṭmiyyāt* belonging to this popular scene exhibit little recognition of classical musical scales and recitation traditions. Instead, their purveyors, sometimes intentionally, follow eclectic progressions inspired by trends in pop music and are influenced by pop-culture tastes from various pop music cultures and scenes.

Ritual pop-cultures and the cultivation of a translocal Shii field

Compromised in terms of classical poetic and musical qualities as they may be, these recitations exhibit features that are important for the cultivation of an affective tie within the diasporic Shii fields as well as with the homeland and the broader Shii world. Essentially, they constitute a 'particular cultural strategy of differentiation' (Bell 1992) and 'a medium for the cultivation of community-oriented virtues' and 'the creation of affective ties' (Erickson 2001). What is

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[22] In Arabic poetry, the rhyme (*qāfiya*) is determined by the last consonant of the last word in each *bayt* (line) in a stanza. The metre (*waẓn*) is based on the length of syllables.

[23] Nunation, or *tanwīn*, is the addition of diacritics to a noun or adjective, indicating that the word ends in an alveolar nasal without the addition of the letter *nūn*.

particularly significant about the ritual *majālis* presented in this article is the 'translocality' of the field they cultivate.

Travelling regularly, in the literal and literary/metaphorical sense, between their diasporic and ancestral hometowns, poets and reciters contribute to the bidirectional flow of ideas between their home countries and their diasporas. Effectively, they constitute what Robert Langer and Benjamin Weineck (2017, 221) call 'a complex constellation of multi-local and heterogeneous actors', whose mutual connectivities cultivate a thoroughly multi- and translocal Shii field. In the process of cultivating this translocality, Imam Husayn, al-Mahdi and their past-and-future companions become as familiar to the congregants as their friends, neighbours and relatives conscripted into or killed in the resistance against various oppressive regimes, Israel, or in the Holy Defence in Syria.

The translocalization of the diasporic Shii field posits Shii ritual practice as a 'process of converting particular values and ends, distributed over a range of actors, into a system of shared or consensual meaning' (Turner 1982, 75; 1988, 97). More specifically, it renders ritual practice a medium for the cultivation of affective ties, which in turn allow for the construction of translocal diasporic Shii communities and the imagination of a global Shii community held together by a sense of oneness and unity (Lambert et al. 2009). By appropriating recitation techniques belonging to the multiple national and regional cultures of the imagined Shii world and 'emplotting' members of the congregation in translocal metanarratives, the *majālis* we attended fostered an imaginal and affective experience. The effect of this is to cultivate a sense of affinity between Shii community members bound together by an imagined religious bond, thus impelling group members into association with and participation in the life of the globally imagined Shii community. In times of hyper-sectarianization and conflict, an inevitable consequence of such affective ties is that difference vis-à-vis the community's Other(s) – the Sunni or, perhaps, the European Other – is made more palatable.

Conclusion: A new European-Shia cartography

The case studies presented in this article showcase the embeddedness of multi-local religious and political actors in the social and political lives of both their diasporic and their ancestral hometowns. This multi-locality brings the everyday politics of the homeland to the socio-religious life of the diaspora while also making the diaspora a present feature of ritual cultures in the ancestral homeland. Congregants in London and Malmö conflate their lamentation of the tragedies that befell *Ahl al-Bayt* with the social dramas of their ancestral and diasporic/exilic hometowns. In particular, Husayni poems 'emplot' members of the *majālis* we attended in a literary story, a metanarrative, that is trans-temporal and translocal. The recitation of Husayni poetry by a diasporic *rādūd* in Sharqiyeh in south Lebanon, on the other hand, gives the community a sense of connectedness with the diaspora and 'the West'. This serves two purposes: First, it cultivates a sense of translocal belonging and affective solidarity stretching from Europe and their ancestral countries of origin to the imagined, broader Shii world, and back to the historical battlefields and sites where the timeless saga of Karbala took place. Second, it gives Shii communities in ancestral hometowns and villages in the Middle East a stamp of recognition and solidarity from 'the West'. This mitigates what Arjun Appadurai (2006, 8, 52) calls the frictions or anxieties of incompleteness, a condition inflicted upon Shiis in the Middle East by processes of ethnonationalism, state consolidation and the forces of globalization.

By examining ritual recitations amongst diasporic Shii supporters of the Bahraini al-Wefaq and the Lebanese Hizbullah, we offer new insights into the different ways in which national and transnational articulations of Shii identities, embedded within the hyper-sectarianized politics of the Middle East, come to the fore. The de-territorialization of a global Shii identity and its translocal aspects are articulated on two levels: first, through the use of

poetic styles traditional to different Shii communities and contextualizing them in new socio-political localities, and, second, by evoking a translocal sense of Shii solidarity mobilized against grievances perceived as common to and yet transcending their respective national politics. Appadurai (1996a, 50) argues that territory is still vital to the national imaginary of diasporic populations and stateless people of many sorts. De-territorialization generates various forms of re-territorialization in which new localized contexts are created. These new localizations, amongst supporters of the two political movements we have examined, are not limited to the territorialities of the nation-state, but also extend to translocalized and transnationalized Shii identification, thereby cultivating a sense of a Shii globality embedded in national contexts and negotiated and redefined through transnational and diasporic connections.

As we have shown, exiled members of the Bahraini al-Wefaq and supporters of the Lebanese Hizbullah in the diaspora demonstrate their involvement and embeddedness in national and regional politics in their respective socio-religious diasporic spaces. In the case of Hizbullah *majālis*, mythico-historical tropes are used to mobilize support for the Holy Defence in Syria as well as to instil solidary among the Lebanese Shii diaspora in Europe. In Bahraini *majālis* in London, Shii tropes are used to sow dissent and resilience against existing power structures in the Gulf monarchy. In both cases, a sense of post-national or supra-national Shii communal identity and solidarity is affectively evoked. Both groups construct an alternative imagined identitarian cartography, which, although deeply embedded in the (sectarian) politics of their countries of origin, is based not only on a territory but also on mythico-historical memories of the (hagiographic) past and imaginings of the (eschatological) future. While the classic understanding of a nation is built on linguistic, racial or territorial affiliations (Appadurai 1996a, 54), the new post-national cartography cultivated amongst European Shiis

affiliated with Hizbullah and al-Wefaq is defined by imaginings of a translocalized Shii subjectivity.

Whereas Appadurai (1996b, 166) argues that many post- or non-national movements have expressed their collective identity in the form of 'translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilizations, and post-national identities', they do so within a 'linguistic imaginary of the territorial state'. He argues that these movements have become anti-national or, at least, anti-state, because they operate within existing frameworks of nation-states, thus forcing movements into a 'language of counter-nationalism'. However, the diasporic Shii communities we have examined adhere to a translocal, non-territorial and post-national form of identity. This identity is generated around the narrative of Karbala and expressed through poetry and forms of performativity within ritual practices. Through this production of translocality, the diasporic Shii communities we have examined challenge the nation-state order, which is based on the isomorphism of people and territory. Shii migrations and displacements in Europe, whether voluntary or forced, de-territorialize and up- or de-root diasporic Shiis from their 'homelands' in the Middle East. Now living in Europe, they use language, and poetry in particular, to re-root and re-territorialize themselves in a new, translocal Shii space. Shiis' cartographies of identity change in the diaspora through the collective imagination summarized in the lines of Hussein Ali Shoeib's and Hussein Faisal's poems: *We are a people who offer our most precious prize* by suffering, but also resisting, displacement and estrangement. Whatever happens however, *Husayn is [our] homeland*.

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