



**HAL**  
open science

# ‘Ashura Rituals in Najaf: The Renewal of Expressive Modes in a Changing Urban and Social Landscape

Géraldine Chatelard

► **To cite this version:**

Géraldine Chatelard. ‘Ashura Rituals in Najaf: The Renewal of Expressive Modes in a Changing Urban and Social Landscape. Sabrina Mervin; Robert Gleave; Géraldine Chatelard. Najaf: Portrait of a Holy City, Ithaca Press; UNESCO, 2017. halshs-01963901

**HAL Id: halshs-01963901**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01963901>**

Submitted on 21 Dec 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **‘Ashura Rituals in Najaf: The Renewal of Expressive Modes in a Changing Urban and Social Landscape**

Géraldine Chatelard

In Sabrina Mervin, Robert Gleave and Géraldine Chatelard, (eds.), *Najaf: Portrait of a Holy City* (Reading, Ithaca Press, and UNESCO, Paris 2017, pp 83-110).

Shi‘is worldwide perform a yearly cycle of rituals to commemorate the life events of figures from their sect’s tradition – namely, members of the Al al-Bayt (the family of the Prophet) and the Twelve Imams they consider Muhammad’s rightful successors.<sup>1</sup> ‘Ali bin Abi Talib – the First Imam, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet – and ‘Ali’s son Husayn, the Third Imam, are the most revered figures among followers of all branches of Shi‘ism. Whereas ‘Ali was buried in Najaf, Husayn and his half-brother ‘Abbas lay 80 km to the north in Karbala, where they were killed on 10 Muharram 61 AH (680 CE) during the battle named after this place, against the army of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. The martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions is remembered on ‘Ashura, whereas ‘Arba‘in marks the end of the forty-day mourning period.<sup>2</sup>

Shi‘i religious rituals were banned or severely restricted in Iraq under Baathist rule, and are commonly presented as having experienced a ‘revival’ since the regime change in 2003. What is happening is not, however, a simple restoration. These rituals, reinvigorated and reinvented, are harnessed by a variety of social agents as expressive media in a changing social, political and technological context. Although rituals are religiously prescribed, part of the meaning with which they are endowed varies over time – and so does the expressive culture of the performances.<sup>3</sup> This ethnographic essay considers how the commemoration of ‘Ashura was performed in October 2016 in Najaf and its surroundings. I shall discuss the dynamics – particularly the city’s physical and social transformations – underlying the renewal of these expressive modes (with a focus on processions and ritual theatre), the grounding of these rituals in local culture and their embeddedness in the social and spatial

---

<sup>1</sup> There is an important social science literature in Western languages on Shi‘i rituals. Some major references are: Kamran Scot Aghaie, (ed.), *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi‘i Islam* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2005); Peter Chelkowski, *Ta‘ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York, NYU Press, 1979); and David Pinault, *The Shi‘ites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1992). On Iraq, see: Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, Part three: ‘The Transformation of Rituals and Religious Practices,’ (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003); Yitzhak Nakash, ‘The Muharram Rituals and the Cult of the Saints among Iraqi Shi‘ites,’ in Alessandra Monsutti, Silvia Naef and Farian Sabahi, (eds.), *The Other Shi‘ites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia* (Bern, Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 115-136; Ibrahim Haydari, ‘The Rituals of ‘Ashura: Genealogy, Functions, Actors and Structures’, in Faleh Abdul-Jabar, (ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq* (London, Saqi Books, 2002), pp. 445–460; and Faraj Hattab Hamdan *The Development of Iraqi Shi‘a Mourning Rituals in Modern Iraq: The ‘Ashurā Rituals and Visitation of Al-Arb‘ain*, (unpublished MA thesis, Arizona State University, 2012) that focuses mostly on Karbala and is the only work so far to consider these rituals in the post-2003 period.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the visitation of Brazilian pilgrims to Najaf on the occasion of ‘Arba‘in see Paulo Pinto in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> On this approach to rituals, see: Jens Kreinath, Constance Hartung, and Annette Deschner, (eds.), *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals: The Transformations of Religious Rituals within their Social and Cultural Context* (New York, Lang, 2004).

fabric of the city and its environs.<sup>4</sup> In the concluding remarks, I shall argue that there is a contemporary Iraqi model of ‘Ashura rituals with the potential to become a reference point for other Arab Shi‘i communities.

## A Changing Cityscape

Relations between the shrine cities and the powers governing modern Iraq were rarely easy, but the centrality of Najaf and Karbala and the religious activity in these cities were especially thwarted during the decades of Baathist rule in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> The cities were neglected, and some neighbourhoods deliberately destroyed. Unsurprisingly, the two cities have experienced a remarkable resurgence since 2003, following the replacement of Saddam Hussein’s regime with a Shi‘i-dominated government. Najaf, a city of 800,000, now hosts over 15,000 religious students,<sup>6</sup> and receives up to 4 million foreign pilgrims yearly – 90 percent of them Iranian – and an equally large number of Iraqi religious visitors.<sup>7</sup>

Redevelopment is profoundly reshaping the urban landscape. The Najaf reconstruction commission, formed by the provincial council in 2006, has invested heavily to improve strategic services such as water, sewage and roads.<sup>8</sup> Its largest operations to date are a multi-lane ring road, an international airport also serving Karbala (the capacity of which was doubled in 2016) and an oversize ‘Palace of Culture’. The latter should have been completed in 2012, the year celebrations were planned within the framework of ‘Najaf, Capital of Islamic Culture’ – a programme overseen by the Islamic Conference of Culture Ministers. However, the event was postponed by official request from the Iraqi government, and at the time of writing the largely empty building was still awaiting inauguration.

A 2009 master plan for the city of Najaf,<sup>9</sup> prepared by the Gulf-based architect and engineering firm Dewan, is currently being implemented. Aiming for the ‘urban renewal’ of the city centre, it is increasing the number of hotels and commercial outlets while emphasising the city’s religious identity. The number of hotels in Najaf continues to grow,

---

<sup>4</sup> Field data for this essay was mostly collected during five visits to Najaf between March 2014 and October 2016, including ‘Ashura 2015 and 2016. During the last two stays, I was accompanied by Agnès Montanari, a documentary photographer. For facilitating our stay and work in Najaf, I would like to thank Reasheed Jabbar, Mehdi Saleh Latif, Dr Ali Naji Attiyah, Dr Moamel Merzah, the department of international organisations at the Iraqi ministry of culture, the public relations departments of the holy shrine of Imam ‘Ali and Najaf governorate, and the University of Kufa. I am also indebted to Nasir Samaraie and Turath Allahoof, as well as to Agnès Montanari and Thibaud Fournet for the photographs and map illustrating this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> See: Pierre-Jean Luizard ‘The nature of confrontation between the State and *Marja‘ism*: Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim and the Ba‘th,’ in F. Abdul-Jabar (ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues. State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq*. (London, Saqi Books, 202), pp. 90-100, and Faleh. A. Jabar, *The Shi‘ite Movement in Iraq*.

<sup>6</sup> Yasser Tabbaa and Sabrina Mervin, *Najaf: The Gate of Wisdom* (Paris, UNESCO, 2014), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Asil al-Talaqani, head of the tourism and archaeology committee of the Najaf provincial council (Berlin, 02/09/2016).

<sup>8</sup> Faris Harram ‘A New Najaf Rises Up,’ *Niqash*, 7 November 2008. <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/economy/2331/A-New-Najaf-Rises-Up.htm>, accessed 29 November 2016.

<sup>9</sup> See: [http://www.dewan-architects.com/2014web\\_backup/work\\_urban\\_planning\\_najaf.html](http://www.dewan-architects.com/2014web_backup/work_urban_planning_najaf.html), accessed 29 November 2016.

with an estimated 450 establishments in all categories as of late 2015.<sup>10</sup> Several five-star hotels are in construction, and vast investment projects are being executed at the western periphery of the city, overlooking Bahr al-Najaf.

The city centre, known as the Old City, is another area heavily affected by urban redevelopment. With a circumference of around 3 km and a maximum length from east to west and from north to south of no more than 900 m, it was walled until 1938 and has a dense urban fabric, typical of medieval Arab cities. All the main roads radiate from the shrine, extending towards what used to be one of the five city gates (FIG. 1). The urban core is divided into four residential districts (*taraf*; plural, *atraf*)<sup>11</sup> and a market sector (*al-suq al-kabir*), where merchants of the four residential quarters own shops and where customers from the city and its surroundings, pilgrims and religious students mingle. The market area presently comprises a broad longitudinal axis with three branches, and extends from the shrine eastwards.<sup>12</sup>

The holy shrine (*al-‘ataba al-‘alawiyya al-muqadassa*) is the object of a vast expansion plan, the Fatima al-Zahra courtyard project,<sup>13</sup> which will more than triple its already-vast surface. The extension, undertaken by an Iranian contractor, comprises seven floors (three of them underground) and includes a large mosque, a museum and a library. From conversations with religious and municipal authorities involved in the city’s and the shrine’s development, it appears that Makkah and Madinah are serving as blueprints to set objectives in terms of the scale of infrastructural development. Officials compare the yearly number of Hajj pilgrims to the holy cities in Saudi Arabia (over 3 million in 2012, a peak year) to that of the number visitors to Karbala during the peak season, the visitation of Arba‘in. For the November 2016 event, the shrine of Imam Husayn publicised a figure of over 20 million visitors.<sup>14</sup> In Iraq and the rest of the Shi‘i world, it is frequently recalled that this event is the largest religious gathering on the planet. With the current exacerbation of Sunni–Shi‘i sectarian tensions and regional geopolitical strife, Najaf, together with Karbala, have become urban stages on which Shi‘i religious and political authorities play out their competition with another pair of sacred cities controlled by Sunni authorities.

Encroachments are visible everywhere in Najaf’s Old City, with old buildings and brick courtyard houses being demolished to make space for hotels, commercial outlets and religious centres often exceeding the three floors in height permitted under municipal regulations. Mohamed Al Assam, Dewan’s founder and managing director, points to the ‘entangled ownership status of private properties’ coupled with ‘ignorance and limited knowledge and experience of officials’ as contributing to an ongoing pattern of destruction by the local authorities.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Abbud al-Tufayli, senior hotelier and businessman from Najaf, and member of various business associations and of the Najaf planning and development council (Najaf, 20/10/2015).

<sup>11</sup> In Najaf, *taraf* stands for neighbourhood or district in both the old and new areas of the city. The term *mahalla*, more common in the Levant, is also used elsewhere in Iraq. See: ‘Neighborhood’ in [Beverly E. Clarity. A Dictionary of Iraqi Arabic: English-Arabic, Arabic-English](#) (Georgetown, Georgetown University Press, 2003), p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Tabbaa and Mervin, *Najaf: The Gate of Wisdom*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.imamali.net/?id=2464>, accessed 29 Novembre 2016.

<sup>14</sup> See: <https://imamhussain.org/arabic/foreignnews-37/18467>, accessed 29 Novembre 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Robert Saliba, *Urban Design in the Arab World: Reconceptualizing Boundaries* (London and New York, Routledge, 2016), p. 194.

He also believes that these authorities want the city redesigned to give priority to the pilgrims. Dewan had to fight to prevent the destruction of the old market area<sup>16</sup> (spared but for a strip abutting the shrine to the east), which was destroyed to allow for the construction of an external esplanade (*sahan*) for the holy site. The shrine's westward extension is being built over an expanse of land in the Old City that once formed the middle section of the 'Amara district, razed to the ground in 1981 under Saddam Hussein and never redeveloped until the recent shrine expansion project. The extension leaves only a narrow pedestrian path to join the two remaining sections of 'Amara. This district has suffered a great deal from the creation, at its northern border with Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, of car parks and hotels. At its western border, the shrine of Safi Safa (a companion of the Prophet), is a station on the foreign-pilgrim circuit that is being enlarged and reconstructed.<sup>17</sup> Next to it, the Dar'iyya has recently been removed to make way for the shrine extension project and an underpass for vehicle circulation; this building, a meeting and reception hall (*madhafa*) associated with the tribes of the 'Amara district, was formerly a landmark of local history and identity. It also served as a religious congregation hall (*husayniyya*) for the district's families during the enactment of the 'Ashura rituals.

In what remains of the traditional urban fabric of the city centre, old buildings lack maintenance; rubble and rubbish are ubiquitous; bundles of enmeshed electrical wires hang a few metres above the ground; and many streets are unpaved and dusty. The skyline itself has been transformed. Tall buildings – including the shrine extension – block the view of the shrine's golden dome, from which Imam 'Ali's holy presence (*hadra*) has traditionally been felt to radiate over the whole area, particularly Wadi al-Salam Cemetery.

The improvement of the security situation in the city since 2006 is a major factor underpinning tourism and urban growth. At present, two armed units control city access along three concentric circles. The municipal police perform checks on vehicles and pedestrians several hundred metres outside the city centre, and oversee another series of checkpoints giving access to the Old City, where vehicles are not allowed. In the intramural city, all thoroughfares leading to the shrine are equipped with control points supervised by the security forces of the holy shrine.

As a result of reinforced control, Najaf has been spared major security incidents in recent years. However, securitisation and traffic congestion, together with a shortage of public transport and car park options, hinder easy access to the Old City. This weighs more heavily on residents of Najaf's new districts who restrict their visits to the city centre, but for religious holidays and private devotions that they try to perform in the early morning or late at night. Walking the streets and visiting the shrine at any other time of the day or year, one encounters mostly turbaned students and '*ulama* as well as pilgrims, the latter overwhelmingly Iranian. The Iranian presence in the city can be experienced daily, and is further manifested in the style and aesthetics of many of the new buildings;<sup>18</sup> in Persian-language signs in shops and at religious sites;<sup>19</sup> and in the imported consumer goods on offer in the markets.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>17</sup> On Safi Safa and his shrine, see Pinto in this volume.

<sup>18</sup> On the rebuilding of minor shrines and madrasas in neo-Safavid style, see *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> For a semiology of Najaf's iconic and linguistic landscape post-2003, see Hassan Nadhem 'Tirs al-'alamat,' in Mervin, Gleave and Chatelard *Al-Najaf: tarikh wa tatawwur*, p. 363-399.

The social fabric of Najaf is complex. Several well-established families of religious scholars trace their origins to different areas of the Islamic world. Others claim Arab ancestry through tribal lineage, and many patrician families include turbaned clerics as well as merchants and funerary entrepreneurs.<sup>20</sup> The secular intellectual scene is vibrant and rooted in a rich history of literary expression.<sup>21</sup> Najafis exhibit a variety of political outlooks including political Islam (the Da‘wa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Sadrist movement are all active in the city) and communism, once a major political force in Najaf.<sup>22</sup> The Baathist regime was repressive, deporting several hundreds of thousands of Shi‘is deemed to be of Iranian origin (amongst them Najafis) in the 1970s and during the Iran–Iraq War,<sup>23</sup> and bloodily crushing the 1991 Shi‘i uprising, in which residents of the city participated massively.<sup>24</sup> Yet the Arab socialist state also allowed for the emergence of two generations of educated modern professionals – including women, who today play an active role in the economic and political life of the city, and people of rural background, who have experienced upward socioeconomic mobility. There is also a constant stream of newcomers to the city: religious students from all over the Shi‘i world; Iraqis who have continued to migrate from the country’s rural south (especially in the later 1980s, when the marshes were drained under Saddam Hussein’s regime); people who settled in Najaf after fleeing sectarian conflict in Baghdad post-2003; and those displaced by the conquest of several regions of the country by Islamic State since 2013. Finally, Najaf has not been spared the emigration and exile of its sons and daughters, forced out by the policies of the Baath regime. There is now a global Najafi diaspora. Some people returned after 2003, while others return for visits; myriad transnational ties are maintained with the hometown.

Families of traders have taken advantage of the religious tourism boom, investing in travel agencies and the hospitality industry, expanding their commercial and funerary businesses and benefitting from rising real estate prices in the Old City. Many have vacated or sold their traditional family homes, and the more affluent people have built modern villas in the new neighbourhoods. Yet some members of the old merchant class, together with groups of lay intellectuals, feel uncomfortable about the nature and pace of urban change. There is a growing critique of the destruction wrought on the Old City, and nostalgia and dispossession have crystallised around a new discourse on the heritage and identity of Najaf.<sup>25</sup> Urban renewal is experienced by this category of residents as a radical transformation of the city’s identity, and an erasure of local history and memory. Those Najafis who feel alienated from the Old City resist in different ways. For some of them, the rituals performed outside the shrine during ‘Ashura provide an opportunity to occupy centre stage.

---

<sup>20</sup> For the place and role of Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, see Muhsin al-Muzaffar in this volume.

<sup>21</sup> See: Al-Hakim, ‘Al-Najaf al-Ashraf markaz ‘ilmi’, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> See Fouad Kadhem in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> See: Ali Babakhan ‘The Deportation of Shi‘is During the Iran-Iraq War: Causes and Consequences,’ in F. Abdul-Jabar, *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues*, pp. 184-210.

<sup>24</sup> For a personal account of Hassan Nadhem’s experience of the uprising and its aftermath in Najaf and Kufa, see: Kadhim, Abbas, ‘Painful Archeology: Excavating Saddam’s Mass Graves,’ *Strategic Insights*, Volume V, Issue 3 (March 2006).

<sup>25</sup> This discourse is manifested in the public sphere through symposiums, talks in the city’s intellectual clubs, lectures at the University of Kufa, and publications such as *Najaf Heritage at Risk* (2013) by the IEEF Heritage Group, a local collective of engineers and academics.

## Governing the rituals

Regarded as vectors of political dissent and social fragmentation between Sunnis and Shi‘is, public rituals associated with the mourning of Husayn were almost totally suppressed by the Baathist authorities – in gradual stages during the 1970s, and more vigorously at the outset of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980.<sup>26</sup> Since 2003, when a Shi‘i-dominated government took over from the previous regime, these rituals have experienced a rapid revival. Public authorities now encourage mass gatherings, yet still aim to control them – especially in shrine cities such as Karbala and Najaf, and in the Kadhimiya district of Baghdad (where the Seventh and Ninth Imams are buried), which receive high numbers of visitors during these periods. A different form of governance is now applied. Rituals are institutionalised, orchestrated and policed; grief and piety are channelled towards reinforcing a sense of communal identity and cohesion; and great effort is exerted to avoid discord with the community of the faithful. This process was particularly visible during the 2016 commemoration, when the Iraqi state and Shi‘i religious authorities galvanised the Iraqi populace as well as the armed forces in preparation for the imminent launch of a major military operation aimed at retaking Mosul and the surrounding region from Islamic State, which had occupied it since 2014.

The *mawakib* (singular: *mawkib*) are central to the Iraqi context of ‘Ashura observance, and are a key medium through which the governance of the rituals operates. The term signifies a procession or parade, as well as a group of more than six people coming together to organise and perform one or more of the mourning rituals for Husayn (though not necessarily the procession). There exists two broad types of *mawakib*: those dedicated to service (*al-khidma*), mostly providing food and lodging to visitors, which may remain active from ‘Ashura to ‘Arbain; and those dedicated to mourning (*al-‘aza*), which organise and perform one or more of the five canonical rituals around the death of Husayn:

1. mourning sessions (*majalis ta‘ziyya*, popularly known in Iraq as *qrayas* or reciting sessions), held from 1 Muharram until ‘Arbain;
2. mourning processions (*mawakib al-‘aza*), held between 8 and 10 Muharram;
3. visits to Husayn’s tomb, particularly on 10 Muharram (*ziyarat al-‘ashura*) and the fortieth day after the anniversary of Husayn’s death (*ziyarat al-‘araba ‘in* or *‘arba ‘iniyya*);
4. representation in the form of dramas (*tashabih*) depicting the battle and various episodes preceding and following it;
5. various types of self-mortification (*tatbir* and *zinjil* [see below]), performed mostly on 10 Muharram.

While some *mawakib* are small and specialised, others have several hundred members and are multipurpose. Most large Iraqi cities with a sizable number of Shi‘i residents now encourage the registration of *mawakib* before they hold their activities, although there is no legislation making this move compulsory. In Najaf, a federation of *mawakib* (*al-mu‘asasa al-‘uliya lil-mawakib al-husayniyya*), registered as a non-governmental organisation since 2011, acts as an interface between the individual *mawakib* and the municipal authorities – including the police – with regard to the logistics and security of the ritual activities. In May 2016, approximately 3,600 *mawakib* from the province of Najaf were registered; these were the only ones permitted to perform their activities in the Old City during the month of Muharram.<sup>27</sup> Each licenced *mawakib* provides a dedicated department at the municipality with

<sup>26</sup> Attempts to control these mass religious rituals predate by far the Ba‘ath party’s access to power. For the monarchical period, see Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, p. 157 and ss.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Zaki al-A‘raji, then head of the Najaf *mawakib* federation (Najaf, 01/05/2016).

a list of its members, who are vetted before being authorised to pass through two levels of security checks from the periphery of the Old City to the vicinity of the shrine. Unregistered *mawakib* can only perform rituals in other areas of the city.

Existing social science literature on ‘Ashura rituals in Iraq and other Arab communities where the term is used has not established a clear conceptual difference between the two meanings of *mawakib*. I propose to differentiate between the *mawakib* as a procession and the *mawakib* as a ‘ritual group’ or ‘guild’ that performs any of the five canonical rituals. The term ‘ritual association’ may also be used to refer to a group with a degree of official institutionalisation.<sup>28</sup>

### Processions in the Old City<sup>29</sup>

Processions only involve male participants, and take place every evening from 8–10 Muharram. In the ‘Amara district, the procession of the torches (*mawakib al-masha‘il*) is held along the street running parallel to the northwestern side of the extension of the shrine, known as al-Masha‘il Street (FIG. 1).

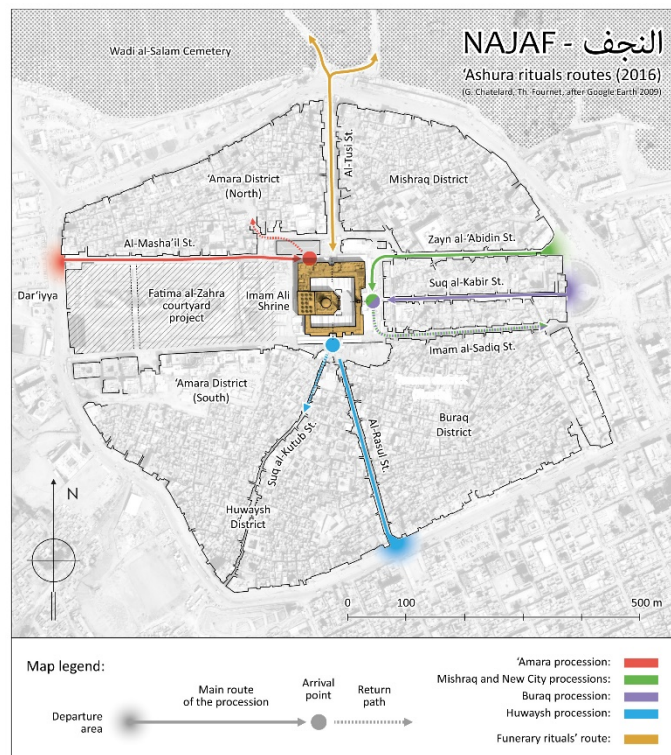


FIG. 1: A plan of the procession routes. Najaf, October 2016.

<sup>28</sup> In Iranian cities, such groups or societies are called *dasteh* or *hay'at*, and are generally associated to quarters. See: Reza Masoudi Nejad, ‘The Discursive Manifestation of Past and Present Through the Spatial Organization of the Ashura Procession,’ *Space and Culture*, 20(10), 2013, pp. 2-3. In India, *matami guruhan* are associations that organise lamentation gatherings. See: David Pinault, *Horses of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India* (New York, Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> The following sections elaborate on field notes taken between 10 and 18 October 2016 (8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of Muharram). Preliminary contacts were made with several people and groups involved in the rituals, and background information collected through interviews during a previous stay in the city in May 2016.



The bare-concrete lower walls are covered with black shrouds and portraits of Imam Husayn, distracting from the huge mass of the building's upper floors, which now divides the quarter of 'Amara into two sections. To the beat of drums, the cortège of men, all dressed in black, sets off after the *maghrib* prayer, counted as the start of a new day. A man waving a large Iraqi flag opens the parade. Participants cover the ground (approximately 500 m) between the area people still call the Dar'iyya, in reference to the recently destroyed *husayniyya* and the esplanade that surrounds the shrine. Torches are set on aluminium beams of different sizes. The largest of these candelabras is 6 m long, holds thirty-seven flaming torches and weighs over 100 kg. One hundred and five registered torch-bearing groups follow each other in an uninterrupted flow that lasts until 3 AM.<sup>30</sup>

In 'Amara, most of the rituals are organised by kin groups or tribes (*'ashira*), with only a few of them gatherings of members of a profession or trade. The most populous processions are preceded by a banner displaying the tribe's name. Participants execute the *hosa*, a folk song and dance performance associated with the Arab tribes of Iraq (see below). Men brandish sticks and chant poems for Husayn in a southern Iraqi dialect, to the rhythm of cymbals and drums. They surround their champion, who bears the candelabra on behalf of his group. On the crowded street, each torchbearer swirls with his load at regular intervals, while some of the group's young men stand under the circle of fire, squatting to avoid the beam but exposing their bodies to the sparks and burning oil falling from the torches (FIG. 2). In so doing, participants experience the 'burning heat' of the Karbala desert, and of Husayn's family tents set afire by the Umayyad army.<sup>31</sup>



FIG. 2: Young men squat under the circle of fire. Najaf, October 2016.

Credit: Agnès Montanari.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews in Najaf with Kamil Abu Qilal, head of the torches ritual groups (01/05/2016 and 10/10/2016), and Husayn Ali Jabbar, torch-bearer for the al-'Akayshi tribe (03/05/2016, and 10/10/2016).

<sup>31</sup> Idem.

Entangled in the act are displays of sorrow and penance for past shortcomings, together with virile commitments to be honoured now and in the future. The *hosa* has been said to strengthen the social relationships of participating members by connecting them to a common emotional state.<sup>32</sup> In the modern era, this versatile genre has been used by men as well as women to express political resistance.<sup>33</sup> Inserted into the ‘Ashura rituals, it serves to voice participants’ collective pledge to defend the cause of Husayn, the family of the Prophet and the Shi‘i community as whole. Torch rituals exist in other locales in southern Iraq, but they have been brought to a higher level by the people of ‘Amara, and have become the pride of Najaf. The procession attracts a large crowd of fervently engaged onlookers who stand back or struggle to move along the way, including small groups of women clad in black *abayas* (which, in Iraq, are pullover cloaks), many beating their chests and weeping. Each torch group reaches a climax and closure after an intense series of torch-spinning movements executed in front of figures of the ‘Amara tribe and, at times of the *hawza*, sitting on a platform along the northern wall of the shrine. Unlike the other parades proceeding through the Old City (see below), the *masha‘il* stops short of sighting the Imam’s tomb through one of the shrine’s gates; Bab al-Tusi, the northern gate, is the only access point for visitors to the shrine and the corpses transported along al-Tusi Street first into the shrine and then to Wadi al-Salam Cemetery for burial.<sup>34</sup> The corpse circulation runs day and night, uninterrupted by the processions or any other religious rituals.

Mishraq and Buraq are the two adjacent districts situated to the east of the shrine. Unlike ‘Amara, each district performs processions in a single *mawkib* comprising several dozen men. The Mishraq procession marches along Zayn al-‘Abidin Street, which borders the main market to the north and leads to the eastern side of the shrine. The district’s *mawkib* is followed by all the ritual groups from Najaf’s new neighbourhoods, together with institutions such as hospitals, associations, clubs and religious political parties, each carrying flags and banners to identify themselves. Groups that do not march under the banner of a political party at times carry portraits of a political or religious figure, thereby displaying their political leanings or inclinations towards a particular *mujtahid*. Buraq’s *mawkib* proceeds separately along Suq al-Kabir Street, which runs parallel to Zayn al-‘Abidin Street. The expression of sorrow is graver and more subdued than in ‘Amara, but no less powerful and virile. With their parties of drums, cymbals and trumpets, the groups are cordoned off by lines of men parading with swords, a type of performance known as *mashaq*. Some groups parade a float in the shape of a gilded shrine or an ark (the latter in reference to a *hadith* from the prophet: ‘My family is like Noah’s Ark: whoever embarks upon it reaches salvation.’)<sup>35</sup> In a choreographed order, all groups converge onto the eastern courtyard abutting the shrine until they are in sight of Imam ‘Ali’s tomb through the opening of the shrine’s eastern gate (Bab al-Sa‘a). There they close their processions with a clamour (*halla*), exiting the Old City from a third parallel axis, Imam al-Sadiq Street.

<sup>32</sup> Robert A. Fernea. *Shaykh and Effendi: Changing Patterns of Authority Among the El Shabana of Southern Iraq* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> See: Haifa Zangana, ‘Iraqi resistance has its song,’ *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 3:3, 2009, pp. 278 and 282; and Scheherazade Hassan, ‘Female traditional singers in Iraq: A survey,’ *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 4:1-2, 2010, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> On the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, see Muhsin al-Muzaffar in this volume.

<sup>35</sup> Sabrina Mervin, ‘‘Ashūrā’ Rituals, Identity and Politics: A Comparative Approach (Lebanon and India),’ in Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, (eds.), *The study of Shi‘i Islam: History, Theology and Law* (New York, IB Tauris, 2014), p. 517.

In these neighbourhoods, members of the *mawkib* appear to take less pride in their tribal identities than in their involvement in commerce, the religious seminary and secular intellectual activities. Ritual groups congregate primarily around a local identity, with the name of their districts well in sight on the banners they carry.<sup>36</sup> But factionalism lies just below the surface. Najaf's neighbourhood identities were constructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries based on tribal affiliations, pitching Buraq against the three other districts.<sup>37</sup> Before 'Ashura processions were completely forbidden in 1980, they were held separately in each district. After 2003, demographic growth led to the formation of ritual groups by new neighbourhoods and corporate groups who demanded access to the Old City. The municipal authorities moved to regulate the processions and impose a single eastern route for all the *mawakib* but for those carrying torches. Buraq refused to share the same route with Mishraq, leading to a conflict in which religious authorities had to mediate an agreement.

During the evening processions, Iranian and other foreign pilgrims are not visible in the Old City. They are advised by tour leaders to stay in their hotels, or to visit Najaf during the day before travelling to Karbala, where they attend rituals and spend the night. The holy shrine, usually bustling with foreign pilgrims at night, is almost empty. In addition, only a few turbaned clerics and *hawza* students participate in *mawakib* organised by their families or neighbourhoods, whereas others do not mingle with the boisterous crowd. Rather, they congregate in the Huwaysh district situated to the south of the shrine, where many '*ulama* and religious students reside. There, the procession is more low-key, with a single *mawkib* performing *mashaq* along al-Rasul Street until the southern gate of the shrine that marks the *qibla* (the direction of the Kaaba in Makkah).

The laypeople and clerics of Huwaysh are busier with mourning sessions. Preceded by lectures, and followed by chest beatings (in Iraqi dialect, *latum*]), these take place in mosques, *husayniyyas* and religious colleges, and run late into the night. Each *mujtahid* (including the four *maraji* ') organises the sessions, which are attended by crowds of followers as well as politicians and other notables. In other districts of the old and new cities, ritual groups and individuals also put together such sessions starting on 1 Muharram, competing to attract the most prestigious reciter (*qari*) to tell the story of Karbala in classical Arabic, and another reciter (*radud* or *na'i*) who declaims elegies (*niya 'at*) in the southern Iraqi dialect and moves the audience into performing *latum*. Gender segregation is maintained; there are sessions in which pious women invite their friends, colleagues and relatives to private homes or *husayniyyas*, and still other sessions occur with separate spaces allocated for men and women.

The practice of charity towards visitors, whether public or private, has largely been supplanted by the hospitality industry; nevertheless, it remains a meritorious act. Hence an important part of all rituals is the offering of food and drink.<sup>38</sup> Across the city, ritual groups

---

<sup>36</sup> Interviews in Najaf with Nafa' Twayj, head of a ritual group from the 'Amara district (02/05/2016), and Hassan Al-Hakim, historian of Najaf (18/10/2016).

<sup>37</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>38</sup> Charity and hospitality are however best expressed during *Arba'in*, when millions of pilgrims converge to Karbala from the entire Shi'i world and the various regions of Iraq, many of them on foot. Marching pilgrims are particularly numerous on the Najaf to Karbala road, dotted with hundreds of stations maintained by ritual groups and offering pilgrims drinks, food, places for worship and shelter. For a recent account of *Arba'in*, see Faraj Hattab Hamdan *The Development of Iraqi Shi'a Mourning Rituals in Modern Iraq*, and also by the same author '*Tatwir tuqus al-hadad al-shi'i fi al-'iraq al-hadith: tuqus ziyarat al- arba'in*, ' *Kufa Review*, vol. 3, n. 2, 2013, pp 165-209. See also Pinto in this volume.

set up outdoor kitchens staffed by young men. Enormous cooking pots and tea stands line the streets next to decorated tents where the mourning sessions are held. Women cook at home and distribute food to neighbours, relatives and needy families. The street atmosphere is festive, yet far from the excesses and grotesquery of a carnival: a grave mood is *de rigueur* when joining a mourning session or parade.

Rituals come to a climax on 10 Muharram – ‘Ashura proper – marking the day of the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his seventy-two companions and relatives together with several freed slaves. From the evening onwards, the sanguinary practices of self-flagellation with chains (*zinjil*) and self-laceration of the head with a sword or knife (*tatbir*) is practiced by a minority of the groups marching along Zayn al-‘Abidin Street. None of the Old City’s *mawakib* engages in such acts. Rather, the perception among members of well-established Najafi families is that self-flagellation and self-laceration are performed primarily by young men residing in the underprivileged neighbourhoods of the new city, which have grown out of emigration from the rural south. These neighbourhoods are the main reservoirs of followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, the militia leader and religious figure from the prestigious al-Sadr *hawza* family who has constantly challenged the post-2003 Iraqi socio-political order.<sup>39</sup> In Najaf’s Old City, the presence and visibility of *zinjil* and *tatbir* practitioners is relatively small compared to the tens of thousands involved in the various rituals. Head-laceration and chain-lashing happen on a much larger scale in Karbala, where not only residents of the city but also non-Iraqi ritual groups can perform in public.<sup>40</sup> In Najaf, it is likely that the institutions regulating the processions attempt to contain them by keeping them outside the Old City: by several personal accounts, they were less extensive in 2016 than in previous years.

Harsh self-mortification polarises laypeople, with some expressing admiration for the penitents’ piety and others concerned that these acts may induce uncontrolled violent behaviour in addition to fostering negative perceptions of the Shi‘i community. Indeed, the image of ‘Ashura conveyed by the non-Shi‘i media worldwide tends to focus on violent bloodletting and self-flagellation. Pious lay notables and intellectuals in Najaf generally consider *tatbir* and *zinjil* as marring the sanctity of ‘Ashura. Some express their disagreement by refusing to participate in or attend any type of procession. The issue is complicated by the fact that the *marja’iyya* has not declared self-mortification illicit (*haram*), although it does not condone excessive behaviour.<sup>41</sup> A frequent reading among the laypeople of Najaf who object the practice is that the *marja’iyya* refrains from condemning it so as to avoid conflict with other *mujtahids* and political leaders who advocate it – Muqtada al-Sadr amongst them.<sup>42</sup> Some commentators see the ubiquitous hand of Iran, where *tatbir* has been declared illicit by Supreme Leader ‘Ali Khamenei since 1994, but which sends a large contingent of self-mortifiers to celebrate ‘Ashura in Karbala. Whatever interpretation of the practice one may favour, evident outcomes are that those involved in it have gained a social identity and,

---

<sup>39</sup> See: Peter Harling et Hamid Yassin Nasser, ‘La mouvance sadriste : lutte de classes, millénarisme et fitna,’ in Sabrina Mervin, *Les mondes chiïtes et l’Iran* (Paris, Karthala and Beirut, Presses de l’Ifpo, 2007), pp. 267-286.

<sup>40</sup> See: Faraj Hattab Hamdan *The Development of Iraqi Shi‘a Mourning Rituals in Modern Iraq*, p. 165.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews in Najaf with: Sayyid ‘Abdel Husayn al-Qadi, representative (*wakil*) of the *marja’* Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sa‘id al-Hakim (10/10/2016), Shaykh ‘Ali Bachir al-Najafi, son of the *marja’* Grand Ayatollah Bachir al-Najafi (16/10/2016), and Shaykh Maytham al-Frayji, a student of the *hawza* following the *mujtahid* Grand Ayatollah Muhammad al-Ya‘qubi (16/10/2016).

<sup>42</sup> See: <http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/5518.html>

in Najaf, challenge the social order and class stratification that lay notables would like to see manifested through the ceremony.

### **Ritual Theatre in Najaf and Its Environs**

On the morning of ‘Ashura proper, many Najafis undertake to visit the resting places of the half-brothers Husayn and ‘Abbas in Karbala, and to join the large international crowd performing a set of specific rituals.<sup>43</sup> Others participate in mourning sessions in Najaf, where the story of the murder of Husayn (*maqtal al-Husayn*) is recited. Still others elect to attend the re-enactment of the battle of Karbala (*tashabih maqtal al-Husayn*) staged by non-professional troupes (*mawakib tashabih*) in Kufa, Hira or Abu Sukhayr, to the east and south of Najaf. In the days preceding ‘Ashura, many *mawakib* stage short plays representing episodes leading up to the battle of Karbala. These take place in the streets and squares in Najaf and the surrounding small towns. Fully-fledged re-enactments of the battle of Karbala, which draw thousands of spectators and involve large numbers of actors and horses, are staged in open spaces outside urban areas on 10 Muharram. In 2016, only four *mawakib* in the Najaf area took up the logistical, organisational and financial challenges of staging these events. In May of that year, we met with two groups – one in Hira, the other in Abu Sukhayr. Both have been performing the battle and other elements of the tragedy of Karbala for the past few years. In October, we attended the performance of the battle in Hira, and of the subsequent episodes in Abu Sukhayr.

The performance in Hira on 12 October, under the direction of ‘Imad al-Hjaymy, lasted from 8 AM to 1 PM. It took place in an empty lot, roughly half the size of a football field, which the municipality had set aside for this purpose in recent years, removing some informal buildings. Local authorities had surrounded the dedicated ground with a wire fence 2.5 m high, and sanded it in preparation for the performance. In two opposite corners were the camps of Imam Husayn and his caravan (represented by white canvas tents), and that of the Umayyad commander ‘Amr Ibn Sa‘ad, whose recruits were the people of Kufa (*ahl al-Kufa*). (In today’s Iraq, Kufa is a suburb of Najaf.)

Re-enacting the tragedy in its near-original geographical context compelled the directors to seek a measure of realism.<sup>44</sup> Adult palm trees had been planted on one side of the field, and a small pond dug to represent the Euphrates. In Abu Sukhayr, the stage set of the *tashabih* performed under the direction of Mu‘ayid Shamma‘ exhibited similar features. Such realism is in contrast with ritual theatre in Iran, where a basin of water is meant to symbolise the river, or in Lebanon, where a landscape is painted on a sheet.<sup>45</sup> In Hira, the performance was an elaborate amateur production. Approximately one hundred and fifty extras stood for the people of Kufa, who fought in Yazid’s army. Each had made his own costume. Three dozen horses belonging to and trained by the actors who rode them were engaged in the battle scenes, and one camel appeared at the beginning and end. The costumes and props (such as the standards) respected the colour coding of Shi‘i ritual theatre – green and white for friends, red for foes (FIG. 3).

---

<sup>43</sup> See: Faraj Hattab Hamdan *The Development of Iraqi Shi‘a Mourning Rituals in Modern Iraq*, pp. 160-162.

<sup>44</sup> Interview in Hira with ‘Imad Al- Hjaymy, director of the Hira *tashabih* troupe (15/10/2016), and with other members of the troupe (28/04/2016).

<sup>45</sup> Sabrina Mervin, ‘Le théâtre chiite au Liban, entre rituel et spectacle,’ in Nicolas Puig and Franck Mermier, (eds.), *Itinéraires esthétiques et scènes culturelles au Proche-Orient* (Beirut, Presses de l’Ifpo, 2007), p. 67.

The director and some of the performers I interviewed expressed concern for the historical realism of the stage set, costumes and other material aspects of the performance, albeit limited by the troupe's available means (a budget of USD 6,000 from donations). This aspect, too, set apart the performance (and other ones we attended in Abu Sukhayr) from the Iranian *ta'zia*, which is at the origin of Shi'i religious theatre. In Iran, scholars have noted that little attention is given to historical authenticity in costume and stage set design.<sup>46</sup>

Another difference from the Iranian *ta'zia*, which is performed in more confined spaces,<sup>47</sup> is that vocalisation was live, performed by non-professional voice actors sitting in the technical booth on one side of the field. This technique was adopted to bypass financial and technical constraints – namely, the prohibitive cost of a wireless microphone system allowing the actors' voices to be heard across the large, outdoor space. The director and sound engineer created a soundscape combining live dubbing that matched the lines the actors were uttering in classical Arabic; elegies declaimed in dialect by a *na'i* after the death of each protagonist in Husayn's party; live drums played by a band offstage; and extracts from the original soundtrack of *The Message (al-Risala)*, the 1976 biopic of the Prophet Muhammad by Syrian–American director Moustapha Akkad. Yet another noteworthy characteristic was that female roles were played and dubbed by women – unlike in Iran, where young men enact female roles. The faces of Husayn and 'Abbas, and those of the women, were entirely veiled with white cloth.<sup>48</sup>



FIG. 3: Death of a companion of Imam Husayn, *tashabih* in Hira, October 2016.  
Credit: Agnès Montanari

<sup>46</sup> Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama*, (London, Frank Cass, 2004), p. 130.

<sup>47</sup> See: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/tazia>

<sup>48</sup> On the veiling of sacred figures in ritual theatre in Lebanon, see Mervin Sabrina Mervin, ‘‘Ashūrā’ Rituals, Identity and Politic,’ p. 521.

The director of the Hira troupe, a thirty-five-year-old engineer and the scion of a local family, traced his artistic choices to recent Arab cinema and TV productions based on the lives of medieval Islamic figures. He had also consulted with elderly residents of Hira who used to perform in the *tashabih* before it was forbidden in 1973; some had kept collections of photos documenting these performances. The director developed the script based on standard sources and narratives,<sup>49</sup> and submitted it to a *mujtahid* for authoritative validation. A large audience of several thousand people attended the performance, weeping when each companion of Husayn faced his death. In the absence of bleacher seating, people stood just outside the fence or on the roofs of surrounding houses, women and men in separate sections. Several dozen privileged spectators were allowed inside the fenced area and provided with chairs. Besides the family and friends of the troupe members, these included a couple of *'ulama* and lay notables from Najaf and Hira. The governor of Najaf province, together with a female Member of Parliament and a whole retinue, came late after attending mourning sessions in the city. They nevertheless arrived on time to attend the cathartic deaths of 'Abbas and Husayn, and to weep with the rest of the audience.

On the same evening in Abu Sukhayr, Mu'ayid al-Shamma', a man in his fifties who was born in the town and works as head of the media department in the water authority, claimed pride in the fact that his was the only troupe in Najaf representing the episode known as 'the estrangement' (*al-wahsha*).<sup>50</sup> In this story, barely mentioned in standard historical sources, Husayn's sister Zaynab and the other survivors of the Imam's party – most of them women and children – spend the night in the camp as the beheaded bodies of Husayn and his companions lie unburied on the battlefield. The director, who traces his love of theatre from childhood and his student years in Baghdad in the 1980s, developed a one-and-a-half-hour performance that was extraordinarily tragic, punctuated by the wailing of a substantial female audience. In the dark of night, candles were set around a dozen headless cloth dummies spread on the large playing field where the troupe had performed battle scenes earlier in the day. Coloured spotlights focused on Zaynab as she wandered in the wilderness in search of Husayn's body. Answering her poignant call for help, God sends her visions of Imam 'Ali (who appears to her in the shape of a lion) and Fatima al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet, wife of Imam 'Ali and mother of Husayn. Most of the cast was female, dubbed live by a group of young, university-educated women. Elegies were declaimed by a young man standing in the technical booth, directed by the middle-aged female poet who had composed them.

The last representation we attended, on 13 Muharram, was the burial of the martyrs (*yawm al-dafn*).<sup>51</sup> In it, women of the Bani Asad tribe encamped on the Karbala plain find the martyrs' bodies, and implore their kinsmen to overcome their fear of the Umayyads and bury the dead. (It is noteworthy that some of the Bani Asad were amongst the people of Kufa who fought against Husayn's party at Karbala.) 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin, Husayn's only surviving son and the Fourth Imam, helps them identify the bodies. In Abu Sukhayr, the performance was very well-attended by a crowd of women, men and children standing around the fenced playing field, whereas some tribal *shaykhs* with their distinctive attires were given privileged seats inside.

<sup>49</sup> See: Sebastian Günther, 'Maqâtil Literature in Medieval Islam,' *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1994), pp. 192-212.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews with Mu'ayid Shamma' and members of his troupe (Abu Sukhayr, 29/04/2016 and 16/10/2016).

<sup>51</sup> The full cycle also includes performances held closer to 'Arba' in such as the Procession of the Captives (*mawkib al-sabaya*).

As has already been noted by scholars of Shi‘i remembrance practices in other settings, these are didactic morality plays in which the cast of clearly aligned characters allows each member of the audience to find a positive and negative role model. Evil is equated with oppression (*dhulum*) and personified by Yazid, the appointed caliph; the commander of his army; and the people of Kufa. Good is represented by the family of the Prophet and their companions, and those who show them loyalty and compassion – such as their freed slaves who do not flee, and the women and men of the Bani Asad tribe who bury the dead. The ethical protagonists include valorous knights, brave and virtuous women, children ready for sacrifice and even a devoted black Christian servant. What is peculiar to Iraq is how the historic Karbala resounds with the audience. In the Shi‘i moral worldview, the people of Kufa act as a foil to pious Muslims loyal to the family of the Prophet, whereas those amongst the Bani Asad who buried the martyrs provide a model for courage and dedication. In today’s Iraq, the inhabitants of modern Kufa are seen as having a unique moral responsibility to repent for Husayn’s death, and to uphold a commitment to his cause. In a similar way, the behaviour of the many Iraqi individuals and tribal groups who trace their ancestry to the Bani Asad is measured against the standard set by those of their people who redeemed their tribe by caring for the body of the Karbala martyrs.

In Hira and Abu Sukhayr, the dramatic cycle drew an audience consisting of entire families, as well as a much larger number of women and children than the processions and short *tashabih* scenes performed in the Old City of Najaf over the previous days. In contrast with the public rituals taking place in the city of Najaf, fully-fledged *tashabih* representations involve a majority of performers, technical crew and residents of what are construed as rural areas. Since the 1970s, these small towns experienced urban growth through encroachment on agricultural land, as well as social changes with access to higher education and government jobs provided by the Baathist welfare state. Many families moved to live in the new middle-class neighbourhoods of Najaf. Elderly people whom I interviewed in Hira and Abu Sukhayr and who took part in the re-enactments some four decades ago recall that, in their time, performances were organised by the few educated men in the villages for largely illiterate actors and audiences, who found them more evocative than the *grayas*. Today, the fact that literacy levels among rural women are still relatively low does not appear to be a factor explaining the vitality of this form of ritual. Rather, the *tashabih* provides a compelling medium of engagement for a segment of Najaf’s population – now largely educated and urbanised, politically incorporated into the dominant religious parties, yet remaining at the edge of the city’s religious landscape.<sup>52</sup> The peripheral towns organise their own mourning ritual groups, with some of their *mawakib* marching in Najaf’s historic districts; but the *tashabih* affords them a much higher visibility, and their reputation for piety and artistry extends throughout Iraq and beyond. Historic re-enactments are also the most inclusive of all rituals. On the basis of talent and motivation, they involve actors, voice actors, reciters, poets, musicians and entire logistical and technical crews of both sexes and various ages, educational levels, professional backgrounds and tribal affiliations. Many of them reside in Najaf’s new middle-class neighbourhoods, but are not members of the city’s old merchant, intellectual and clerical families. Unrestricted by the narrow urban space and rigid social stratification, and taking place away from the holy shrine, religious theatre permits gender and class mixing, more freedom with canonical texts and a more creative aesthetic that borrows from the secular performing arts and cinema.

---

<sup>52</sup> Abu Sukhayr and Hira have distinct social fabrics, and stand in a different relation to Najaf, including as regards the performance of the ‘Ashura rituals. The same holds true for Kufa in addition to its religious and historical importance as an early Islamic capital and the seat of one of the first mosques in Islam. Such dimensions deserve historical and anthropological investigations beyond the scope of this essay.



## Conclusion: An Iraqi Model of ‘Ashura

Among the Shi‘is, Yitzhak Nakash contends that self-mortification and religious theatre have their origins, respectively, in the Caucasus and Iran, and first appeared in Iraq in the nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Since then, these practices have continued to travel to other Shi‘i communities in the Arab world, fusing with other cultural models. Iraq, too, has exported rituals that reflect the country’s specific socio-cultural context. This is hardly surprising when considering the centrality of Karbala and Najaf in Shi‘i history; the scope of influence of Najaf’s *hawza*; and the fact that Iraq is the country with the largest Arabic-speaking Shi‘i population. Thus, since the late nineteenth century and owing to the movement of people, different Iraqi cultural models of ‘Ashura have been conveyed to Lebanon and Syria, the other main Twelver Shi‘i locales in the Arab world.<sup>54</sup> The mass displacement of Iraqi Shi‘is to Iran between the 1970s and 1990s also led to the transfer of some Iraqi ritual practices across borders. A Najaf-style torch parade is now being organised in Dowlat-Abad, a neighbourhood in the southeast of Tehran where Iraqis have congregated, and is becoming an invented Iranian tradition.<sup>55</sup>

The in-house audiovisual studio of the Holy Shrine of Imam ‘Ali, which broadcasts live footage of the shrine,<sup>56</sup> uses high-tech equipment to film all the processions – particularly the torch parades. These images are shown live on two large screens set on the outer walls of the shrine as they take place, and heighten the dramatic effect of the swirling torches. Footage is also fed to Shi‘i satellite and online TV networks. Some channels, such as Al-Ghadeer, the TV media wing of the Badr Organisation broadcasting from Najaf, produce their own material. These networks have a wide audience in the Iraqi Shi‘i diaspora that spreads as far as Australia and the United States, which further consumes audiovisual material created by participants in the rituals and disseminated through Shi‘i websites and the social media.<sup>57</sup> Images of ‘Ashura celebrations in Iraq invite expatriates to maintain spiritual and emotional ties with the community at home, and to rejoice in the revival of Shi‘i public rituals in the country.

Furthermore, rituals are occasions for the declaration of local identities on a global stage, and convey an Iraqi cultural, aesthetic and moral model for commemorating the tragedy of Karbala. Such a model includes the use of the southern Iraqi dialect in poetry and song, together with specific musical instruments and styles, costumes and artefacts used during the processions and dramatic performances, theatre techniques and methods of food preparation and distribution. Universal Shi‘i moral values of mourning and atonement are coloured with a distinct Arab ethos of bravery, honour and generosity, a fact already noted for the period between the late nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century with a focus on men.<sup>58</sup> Specific to Arab Shi‘ism, women, too, are participants in these rituals – especially in

---

<sup>53</sup> Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq*, pp. 146-151.

<sup>54</sup> See: Sabrina Mervin, ‘‘Ashura’’: Some Remarks on Ritual Practices in Different Shiite Communities (Lebanon and Syria),’ in Monsutti, Naef and Sabahi, *The Other Shiites*, pp. 137-148.

<sup>55</sup> See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/10/iran-ashoura-151025073737053.html>

<sup>56</sup> See: <http://www.imamali.net/?id=2506&sec=live>

<sup>57</sup> See: Sabine Kalinock, ‘Going on Pilgrimage Online. The Representation of the Twelver-Shia on the Internet,’ *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 2.1, 2006 (online).

<sup>58</sup> Nakash, ‘The Muharram Rituals and the Cult of the Saints,’ p. 117.

theatrical productions, as has also been reported in Lebanon in recent years.<sup>59</sup> In these plays, Zaynab is not only a role model because of her loyalty to the memory of Husayn, but also because she displays a female version of Arab courage and dignity. This Iraqi and more generally Arab model of 'Ashura, disseminated by the Shi'i media to the global Iraqi and Arab diaspora, is now incorporated in 'Ashura ceremonies in countries of emigration where these transnational communities distinguish themselves by national origin.<sup>60</sup> Arguably, the realism of the *tashabih* performances – their inclusiveness, grand scale, technical sophistication, and artistic modernity – gives them the potential for becoming expressive references at least amongst global Arab Shi'i communities, and possibly beyond.

---

<sup>59</sup> Mervin, 'Le théâtre chiite au Liban,' p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example: <http://en.abna24.com/service/pictorial/archive/2015/11/03/718314/story.html>