
From the Throes of Anguished Mourning

Shi'i Ritual Lamentation and the Pious Publics of Lebanon

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Drawing on a study of Shi'i ritual lamentation in Lebanon, this article examines how religious actors and pious publics employ literary, recitational, theatrical, and socio-technological methods to cultivate imaginal engagements with the other-worldly. These methods are analyzed, demonstrating how they locate pious Shi'is in religious meta-narratives that transcend the linearity of time, taking place simultaneously in the Elsewhere and in the here-and-now. I argue that this produces transposable and lasting dispositions that constitute the Shi'i self, immerses subjects in this-worldly-oriented modes of religiosity, and bestows upon Shi'i politics and the imagined community a profound emotional legitimacy. I posit that cultivated engagements with the Elsewhere are constitutive experiences in modes of religiosity that emphasize a symbiosis between human action and metaphysical intervention, thus complicating the question of agency and intentional action.

■ **KEYWORDS:** eschatology, Hezbollah, Islam, Lebanon, ritual practice, sectarianism, Shi'ism

Beirut, March 2017. "Labayka ya Nasrallah!"

The chants of "We are at thy service, O Nasrallah!" emanating from inside the Sayyida Zaynab Congregation Hall in Beirut's southern suburb of Ghobeiri interrupted the friendly chatter and neighborly banter. The youths gathered in the foyer and on the streets outside the hall hurried to take the last drag on their cigarettes, drink up their teas, and replace their restrained smiles with expressions of solemnity befitting the occasion. Other, more somber youths entered the hall from the adjacent Rawdat al-Shahidayn, a ceremonial cemetery reserved for Hezbollah fighters killed in battles against Israel and, more recently, in Syria. The streets leading to the funerary complex were cordoned off by concrete barricades and military checkpoints manned by Internal Security Forces, the Lebanese army, and Hezbollah special forces—a precaution that has altered socio-spatial life in Beirut's southern suburbs since 2015, when a series of attacks attributed to the Islamic State and its affiliates in Syria targeted Shi'i mosques in Beirut.¹

It was shortly before ten o'clock on a Thursday night in March 2017, the second of the Fatimid Nights and the eve of Friday, the Muslim weekly holy day. The chants, a proclamation



of allegiance to Hezbollah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, announced the beginning of the ritual lamentation ceremony and ushered members of the congregation into the ceremonial hall. Exacerbating the commotion caused at the doors by the hurried entry of some 400 young men, volunteers distributed red headbands bearing the Qur'anic verse, "Indeed, We have granted you, [O Muhammad], al-Kawthar" (108:1), which Shi'is interpret as a reference to Fatima, Prophet Muhammad's daughter.²

Members of the all-male congregation were predominantly young Shi'is between the age of thirteen and mid-to-late-thirties. Most of them attended Hezbollah's faith-based schools and frequented mosques aligned with its worldview. As the doors closed and the blood-red lights dimmed, the congregants gathered toward the center of the hall and kneeled around the slightly elevated podium, which the eulogy reciter (*radūd*, pl. *rawādīd*) ascended.³ Hussein Ayash, a Lebanese *radūd* in his mid-thirties, is closely associated with Hezbollah and its Islamic milieu in Lebanon and is also one of the resident *rawādīd* at the Sayyida Zaynab Hall.

Almost shyly, Ayash spoke into the microphone, instructing the congregants to invite God's blessings upon their congregation. Immediately, the commotion receded as congregants praised Prophet Muhammad in a melodic chant (*ṣalawāt*) repeated thrice. The ritual lamentation ceremony (*majlis*; pl. *majālis*) had commenced. Ayash inaugurated the *majlis* with a melancholic devotional supplication to al-Mahdi, Shi'is' twelfth and final imam and awaited messiah. Shi'is believe that al-Mahdi entered into a Major Occultation (*al-ghayba al-kubra*) in 941 CE, rendering him 'concealed' in the realm of *al-ghayb*, a pendant notion of the unknown and unseen. They also believe that his "ghostly presence" (P. Collins 2016: 113) in the realm of the this-worldly is most evident on the eve of Friday and on Muslim holy days.

Sung by Ayash and reverberated by his congregation, the devotional supplication is both a proclamation of their creedal faith in al-Mahdi's ghostly presence and an appeal to his (re)appearance (*zuhūr*) and fulfillment of divine redemption. For the following hours, the *majlis*, which had been convened in commemoration of the Fatimid Nights, entailed emotive recitations (*laṭmiya*, pl. *laṭmiyāt*) of lamentation poetry recounting what is believed to be an injustice done to Fatima by her husband's protagonists in the struggle for succession in 632 CE. Throughout the *majlis*, the *radūd* dramaturgically and theatrically orated the plight of Fatima and her saintly descendants, *ahl-ul-bayt*. Meanwhile, he and a retinue of enthusiastic youths scattered across the hall guided fellow congregants in performing a rhythmic and reticent chest-thumping (*laṭam*), providing a tenor or 'beat' accompanying the *laṭmiyāt*. In addition to their *laṭam*, congregants interacted with the sung orations of the tragedies that befell *ahl-ul-bayt* and the recitational techniques Ayash employed, going in and out of emotive states of lamentation, weeping, and enthusiasm.

However, it quickly becomes discernable that the congregation of assembled youths did not gather merely to commemorate an event from a distant hagiographic past; they gathered to immortalize a timeless battle against injustice that lies at the core of the Shi'i creed. In so doing, the epic events and saintly personages of hagiographic pasts and eschatological futures become more relatable to the present-day and this-worldly. In particular, the passions of youths gathered in the Sayyida Zaynab Hall are ignited by unambiguous references to current socio-political events. On the other hand, the recitation immortalizes revolutionary qualities attributed to the saintly martyrs of *ahl-ul-bayt* in ways that make them more relatable to members of the congregation, many of whom are Hezbollah conscripts or friends and relatives of fallen fighters. Feeling that they are in the ghostly presence of al-Mahdi on this eve of Friday and, crucially, identifying their own 'war on terror' in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as a continuation of *ahl-ul-bayt*'s struggle against injustice, congregants who took part in the *majlis* explained to me that they felt "as if [they] were finally united" with their saintly and other-worldly imams.

Furthermore, they said that they could relate the places described vividly in the poetic oration with modern-day battlefields in the Syrian war and hagiographic personages from the saga of *ahl-ul-bayt* with their comrades-in-arms. This relatability is made more vivid by the photographs of fallen comrades-in-arms that many of the congregants wore on their foreheads under the red headbands.

The ritual oration of the plight of *ahl-ul-bayt* brought congregants in and out of sensory-affective states of collective lamentation, excitement, and enthusiasm, and ignited their passions regarding present-day and this-worldly concerns of the here-and-now. Meanwhile, the collective performance of devotional supplications to al-Mahdi reminded them of the ghostly omnipresence of their other-worldly messianic redeemer. Together, this cultivated an imaginal sense of ‘being united’ with al-Mahdi and translated the religious Shi‘i meta-narrative into a performed imaginal and dialogical engagement with the occult and metaphysical Elsewhere. Thus, the congregants’ experiences and conceptualizations of the here-and-now were transformed. By conjuring experimental and imaginal engagements with the other-worldly, religious actors and pious publics cultivate pious selves and socialize subjects into this-worldly-oriented modes of Shi‘i religiosity.

This article is an inquiry into how sensory-affective states of ritual lamentation serve as a medium for the cultivation of pious subjectivities, community-oriented virtues, and affective ties. In particular, I am concerned with the role of the ritual eulogy reciter, *al-radūd*: How and to what effect does he (or she) curate ritually patterned sensory-affective experiences, which deliberately and sophisticatedly obfuscate the distinction between the occult and the profane and engage (with) the other-worldly? How do these ritually patterned experiences bestow upon Shi‘i politics and the imagined community a profound emotional legitimacy? And how does ritual lamentation cultivate an imposing political impetus, mobilizing pious Shi‘i subjects into the political and socio-religious life-world of the community?

Conceptually, I draw on scholarship concerned with the study of ritual, recognizing that social and political inter/actions are ritualistically staged and that, while ritual cultures might be symbolic in their methods, they apply to phenomena conventionally defined as the opposite of symbolic, for example, violence, governance, pluralism, nationalism (Geertz 1973: 30). Moreover, I share the viewpoint that the entrainment of emotional states through ritualized interactions is a fundamental mechanism of social life (R. Collins 2004). Therefore, I understand ritual practice as a “particular cultural strategy of differentiation” (Bell 1992: 8), which can serve as “a medium for the cultivation of community-oriented virtues” and “the creation of affective ties” (Erickson 2001: 122).

Intellectually and politically, my undertaking is indebted to the anthropology of Islam. In particular, Saba Mahmood’s (2005) work on Cairene women’s mosque study groups and Charles Hirschkind’s (2006) account of the effects of listening to tape-recorded sermons in Cairo inform my understanding of the cultivation of the modern, moral self. Similarly, Richard Gauvain’s (2013) analysis of Salafi ritual ablution and purity in two Cairene localities and Anna Gade’s (2004) and Julia D. Howell’s (2015) work on emotive Qur’an recitation in Southeast Asia offer valuable insights into how performances of revival rituals are articulated and structured in such a way that they communicate a certain set of meanings for the late-modern individual and her/his wider society. With reference to Shi‘i Islam, a number of scholarly works offer nuanced political and gendered accounts of Shi‘i religiosity and ritual practice (e.g., Aghaie 2004, 2005; Deeb 2005; Enayat [1982] 2005; Pinault 2001). Lara Deeb’s (2006) work on pious Shi‘i women loosely associated with Hezbollah in the southern suburbs of Beirut offers a remarkable ethnographic account of the co-constitutive relationship between politics and piety. In particular, she examines the ways in which politics and piety co-angulate, challenging enchanted forms of religion

and replacing them with modern and rational faith, thus creating new and variegated forms of ‘religiosity’ and ‘modernness’. Similarly, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb’s (2013) study of leisure among pious Shi’i youths in Beirut demonstrates the complex relationship between morality, geography, and youth cultures. Other studies call into question the relationship between Shi’i religiosity and political power, empire-making (Calmard 1996; Rahimi 2011; Yildirim 2015), and resistance (Dabashi 2008, 2011; Norton 2005), and expose the role that ritual practice plays in fractal identity politics and the politics of pluralism and differentiation (Masoudi Nejad 2012; Ruffle 2011).

Cultivating an Engagement with the Elsewhere

While this scholarly work has opened up new avenues to explore the complex entanglements of religiosities and modernities, I share Amira Mittermaier’s (2012) opinion that they engage only with a specific facet of contemporary Muslim religiosity and ritual cultures—namely, the piety movement. This mode of religiosity is particularly tied to the rhetoric of Muslim reformism, revisionism, and rationalism, foregrounding believers’ responsibility and tropes of self-cultivation while de-emphasizing or contesting imaginal encounters with the metaphysical and the possibilities of divine intervention. I agree with Mittermaier that this “erases from our view not only various non-religious sensibilities” and sensory regimes “but also other modes of religiosity” (ibid.: 250). However, I want to push this critique further, arguing that *cultivated* engagements with metaphysical Elsewheres can be constitutive experiences in processual constructions of pious-modern subjectivities. I have thus posited these engagements as practices integral to modes of religiosity centered on tropes of self-cultivation and premised on modernist and revisionist religious thinking.

In other words, I want to problematize the notion that agency is located either in the tradition and the believers or in the Divine, arguing that it is located simultaneously in both—or, more precisely, in their co-angulation and co-acting. I understand agency as the ability to act in and upon the world, “mak[ing] possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself” (Asad 2003: 78). Put differently, my understanding of agency inherits Talal Asad’s (2000) critique of liberal-individualist conceptions, delinking agency from the ideological quest for and celebration of conscious intention and self-empowerment. Instead, I acknowledge that agents often act in and upon a dangerous and painful world fraught with tribulations and precarity. Often, they act not out of a conscious intention free of the forces of habit and tradition, but out of contextual and circumstantial necessity. I push Asad’s critique further by decoupling agency from the precepts of triumphalist anthropocentric visions of history and extending the inquiry to account for the ability of not only humans but also non-human and superhuman agents to act. I contend that the world and the particular ways of relating to people, things, and (one)self are shaped by the co-angulation of the conscious and less-conscious actions of human subjects, non-human objects, and superhuman beings. In the case study presented, I demonstrate how the agency of pious Shi’i Muslims in Lebanon co-angulates with that of their other-worldly messiah, whose presence they cultivate through ritual lamentation ceremonies, such as the one described in this article. I argue that members of the pious Shi’i publics of Lebanon and their soteriological redeemer act together, shaping the dispositions of the community and its relation to the social worlds within which it exists.

I do so by calling into question the agentive ways in which Hussein Ayash and the Shi’i youths attending his ritual lamentation ceremony in Beirut *cultivate* the ghostly or metaphysical presence of persons from the Elsewhere (e.g., the awaited al-Mahdi, the saintly martyrs of

ahl-ul-bayt, and the fallen fighters of Hezbollah) and how this allows them to affect and be affected by pendant notions of the occult and other-worldly (e.g., the Almighty, the unknown, *al-ghayb* and *al-ghayba*). In so doing, I propose that sensationally popular ritual practices allow religious actors and pious publics to cultivate ritually patterned sensory-affective states of collective excitement that engage with the Elsewhere. I show that these cultivated engagements with the Elsewhere allow members of the pious public to be located (emplotted) and to emplot themselves (Gaiser 2017) in religious and creedal meta-narratives, imaginal experiences, and relationships of devotion and loyalty/disavowal (*al-walā' wa-l-barā'*) with saintly and other-worldly personages. Cultivated engagements with the Elsewhere can thus have socio-political afterlives that impel self-imposed and self-monitored participation and engagement in the life of the social group. In short, I will argue that cultivated engagements with the Elsewhere constitute a mode of socialization, cultivate an affective bond among group members, and promulgate community-oriented values suited for late-modern and post-secular settings. A moral and socio-political consequence of this process is the opening up of new possibilities of critiquing the present and imagining alternative futures (Kasmani 2017).

The Post-secular Pious Publics of the Islamic Resistance

Lebanon is home to a two million-strong Shi'i community, constituting somewhere between one-third and one-half of the country's total population.⁴ Although accounting for less than 2 percent of the world's Shi'i population (Pew Research Center 2009), Lebanese Shi'is play an important and growing role in the cultural and political life of the broader Shi'i world, a role far superseding their numerical size. This is due to the fact that Lebanon is home to a vibrant Shi'i milieu and public sphere made possible by its consociational political system and confessional political culture. Coalescing this milieu is Hezbollah, arguably the most established Shi'i political movement and socio-cultural and geopolitical actor in the region. Lebanon has also become a hub for institutional, clerical, and philanthropic networks and the cultural-artistic epicenter of a vibrant transnational Shi'i mediascape.

However, pervasive religiosity and transnational religion among Lebanese Shi'is must be understood in relation to the community's historical encounter with what Anthony Giddens (1990: 4) calls the transformative "set of discontinuities, associated with the modern period." Annexed to Lebanon in 1920, large swaths of Shi'i Muslims residing in the Beqaa valley and modern-day south Lebanon were unfavorably incorporated into Beirut's capitalist system of production. Although disadvantaged in its encounter with modernity, Lebanon's Shi'i community underwent profound social reorganization shaped by the country's modern political system and confessional underpinnings. This reorganization involved the invention of 'the Shi'a', a modern social category and form of political organization deeply intertwined with the organizational manifestations and institutional clusterings of Lebanese modernity—the nation-state and 'the sect' (*al-tā'ifa*).⁵ Indeed, the institutionalization of the sect and the clientelistic reliance on community- and faith-based organizations allowed religion to retain control over the law, public welfare, and education in Lebanon. However, sectarianism and religion in Lebanon are not synonymous with piety or religiosity (Joseph 2008), and sectarian persons do not necessarily subscribe to creedal dogmas (Ofeish 1999). The Shi'i community's encounter with the discontinuities of the modern period in Lebanon promulgated a disenchanting anthropocentric understanding of the world, one that was often irreconcilable with theocentric and metaphysical worldviews. It might be true that religious ties did not 'dramatically lapse' as they did in the affluent post-secular societies that Jürgen Habermas (2008) speaks of. But Shi'i Muslims' ties to

and experiences of religion were profoundly altered while ‘the religious’ itself changed in nature and lost much of its relationship with the metaphysical.

Nonetheless, the vulnerability of the Shi‘a to the contingencies of modernity resulted in widespread disillusionment with the epistemological meta-narratives of secular modernity and its promises of humanely engineered progress and existential security (Giddens 1990; Habermas 2008; Lyotard 1985). Consequently, the Lebanese Shi‘a—like others around the globe—witnessed a ‘crisis of faith’ in the “ideological quasi-religious project” of secular modernity “that claimed an integrated vision of the world and man” (Kyrlezhev 2008: 25). Consequent to this ‘loss of faith’ was a resurgence of religion beyond the realm of the private sphere and the administration of the means of salvation. By remystifying the world (Morozov 2008) and reinstating faith in the power of the cosmic, religion offered Lebanese Shi‘i Muslims a means to make sense of and cope with their fraught and dangerous world. This amounted to what scholars consider a cultural counter-revolution marking ‘the start of a post-secular age’. A consequence of this is that religion assumed new importance as a marker of identity and a symbol of being ‘authentic’ and belonging to a ‘tradition’ (albeit an invented one) and not a mere embodiment of superstition (Kyrlezhev 2008).

For the Lebanese Shi‘a, this coincided with a regionwide and cross-denominational ‘Islamic awakening’ as well as with the rise to prominence of a militant and revolutionary fervor in the Shi‘i seminaries since the mid-twentieth century. By the mid-1980s, a coterie of Lebanese junior *shaykhs* had socialized into transnational Shi‘i revisionism and, inspired by the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, had embarked on articulating a holistic political project in Lebanon dubbed the Islamic Resistance, or simply *al-Muqāwama* (the Resistance). The forefathers of this project envisioned it as a “conscious and comprehensive social experience” shaping the worldviews and everyday lives of its broader society, or, in the words of Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Shaykh Naim Qassim (2007), as “not a *muqāwama* of the fighting few, but a *muqāwama* of the whole *ummah*.” Defining the social milieu and everyday life experiences of the Resistance is what the militant *shaykhs* of Lebanon dubbed *al-ḥāla al-islāmiya*, the Islamic ‘state of being’, a social movement that combines its emphasis on Islamic doctrine with an emphasis on individual piety and observance of a vigorous Islamic lifestyle. Crucially, this comprehensive social experience is indebted to a revisionist political theology. This theology is premised on the belief that injustice and oppression are not predestined to remain for the duration of the Major Occultation; rather, justice and equality can be restored through human action, that is, through resistance and revolution. In other words, the Islamic awakening as encountered by Lebanon’s Shi‘a does not substitute the anthropocentric worldview of secular modernity with a theocentric worldview whereby salvation and redemption are consigned to the realm of the eschatological. Instead, it invites members of the pious publics of the *Muqāwama* to cultivate themselves while also engaging with their imam and other-worldly redeemer. Only then can pious Shi‘i Muslims resist the tribulations of the modern era and bring about a different future. Indispensable in this worldview are the efforts of youths educated and socialized into the Islamic milieu and indoctrinated with the political theology of the Resistance. A representative sample of those youths gathered at the Sayyida Zaynab Hall in Beirut on that eve of Friday.

In what follows, I describe and analyze the multi-sensorial experience of collective ritual lamentation based on my immediate impressions. The analysis presented also draws on post-experience analysis and ethnographic reflections voiced during sessions with a group of interlocuters—the friends with whom I frequented the Sayyida Zaynab Hall. In our group discussions, we tried to understand, analyze, and synthesize our experiences, thoughts, and feelings. We shared our observations and impressions of the (re)actions of ritual conveners and participants during and after the ritual ceremony: how and how quickly members of the

congregation—including ourselves—respond to the sensorial stimuli, cultural references, and socio-technologies employed in the ceremony. Together we made sense of the sensory-affective experience by looking for the cues that point to the intention, meaning, and repercussions of the conscious and less-conscious actions of ritual conveners and participants.

Setting the Scene

The congregation hall is named after Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter Zaynab, whose shrine in Damascus ignites the passions of Shi'is worldwide and mobilizes their support for a Holy Defense against the Islamic State and its affiliates in Syria. The hall's decor is customized according to the event. The events ranged from ritual lamentation *majālis* and funerary services for fallen fighters to mobilizational partisan meetings and festive religious and political occurrences. For the purpose of the Fatimid Nights, the hall was deliberately decorated in a manner that aesthetically evoked sensational imaginaries of martyrdom, sacrifice, and the inevitable "victory of blood over the sword," a creedal narrative central to what Michael Fischer (1980) calls 'the Karbala paradigm.' In addition to the dim blood-red lighting and religious posters and banners adorning its walls, the hall was equipped with a blasting sound system installed to intensify sonic and sensory-affective experiences of collective lamentation.

Screens mounted on the walls alternated between a karaoke-style lyrical display (intended to familiarize the congregation with the elegiac ode and thus allow them to participate in the performance) and self-nesting footage of the *majlis*. The latter is a particularly new and curious tool that ritual organizers employ to produce a digital and visual *mise en abyme*. The digital intervention itself is an attempt at cultivating an affective tie between members of the congregation as they watch themselves in the performative state of ritual lamentation while also emplotting them visually into the mournful saga that the *majlis* commemorates. In other ritual gatherings I attended, screens showed live or recorded footage from similar *majālis* in faraway lands. This creates a translocal *mise en abyme* emplotting the congregation not only in the saga of Prophet Muhammad's saintly descendants (*ahl-ul-bayt*), but also in a broader and globally imagined Shi'i universe whose life-worlds extend far beyond their proximal and immediate surroundings.

More proximally, Hussein Ayash stood on a slightly elevated podium in the middle of the hall. Behind him, a banner with a calligraphic inscription of a supplication to Fatima, "Yā Fatima az-Zahra," sat between two arabesque ornaments with the second and third segments of the three-part Shi'i profession of the creed (*shahāda*)—that "Muhammad rasūl Allah" (Muhammad is the Messenger of God) and that "Ali walī Allah" (Ali is His Vicegerent). The elevated front stage was occupied by the cameramen and digital media crews responsible for providing video material for Hezbollah's Al-Manar television station, the social media portals of al-Rawdatayn Association, and a plethora of pan-Shi'i satellite channels broadcasting worldwide. Ornamenting the stage were portraits of Khomeini and Khamenei, the former and incumbent Supreme Leaders of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The portraits hung above larger-than-life posters of Husayn's shrine in Karbala and Zaynab's in Damascus.

In addition to being one of the resident reciters at the Sayyida Zaynab Hall, Ayash performs *majālis* at Shi'i mosques and community centers (*husayniyāt*) throughout Lebanon and accompanies pilgrims on tour packages operated by Lebanese travel agencies to the shrines of the early Shi'i imams in Iraq and Iran. He also performs ritual recitations at political rallies organized by Hezbollah and attended, in person or via webcam, by its leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Besides his association with the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon, Ayash is popular among Shi'i youths due to his ability to integrate into his recitations non-traditional lyrical forms and pop-culture rhythms

and performative traditions vernacular to Lebanon and attuned to the sensibilities of a younger generation of Lebanese Shi'i Muslims.

From the Throes of Anguished Mourning

Reaching out to their concealed Mahdi and conjuring his ghostly presence, the supplication with which Ayash commenced the *majlis* reminded the congregation that they are not only in a union with one another but also in an imaginal union with the metaphysical realm of *al-ghayb*. Acting as the orator of the saga of *ahl-ul-bayt* as well as the curator of the emotive experience of ritual lamentation, Ayash invited the congregation to interact with the supplication. As they collectively pleaded to al-Mahdi, the congregants' rhythmic chest-thumping filled the hall with a pounding echo and provided a tenor and rhythm to accompany Ayash's recitation of the night's elegiac ode.

The lyrical stanza—with which Ayash sought to cultivate an affective bond between his congregation, *ahl-ul-bayt*, and al-Mahdi—is written in the form of a monologue in which their awaited messiah praises the central figure of that night's tragic saga, Fatima, al-Mahdi's ancestral mother and Prophet Muhammad's daughter:

My mother, Fatima, is the ultimate of Allah's sacred mysteries;
 My mother, Fatima, is the utmost prodigy of Almighty Allah;
 My mother, Fatima, is a praise uttered by [Allah's] throne and the universe;
 My mother, Fatima, Her partisans [*shī'a*] are vengeful like hellfire.⁶

Reminding the audience that they, the Shi'a, are destined to be revolutionaries, these verses instigated a collective outcry and another supplication to the concealed messiah. Denouncing the injustice done to al-Mahdi's ancestral mother and pleading that he grace them with his presence, they chanted along with the *radūd*:

Grace our *majlis* with your presence, O son of al-Mukhtār!⁷
 Let us lament together the tragedy of Fatima;
 Let us recount how she was done injustice to,
 and how she pleaded for help, crying "O, Karrār."⁸

Having brought members of the congregation to the throes of anguished mourning, Ayash ignited their passions further with a desperate plea to their other-worldly messiah: "Yā thār āāl-il-llāh." Literally meaning "O! Avenger of the family of God," the outcry is a reference to al-Mahdi's Second Coming, an eschatological prophecy that promises to avenge the household of Prophet Muhammad and thus restore universal justice. Noteworthy, Shi'i liturgy recounts injustices committed against *ahl-ul-bayt* not as historical events from a distant hagiographic past, but as an embodiment of injustice in an abstract sense that transcends time and space. In other words, when Ayash orates the tragedy of Fatima and leads his congregation as they plead for al-Mahdi's Second Coming, they do so in relation to an unjust present they aspire to change and an alternative future they seek to install.

The verses with which Ayash then proceeded demonstrate more vividly how Shi'i ritual lamentation collapses past, present, and future into a state of temporal liminality:

How is it that injustice can reign upon us and inflict such pain?
 We approach you [O, Mahdi] on foot, bleeding, out of sheer affection;
 For, how many noblemen have been slain,

and how many free hearts have been crushed!
Our souls are like Muslim [ibn Aqeel] and our times are akin to Kufa.

The lyrical stanza is the opening couplet of an elegy (*qaṣīda*) by Nour Ameli, a Lebanese poet whose poems feature in recitations by a coterie of Lebanese, Arab, and Iranian *rawādīd* sharing an allegiance to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Supreme Leadership of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The stanza compares modern-day injustices with the tragic fate of Muslim ibn Aqeel, Husayn's cousin and messenger to Kufa in modern-day Iraq. Abandoned by the treacherous Kufans, Muslim, who had been sent to rally support for Husayn's rebellion, was murdered by Yazid's governor, Ubaid-Allah ibn Ziyad. His martyrdom in the days preceding the epic Battle of Karbala in 680 CE is considered the inciting incident of the three-act drama of Karbala. The underlying message of Ameli's poem is explicit: like Husayn, modern-day Shi'is adhering to the worldview of the Resistance are committed to fighting injustice despite the pains inflicted upon them. However, like Muslim, they are repeatedly betrayed by the faint-hearted and treacherous rulers of a contemporary Middle East akin to Kufa.

Melancholic as this focus on death and betrayal may seem to the uninitiated, these verses ignited a brace of faster-paced chest-thumping, *laṭam*, generating a thundering sonic associated with the paradigmatic focus of the Islamic Resistance (*al-Muqāwama*) on persistence and resilience. Alongside their astounding chest-thumping, congregants addressed al-Mahdi, engaging more vividly with his imaginal presence:

It is reported that you are present on the eve of Friday;
that you are all-observing of your loyalists' deeds;
and that your eyes tear [with elation and grace].

The *qaṣīda* continued, recounting the revolutionary qualities personified by the awaited messiah, interjected by verses making direct reference to contemporary geopolitics in the Middle East. In one instance, Ayash chanted, in a melancholic-but-solemn tenor, a couplet eluding to the war in Syria and attempted assaults on Zaynab's shrine in Damascus by anti-Shi'i factions:

Day and night, she weeps;
her heart bleeds.
Our wounded Zaynab calls upon you;
Avenge me!
...
O, awe-inspiring Mahdi and our [source of] peace;
we are your orphaned servants.
In your name, we defend our Islam;
from the usurping Saudi clan.

The *qaṣīda* was once again unclear about whether Zaynab's plea for help was being directed toward al-Mahdi or Ayash's congregation. To be sure, this ambiguity is not haphazard. The boundary between al-Mahdi's millennialist army of 313 warriors and Hezbollah is intentionally blurred. The blurring evokes a tenet central to the revisionist thinking that informs the Shi'i piety movement—that eschatological redemption does not *come to* the faithful but is *immanentized through* their commitment to resistance and revolution. While the poem emplots members of Hezbollah's pious public in this eschatological narrative, the bodies and garments of the youths gathered for the *majlis* become tools at their disposal, allowing them to emplot themselves further and navigate the roles they choose to play in the plot. In a most literal and visceral sense, some of the congregants bore the eschatological number 313 and the word *rāfiḍī*⁹ imprinted on

their black T-shirts or tattooed on their upper bodies alongside pictorial symbols inspired by the early Shi'i imams and modern-day religious and political leaders.

Concluding the *majlis* and bringing the sensory-affective experience to a breathtaking crescendo, Ayash invited the congregation to make an oath of allegiance to their concealed Mahdi. "Let us, the loyal sons of Hezbollah, renew our allegiance," he instructed. Responding to his appeal, the congregation emerged from the throes of anguished mourning and pleaded in unison: "Yā thār āāl-il-llāh, hasten [your Second Coming]! Redeem our souls."

In a finale befitting of the ceremony, congregants raised photographs of relatives and friends killed fighting in the Syrian war or in battles against Israel alongside posters of Hezbollah leaders and Iran's Supreme Leader while chanting slogans associated with Hezbollah's political rallies: "Al-mawt li-āāl-Saud" (Death to the House of Saud!); "Al-mawt li-Israel" (Death to Israel). Declaring the end of the ritual congregation and ensuring that the distinction between the other-worldly and the here-and-now was blurred beyond the *majlis*, the youths avowed allegiance to Husayn, Zaynab, and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah with chants that slowly faded into friendly banter and banal neighborly chatter: "Labayka ya Husayn!" (We are at thy service, Husayn!), "Labayki ya Zaynab!" and "Labayka ya Nasrallah!"

A Mise en Abyme of Multiple Emplotments

Alongside its unambiguous political references, what characterizes the *majlis* I have presented is its theatrical and dramaturgical staging. In a demeanor transformed and reinvented, but not entirely uncommon to Shi'i ritual lamentation, Hussein Ayash's *majlis* locates members of the congregation and allows them to locate themselves in a long and eventful meta-narrative that takes place simultaneously in the this- and other-worldly. In addition to transcending the linearity of time, this meta-narrative transforms friends and relatives conscripted in the Holy Defense or killed in Syria into contemporaries of Husayn, in the past, and al-Mahdi, in the future. The youths themselves become postulants, ready to partake in present-or-future episodes of the timeless Karbala saga. Performatively, the congregation becomes intrinsically co-constitutive of the dramaturgical scenes re-enacted and performed in the *latmiya* through its members' interactive chest-thumping, rhythmic heavy breathing, and choral recitation. To be sure, this ritually patterned experience is carefully staged and cultivated through purposefully curated sense-aesthetics and sophisticated socio-technologies as well as the immersive sensory-affective techniques employed by the *radūd*.

The political affect of the *majlis* is astounding: past, present, and future are collapsed. Syria becomes a modern-day Karbala. The Sayyida Zaynab Hall, as well as congregants' chests and sweaty bodies, become a stage upon which the saga of *ahl-ul-bayt* is enacted and embodied. Husayn, al-Mahdi, and their past-and-future companions become as familiar to the congregants as friends, neighbors, and relatives fighting in Syria and Iraq. In short, the *majlis* reinterprets time and space and gives new relevance to the saying "every day is Ashura, and every land is Karbala," a tenet central to activist modes of religiosity inspired by Shi'i revisionist thinking. Moreover, the *majlis* exhibits two important sensory-affective features crucial to the cultivation of the imaginal experience, which, in turn, contributes to the cultivation of pious subjects and mobilizes them into identification with the religious meta-narrative and imagined community. First, the purveyor skillfully employs immersive and participatory techniques that break down the 'fourth wall' separating audience and performance. This Brechtian staging transforms the congregants from spectators to 'spect-actors' and thus invests in the *majlis* a power to elicit action from the community of congregants and beyond. In addition, the physical positionality of the *radūd*, standing on a

podium only slightly elevated and located in the center of the congregation, allows congregants to observe one another and not only the purveyor. This theatrical setting, or frantic assembly, allows congregants to avoid being passive observers or members of an audience that *reacts* to the performance; it allows them to *interact* as fully immersed co-constitutive spect-actors in the ritual *majlis*. Immersing them further in the experience of ritual lamentation, the real-time self-nesting footage displayed on mounted screens locates the congregation digitally and visually in the epic plot.

Together, Nour Ameli's poem, Hussein Ayash's recitation, the staging, and the sense-aesthetics and socio-technologies employed by the ritual organizers co-angulate, creating a *mise en abyme* of multiple emplotments—literary, theatrical/performative, and digital/visual. These emplotments transform members of Hezbollah's pious public into postulants, immerses them in the trans-temporal saga of *ahl-ul-bayt*, and cultivates an affective tie between them as well as between the congregation and the saintly figures of the Shi'i meta-narrative—Fatima, Husayn, Zaynab, and al-Mahdi. Adorning their foreheads with photographs of friends and comrades killed in Syria, the youths who participated in the *majlis* complicate the scene further by emplotting their 'living dead', the martyrs of Hezbollah, in the long and eventful narrative. Moreover, conjuring the ghostly omnipresence of al-Mahdi, the *majlis* immerses members of the congregation in an imaginal engagement with the realm of *al-ghayb*—an Elsewhere. This immersion cultivates transcendental experiences, where pious Shi'i Muslims locate themselves in a religious meta-narrative and belong to an imagined community that spans the this- and other-worldly and brings them into communion with God, the Prophet, his saintly descendants, al-Mahdi, and Hezbollah's living dead (the martyrs).

From the Throes of Anguished Mourning to Post-secular Modes of Socialization

These *cultivated* engagements with the Elsewhere have multiple social and political afterlives. As scholars of Islamic piety movements have aptly argued, they allow pious subjects to hone their "affective-volitional dispositions" or "ways of the heart" (Hirschkind 2006: 9) and attune their "visceral modes of appraisal" (Connolly 1999: 27). A consequence of this is the cultivation of pious subjects whose hearts and bodies are inclined toward moral conduct. While these approaches foreground the believer's responsibility and emphasizes her/his agency, ritual *majālis* like the one I have presented do not de-emphasize the possibility of divine intervention, nor do they contest or dismiss engagements with the metaphysical. It is precisely by cultivating an imaginal engagement with the Elsewhere that ritual lamentation socializes members of the Shi'i pious public into the religious life-world of the community and renders the worldly and other-worldly intrinsically and even inseparably entangled.

It is important to note here that unlike Mittermaier's (2012) "Dreams from Elsewhere," members of Hezbollah's pious public are not acted upon by the Divine through received visions. They actively *cultivate* their engagement with the metaphysical. The purveyors of the Karbala paradigm—the poets, *rawādīd*, and ritual organizers and mediatizers—employ an ever-growing toolkit of literary, recitational, theatrical, and socio-technological methods. They do so in order to cultivate sensory-affective experiences that immerse devotees in a state of imaginal union or 'unitedness' with the metaphysical and emplot them in the paradigmatic meta-narrative. Meanwhile, by becoming intrinsically co-constitutive of the *majlis*, devotees emplot themselves further in a grand meta-narrative that transcends the linearity of time and the boundaries between the this- and other-worldly. This cultivated experience allows members of the pious public to enter into an imaginal state of companionship and contemporaneity with *ahl-ul-bayt* and al-Mahdi

that is not experienced or perceived as merely figurative or poetic.¹⁰ This imaginal state bestows upon religious actors and the community a profound emotive power and legitimacy. After all, it is an imagined community that coalesces not only members of the pious public and the global Shi'i world, but also God, the Prophet, *ahl-ul-bayt*, and al-Mahdi.

The cultivation of an imaginal unison with the Elsewhere, as exemplified by the *majlis*, complicates the hegemonic paradigm of self-cultivation and makes the question of agency and intentional action among members of post-secular pious publics an even trickier subject. Indeed, the multiple emplotments experienced by youths in the Sayyida Zaynab Hall shift the devotees away from anthropocentric worldviews premised on humanly engineered progress. However, it promulgates a post-secular worldview premised not on theocentrism but on a symbiosis between human action and metaphysical intervention. Put differently, the imaginal engagements cultivated through ritual lamentation do not shift agency away from the believer and the Karbala paradigm to the Divine; instead, they intertwine the community of believers and al-Mahdi, their concealed imam, in a meta-narrative of co-action and thus shared agency. The former commits to live and act in a manner that paves the way for the (re)appearance of the messiah, while the latter acts as their ghostly guardian, ensuring their victory, enabling redemption, and restoring universal justice.

Conclusion

This article is not intended as a reductionist religio-culturalist reading of Shi'i ritual lamentation, nor does it understate its spiritual significance for pious Shi'i Muslims by folklorizing or, conversely, overpoliticizing the analysis. Instead, it is an inquiry into the agentive ways in which religious actors and pious publics engage with the ghostly and other-worldly. I have demonstrated that Shi'i ritual lamentation makes sense of and mobilizes for the here-and-now by collapsing the temporal gap between hagiographic pasts, eschatological futures, and the present. I have also illustrated how the *radūd* took his congregation into a place of ecstasy and elation through emotive orations of the plight of *ahl-ul-bayt* and enthusiastic supplications to al-Mahdi, allowing pious Shi'i Muslims to characterize and critique the injustices of the here-and-now. However, as a curator of the social drama, he also brought them from the throes of anguished mourning into a purposeful mode of socialization and even militant politicization.

This invites us to consider the social and political afterlives of ritually patterned experiences more seriously and calls for a systematic inquiry into how religious ritual practice constitutes 'a social drama'—a process of converting community-oriented values, worldviews, and social and political ends, distributed over a range of actors, into a system of shared or consensual meaning (Turner 1979: 92) through dialogical modes of communication (Classen 1997).

In short, I have argued that Shi'i ritual lamentation entails a series of entrained and emotionally charged interactions that engage with pendant notions of the Elsewhere and cultivate imaginal experiences of unitedness with the other-worldly. Over time, these ritually patterned interactions produce transposable and lasting dispositions attuned to the objectives of religious actors and pious publics. Thus, they constitute the pious Shi'i self and immerse pious subjects in modes of religiosity that are, at once, this- and other-worldly oriented. Moreover, Shi'i ritual lamentation reveals how dialogical processes (of thinking, speaking, listening, and responding) take place between members of the community of believers, between the social group and its Other(s), as well as between devotees and the other-worldly realms of the saintly, the dead (or martyred), and the eschatological.

This further complicates hegemonic tropes of self-cultivation while also problematizing the notion that agency is located either in the tradition and the pious subjects or in the Divine, and

that modes of religiosity either foreground the believer's responsibility or emphasize the possibilities of divine and metaphysical intervention. Instead, I have demonstrated that Shi'i ritual lamentation intertwines reformist notions of self-cultivation and human action with cultivated and curated imaginal engagements with the metaphysical. Together, the two co-angulate and co-act, wedding tropes and modes of socialization characteristic of post-secular contexts (e.g., nationalism, sectarianism, counter-terrorism, contentious politics) with ritual performances that affect and are affected by the Elsewhere.

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■ NOTES

1. I use 'Shi'i', the adjective form derived from Arabic, to denote an attribute of a proper or common noun. This article examines how Shi'i rituals, beliefs, and experiences affect Shi'i individuals and communities. Therefore, I intentionally avoid using '(the) Shi'a', a commonplace expression used in English-language scholarship both as a noun and an adjective. Derived from the Arabic noun al-Shi'a, I only use 'Shi'a', singularized and capitalized, with a definite article as a reference to *the* (Shi'i) community, a constructed social category with a particular political implication. I use 'Shi'ism' as a noun formation referring to the faith. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
2. This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Lebanon in 2017. The arguments presented are informed by over 10 years of ethnographic research on Shi'i piety and politics in Lebanon, the Middle East, and the diaspora.
3. Due to the article's focus on Lebanon, the terms used by Lebanese Shi'is for religious and ritual practices are used here. Translations, transliterations, and didactics are provided from Arabic and the Lebanese colloquial. These may differ from the terms used by Arabic-speaking Shi'i communities in Iraq and the Persian Gulf and the terms prevalent in Iran and Central and South Asia, where Farsi, Urdu, and other native and hybrid languages prevail.
4. No official population census is provided by the government of Lebanon regarding the numerical size of confessional communities. Conducted in 1932 by French Mandatory Authorities, the last census estimated Shi'i Muslims to be 20 percent of the total population. Recent studies conducted by international and private organizations and fact tanks put the number somewhere between 40 percent and 55 percent of the total population, making Shi'i Muslims the single largest confessional community in Lebanon (see Levinson 1998).
5. Ussama Makdisi (2000) convincingly argues that sectarianism is a deliberate mobilization of religious identities and a manifestation of modernity.

6. The English translation of the Arabic ode is based on my understanding and interpretation of the meaning and lyrical forms used in the text. To stay true to the religious and cultural references, these are not always literal verbatim translations.
7. Al-Mukhtār (the Chosen) is an epithet of Prophet Muhammad.
8. (Haydar) al-Karrār is an epithet of Imam Ali and a reference to his bravery in battle.
9. *Rāfiḍī*, literally ‘rejectionist’, is historically a derogatory reference to Shi‘i Muslims’ alleged disloyalty to the caliphs and the early Muslim empire. The term was appropriated by twentieth-century Shi‘i revolutionaries, transforming it into a profession of their rejection of and defiance toward marginalization and oppression.
10. None of the congregants I spoke to claimed to have experienced supernatural or out-of-body transcendence. However, many of them recounted how they *felt* “touched” or “affected” by their imaginal experience of “unitedness” with al-Mahdi. Some claimed to have *felt* “a breeze” or *saw* “a sign”; others said that the midnight “sky look[ed] more heavenly”—all of which are understood as indications of al-Mahdi’s ghostly presence.

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