

# Invisible and Visible Shi'a

## *Ashura, State and Society in Kuwait*

Thomas Fibiger

---

**Abstract:** The Twelver Shi'a in Kuwait constitute a minority amongst the country's population. Compared to the situation of Shi'a in the region, they enjoy a good position economically and politically. While this political aspect of their identity frequently has been highlighted in scholarly literature, little has been written about how Shi'a ritual life relates to the political and economic spheres of social life. In this article, I discuss the performance of the annual Shi'a *Ashura* ritual in relation to the political status of the Shi'as in Kuwait. I show that the Shi'as' public enactment of the ritual is multifaceted and revolves around the issue of ritual visibility. Ritual performance demonstrates compliance with as well as contestations of state authorities' identity policy regarding religion and nationality, contestations within the Shi'a community, and contentions in relation to other groups in Kuwait.

**Keywords:** Ashura, Kuwait, *marja'iyya*, minority, politics, Shi'a Islam

---

The Twelver Shi'a commemoration of Ashura – the day of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Imam Husayn's martyrdom in the Battle of Karbala (680 CE [61 AH]) – is in the academic literature often seen as a ritual of political mobilisation and regime critique (Dabashi 2011 (Iran); Deeb 2006 (Lebanon); Fibiger 2010 (Bahrain), promoting a social narrative focussed on rebellion against unjust rulers. In contemporary Kuwait, the Shi'a minority community is instead described as being 'in the ambit of the state' (Louër 2008: 45), supportive of and supported by the Sunni Al Sabah regime. Little is, however, written about this topic from the perspective of ritual performance on Ashura.

Based on ethnographic observations of Ashura rituals in 2013, I discuss in this article how the Shi'a in Kuwait relate to state authorities' expectations regarding Shi'a visibility in the public, that is, that Ashura processions and



other Shi'a rituals should not be performed in the streets but instead remain invisible. I demonstrate that the Shi'as' enactment of the rituals in this regard is multifaceted. Some Shi'a groups choose to comply with the state and practise 'ritual invisibility', whereas other groups challenge such limitation put on their religious freedom and perform rituals in public, practising 'ritual visibility'. There is thus in Kuwait internal Shi'a disagreements regarding the public visualisation of their religious identity. In pursuing this disagreement, I examine how the various Shi'a groups' public expression of Ashura can be interpreted as relating to and engaging with ongoing discussions between various social and religious groups in Kuwaiti society. Again, I demonstrate that these discussions are multifaceted. One debate takes place within the Shi'a community itself and deals with differences in opinions held by followers of various Shi'a religious leaders, *marja'i*, regarding ritual and politics. Another deliberation runs between Shi'a and Sunni groups portrayed by the Shi'a as intolerant 'Wahhabi'.

Analysing different viewpoints and areas of contestation, I argue that most Shi'a try to steer clear of turning Ashura and their Shi'a identity into a political issue. In the process, their efforts, nevertheless, point to the presence of conflictual relations, and therefore political issues, within Shi'a groups as well as between Shi'a and non-Shi'a groups in Kuwait. What is political and how it is demarcated are central questions I discuss throughout the article. In this way, my aim is to nuance and refine our understanding of the Shi'a in Kuwait as being 'in the ambit of the state'. While this is undoubtedly the case, what defines this ambit is not always obvious.

## The Shi'a in Kuwait

During fieldwork in Kuwait in 2013, focussing on Shi'a identity and in particular the role of *marja'iyya* ('religious authority'), I observed Ashura rituals of commemoration by visiting various *husayniyyat* (Shi'a congregational halls, sing. *husayniyya*), particularly in the neighbourhoods of Bneid al-Gar and Da'iya in Kuwait City.<sup>1</sup> Bneid al-Gar is home to a number of *husayniyyat* built shortly after Kuwait City began to expand beyond the walls of the old town, around 1960, while Da'iya hosts some newer *husayniyyat* which today are amongst the most popular in Kuwait. Some of these, like Husayniyya bu Hamad and Husayniyya Karbalaiyya, which can host hundreds of visitors, are affiliated with the somewhat controversial *marja'* line of Muhammad al-Shirazi (d. 2001), whose son Sadeq is now the *marja'* ('source of imitation', 'source to follow') residing in Qom in Iran. Originally from Iran, Muhammad al-Shirazi used to teach in Karbala. After being expelled from Iraq during Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1970s he lived for some years in Kuwait before returning to Iran. In Iran, he took part in the Islamic Revolution but later voiced opposition to Ayatollah Khomeini and his new doctrine about

the supreme political authority to be held by a supreme religious authority (*wilayat al-faqih*). Al-Shirazi's thoughts have significantly influenced the Shi'a in Kuwait, although not in the politicised manner observed in Iraq and Iran (Louër 2012). A key idea is rather to be critical of the Iranian model of an Islamic revolution, which many Shi'a in Kuwait find to be a corruption of Islamic ideas. 'If leaders in Iran should choose between their own power and Husayn's way', I was told repeatedly, 'they would choose their own power'. This insistence on sticking with 'Husayn's way' demonstrates the manner of devotion found amongst many Shi'a in Kuwait. Ashura rituals should commemorate Husayn and his message, but not in a politicised manner.

It is estimated that around 25 per cent of Kuwait's national population of 1.3 million are Shi'a.<sup>2</sup> Most Shi'a are Arab (ethnically distinguished as Hasawi, from the Hasa oasis region on the Arabian Peninsula; Baharna, from the coast of Eastern Arabia; or Iraqi, while some have Persian descent and are known locally as 'Ajam, non-Arab). Compared to neighbouring countries the Kuwaiti Shi'a have enjoyed a good relationship to rulers and better economic and political integration. The Shi'a identity is less visible in everyday life than in neighbouring Iraq, Bahrain, and Iran. In her magisterial study of Shi'a political identity in the Gulf countries, Laurence Louër (2008) has described the Shi'a in Kuwait as very complicit and well positioned in the Kuwaiti state, a situation much different from the Shi'as' position in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Graham Fuller and Remd Francke have, moreover, singled out Kuwait as 'the one success story' of the Shi'a in the Arab world (1999: 155; notably before the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq). The Shi'as' position in Kuwait is due to the country's history of state formation where Shi'a groups allied with the Al Sabah rulers vis-à-vis other groups such as the Bedouin Arabs. The social dichotomy between Hadhar – that is, the urban Sunni and Shi'a population – and Badu – that is, Sunni nomadic tribes – is still as important in Kuwait as the sectarian Sunni–Shi'a dichotomy (Al-Nakib 2014; Longva 2006; Matthiesen 2015; Potter 2013; Wehrey 2013). The Kuwaiti business and administrative elites are predominantly Hadhar. The Kuwaiti interlocutors for this article were Hadhar – in my own assessment, from the middle and upper middle classes. They were generally sceptical of Badu Sunnis, amongst whom they thought Wahhabi puritan and anti-Shi'a currents were widespread. Importantly, they were not critical towards Sunnis as such but towards those they termed 'Wahhabi'.<sup>3</sup>

The season of Muharram and the holy day of Ashura are the occasions for contestations to be played out regarding Shi'a (in)visibility in Kuwait. While street processions are not allowed, contrary to Bahrain (Doherty 2017; Fuccaro 2009) and present-day Iraq (Chatelard 2017; Haddad 2011), people flock to the *husayniyyat* during the first ten days of Muharram. Some venues also provide seating outdoors. In addition, there are stalls for food, drinks, exhibitions and merchandise. Some groups in Kuwait argue against such public displays of Shi'a identity and have sought to prevent it. Ashura is therefore a time for collective identity to be put on display and a time of socio-religious tension.

## Ashura in Kuwait

Shi'a Islam is often described as 'a religion of protest' (Dabashi 2011). However, as Hamid Dabashi points out, this is a one-sided image, in part also a neo-colonial portrayal of Shi'a against Sunni, and Shi'a against the West, that is particularly connected to a perception of the Islamic Republic of Iran as posing a political threat to the world. Dabashi and others note, however, that political quietism for most of Shi'a history has been more dominant than the political activism with which the Islamic Republic is associated (see also Mavani 2013; and Momen 1985). Differently from Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology and the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* ('guardianship of the supreme jurist', the most learned religious authority) most religious authorities within Shi'a Islam have historically avoided taking a political role. Notably, this is also the attitude today amongst influential religious authorities such as Ayatollah Sistani, residing in Najaf, Iraq. Sistani's position on the issue is of great importance, as he is arguably the most widely followed *marja'* globally, and also amongst Kuwaiti Shi'a.<sup>4</sup> As noted above, many Kuwaiti Shi'a, and a majority of those I have met, are critical of the Islamic Republic in Iran. Some hold the state to be permeated by corruption, as the followers of Ayatollah Shirazi tend to argue, while some argue that religious authorities should not hold political positions, as followers of Ayatollah Sistani argue. This is also the position held by followers of the minority Shaykhiyya branch.

The performance of Ashura rituals in Kuwait is a testimony to the variety of Shi'a ritual practice, doctrine and ideas of political involvement. Along with Dabashi (2011) and others (Deeb 2006; Fibiger 2010) I argue that that Ashura cannot be reduced to politics, but relates profoundly to people's strong, personal and emotional relationship with central figures of early Islam, in particular Imam Husayn and his family, including his grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad, who is the basis of the Imamate (Dabashi 2011: 15–16; Deeb 2009). However, although Ashura rituals in Kuwait do not explicitly address politics, ritual performance is a way for Shi'a to assert their identity in Kuwait, not simply as being Shi'a but in indicating which religious authority they follow. In her ground-breaking ethnography on the Shi'a in Lebanon, Lara Deeb argues this point along similar lines: there are different ways of engaging with and practising Ashura. These differences relate primarily to perceptions of 'authenticity', that is, how the Karbala events can be made relevant today in modern society. In Lebanon, the concerns result in a distinction between 'modernisers' and 'modernists', and between those supporting the political activism of Hezbollah, or the liberal theology of the *marja'* Muhammad Fadlallah (d. 2010). In Kuwait, Ashura demarcates people's identification with different religious authorities, *marja'iyya*, as well as with ethnic belongings. The ethnic dimension is partly played out amongst those who identify as nationalised Kuwaitis – Hasawi, Arab or Persian – and partly between Kuwaitis and migrants, for example Persian labour migrants whose ritual marginalisation I describe below.

In the following, I relate my observations of how Ashura rituals were performed in Kuwait, focussing on particular events during the first ten days of Muharram in 2013. I begin with describing a visit to Husayniyya Arbash on the first night of Muharram, where ritual performance complied with the authorities' demand for ritual invisibility – both Kuwaiti authorities and the *marja'* of the Arbash – and the opening of Muharram was characterised by joyfulness. Moving on to the culminating rituals towards the day of Ashura itself, the sentiments of grief and tragedy become clearer. My observations here also show a discussion between Shi'a about the proper way of doing rituals, in particular those related to the issue of *tatbir*, bloody lamentation, which is illegal in Kuwait and where international *marja'ji* have different opinions. In the following section, which discusses examples of attempts to move processions outside into the streets, the questions of when and how boundaries are being challenged and how Shi'a may negotiate 'the ambit of the state' are raised.

### The Art of Ritual Invisibility

On the first night of Muharram, I was invited to the Husayniyya Arbash in Bneid al-Gar, which followed the Ibrahimite line of *marja'iyya*; at that time, it was headed by the *marja'* Sayyid Ali Musawi in Basra (d. 2015).<sup>5</sup> Similar to other places, Husayniyya Arbash held Muharram commemorative rituals that were opened with a speech by an invited shaykh. From the pulpit, *minbar*, he laid out the story of Imam Husayn which would become the focus of *husayniyya* gatherings, speeches and rituals in the coming days and weeks. After the speech, the attendees did not respond to the telling of the events at Karbala with lamentation rites, such as weeping and light self-flagellation, which is a conventional response all over the world. Instead, people helped themselves to a sumptuous buffet which was served in an adjacent hall of the *husayniyya*. The serving of a meal turned the sad commemorative ritual into a cheerful reception in which people could enjoy the company of family and friends. In fact, the reception was for many the only occasion on which they would meet during the year. While balancing ritual grief and social joy is not unusual during Ashura rituals, in Kuwait and elsewhere (Deeb 2006) joyous celebrations seldom equal that demonstrated at Husayniyya Arbash in Bneid al-Gar.

Husayniyya Arbash stands out also in other ways. Contrary to almost all other *husayniyyat* and ritual Ashura gatherings I have visited in various countries, most participants in this *husayniyya* did not wear black clothes, which is the customary way of expressing sentiments of grief and sorrow for the martyrdom of Husayn as well as empathy and compassion for Husayn and his family. Instead, people attended in conventional white *dishdashas*, the 'national' dress of the Gulf countries (Khalaf 2005). 'Our *marja'* has said', it was explained to me, 'that our grief and compassion for Husayn should not be a matter

of outside appearance, but inside sentiment'. Thus, in this *husayniyya* they did not practise lamentation rituals and chest-beating ('*aza*). Some people, nevertheless, could not restrain their emotions and wept for Husayn. The act of weeping was in fact highly approved of, also by the Ibrahimi *marja'*, as an often-quoted *hadith* states that 'a tear wept for Husayn paves the way for paradise'. The ritual of commemoration in Husayniyya Arbash did not, however, express an all-encompassing atmosphere of grief and sorrow.

Every other night during these first ten days of Muharram I went to Husayniyya bu Hamad with one of my key interlocutors. This *husayniyya* is one of the largest in Kuwait and has a clear, if somewhat controversial, profile. It is affiliated with the Shirazi *marja'iyya*, and often the preaching shaykh would raise conflictual issues from the *minbar*. After a session on one of the first nights of Muharram (which I did not attend), a Saudi Arabian Shi'a shaykh speaking at the *husayniyya* was deported from Kuwait because of his critical speech about Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad. Aisha is held in high esteem by Sunni Muslims but is often criticised amongst the Shi'a because she was an opponent of Imam Ali and his supporters (Halm 2004: 9). Criticising Aisha, but also the early caliphs, who the Shi'a do not accept, marks a red line in Kuwait's public discourse, and has in the past led to conflicts as well as imprisonment and exile for those breaking with this ruling.<sup>6</sup> Many of my interlocutors, within and beyond Husayniyya bu Hamad, regretted that this shaykh had been asked to leave Kuwait, because he was a good preacher. They accused Sunni groups, particularly those they term 'Wahhabi', for misconstruing the shaykh's words and turning a small matter into a big issue. More generally, they claimed that the 'Wahhabi' had gained too much influence over the Kuwaiti government.

Another conflictual issue circulating primarily amongst the Shi'a, was the mourning practice based on bloody self-flagellation, *tatbir*. The legitimacy of the practice was debated amongst ritual participants and discussed from the *minbar* on the last nights before Ashura. The practice is illegal in Kuwait, contrary to nearby Bahrain (Fibiger 2010; Flakerud 2016). The discussions in the ritual assembly halls did not, however, revolve around the government's policy but highlighted disagreements that exist between Shi'a religious authorities on the matter. The discussions also revealed the attitude amongst 'ordinary' Shi'a that religious authorities could be wrong in their assessments of religiously advisable behaviour. Some debaters argued that religious authorities, *marja's*, are not infallible ('*al mara'ji mu ma'sum*'), contrary to the status of the Imams and the Prophet Muhammad. Within the institution of *marja'iyya*, some religious scholars reject blood-drawing flagellation while others encourage the practice; there is also a third group of scholars that remains neutral in the matter (Flakerud 2016). According to my interlocutors, Ayatollah Sistani, widely recognised as the most important *marja'* today, has not stated a clear opinion on *tatbir*. In such a case, the follower of a religious authority, *muqallid*, may take the advice of another *marja'*. Ayatollah Shirazi, who has many followers



in Kuwait, permits *tatbir*. Young people I met who typically followed Sistani would in this matter take guidance from Shirazi and accept the legality of *tatbir* and sometimes practise it. Instead, Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran, who is not so popular amongst Kuwaiti Shi'a, has issued a decree, *fatwa*, against the practice on the grounds that it is uncivilised, risks spreading diseases and gives a bad image of the Shi'a (Deeb 2006: 153; Flaskerud 2016; Louër 2008: 215). Although Khamenei has few followers in Kuwait and only a few *husayniyyat* support and represent his *marja'iyya*, practising *tatbir* is controversial amongst Kuwaiti Shi'a. The Kuwaiti Sunni-dominated government's prohibition against *tatbir* can thus not be accused of being anti-Shi'a. Rather, it merges with authoritative Shi'a positions. In this case, compliance with the Kuwaiti government's position does not contradict or side-line authoritative Shi'a positions.

During the last nights before Ashura, the atmosphere at Husayniyya bu Hamad was characterised by intense emotions of grief. The place was packed with people, mainly young men, who almost invariably would wear black clothes, a visual sign of mourning and remorse. Most people wept during the shaykh's speeches, which presented a passionate narrative about the Battle of Karbala. In fact, shaykhs who can stir emotions amongst the listeners are often preferred as speakers at mourning rituals. In addition to speeches and rites of mourning, attendees watched theatrical re-enactments, *ta'ziya*, of Qasim's wedding and, on the last night before Ashura, of the killing of Ali-Asqar, Husayn's baby son. Ali-Asqar's murder is generally seen as the most inhumane cruelty performed by the army of Caliph Yazid during the Battle of Karbala and the shaykhs' telling of the event during rituals presents perhaps the most disturbing event recalled in the Karbala stories. To enhance emotions amongst the spectators, a baby was carried through the *husayniyya* and received blessings from the shaykh seated on the *minbar* as well as from other shaykhs seated next to the *minbar*. The baby had a mock arrow stuck between his arm and chest to initiate and visualise the manner in which Ali-Asqar is said to have been killed, that is, by an arrow shot by one of Yazid's soldiers. Subsequently, a number of small children were brought to the shaykhs to receive their blessings. After the theatrical performances and blessing of the children, the performance of lamentation rituals (*'aza*) began. Every night during the first ten days of Muharram, the rites of mourning intensified. More and more people participated in self-flagellating rhythmic chest-beating. Some would sit on the floor in the assembly hall, while others stood; a large group gathered in front of the *minbar* in circles. This part of the ritual was led by a smaller group of men positioned in a circle in front of the *minbar*. Their task was to maintain certain patterns of rhythmic chest-beating and to intensify the rhythm.

The rituals culminated in the morning of Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, the day when Husayn was killed. People returned to the *husayniyyat* to listen to the story of his death and perform lamentation rites from early morning until the noon prayer. For some, however, the rituals had begun already at the morning prayer at daybreak. I was told that some groups of men had met,

not at Husayniyya bu Hamad, but elsewhere in the Da'iya neighbourhood to perform *tatbir*. I was able to observe one of the occasions when someone called me on the phone early morning at 5:00 am to invite me to join them. By car, we arrived at a building on a narrow street. The front bore no significant marks to identify the building as a ritual assembly hall, but, when we entered, we encountered several hundred men getting ready to perform *tatbir*. On this occasion, the black clothing had been exchanged with white, either the standard white Kuwaiti male gown, *dishdasha*, or a piece of white linen fabric that they wore over the black clothes. Many also carried shiny swords. The ritual began with the morning prayer, which they performed together in the large hall. After this, many participants used a sword or shaving knife to cut a small wound on the forehead, from which they made blood pour across the face and the clothes. Then they marched around the hall with raised swords accompanied by music performed by a trumpet player and percussionist. After a while, the floor was covered in blood and the room began to smell of blood. Apparently, this was expected because the walls were covered in plastic to prevent blood stains. During the rite, some participants passed out and were carried outside to receive medical assistance from aides waiting in adjacent rooms. Most people, however, appeared to be mainly emotionally affected by partaking in the ritual, and they would weep and call out for Husayn. I watched the event for about half an hour before taking my leave. Many of the ritual performers also left around the same time, perhaps to attend other public events and speeches at other *husayniyyat*.

Despite popular support amongst many Kuwaiti male Shi'a for practising the rite of *tatbir* and their coming together for ritual performances at large conventions, many participants were cautious and tried to avoid attracting attention from outsiders. For example, one participant invited me to photograph the *tatbir* performance, but when I took out my camera others stopped me. They did not want any pictures taken to document an illegal event. Nevertheless, although kept behind doors, the performance of *tatbir* was not completely kept a secret. Many of the men who left Husayniyya bu Hamad to visit other ritual gatherings carried bandages around their heads.

## Challenging Boundaries: Becoming Visible

Bneid al-Gar is a neighbourhood hosting many *husayniyyat*. It used to be primarily inhabited by Shi'a Kuwaitis, but today most Kuwaitis have moved to villas further away from the old town and Bneid al-Gar is primarily home to labour migrants. The old *husayniyyat* are, however, still in place and are visited regularly by Kuwaiti Shi'a, particularly during ritual seasons such as Muharram. During the first week of Muharram, until after Ashura, the streets were packed with Shi'a Muslims observing Muharram rituals. In the streets were placed many temporary stalls (*mawakib*, sing. *mawakib*) providing food



and drinks in addition to religious merchandise such as images of Imam Husayn, cassette sermons and special clothes.<sup>7</sup> Some stalls also exhibited scenes from the Karbala events. A popular event was the wedding between Husayn's daughter Fatima al-Kubra and his nephew Qasim in the Karbala camp shortly before Qasim was killed in the battle (see also Deeb 2006: 157; Fernea 2005: 132; and Flaskerud 2015).<sup>8</sup>

Iranian labour migrants instead met in a large tent located in the backyards of this neighbourhood. Most of the migrants still have their families in Iran and are not recognised as Kuwaiti citizens, not even as 'Ajam Kuwaiti', holding Kuwaiti citizenship of a 'second degree' (see Longva 2005: 121). Due to their lack of citizenship, they do not share the privileges, resources and inclusion credited to Kuwaiti Shi'a. They sometimes visit various Kuwaiti *husayniyyat* on a regular basis, as they do not have a place of their own. For Ashura commemorative rituals, however, they met temporarily by or in the tent to perform a lamentation procession (*dasta*) in the Persianate style, often involving *sanjil* chains and the eating of a meal together. In 2013, they first convened to perform the procession outside the tent. The public display of Muharram processions was not, however, tolerated by Kuwaiti authorities. Participants were told to move the ritual inside the tent, an order which they immediately obeyed.

From these observations, I conclude that public visibility marks the boundary of what is accepted Shi'a ritual practice in Kuwait. Rituals are officially tolerated if they are not visible in public space, although in this case the whole neighbourhood of Bneid al-Gar was enveloped in a Muharram-like ritual atmosphere. Most groups, including the well-off Arbash family and visitors to the *husayniyya*, as well as the marginalised Iranian workers convening in the tent, complied with the official policy demanding ritual invisibility in public. Amongst the Arbash this was perhaps not a great sacrifice to make, since the religious scholar they followed advised them, on theological grounds, to refrain from any bodily expressions of grief.

Some ritual sites, however, challenged the authorities' restrictions on the visual display of Shi'a rituals. One of these sites was the Husayniyya Ashur, which is located on the main street of Bneid al-Gar. This *husayniyya* is unusual for two reasons. First, the building has a modernist design and 'looks like a basketball stadium' according to the opinion of a fellow scholar (conveyed in private conversation). It is highly visible, although not necessarily detectable as being a Shi'a ritual centre. Second, the Ashur family, who runs this *husayniyya*, is well-known for its business and political activities in Kuwait. For example, at the time of fieldwork, Saleh Ashur was a member of Kuwait's Parliament. The family followed the *marja'iyya* of the Shirazi School and agreed with its activist approach to society. In this local case, activism did not imply political opposition against the rulers but rather to introduce (Shi'a) religious ethics and world views into society. Important channels were activities at the Ashur's *husayniyya*, and political and social activities in general. In pursuing this aim, the *husayniyya*, on the fifth night of Muharram, tried to organise a public

procession in the main street of Bneid al-Gar. The Kuwaitis' Husayniyya Ashur procession was much more publicly profiled and visible than the modest processions organised by the few Iranians expressing grief in mild forms of ritualised chest-beating, *sanjil*, in front of their tents located in the back alleys of the same neighbourhood. It is thus not surprising that the Husayniyya Ashur procession was dissolved just as quickly as the Iranians' ritual. Because of the state authorities' restrictions, the following nights' mourning rituals took place inside the grand hall of the *husayniyya*. Newspapers in Kuwait, which have a taste for debate (see Selvik 2011), and social media were quick to criticise such violation by the Shi'a of the social contract in Kuwait that pertained to keep religious displays out of the public eye. It is noteworthy that amongst the Ashur participants no resentments were raised in public against the authorities' restrictions. The Shi'a had attempted enlarging the space permitted for ritual performance to encompass the streets of Kuwait City, and in this way assert Shi'a religious identity in the country. When they failed, they readily accepted the status quo.

## Friends and Enemies

The level of discretion employed by the Shi'a during Muharram ritual performance suggests there has developed an understanding between Shi'a groups and the authorities in Kuwait. The Shi'a can perform rituals of commemoration if they are not displayed in public. At the same time, discussions about *tatbir* amongst the Shi'a demonstrate contesting opinions in the matter, but disagreements are tolerated since they correspond with the institutionalised pluralism defined by the *marja'iyya* system. There is, however, a third line of conflict which seems less manageable by many Shi'a I met in Kuwait. This is the threat that many Shi'a perceive to be exercised by the so-called 'Wahhabi', who oppose Shi'a beliefs and rituals. To illustrate how such perceptions are nourished but also appeased, I refer now to conversations with Shi'a interlocutors who during Ashura commemorations in 2013 on their own initiative shared with me photos in which, they concluded, Shi'a identity was being attacked.

During one of my many road trips with Ali, a key interlocutor (see Fibiger 2015), he showed a photo of a decapitated Syrian Shi'a Muslim whose head was put on display as a trophy. The head carried a green band wrapped around the forehead. Ali explained that the only reason why this man was killed was because he was carrying the green head band saying: 'Ya Husayn'. The head band is a common marker of Shi'a identity. It is used by some Shi'a militia in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, but is also carried by ritual mourners in Ashura processions. Ali was upset, and we discussed the possibility of whether the distribution of photos like this could provoke the otherwise calm sectarian relations in Kuwait. Our discussion suggests that the cultivation of Shi'a identity in Kuwait is shaped also by events taking place outside the country. Ali, as we have seen,

referred to the killings of Shi'a by ISIS soldiers in Syria and neighbouring Iraq. His perception of victimisation based on his Shi'a identity was framed not only by his identification with Shi'a killed by ISIS. In his perception of the present political reality, the killing of Husayn at Karbala in 680 CE became entangled with the war in Syria in 2013, and both impacted on his feeling of being Shi'a in Kuwait. For how long could they enjoy sectarian peace?

The second example is a young man in a *husayniyya* who showed me a photograph of a person he called 'a Wahhabi man.' The man, I was told, had announced that he would have liked to be the killer of Imam Husayn. He allegedly had argued that Imam Husayn revolted against the caliph, and it is a Muslim's duty to defend the caliph. Like the photograph shown to me by Ali, this image was interpreted as a sign indicating that Muslims with a 'Wahhabi' world view, although not being Kuwaiti citizens, represented a threat to the Shi'a in the region, including in Kuwait. The fear was nourished by the labelling of Shi'a as *kufir*, 'infidels', by both WahhAshurabis and members of ISIS (see Bunzel 2016).

The examples demonstrate more widespread sentiments of insecurity and fear amongst many Shi'a in Kuwait. It was difficult at the time of my field research in 2013 to assess the level of threat they were exposed to. However, two years after my field research, on 26 June 2015, a suicide bomber attacked the main Shi'a mosque in the old town of Kuwait, killing 27 people and injuring more than two hundred. This was the worst sectarian attack ever in Kuwait. The suicide bomber was a Saudi national and was apparently assisted by Kuwaitis.

Kuwaiti authorities have, however, repeatedly publicly demonstrated support for the Shi'a population. Minutes after the attack in 2015, Kuwait's then Emir Sabah Al Sabah (d. 2020) rushed to the scene, expressing his sympathy and grief, declaring that the deceased 'are my children.' This also showed to the Shi'a how they had the support and protection of the ruler and the state, and the incident has strengthened rather than eroded this idea of the Shi'a living in harmony within the Kuwaiti state.

During my field research in 2013, such positive sentiments from the rulers were picked up by my interlocutors. On the day of Ashura, someone showed me a photo of the sister of Kuwait's Emir, who was visiting a *husayniyya* that year. The ruling family member was flanked by smiling girls, supposedly Shi'a ritual participants. The photo was clearly meant to demonstrate the good relations cultivated between the Shi'a in Kuwait and the ruling family, and the rulers' acknowledgement of the significance of Ashura to the Shi'a.

On the one hand, the authorities' support or acknowledgement of the Shi'a can be interpreted to indicate that Kuwaiti Shi'a are 'in the ambit of the state', and the way *Ashura* is carried out is a product of this political relationship. At the same time, *Ashura* is a platform for a negotiation of this relationship and what defines the ambit. On the other hand, however, many Kuwaiti Shi'a see *Ashura* as decidedly not about politics, in the sense that it should not be taken

as a ritual that infuses a spirit of rebellion and opposition, not even against the political terror of militant Islam targeting the Shi'a for *kuf'r*, 'unbelief', and not practising true Islam. Kuwaiti Shi'a hope to live in peace, but at the same time aim to assert their ritual practice as part of this peaceful (co-)existence.

## Conclusion

The performance of Twelver Shi'a rituals of commemoration in Kuwait relate to state authorities in multifaceted ways, as well as to other groups in Kuwaiti society and relations within the Shi'a community itself. An important dynamic structuring the relationship between the Kuwaiti Shi'a and the authorities revolves around the public visibility or invisibility of ritual practices. Ritual practices are tolerated and acknowledged as long as they remain invisible to the general public. Another important dynamic revolves around Shi'a attitudes towards the politicisation of ritual performance. Ashura in Kuwait is on the one hand not so much about politics in the sense of social protest, rebellion and political mobilisation, but it is very much about asserting Shi'a identity and presence in Kuwaiti society. On the other hand, a comparison of ritual practices amongst different Shi'a groups reveals variations and divergences within different Shi'a strands.

There is in Kuwait an implicit treaty between authorities and ritual participants regarding visibility. Rituals should take place inside the *husayniyyat* and not outside in the streets, and this applies especially to lamentation. Moreover, speeches and public rhetoric is not to be targeted towards other groups in Kuwaiti society, in particular dominant Sunni groups. The only exception I registered was the Saudi Arabian Shi'a shaykh who was deported for his critique of Aisha, the Prophet's wife. Shi'a Muslims in Kuwait predominantly comply with official restrictions on ritual practice, demonstrating that they find themselves 'in the ambit of the state', as asserted by Louër (2008: 45). But at the same time, this ambit is constantly negotiated, not least during the Ashura rituals, and divergences of different groups in society come to the fore. In complying with official regulations, the threat and antagonism felt by Shi'a in Kuwait does not stem from the state regime and authorities, but rather from a particular group of Sunnis, by whom the Shi'a termed 'Wahhabis'. Most Shi'a in Kuwait therefore aim to focus Ashura rituals on commemoration and express their affection for Imam Husayn and his sacrifice for what they see as true Islam.

Nevertheless, the way the rituals are carried out is a matter of contestation between different viewpoints and Shi'a schools of thought. This is very clearly the case in Kuwait, where different strands of *marja'iyya* schools, such as Shirazi, Shaykhi, Sistani, and Khamenei have followers. While some, like the ritual participants in Husayniyya Arbash, respect official regulations by refraining from showing grief outside of ritual buildings, even by not wearing

black clothes to express mourning, others immerse themselves fully in illegal flagellation and the spirit of sacrifice, doing *tatbir* bloodletting on the morning of Ashura day. Bloodletting flagellation is particularly endorsed by the Shirazi *marja'iyya*, working to promote an outward and socially assertive Shi'a identity in Kuwait and elsewhere. Ashura commemoration in contemporary Kuwait is therefore a contested ritual amongst Shi'a, and its performance expresses a variety of Shi'a identifications. While perhaps not to be identified as 'a religion of protest', as suggested by Dabashi (2011), Shi'a religion in Kuwait shows a contestation of different world views and ideas of proper religious conduct both between the Shi'a minority and Sunni groups, but also, and not least, between Shi'a groups themselves.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the editor of this special issue, Ingvild Flakerud, as well the two anonymous reviewers, for their careful edits and suggestions for this article.

---

**Thomas Fibiger** is Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. The fieldwork for this article was done as part of the collaborative research project called 'Negotiating Authority in Shi'ite Thought and Practice', which is funded by the Swedish Research Academy and headed by David Thurfjell of Södertörn Högskola (2013–2016). Before and after this project, Dr. Fibiger has mostly focussed on Bahrain, and he is currently working on a project on South Asian Shi'a minority groups and trans-regional identity across the Indian Ocean. E-mail: thomas.fibiger@cas.au.dk

## Notes

1. The discussion in this article is based on observations of rituals taking place during the first ten days of the month Muharram, culminating on the tenth day (Ashura). Both Muharram and the subsequent month Safar are, however, devoted to commemorative rituals, and I have been present also at many ritual gatherings during the full extension of these two months.
2. The estimates differ to some degree. Fuller and Francke (1999) note 25–30 per cent, Louër (2008) 25 per cent, Beaugrand (2016) 30 per cent, and Hafidh and Fibiger (2019) 15–25 per cent. The population of Kuwait is around 4 million, including migrant labour from South Asia and Arab countries. For a nuanced discussion on the minority–majority issue in the Gulf countries, see Beaugrand (2016).

3. Those termed ‘Wahhabi’ would probably call themselves ‘Salafi’, which they perceive as a broader and more positive term.
4. For more on Sistani and the Najaf *marja’iyya*, see Corboz (2015) and Rizvi (2018), and for more on his role in Kuwait, see Fibiger (2015).
5. The Ibrahimī line is a branch of Shaykhism, which has historical and contemporary significance in Kuwait. People who identify as Shaykhis follow the teachings of Shaykh Ahmed al-Ahsai, an eighteenth-century scholar, and are today found amongst small groups in Iran, Iraq and Kuwait. The mosque that was the target of a suicide bomber in Kuwait in 2015 was the main Shaykhi mosque in Kuwait. Normally, the Shaykhis have their own *marja’* in Kuwait, but at the time of my fieldwork they were waiting for a new *marja’* to announce himself. For more on Shaykhism in Kuwait, see Matthiesen (2014).
6. The red line for criticising Prophet Muhammad’s contemporary followers, the Sahaba, were marked as well as being crossed by a young Shi’a cleric, Yasser al-Habib (b. 1979) who in 2003 was arrested because of a sermon defaming the two first caliphs. In 2004, he was pardoned by the Kuwaiti Emir but arrested again only after few days. Eventually Habib managed to flee Kuwait and obtain asylum in Britain. Today, he oversees a mosque in London. In 2010, he was stripped of his Kuwaiti citizenship after arranging an event celebrating the death of Aisha – an event which sparked controversy in the wider Muslim community, including Kuwait and Britain (Corboz 2019: 66). This was the background to the tension around this issue during my fieldwork in Kuwait in 2013.
7. Chatelard (2017: 90) notes that in Iraq *mawakib* have two forms: processions and stalls for food and drinks. In Bahrain, *mawakib* designates the outside, public procession, while the stalls for food and drinks are called *mudhif* (Fibiger 2010). In Kuwait, processions are seldom organised.
8. In Lebanon, discussion about proper ways of observing rituals is very much about proper ways of being Muslim in modern society. Deeb (2006) makes the point that amongst Ashura observers in Lebanon the approach to Qasim’s wedding shows some of the difference between what she terms ‘traditionalist’ and ‘modernist’ groups. Traditionalists, allegedly, re-enact the wedding of Qasim as part of rituals performed during the last nights before Ashura. Modernists, on the other hand, who want to ‘authenticate’ Ashura, claim to not find adequate proof confirming that Qasim was married during the Battle of Karbala, only that he intended to be married before his death. Therefore, they downplay the wedding in rituals of commemoration. In Kuwait, Qasim’s wedding was enacted in full. The same is true for rituals performed in Denmark, where I observed the wedding of Qasim in 2018. I would not, however, argue that this makes Kuwaiti and Danish Shi’a Muslims less modern than those in Lebanon or anywhere else; ritual practice and interpretation is rather a matter of relating to the local context.



## References

- Al-Nakib, F. (2014), 'Revisiting Hadar and Badu in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing and the Construction of a Dichotomy', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1: 5–30, doi:10.1017/S0020743813001268.
- Beaugrand, C. (2016), 'Deconstructing Minorities/Majorities in Parliamentary Gulf States (Kuwait and Bahrain)', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 2: 234–249, doi:10.1080/13530194.2016.1138645.
- Bunzel, C. (2016), 'The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18 February, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/18/kingdom-and-caliphate-duel-of-islamic-states-pub-62810>.
- Chatelard, G. (2017), 'Ashura Rituals in Najaf: The Renewal of Expressive Modes in a Changing Urban and Social Landscape', in *Najaf: Portrait of a Holy City*, (ed.) S. Mervin, R. Gleave and G. Chatelard (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press), 83–110.
- Corboz, E. (2015), *Guardians of Shi'ism. Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Corboz, E. (2019), 'Islamisk enhedsdiskurs: Et studie af sunni-shi'a relationer fra britiske Shi'amuslimers perspektiv' ['Ecumenical initiatives and the study of Sunni-Shi'i relations: A case study from the United Kingdom'], *Scandinavian Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, no. 1: 62–86, doi:10.7146/TIFO.V13I1.112226.
- Dabashi, H. (2011), *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Deeb, L. (2006), *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Deeb, L. (2009), 'Emulating and/or Embodying the Ideal: The Gendering of Temporal Frameworks and Islamic Role Models in Lebanon', *American Ethnologist* 26, no. 2: 242–257, doi:10.1111/j.1548-1425.2009.01133.x.
- Doherty, G. (2017), *Paradoxes of Green: Landscapes of a City-State* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Fernea, E. (2005), 'Remembering Ta'ziyah in Iraq', *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4: 130–139, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/191158>.
- Fibiger, T. (2010), 'Ashura in Bahrain: Analyses of an Analytical Event', *Social Analysis* 54, no. 3: 29–46, doi:10.3167/sa.2010.540302.
- Fibiger, T. (2015), 'Marja'iyya from Below: Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religious Authority', *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 8, no. 4: 473–489, doi:10.1353/isl.2015.0038.
- Flaskerud, I. (2015) 'Aruze Qasem: A Theatrical event in Shi'a Female Commemorative Rituals', in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam*, (ed.) F. Suleman (London: Azimuth Editions), 202–211.
- Flaskerud, I. (2016), 'Ritual Creativity and Plurality: Denying Twelver Shi'a Blood-Letting Practices', in *The Ambivalence of Ritual*, (eds) U. Hüsken and U. Simon (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz), 117–143.
- Fuccaro, N. (2009), *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Fuller, G. and Francke, R. (1999), *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: St. Martin's Press).

- Haddad, F. (2011), *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Company).
- Hafidh, H. and Fibiger, T. (2019), 'Civic Space and Sectarianism in the Gulf States: Dynamics of "Informal" Civil Society in Kuwait and Bahrain', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no. 1: 109–126, doi:10.1111/sena.12290.
- Halm, H. (2004), *Shi'ism* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Khalaf, S. (2005), 'National Dress and the Construction of Emirati Cultural Identity', *Journal of Human Sciences* 11: 229–267, <https://www.academia.edu/1415931/>.
- Longva, A. N. (2005), 'Neither Autocracy, nor Democracy, but Ethnocracy', in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, (ed.) P. Dresch and J. Piscatori (London: I.B. Tauris), 114–135.
- Longva, A. N. (2006), 'Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise: The Discourse on Hadhar and Badu in Kuwait', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2: 171–187, doi:10.1017/S0020743806412307.
- Louër, L. (2008), *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Company).
- Louër, L. (2012), *Shi'ism and Politics in the Middle East* (London: Hurst 2012).
- Matthiesen, T. (2014), 'Mysticism, Migration and Clerical Networks: Ahmad al-Ahsa'i and the Shaykhis of al-Ahsa, Kuwait and Basra', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34, no. 4: 386–409, doi:10.1080/13602004.2014.984903.
- Matthiesen, T. (2015), *The Other Saudis: Shi'ism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Mavani, H. (2013), *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini* (London: Routledge).
- Momen, M. (1985), *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Potter, L. G. (ed.) (2013), *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst & Company).
- Rizvi, S. (2018), 'The Making of a Marja': Sistani and Shi'i Religious Authority in the Contemporary Age', *Sociology of Islam* 6: 165–189, doi:10.1163/22131418-00602006.
- Selvik, K. (2011), 'Elite Rivalry in a Semi-Democracy: The Kuwaiti Press Scene', *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 3: 477–496, doi:10.1080/00263206.2011.565143.
- Wehrey, F. (2013), *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press).