The Aesthetics of Ritual: Performing “Iraqi-Shi’a” Identity in the Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

What kinds of emotional and affective involvements are invoked in the practice of religious and social rituals, whether at the level of everyday informal practices or formal ceremonies? And how do the aesthetics of ritual produce, shape, and channel these performances and emotions into crystallised forms of identification? Through an analysis of the religious and social practices of Iraqi Shi'is in London, specifically the rituals of mourning and commemoration during the Islamic month of Muharram, this paper explores the nuances between performative, aural, and visual aesthetics, and especially the ways in which notions of self and other are produced and reified or contested through practices of religious ritual. In particular, the paper draws on psychosocial theories of subject-formation and ritual aesthetics to productively explore the sites of transnational linkages and imaginaries around which ideas of “Shi‘a” and “Iraqi” subjectivity coalesce, and which ultimately relate to the politics of identity and its intersection in existing power relations. By drawing attention to the embedded nature of inter-diasporic practices, and the ways in which these are embodied in the aesthetics of religious and social performance, I tease out the relationship between individual and community forms of identification, and especially the crystallisation of a specifically “Iraqi-Shi‘a” identity that seeks to place itself on the trans- and inter-national map. In this sense, I envisage the sensory and affective facets of religious and social performance to contribute to forms of political identity that make claims regarding the nature of the Iraqi state and/or nation, and its place in international relations.

Key words: Subjectivity; Identification; Affect; Ritual; Aesthetics; Power
[I]dentities are contingent constructs… fragile, multiple, and incomplete
… they emerge through processes of identification
HOWARTH (2013: 272)

Iraqi Shi’ism is multifaceted and complex; it is religious cult, social boundary,
political formation and source of ideas and knowledge.
SAMi ZUBAIDA (in JABR 2003: 13)

Introduction

The shifting sands of individual and collective “identity”, a concept at once analytically problematic (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) and yet one that evades critical deconstruction (Hall 2000), represents the site of multiple and intersecting socio-political processes and structures of power. While essentialist and primordialist accounts of identity have mostly fallen out of favour in recent decades, the complexities of theorising the related notions of “identity”, “identification”, and “subjectivity” continue to preoccupy contemporary scholars, with debates cutting across theoretical, disciplinary, and political divisions. One of the most productive lines of inquiry in this field can be found in the work of scholars such as Judith Butler (1997; 2000; 2006; 2010), Ernesto Laclau (1994; 2000; 2004), Chantal Mouffe (2000; 2005), Jacques Derrida (1996; 1985; 1993), and Slavoj Žižek (1989; 2000; 2006), among others, who have incorporated psychoanalytic theories of identification and subjectification within a critical poststructuralist framework. These contributions have, in turn, spawned the sub-discipline (or trans-discipline, as many of it proponents would maintain) of psychosocial studies, a field of inquiry that seeks to take seriously the ambivalent relationship between material and psychic reality and which draws on elements of sociological, psychoanalytic, and political theory. A realm of cross-fertilisation and intellectual diversity, psychosocial studies can be considered as “a critical approach interested in articulating a place of ‘suture’ between elements whose contribution to the production of the human subject is normally theorised separately” (Frosh and Baraitser 2008: 348). Part of this psychosocial project has been to bring theories of affect, fantasy, ritual, aesthetics, emotion, and other textural details of everyday life to bear on practices of identification and the articulation of political and social identities.
Drawing on this eclectic scholarly tradition, this paper seeks to explore the nuances between performative, aural, and visual aesthetics in practices of identity-formation, and especially the ways in which notions of self and other are produced, reified, and/or contested through rituals of religious commemoration and mourning. In particular, I am interested in unpacking the emotional and affective involvements that are invoked in the practice of religious rituals and ceremonies, especially in the way such rituals constitute performative (re)iterations of political and social identities. The empirical case study for this inquiry is the mourning and commemorative rituals performed by first-generation Iraqi Shi’a migrants in London, and stems from my ongoing doctoral research on the political subjectivity of the Iraqi Shi’a diaspora. The paper focuses on a period of intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Iraqi Shi’a communities in London during the Islamic month of Muharram in October/November 2014; although the analysis of the events discussed is a result of a wider and ongoing period of participant observation and semi-structured interviews beginning in March 2013.

The paper will begin with a theoretical discussion of the concepts of subjectivity, identification, and identity, before progressing through a discussion of ritual and aesthetics to a detailed analysis of the empirical case in hand in order to highlight the inter-subjective and embodied production of socio-political identity. By drawing attention to the embedded nature of inter-diasporic practices, and the ways in which these are embodied in the aesthetics of religious and social performance, I hope to tease out the relationship between individual and community forms of identification, and especially the crystallisation of a specifically “Iraqi-Shi’a” identity that seeks to place itself on the trans- and inter-national map. In this sense, I envisage the sensory and affective facets of religious and social performance to contribute to forms of political identity that make claims regarding the nature of the Iraqi state and/or nation, and its place on the international political map.

"Who Needs 'Identity'?": Towards a Psychosocial Theory of Identity Politics

Despite its seeming centrality to social life, the topic of identity remains hotly contested and treacherous theoretical territory. Indeed, the proliferation of studies and discussions pertaining to identity in recent decades has provoked a critical backlash that has sought to interrogate and deconstruct the seemingly all-encompassing term of “identity” and to question its relevance for political and social analysis. A seminal work in this tradition was Brubaker and Cooper’s article “Beyond ‘identity’”, published at the turn of the century and in which the authors criticised the myriad use of “identity” as an analytical concept: “If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere”
(Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 1). As the eminent cultural theorist Stuart Hall put it in the same year: “What, then, is the need for a further debate about ‘identity’? Who needs it?” (Hall 2000: 15).

And yet, as Hall highlights in the same article, despite its analytical limitations, the concept of “identity” is nevertheless one that sticks; it somehow escapes deconstruction and comes back to haunt us in the forms of social and political positionings adopted by individuals and collectives alike. Numerous attempts have been made to tackle the resulting and enigmatic “irreducibility of the concept [of identity]” (Hall 2000: 16), the most prominent of which in the field of critical studies has been through the application of elements of psychoanalytic theory to the sociological and political realities of lived subjects.

It seems to be in the attempt to rearticulate the relationship between subjects and discursive practices that the question of identity recurs – or rather, if one prefers to stress the process of subjectification to discursive practices, and the politics of exclusion that all such subjectification appears to entail, the question of identification. (Hall 2000: 16)

Central to this theoretical project is the concept of subjectivity, which within the critical tradition emerging from the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault is generally used to refer to the product of discursive power relations. In Foucauldian terms, power is not merely a coercive or external force acting on a subject but is itself productive, constitutive of the subject and an inextricable part of the subject’s interiority. More than this, power is the very thing that brings the subject into being as a subject and that simultaneously produces the subject’s capacity for action; its subjectivity (Foucault 2003). This discursively-constructed subjectivity is not, however, merely limited to the effect of power, it is also constitutive of the subject’s interior life, of its understanding of self; of what may be called its “identity”.

[P]ower that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity. (Butler 1997: 3, emphasis added)

Rather than being a static or self-contained property of the subject, this conceptualisation of identity theorises it as an active process, the combined result of ongoing practices of identification and performative (re)iterations of subjectivity. The subject, as a product of power, is able to occupy a range of potential subject-positions (or “identities”) within the confines of existing discursive hegemonies, and it is the negotiation, articulation, and performance of these
subject positions that constitutes the subject’s capacity for agency (Butler 1997; Stavrakakis 2007). As Olick and Robbins note: “Identities are projects and practices, not properties” (1998: 122). In this sense, a social or political identity can be understood as the temporary and contingent crystallisation of certain practices and performances of identification resulting from the alignment of particular discursive structures. In other words, the salience or resonance of particular identities at particular historical junctures is a reflection of the contemporary politics of inclusion and exclusion that operate through relations of power and socially produced hegemonies.

Political identities are not given or primordial entities, but social fabrications that are constituted by political practices of inclusion and exclusion. Constructing an identity is thus also an act of power, for it excludes other possibilities and forms of the self. (Howarth 2013: 272)

Such a conceptualisation of identity – and political identity in particular – as the convergence of internal and external processes of identification and becoming, is necessarily psycho-social since it posits the entanglement of interior (psychic) and exterior (material and social) worlds. As human beings, we are subject to a variety of social, material, and psychological forces, all of which act upon and through us to precipitate modes of belonging and repertoires of being. This is the underlying psychosocial theory of identity politics that informs and directs the research in hand.

Performing Identity: The Aesthetics of Ritual

Having outlined a theory of identity politics that productively interrogates the binary between interior (psychic) and exterior (material and social) worlds, it is necessary at this juncture to draw attention to the inherently performative and dynamic processes of identification that constitute such identities. As I have argued, identity is not a static or coherent entity but an inherently political process involving the foreclosing of other possible identities, one that is articulated and negotiated through various performances and practices of identification. Identification, itself a contested concept, can be understood here as the (always-already failed) attempt to project or subsume one’s subjectivity into particular subject positions or “identities”, which themselves “do not exhaust the question of subjectivity” but can be understood as “the sedimented forms of identity with which social actors identify in their ongoing social representation” (Howarth 2013: 246). This identification, however, is never complete, but
constantly in flux; perpetually shifting and reiterating itself in a doomed attempt to paper over the silences and cracks inherent in every discursive hegemony.

Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality… It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to complete the process. (Hall 2000: 17)

Since each realm of discursive hegemony is defined and bound by what lies outside it, its constitutive “other”, it is never fully whole or complete in and of itself since it is dependent on this other for its very existence. Any attempt by the subject to identify with a subject-position within such a discursive formulation is therefore equally incomplete and lacking. This notion of the over-determined nature of identification, the constant (re)articulation of identity, is indebted to Lacanian psychoanalysis and its conception of the split subject. In Lacanian theory, the subject is structured by socially and culturally determined discursive formations, but can never realise its full identity within those structures because those discourses themselves are lacking, incomplete and ever-changing. In this sense, “the fullness of identity that the subject is seeking is impossible” (Stavrakakis 1999: 29), a doomed project that precipitates a constant re-articulation and re-iteration of those identities thus sought that is deeply implicated in the politics of power and exclusion. Not only are these failed and repeated attempts at identity politically invested, they also involve recognisable processes of identification that can be traced and categorised for political analysis: “What we have then… is not identities but identifications, a series of failed identifications” (ibid).

Judith Butler, in her application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the realm of politics, has drawn on the (re)iterable and (re)articulatory practices of identification to outline a theory of the performativity of identity. In her theorisation, expressions of identity, although appearing naturalised, are actually the effects of social and political discourses that reinforce and crystallise the supposed “identity” each time they are performed or articulated. Through this process, “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 2006: 34). Although Butler initially intended this theory to apply to the politics of gender and sexuality, her insights might be equally applied to articulations of religious identity through rituals of mourning and commemoration. As performative and performed social practices, religious rituals are equally invested in the politics of inclusion and exclusion inherent in any act of identification; “any articulation of an identity… instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically
engaged action” (Butler 2006: 21). In this sense, performances of religious identity through ritualistic practices, such as those of mourning and commemoration associated with the Shi’a remembrance of the death of Imam Hussein during ‘Ashura, can be seen to function performatively to construct and reify notions of “Shi’a” identity:

For Shi’a Muslims, the Karbala myth is a potent processual paradigm, root metaphor, or cultural script. Its ritual representation and enactments… are fundamental for Shi’a spiritual, emotional, social, cultural, and political life. (Hegland 1998: 251).

Like other manifestations of political and social identities, “religious practices and beliefs can become some of the most intractable and inflexible symbolic border guards to belonging to specific collective boundaries”, to the construction and policing of collective identities (Yuval-Davis 2011: 117). The fact that such identities, as previously outlined, are doomed from the outset, suggests a constant need for the re-articulation and re-signification of religious practices that can be traced over time. In particular, the aesthetic and affective content of such rituals can be observed and analysed according to contemporary political developments, in order to reveal the ways in which sensory and embodied aspects of religious performance contribute to the ongoing construction of communal and individual identities. Religious ritual, in other words, emerges as an aspect of performative identity (or rather, of the re-iterations of failed identification) that can be perceived, experienced, and analysed through its use of aesthetic and affective practices.

[Religious] modalities generate particular forms of sensibility and values, certain types of subjects… With such significance given to the smallest details, to temples and texts, prayers and ceremonies, disciplines and beliefs during day and night, every week and month of every year, it is almost impossible to imagine another reality or a different identity from that collectively played within their group and so carefully woven by aesthetic strategies. (Mandoki 2007: 232-3)

Aesthetics, then, rather than being peripheral or insignificant to processes of identification, emerges as central to the production and (re)articulation of identities through the discursive constraints of religious ritual. The channelling, moulding, and directing of bodies, minds, voices and sounds inherent in ritualistic performances, all contribute to the affective and psychosocial construction of a collectively articulated religious identity that is politically invested in the foreclosing of all other possible articulations. Thus, “[e]very presentation of the self not only informs who we are or pretend to be, but also tries to persuade, affect, fortify, or debilitate
others by aesthetic strategies” (Mandoki 2007: xv). It is to the presentation of the “Iraqi-Shi’a” self, articulated through religious rituals and embedded social practices, that I now turn.

**Building a Politico-Religious Community: Iraqi Shi’is in London**

According to 2011 census data, there are an estimated 73,000 Iraqi nationals living in the UK (though this is likely to have increased in the intervening four years), with the vast majority concentrated in London (Office for National Statistics 2013). As with any migrant population, Iraqi Shi’is in London represent a diverse amalgam of individuals from a variety of socio-economic, class, regional, ideational, and generational backgrounds, and who may have come to the UK at different times and under very different circumstances. For the purposes of this study, I am focusing solely on religiously observant first-generation Iraqi Shi’is who left Iraq between the late 1970s and early 1990s.¹ This period represents one of the most traumatic and tumultuous times for religious Shi’is in Iraq – spanning the rise to power of Saddam Hussein in 1979, the trauma of the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-88, and the brutal repression of Shi’a communities in the south following the 1991 Shi’a intifada (“uprising”) – and resulted in the mass emigration of mostly lower-middle class and professional Iraqi Shi’is, many of whom fled due to their religious and political views (members of the Iraqi Communist Party and Shi’a Islamic Da’wa Party were actively persecuted during this period) or were forced out through mass expulsions on the grounds of being “Iranian”.² Although dispersed across the globe, with significant communities forming in the US, Sweden, Denmark and Germany, as well as neighbouring Arab countries, a large proportion of these Iraqi Shi’is found their way to the UK, the vast majority settling in London, where they established connections with existing Iraqi exiles and founded a variety of religious and civil society institutions and networks. These networks, and especially the Shi’a religious institutions known as husseiniyat, provided exiled communities with a meeting place and social space within which to engage with other Iraqis and, significantly, to practice Shi’a religious ceremonies and rituals that had been banned in

¹Second- and third-generation Iraqi Shi’is have arguably followed a different trajectory of political emancipation and strategies of identification, and as such will not be discussed here (although the divergence between different generational articulations of Shi’a political and religious identity forms the basis of my current research).

²During the 1980s, and following the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the ensuing Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein deported an estimated 200,000 Iraqi Shi’is “of Iranian origin” (tabaiyya Iraniyya) over the border into the Islamic Republic (McLachlan and Joffé 1984; Metz 2004; Cole 2002; Davis 2005; Salbi 2005; Adib-Moghaddam 2007). Although many of the individuals in question did indeed posses documents identifying them as “Iranian”, this was more often than not a product of historical oversight in the “arbitrary” processes of Iraqi bureaucracy in which many Shi’is had registered themselves as tabaiyya Iraniyya during the Ottoman era in order to escape military conscription (Sassoon 2012; Makiya 1993; Kubba 2003; Salbi 2005).
Ba’thist Iraq. As a result of such converging social and political factors, such Shi’a religious rituals in exile assumed a significant political dimension in the emancipatory articulation of a hitherto suppressed Shi’a religious identity. In other words, the mediation of the exile experience through the religious institutions of the husseiniyat plausibly contributed to a diasporic identity that came to be intimately linked with Shi’a religiosity and political emancipation. Part of the resonance of this narrative, no doubt, was the revolutionary zeal bequeathed to Shi’a religiosity as a result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, in which Shi’a religious practices, and specifically the mourning and commemoration rituals of ‘Ashura and Muharram, served “as a crucible for transforming meaning, subjectivities, and, ultimately, political power” (Hegland 1998: 251).

In this sense, despite their often diverse backgrounds and religious and political differences, Iraqi Shi’is in London were able to come together through the articulation of religious practices that were themselves embedded in discourses of political power. Thus, “from the outset, there [was] an emphasis on the political dimension on the [Iraqi Shi’a] community and its political expression as part of its particular identity” (Flynn 2013: 3). Fundamental to this was the politics of Shi’a religious ritual, and specifically the commemoration of the death of Imam Hussein on the battlefields of Karbala during the Islamic month of Muharram. This “central trauma of Shi’ism” was thus gradually transformed through social and political practice into “a nexus of emotive responses and political instincts” that contributed to the ongoing construction and articulation of a Shi’a political identity in exile (Dabashi 2011: 86).

This is a necessarily brief overview of the role of religion in shaping the politics of Iraqi Shi’is in London, but has hopefully laid the groundwork for a more nuanced discussion and analysis of religious rituals of mourning and commemoration and their role in the (re)articulation and (re)iteration of a specifically “Iraqi-Shi’a” identity in the diasporic space.

**The Karbala Paradigm**

Shi’ism is the shimmering memory of an event, a dream, a single traumatic incident, condemned forever to try to remember itself in vain… Shi’ism is a poem, a eulogy, an epic, a panegyric pausing for a moment for history to recollect itself and start anew.

*Shi’ism is Karbala.* (Dabashi 2011: xi-xii, emphasis added)

Shi’ism, as a minority branch of Islam, is at once a religious sect, a sociological positioning, and a political orientation. Although there is no single, unitary “thing” that can be called “Shi’ism”, just
as there is no single, monolithic community that can be called “Shi’ā”, there are multiple convergences of religious, social and political narratives and ritualistic enactments that coalesce around the identity category constructed (but not wholly contained) by the word “Shi’ā”. Individuals and communities who claim to belong to this category span geographical, ethnic, and political divides – with adherents found in places as diverse as Ethiopia to Pakistan, Iran to the United States. Despite their differences, however, there is one element that all articulations of Shi’ism have in common, and that is the religious observance and commemoration of the Battle of Karbala during the Islamic month of Muharram. The emergence of Shi’ism dates back to a dispute regarding the succession of the Prophet Mohammed following his death in 632 AD. While the majority of Muslims – both at the time and still today – supported the appointment of Mohammed’s companion Abu Bakr as caliph, a small band of dissidents maintained that the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Talib, was the rightful successor; a fundamental split that divided the Islamic world between the supporters of Abu Bakr (who came to be known as “Sunnis”) and the followers of Ali (in Arabic “shi’at Ali”, or simply “Shi’a”). This split deepened throughout the first fifty years of the Sunni caliphate and culminated in an uprising orchestrated by the Prophet’s grandson (and Ali’s son) Hussein ibn Ali in 680 AD, which resulted in the massacre of his family and supporters at the Battle of Karbala by forces under the direction of the first Ummayad caliph Muawiya I and his son and successor Yazid I on the tenth day (‘Ashura) of the Islamic month of Muharram.

The traumatic memory of the Battle of Karbala, with its political and theological repercussions for adherents of Shi’ism, thus “generated the central Shi’a paradigm” (Hegland 1998: 251), a moment of rupture around which all forms of Shi’a identification and ritual practice coalesce. Although for much of Shi’a history this narrative of trauma and suffering has occupied the realm of mythology and memory, during the latter half of the 20th century, and particularly as a result of the Iranian Islamic revolution, the “Karbala paradigm” was “transformed from an originary myth... into a mobilising narrative of political struggle and self-sacrifice” (Khalili 2007: 29). Karbala, and the mnemonic and commemorative rituals associated with it, thus became central to the articulation and performance of a specifically Shi’a religious identity; an identity that was imbued with political status through its implication in contemporary power structures of political emancipation and revolution. In the diasporic space, such rituals and narratives of defiance and resilience held affective and emotive resonance for individuals and communities who found themselves exiled from their homelands and forced to rebuild their lives in a foreign land. For Iraqi Shi’is in particular, who had been unable to feely express their religious affiliation or to engage in such religious rituals and practices under the watchful eye of the Ba’th Party in
Iraq, the Karbala paradigm took on new meaning as a ritualised politics of religious expression and emancipation through the suffering of exile and loss.

The ‘Ashura narrative is the attempt to recover the dangerous memory of Karbala and apply it to the social, religious, and political context of Iraqi Shi’i communities… In the context of exile it becomes the narrative of loss, dislocation, emerging realities and new religious articulations. (Flynn 2013: 226).

For this reason, recording and analysing the religious rituals and practices associated with the commemoration of Karbala in exile is key to understanding the politics of performativity and identification as (re)articulated, (re)imagined and (re)iterated by Iraqi Shi’is in the diaspora, and particularly their implication in contemporary political structures and regimes of knowledge. It is to this project that I now turn. The following analysis is the result of a period of intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Iraqi Shi’i communities in October/November 2014. During this period, I attended eight separate majalis (religious gatherings) at five different husseiniyat (Shi’a religious institutions), as well as taking part in two marches in central London (one for ‘Ashura and one for ‘Arbaeen, the tenth and fortieth days of Muharram respectively and two key junctures in the remembrance of Karbala) and conducted dozens of informal and semi-structured interviews as well as taking extensive ethnographic field notes. In what follows, I draw out the affective, embodied, and aesthetic qualities of the Muharram rituals in order to analyse their roles in the ongoing construction and performance of a hybridised “Iraqi-Shi’a” identity through the politics of mourning and commemoration.

**Mourning and Commemoration: The Aesthetics of Ritual**

The room was dark and stuffy, a faint smell of sweat lingered in the heavy air that was now filled with the sound of moaning and crying as the women buried their heads in their hands to mourn Hussein. Many of those in Iraqi-style *abayas* pulled the material over their heads, shrouding them entirely in black and turning them into indistinguishable mounds of inky material, quivering and shaking with emotion… The crying increased in

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3 A form of women’s dress comprised of one large piece of black material draped over the head and held under the chin. Similar to the Iranian *chador* but distinguished by a small stitched section that fits over the crown of the head.
volume and momentum throughout the *quraiyya*, some women wailing and screaming and hitting themselves as they were overcome with grief. (Extract from author’s fieldnotes, 30 October 2014).

The above description, taken from an account of a women’s-only *majlis* held in Holland Park Mosque on the fifth day of Muharram 2014, showcases some of the dominant aesthetic and performative registers of the Muharram commemorative rituals. Recalling the events now, and reading through my fieldnotes, the predominant images and impressions that come to mind are of dark rooms, sweaty bodies, rhythmic chanting, high-pitched wailing, chest-beating, lyrical singing, and of black cloth covering everything from walls, floors, ceilings and human bodies; blackness upon blackness. Along with such sombre memories, are those of community bonding and solidarity; eating and distributing food, laughing and exchanging gossip, debating and arguing, and offering a shoulder to cry on. Such snapshots illuminate the profoundly social and (inter-)subjective nature of Muharram rituals, a period of time in which people of all backgrounds and classes come together to engage in a collective expression of grief, a cathartic outpouring that manifests as the embodied and ritualistic shedding of tears and beating of chests. Such rituals, embedded as they are in the somatic register of corporal movement – supplication, beating, praying, swaying, marching, hitting, etc. – are *performativ*; they simultaneously enact the articulation of Shi’ā religiosity at the same time as they create and identify with the meaning of that performance as an articulation of “Shi’ā identity”. In this sense, such rituals constitute forms of “representational activity” (Hegland 1998) through which discursively-constituted identities are interrogated, constructed, contested and reiterated. Each enactment of the Muharram ritual is thus part of an ongoing process of identification and subjection that establishes what it means to be “Shi’ā” at the particular temporal juncture in which it is performed.

Ritual audience members are not passive recipients of a rigid and uniform ritual package but instead are actively involved in the social construction and resulting meaning of a ritual. (Hegland 1998: 252)

Similarly, the aesthetics of aural performances – whether that be crying, wailing, singing, chanting, or playing music – are equally implicated in the politics of identification and

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4 The *quraiyya*, literally “reading” in Arabic, is an integral part of every Muharram *majlis* (religious gathering) and is the point at which the sheikh (or female mullah, if it is a women’s only event) will recite elements of the Karbala narrative. On each of the ten days preceding ‘Ashura, a different part of the narrative will be told, often accompanied by performances and enactments of the days leading up to the battle itself.
belonging. One of the central components of the ‘Ashura ritual is the practice known as *latum*, the ritualised beating or hitting of the chest and body as a representation of the pain and suffering of Imam Hussein and his followers. The *latum* is conducted in time to the beat of a religious “song” or chant, which narrates the story of Karbala (technically, the use of music for religious ritual is *haram*, forbidden, in orthodox Shi’ism, and so these chants are usually referred to as “readings” (*quraiyya*), or simply as *latmiyya*, despite the fact that many of them follow well-known tunes and melodies and are, by all objective accounts, music). Individuals gifted in “reading” the *latmiyya* are often venerated and admired, and in Iraq and Iran there has been a recent explosion of professional *quraiyyat* (“readers”) who produce slick, Hollywood-style “music” videos and CDs of their “songs”, which are distributed and sold to Shi’i communities worldwide, including in London. On my way to one particular *majlis* in North London on the evening before ‘Ashura, I found myself in a car with two older Iraqi women who spent the entirety of the journey discussing their favourite “readers”:

In the car, Ali connected his phone to the sound system and began playing religious *latmiyya* songs (though I was told quite categorically that this was “not music”).

“Is this Bassem Karbaa’i?” Asked Um Zainab, “I like him, he reads well.”

“Yes, he’s good,” replied Um Mustafa, “but he’s not my favourite.”

The two women began discussing the various merits and shortcomings of the mullahs in the same way that two teenage girls might gossip about their favourite pop stars… Another “song” came on, the tune of which was exactly the same as an old Iraqi song that M had taught me a few weeks previously. I began humming it softly to myself and Um Zainab turned to me with a smile.

“You know this?” She asked, surprised.

“No, I don’t know it, but I know the tune,” I replied, attempting to sing the lyrics to the Iraqi song (which I have often heard her singing). She looked perplexed.

“That’s different,” she proclaimed, “this is a *latmiyya*,” seemingly putting an end to the conversation.

(Extract from author’s fieldnotes, 3 November 2014)⁵

In this exchange, it is possible to discern the competing forces constraining these women’s attempts to articulate their proclaimed “Shi’a” identity, especially in the convergence of capitalist modernism and traditionalist piety. In the political economy of religion epitomised by the production and consumption of religious chants, Um Zainab can be seen to occupy a liminal

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⁵ The reported conversation took place predominantly in Iraqi Arabic dialect, I have translated it into English here.
space of negotiation, engaging in an unconscious form of cognitive dissonance as she denies the musical registers of the *latmiyya* while simultaneously engaging in a qualitative assessment of the various oratory and lyrical styles of the "readers" who perform them. In this sense, we can see how the various aural and embodied enactments of the Muharram rituals involve ongoing negotiations and articulations of what it means to be "Shi’a" that are implicated in contemporary political and social realities, including those associated with capitalist projects of consumer liberalism.

Another example of such attempts to (re)negotiate and (re)articulate religious forms of identification through ritual performance can be seen in an altercation I witnessed between an older Iraqi lady and a younger, British-born girl (referred to here as "K") who was volunteering at the *husseiniya* where the *majlis* was being held on the night of ‘Ashura:

A group of women had formed a large circle that took up almost the entire room, and all of them had removed their *hijabs* and were flicking their hair over their heads and slapping their foreheads in time to the *latmiyya*… Outside, a steady stream of women was trickling down the stairs and out the door, where K was handing out boxes of food and cups of warm milk infused with spices. A woman came down the stairs with a number of children in tow and began talking loudly at K in Iraqi, her hands gesticulating wildly. She spoke very fast, and I could only make out that she was evidently annoyed about something, and kept repeating that “it’s not right”, that “there’s no respect” and that “Ashura is for children”. After she had left, I asked a flustered K what the woman was angry about and she explained that some of the children were upset because the older women had monopolised the space with their hair flicking, and that some of them had even pushed the younger ones out of the way. (Extract from author’s fieldnotes, 3 November 2015)

Here, the older woman is criticising the other women for breaching what she considers a fundamental social convention of the ‘Ashura ritual (that it is predominately "for children"; a mode of religious expression and enjoyment that serves almost as an initiation rite into the Shi’a community), while those women evidently and contradictorily saw themselves as embodying piety and religious observance (I later spoke to one of the women who told me she considered the ritual “very spiritual”). As well as representing an opportunity for individuals to express their religious adherence and “Shi’aness”, then, Muharram and ‘Ashura also constitute a moment of social negotiation, when individuals are able to affirm or contest their place in the social hierarchy through the enactment of religious ritual. Indeed, this social and community
aspect of Muharram was often remarked upon by my informants, with one woman telling me that she “only saw people during Muharram”, while another would spend half an hour before leaving to attend any majlis calling all of her friends to see who was going where and to organise lifts to and from the different husseiniyat. I should note here that many of the different husseiniyat in London follow the traditions of different Shi’a religious scholars, or marjas, and thus attendance at one institution or another can demonstrate affiliation to a particular religious authority and ideology (every practicing Shi’a chooses which marja to follow). During my fieldwork, however, I was struck by the fact that such doctrinal differences didn’t seem to have much practical bearing on who went where, and people often seemed to choose which majlis to attend based on where their friends were going, who the speaker was, or on practical details such as what time the majlis started, where it was, and how long it lasted (I met at least one person who told me they chose where to go based on the quality of the food handed out at the end). In this sense, while the different majalis in theory represented the negotiation and contestation of religious doctrinal authority, in practice people’s engagement or otherwise with the ideological elements of their religion were secondary to much more social and practical considerations and their efforts to “fit in with the community”.

**Diasporic Imaginings: Performing “Iraqi-Shi’a” Identity**

Through such analyses, it is possible to build an understanding of the mourning and commemorative rituals of Muharram that sees them as individual and collective performances of belonging and identification, articulated on the continually shifting ground of social convention and political reality and that strive to create a cohesive category of Shi’a identity at the same time as they contest and interrogate the notion of “Shi’aness” itself. Part of this identification process can be read in the explicit orientations towards “Iraqiness” articulated by many of my informants. Although Muharram majalis in London are attended by Shi’is from a variety of different ethnic and national backgrounds, the vast majority are of either Iraqi or Iranian origin, with a significant minority from the Indian subcontinent and other Arab countries including Lebanon, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Indeed, of all the husseiniyat I attended, three of the five were established and run by Iraqis, while the remaining two were Iranian-run centres. As a result of the long history of cross-fertilisation between Iraq and Iran, national and ethnic differences between Iraqi and Iranian Shi’is in the diaspora are not always immediately recognisable, and there is much overlap between the two communities (indeed, many Iraqi Shi’is who fled Iraq due to persecution spent a considerable amount of time in Iran, and a large proportion are fluent in Farsi as well as Arabic – though the converse is much less common).
Nevertheless, almost without exception, every Iraqi I spoke to articulated some kind of affinity to what they deemed to be “Iraqi” national or religious traditions. For example, when invited to attend the women’s only gathering in Holland Park Mosque (the oldest Shi’a mosque in London and run by Iranians), I was told that I should come because it was a “proper traditional Iraqi majlis”, despite the fact that when I arrived, I found a large proportion of the women there to be Iranian. Another contested practice was a particular style of “reading” the latmiyya, which involved the repetitive intonation of the name “Hussein” in a manner that I described in my fieldnotes as “creating a kind of gulping sound”. The same young lady involved in the altercation with the older woman regarding hair flicking, K, grimaced when she heard it and told me that “that’s a really Iranian way of doing it. I don’t like it personally, I think it sounds like beat-boxing.” Similarly, when it came to the food given out at the end of each majlis, I constantly encountered narratives and disputes regarding the alleged “Iraqi” or “Iranian” origin of the dishes being served. In one instance, I was told by an older Iraqi lady that the qeema (a type of meat and lentil stew) being handed out in one of the husseiniyat was cooked in a “Najafi” style (i.e. from the southern Iraqi city of Najaf) and that she preferred the “Karbal’ai” style since it was “less close to the Iranian one”. In this example, not only is the cooking and consumption of food during Muharram imbued with social and religious significance, it is explicitly tied to a politics of geographic orientation and regional rivalry in which one Iraqi city is seen as better than the other because of its transnational ties with Iran.

Within these articulations, and despite the shared historical traditions and diasporic and religious space that these two national communities inhabit, we can see that the identity category of “Iranian” is being specifically compared and contrasted to that of “Iraqi” in a logic of mutual exclusivity. Part of the underlying psychological and political reasons for such a splitting of “Iraqi” and “Iranian” identities may lie in the historical legacy of the Ba’th Party in Iraq and its persecution (and forced expulsion) of many Iraqi Shi’is as traitors and fifth columnists as a result of their alleged “Iranian origins”. In other words, it can be argued that the effect of the combined physical and ideational ostracism of Iraqis “of Iranian origin” under Saddam Hussein, along with the simultaneous pursuit of an Arab nationalist assimilationist agenda by the Ba’th Party, has resulted in problematizing the distinction between “Iraqi” and “Iranian” Shi’ism, in which ethnic and cultural identification categories have been opposed to religious sectarian ones. Put differently, it would seem that the pervasive power of the Ba’thist state in classifying

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6 Through the manipulation and reinvention of historical memory (Davis 2005), Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party sought to strategically undermine the influence of Shi’a elites within the country, and especially to limit the influence of (Shi’a-majority) Iran in its domestic politics, predominately through the discursive demonisation of the “Persian menace”, an ethnic category that was explicitly opposed to the “Arab” character of Iraq.
Iraqi Shi’is as “Iranian” and non-, has been subsumed into subjective fantasies and imaginaries of what it means to be “Iraqi” or “Iranian” for Iraqi Shi’is thus targeted, and is being reflected and reproduced differentially across the Iraqi Shi’a diaspora through the creation of a diverse spectrum of hybridised “Iraqi-Shi’a” subjectivity. In this sense, the affective surplus of meaning produced by the combination of pan-Arabist and anti-Iranian (and implicitly anti-Shi’a) discourse and forced expulsion Iraqi Shi’is continues to haunt individuals in the diaspora long after the locus of that meaning has dissipated. The Ba’thist state has taken on a spectral and phantomic quality that nevertheless “comes back” (Derrida 1993) again and again to shape various forms of subjectivity in the diaspora through both the material and psychic effects political and social subjugation.7

As well as invoking historical ruptures between Iraqi and Iranian Shi’ism through the articulation of ritually-performed religious and national identity, many of the Muharram rituals I witnessed in London were implicated in wider regional and international political discourses and structures, including in the global political arena. The diverse national and ethnic backgrounds and orientations of Shi’is in exile, which were mostly glossed over during the majalis, were made explicit during the public ‘Ashura march on 4 November 2015 (the day of ‘Ashura itself). An annual event beginning at Marble Arch and progressing through Hyde Park (although this year it went up Edgware Rd), the march draws thousands of devout Shi’is from various backgrounds onto the streets and avenues of central London to profess their faith and to mourn the killing of Imam Hussein. A watered-down version of similar processions in Iraq, Iran, and other countries with significant Shi’a populations, the march manifests aesthetically as a mass of black-swathed bodies and large, Arabic-inscribed banners, punctuated with the melodic cadences of latmiyyat in various languages and the rhythmical beating of bodies and drums. Alongside the religious banners, the national flags of Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Bahrain, and a host of other nations were visible (as well as the flags of Shi’a religious and political parties such as Hezbollah), as were various smaller placards and banners bearing religious and political slogans in English, such as: “Genocide committed to those who stood against tyranny”; and “Every land is Karbala and every day is Ashura.”

This year, as well as such slogans of Shi’a doctrinal ideology, there were numerous placards pertaining to current affairs in the Middle East, including a sea of black signs inscribed with red and white letters proclaiming ”Down with ISIS”, or alternatively “ISIS are the Yazid of today”,

7 This is an interesting theoretical and empirical postulation, and one that I have explored elsewhere (Degli Esposti, forthcoming), but falls outside of the confines of the present study and as such is not elaborated further here.
and even “Shi’a Muslims are the biggest victims of terrorism”; references to recent atrocities committed by the fundamentalist Sunni terrorist organisation known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or ISIS). Such articulations of Shi’a religious and sectarian identity in explicit opposition to the politics and practises of ISIS (whose massacres of Shi’as, Yazidis, Christians, and other religious denominations in Iraq have made international headlines) are particularly interesting, especially in the way they draw on contemporary social and media tropes of Islamism and terrorism to articulate an unequivocally “Shi’a” political and religious message. In a conversation with one Iraqi Shi’a volunteer at the march, I was told that it was important to have such messages and banners in English because of the “current climate”. “People think the march is about Saddam every year,” she said, “it’s not about the number of flags or chants but about getting across the message in the most efficient way.” In this, she is implicitly invoking her Iraqi national identity in her articulation of Shi’a religiosity and adherence to rituals of mourning and commemoration. Such expressions of a politised “Iraqi-Shi’a” identity in relation to contemporary global politics can be understood as affectively-invested attempts to make sense of the world according to a posited and constantly shifting notion of what it means to be “Shi’a”. Such processes of meaning-making are thus both psychologically and materially invested, and implicated in ongoing psychosocial processes of identification: “Psychologically... the [‘Ashura] rituals are emotional defence mechanisms to relieve social, political and psychic pressures and supressed emotions” (Haydari 2002: 112).

“Every land is Karbala”

Through an analysis of aesthetic and affective qualities of Muharram rituals by Iraqi Shi’is in London, I have tried to show that such ritualised articulations of Shi’a religiosity are inherently performative in the way they simultaneously express and define what it means to be both “Iraqi” and “Shi’a” in London today. In this sense, the aesthetics of Shi’a mourning and commemoration rituals can be seen to be deeply embedded in discourses of social convention, communal belonging, and invested in both local politics and international relations. These performances of a posited and hybridised “Iraqi-Shi’a” identity are constantly in flux, shifting and re-aligning over time to accommodate changes in hegemonic structures and power relations. As well as articulating and identifying with subject positions in both local and international discourses – such as the explicit invocation of the spectre of ISIS in the ‘Ashura through the slogans of the ‘Ashura march – these identifications are also necessarily political in and of themselves, since they involve the foreclosing of other possible forms of identification or expression of Shi’a political religiosity outside the discursive boundaries constructed by the articulation of
opposing value systems. Thus, it is impossible to be both “Iraqi” and “Iranian”, “ISIS” and “Shi’a”, “latmiyya” and “music”. These discursive lines in the sand are reflective of the contingent convergence of an array of social, political, and historical factors, and represent a temporal freezing and crystallisation of what it means to be “Iraqi-Shi’a” in the diaspora; a ritualistically performed political and religious identity whose silences and elisions nevertheless resonate beyond the reality of its own articulation. At some point or another, “every land” will indeed be articulated as “Karbala” and “every day” performed as “Ashura”.

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Comparative Approaches to Identity Change


