

RITUAL AND RESETTLEMENT

An Iraqi Shi'i Refugee Family and the Making of a Community in Quincy

“The notion that religions change seems in itself almost a heresy. For what is faith but clinging to the eternal, worship but a celebration of the permanent?...Nothing, apparently, alters like the unalterable”⁽¹⁾

I. Introduction

“Forget Quincy!” For Ahmed and Zainab, the “Islamic Center” in Quincy, Massachusetts is not theirs. When I asked Zainab what she and Ahmed call it, she said “The Lebanese call it the Markez al-Islami, and we call it al-jam’a (mosque).” Cynically, Ahmed said that “the Center is for parties! You can rent it out for any party you want!” While he immediately said that he was only joking, he made his point. He does not feel that many of the predominantly Lebanese members of this Shi'i community are “good” Muslims, living piously enough outside as well as inside the Center. He was referring to some mixed-gender events where he used an example of Lebanese men and women dancing together. He and his family do not feel that they are part of a religious community that resembles the one they knew in Baghdad. While the family does attend events and participate in many of the activities, calling them simply “ceremonies,” at the

**Heidemarie
Woelfel***

Iman Islamic Center in Quincy and another in Roslindale (Islamic Education Center), which is Iraqi-run, these two centers do not represent their Islam; for this family, these centers are not Baghdadi. What he means by “ceremonies” is of a superficial nature and any ritual that are deemed more intimate are performed in their home or the homes of their closest circle of friends, who they consider to be “good” and pious Shi’i Muslims.

From these interviews, the making of a recognizable religious community that reflects the particular values and belief system and sense of the community this Iraqi refugee family left behind becomes quite apparent through the brief comments introduced above. What also becomes apparent is a longing to return ‘home’ to what is familiar. Moreover, it is clear that the Shi’i community in the United States (U.S.) is not simply a monolithic Shi’i Muslim community being brought together by national,

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ethnic, linguistic, or religious affiliations. It is something more intimately significant than this. That this family seeks a particular sense of community and belonging is a reflection of their social-historical background in the current context of the Iraq War from which they had to flee because of the husband’s association with the U.S. military mission in Iraq. They are seeking a sense of community and belonging that they most closely associate with in their experiences as Iraqi Shi’a, and especially now as refugees, fleeing because of the association and collaboration with the “enemy.”

For this newly-arrived Iraqi refugee family, it is not only the maintenance of a sense of community in Quincy they are attempting to create, but it is also about the family members and circle of friends that make up this sense of community and belonging that they have been forced to leave behind and strive to recreate in

their new environment. As Shi'i Muslims from Baghdad, their religious identity is intertwined with the preservation of a particular way of life, a life informed by social class and an urban culture of their capital city, Baghdad. It is the historical legacy of Iraq's diverse ethnic, sectarian and social groups that complicate the religious identities of Iraqis and thus a certain incohesiveness has existed. As Batatu points out: "The majority of the inhabitants of Iraq, the Arabs, through sharing common characteristics, were themselves in large measure a congeries of distinct, discordant, self-involved societies". Moreover, the historically intimate relationship between Shi'ism and Iraq is captured through the recorded observations Abu-Bakr al-Khawarizmi: "In their midst are the tomb-sanctuaries of the Commander of the Faithful ... and of Husain the lord of the martyrs ... and because (among other things) Shi'ism is Iraqi".⁽²⁾ As I will discuss later in more detail, the Iraqi Shi'i sense of themselves as the "keepers" of Shi'ism has played and continues to play a deeply significant role in the lives as the Iraqi family under study here.

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Methodology

For the purposes of this paper, I explore how the religious rituals that symbolize and represent Islam's minority sect of Shi'ism has been impacted within the context of one family's refugee resettlement experience in a non-Muslim host country, such as the U.S. Due to its central significance in Shi'i

Islam, the events at the Battle of Karbala in A.D. 680 are the foremost soteriological, or devotional, moments that intrinsically define Shi'i identity more than any other day on the hejira (lunar) calendar.

As mentioned above, in the Iraqi context, Shi'ism's followers perception of themselves as the "keepers" has great import with regard to the religious identity of the Iraqi family discussed in this paper.

My interest into the effects that refugee resettlement has on how religious ritual practices are carried out in a new environment raised a number of questions for me: How does such a central event as the Battle of Karbala, and the rituals that symbolize it, change in new and often "alien" environment? How does this family (re)enact these rituals

when abrupt and unexpected life changes occur, especially in the case of becoming a refugee? Because these refugees are newly-arrived, are they more resistant to changes or differences with how other Shi'i Muslim groups commemorate Muharram and 'Ashura? What do Shi'i institutions

in the U.S. attempt to do in order to maintain a distinct Shi'i identity in such a diverse community? How are the historical events at Karbala being recreated by this Iraqi family so that they are a reflection of their own personal sense of suffering in the context of their forced migration? How do Shi'i Muslim recreate and maintain social networks in their new community? These are some of the questions that I attempt to answer in this paper, although I am certain that I cannot fully complete the task within the confines of this paper.

The preliminary nature of this examination into how Iraqi Shi'i Muslim refugees cope with such change is

viewed from the perspective of one family with whom I have known for the last three years. Although I did attempt to seek out other

among this family's circle of friends, I found that even up to now it has been a persistent struggle. In lieu of this, I attempt to present how one family has gone

through the changes and continues to go through changes, and to encounter the many obstacles of how they maintain their distinctive Shi'i community and sense of community, one that not only defines itself religiously, but also socially and politically.

In order to support the rather thin empirical evidence, I attempted to bring in a wealth of secondary materials to support my initial findings and explore the literature on the topic. My preliminary exploration suggests that it is not only linguistic, ethnic or national identities that

inform how religious identity sustained, but something more distinctive, and it is this that

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causes conflict between and across diverse groups of Shi'i Muslim groups.

For Iraqis, it is about social class, infused with the sectarian sense of themselves as the “keepers” of Shi'ism, and of the political identities that individuals and groups employ to define themselves in the context of the current Iraqi war. Again, Batatu notes that it is crucial to understand the general “incohesiveness” of the religious, political and social identities that makes up the Iraqi population. These multi-fold identities are often infused with a religious sectarian belief system that not only informs the group's religious identity, but also informs their political identities. These identities are constantly in flux, and this affects the internal differentiations are brought with them to the Shi'i community in the North America.

I conducted my research through formal, in-depth interviews, extensive participant observation, and numerous informal conversations that took place in a variety of settings and over a long period of time, from in-home visits to attending a birthday party

and participating in a religious ritual event at the Iman Islamic Center. I completed two audio-taped interviews with the husband and wife that lasted 6090- minutes each with one in Arabic with the wife, Zainab, and one in English with the husband, Ahmed. I also spent several hours with the family discussing various aspects of their resettlement experience in the U.S. and the experiences of other Iraqis who

arrived as refugees and the difficulties and challenges they have faced.

As I have known this family since 2008, we have developed a strong rapport and evident feelings of trust have developed between us during this time. This family has

been immensely helpful to me by opening up their home and their personal lives to me. They also began to allow me some access to their circle of friends by inviting me to their daughter's birthday party as well as to a significant Karbala-related ritual, the Mawlid Zaynab, where I fully participated in both these functions. In both these settings, I was able to engage their friends and family members, and

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I, too, was open to any and all questions about myself. However, because of the sensitivity of the nature of their presence in the U.S., I constantly felt, and observed in some cases, that many feel a sense of apprehension about my presence. This was not unlike many of my experiences as an “American” living in Syria and Lebanon. There was always an initial inquiry of my background, and then a decision is made to whether “I’m okay” or not, i.e. whether I am potential spy or not.

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Introducing the Family

I met this Iraqi family through the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a well-known non-profit resettlement agency in Boston in 2008. The organization was looking for Arabic-speaking volunteers to assist newly-arrived Iraqi refugee families. I found the posting for this volunteer position on a mailing list related to all things Middle East through the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. I became what the agency called a “Family Mentor.” The duties of this mentoring position were to familiarize the assigned family

with their new environment about the various everyday aspects of daily life, such as where to food shop, how to find a job, how and where to register the children in the local schools, and locating and signing up for ESL (English as a Second Language) courses among many other things. I was assigned to work with Zainab, Ahmed and their two young children,

a daughter who is six years old, and a boy who four years old, had only just arrived in June of 2008 when I met them in October. They were sponsored by their cousin, Haidar, who arrived in the U.S.

through a Special Immigrant Visa Program (SIV).

Haidar, Ahmed’s maternal cousin (ibn khaltu), arrived in Boston a year earlier in 2007 before the SIV Program for Iraqi employees who worked with the U.S. Mission in Iraq. This program raised the allotted number of slots from 50 to 500 under the auspices of the Department of Defense, which provided special status immigrant visas to eligible Iraqis and Afghanis who worked for the U.S. military and were under threat of direct violence and death as they were viewed as “collaborating

with the enemy” from insurgency groups and militias in Iraq and Afghanistan. Haidar was a translator for the U.S. military. Under this program, he was able to sponsor Ahmed and his family to come to the U.S. through Jordan as refugees.

When I met the family for the first time, I was introduced only to Zainab and the two children. The volunteer coordinator from the agency brought me to meet the family for the first visit as part of the standard protocol for the agency. Since Zainab did not know any English, we quickly began conversing in Arabic and got on friendly terms, developing a strong rapport. She is in her mid-twenties with a gentle, yet strong and energetic personality. Ahmed was working when I arrived that evening; I would not meet him until later.

Ahmed works as a “temp” employee at a well-known Cambridge-based technology company in the shipping department from 11:30 am until 10:30 pm, Monday through Friday. This is similar to the work he did in

Baghdad with the U.S. Embassy. Because he is fairly fluent in English, he was able to start working relatively soon after his arrival to the U.S. with the assistance of the IRC.

When I first arrived inside their basement apartment, one of the first things I that observed was a large and simply framed 8 x 11 color photo of Ahmed on the wall in the living room. It was something that one takes notice of quickly as it was in plain view as soon as the front door was open; it could be observed by all who crossed the apartment threshold. In the photo, I could see Ahmed standing solemnly in front of what I assumed was the holy tomb of one of the imams in Iraq,

but I discovered that it was the tomb of the Sayyedah Zaynab in Damascus. Its grand and beautiful structure stands out against the poverty in the town of the same name. As the family expressed to me, their time in Syria was one the family’s most frightening and difficult experiences since their departure from Iraq. In 2007, the United Nations High Commission

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for Refugees (UNHCR) registration and processing of Iraqi refugees was in its infancy, and so there was little assistance available. The family had to live off their savings from all that they sold off in Iraq.

To me, this photo suggests that it is not only evidence of him having been to the tomb of one Shi'i Islam's most revered figures, it also preserves the memory of their own experience of being unregistered refugees in Syria, a story similar to Sayyedah Zaynab and the experience of her plight in Karbala, unprotected, but determined. This feeling of insecurity that Ahmed expressed to me comes from the fact that he had worked with the U.S. Embassy in Iraq, there was an ever-present fear that he and his family felt throughout their time in Damascus. As Ahmed made clear:

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"So, I was there seven months...So I was so scared, so scared...even when I apply to open a new case, I was scared from them because any information I give to them they will transfer it to the government. I was...hiding...like a thief, I was hiding!"

As example of the possible scenarios that could have happened to him, he also relayed to me the story of his friend who had fled to Syria because he was working with Paul Bremmer, the U.S. Administrator in Iraq for the Coalition Provisional Authority

(CPA) in the Ministry of the Interior. He fled to Syria with his family, but was arrested and forcibly deported back to Iraq without his family. Ahmed believes that this was a form of punishment by the Syrian government because his friend had "collaborated with enemy" by working for the U.S. mission in Iraq. Although his friend's family was eventually allowed to return to Iraq through intervention of the

U.S. authorities, by "keeping" his family in Syria, Ahmed believes that the government was punishing his friend because his association with the U.S. military mission.

Whether Ahmed's fears were real or not, the story of his friend was indicative of the possibilities. After seven months of waiting in Jeramana, a city on the outskirts of Damascus where many Iraqis reside, the family went to Jordan at the insistence of the U.S. Department of State;

there they were able to register as refugees with the UNHCR. Jordan was their point of departure for resettlement in the U.S.

Islam in the U.S.

Contrary to the ongoing and current media portrayals of Muslims as distant and foreign denoting “them” as not one of “us,” Muslim immigration to the U.S. and Canada has been occurring since the late 1800s, when young male migrants came from the Middle East to find work, make their fortunes and return home. Many of those who came to the U.S. had never intended on staying, and gradually they settled and established communities throughout the North American continent. In the 1920s, immigration to the U.S. was curtailed due to restrictive immigration laws that imposed quotas on several groups and nations. However, by the 1960s, quota restrictions were relaxed, the most recent wave of Muslim immigration began again for both economic and educational reasons as well as fleeing the conflict and political strife in their respective

countries.⁽³⁾

At present, while it is difficult to know how many Muslims there are in the U.S. due to incomplete data sets and inadequate measurement tools, there are an estimated six million Muslims who make U.S. their home.

⁽⁴⁾ The U.S. is unique in the world in that the Muslim population is heterogeneous in nature, representing Muslims of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities, of which African Americans make up 30-35 percent

of an indigenous and mostly Sunni Muslim identification.

⁽⁵⁾ The patterns of immigration have varied greatly as their migration movements are closely related to the histories and

social conditions of the origin countries. However, most Muslims in the U.S. do share some commonalities and in particular one, the move from being a practically invisible religious group to a very visible one as a result of the attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001 (hereafter: 9/11). Since 9/11, many Muslims have reported that they are discriminated against through a prism of ignorance about their religion and negative

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stereotyping and are viewed with suspicion.⁽⁶⁾ Walters (2008) notes that in post 911/ U.S., fear and being regarded with suspicion among non-Muslim Americans has caused many in the community to reconsider how they dress, speak about themselves and otherwise represent their faith.⁽⁷⁾

In her book, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 911*, Abdo describes how in the post-911/ environment, Muslims in the U.S. feel they have come under an intense spotlight. Muslims have gone from being relatively invisible to being scrutinized on a daily basis. Thus, Muslims are perceived as not assimilating into American society the way it was assumed they were and should be. She notes that because of this intense scrutiny, Muslims are becoming more alienated-more women are wearing hijab, more Islamic schools are opening and more of the second generation of Muslim Americans is becoming more religious. She also describes a notion of a “globalized” notion of Islam that is growing particularly among the

second generation among Muslim Americans. However, while there may be a “bond of the ummah, the collective Islamic community” among the new generation of young Muslims in the U.S., it has not overcome the divide between Sunni and Shi’i Muslims.⁽⁸⁾

Shi’ism in the U.S.

Much of the literature on Islam in the North America have been to focus on Islam in general, often conflating Sunni and Shi’i Islam among other minority Muslim groups, such as Sufis, into a homogenized and monolithic

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representation of all Muslims in North America as well as in the West in general. Hyder perspicaciously notes that one of the main objectives of his book, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory*, is

“to engage the straight-jacketed manner in which Muslim societies are represented in the western world” where not only the mass media and governments, but also the “many institutions of higher education” contribute to

this often misconstrued notion of Muslims and Islam in the West.⁽⁹⁾ Because many immigrant Muslim communities, who make up nearly 65 per cent of Muslims in the U.S.,⁽¹⁰⁾ are concerned with the survival of their religion and thus are concerned with any suggestion of “dissensions” within the overall Muslim community, discussion of the heterogeneous nature of Muslims in the West is a difficult and sensitive topic to broach.⁽¹¹⁾

Despite the growing literature on Islam and Muslims in America, there is still a dearth of scholarly work on the Shi'i Muslim experience in America.⁽¹²⁾ The Shi'a represent 16 per cent of the total population of the estimated six million Muslims in the U.S. This reflects the minority status of the Shi'a globally, i.e. 10 - 13 per cent of all Muslims.⁽¹³⁾ Takim calls the Shi'i Muslims in America a “double-minority”

as they are not only a minority within Islam worldwide, but it is also a reflection of their minority status here in the America.⁽¹⁴⁾ Thus they easily become part of this monolithic view of American Islam. Moreover, the Shi'a are a doubly misunderstood minority within an

already misunderstood minority religion in the U.S. When a differentiation is made, it is often starkly negative as it evokes images such as the 1979 American hostage crisis in Iran or the deaths of 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983 in the minds of non-Muslim Americans.

Identifying Iraqi Shi'i Refugees in the U.S.

With the latest war in Iraq beginning in 2003, there has been a constant ebb and flow of mass movements of refugees and internal

displaced people (IDPs) attempting to survive the current conflict. Unfortunately, this current mass displacement of Iraqis is nothing new in their recent history. If one looks back to the 1920s, there have been mass

migration flows of Iraqis within and outside of the country throughout much of the Twentieth century. As Chatelard notes that most of the current literature, which is mostly made up of non-scholarly literature, call this most recent migration movement an “unprecedented

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refugee crisis” and this is inaccurate.⁽¹⁵⁾

There are three distinct phases of Iraqi Shi'i migration to the U.S. Takim points out that many of the Iraqis who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s came as students, and stayed when the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1958,⁽¹⁶⁾ which brought about a volatile new period where “the new regime was beset by internal struggles and dissension that spread to the populace at large”.⁽¹⁷⁾ Other Iraqis came after 1979 with the rise of Saddam Hussein. These groups were generally well-educated and highly-skilled coming from cities such as Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala and Basra. However, Takim notes that, in an interview with the Imam Hisham Husainy of the Karbala Center in Detroit, the imam remarked that it is necessary to differentiate between

those Iraqis who came before and after 1991. He notes that those who came after 1991 came as refugees after the failed uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991. Many of these refugees came the Southern Marshlands; they were mainly agrarian based, and thus did not have the technical skills and educational

background that would have translated more easily in the U.S. like the earlier groups of Iraqis.⁽¹⁸⁾ Walbridge and Aziz also note something similar about the Iraqi Shi'i refugees who arrived in Detroit after 1991. Offering the example of the type of refugees arriving, she describes those from the small southern Iraqi city of Samawa and notes that the population of 15,000 did not have any history of migration, internal or much less international.⁽¹⁹⁾ Many of these Iraqis often spent months, if not years, in a refugee camp near the city of Rafah,

Saudi Arabia where they tens of thousands Iraqis were movement was severely restricted by Saudi authorities and lived in very poor sanitary conditions around the aura of the threat of violence.⁽²⁰⁾

At the end of her 1997 work on the Lebanese

Shi'a in Detroit, Walbridge poignantly notes that with the mass influx of Iraqis, they were having and would continue to have a significant impact on the Lebanese Shi'a in Detroit and Dearborn in terms how ritual is practiced as they view themselves as the “keepers” of the faith because Iraq houses most of the Imami

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shrines and madrasas⁽²¹⁾ as well as the site of the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Husayn in A.D. 680 (Muharram A.H. 61)- a history the Lebanese cannot claim. With latest influx of Iraqis, the trend that Walbridge pointed to in 1997 seems to have been confirmed, at least part, according to Takim's most recent findings. He notes that the Iraqis have brought with them a deep sense of religious commitment and a desire to recreate their religious rituals in the U.S.⁽²²⁾ In his description of this most recent wave of Iraqi Shi'i refugees, he argues that more than any other group, it is these newly-arrived refugees that bring with them "an intense form of Shi'ism and expression of devotion" to the Ahl al-Bayt (Family of the Prophet) compared to the Lebanese Shi'i Muslims, and this intensity has had an inordinate impact on the Lebanese Shi'i community in Dearborn. In an interview with Najjah Bazy of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn (a.k.a. Jami'), opened in 1965, Bazy remarked that Iraqis brought with them the "intensity of 'Ashura. The Lebanese Shi'i Muslims in Dearborn were considered

the imam remarked that it is necessary to differentiate between those Iraqis who came before and after 1991. He notes that those who came after 1991 came as refugees after the failed uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991

by the Iraqis as "too lax" as opposed to the Iraqis being considered by Lebanese as "too stringent." This led to many conflicts in the

Jami' (Islamic Center of America). Due to ongoing conflicts, many of the Lebanese centers in Dearborn were reluctant to have Iraqis participate in center activities⁽²³⁾ Eventually these conflicts led to the founding of the Karbala

Islamic Education Center (Markaz Karbala) in Dearborn in 1994 in order to cater to the particular needs that Iraqi refugees required.

⁽²⁴⁾

The Iraqi "Myth of Return"

"If I had wings, I would fly there tomorrow!"

As the above quote clearly notes, Ahmed wishes that he and his family could return to Baghdad tomorrow. His hope is to return to Iraq someday in the near future-the sooner, the better. However, since the possibility is still at least three years away, as the family will receive U.S. citizenship at that time, there is a need and desire to recreate and maintain a religious community that deals with the

particular needs in which his community is going through as refugees.

Takim argues that more than any other group, it is the Iraqi Shi'a, particularly the newly-arrived, "who harbor the 'myth of return' the most." Because they feel they are in exile, they have a strong desire to return. Although Ahmed did not specifically use this word, his above comment suggests the sentiment of exile. Takim describes exile as "nostalgia for the homeland and the sense of loss that accompanies it often continues for extended periods of time." Moreover, he argues that because of this "myth of return," many do not attempt to integrate into their local communities, and thus this "myth of return" causes the newly arrived Iraqi refugees to develop "ethnic islands"

in the communities where they live. He argues that because they are so new, they do not have their own established institutions.⁽²⁵⁾

Whether this family or other Iraqis will in reality return to Iraq in the near future remains to be seen, but I would argue that rather than

viewing (any type of) migration as a singular event, as Takim seems to assume, it needs to be understood as an evolving process, even after the migrant has arrived to the host country. For now, as life goes on here in the New England town of Quincy, this family has a small, but growing, circle of friends that cushion the transition of a routine daily life that is no longer taken for granted. The daily grind is made more difficult by it being a more conscious effort to live their lives in this new environment, but with new and additional

duties, such as remitting any extra "overtime" money home to his elderly father in Iraq. For example, for Zainab there is increasing pressure from her parents, particularly her father who has been a registered refugee in Egypt for the last six years, and her mother

and brother who only returned to Baghdad, the mother from Egypt and their son from Sweden, want to come to the U.S. to be closer to family and to, again, be further from the tragedies of a seemingly unending conflict. According to Ahmed, he is the head of the

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“whole” family, not just his side of the family, but Zainab’s as well. This fragmented family network is not only in the “business of building community” here in Quincy, but they are also charged with and feel obliged to maintain their extended family, no matter where they are.

Ritual and Resettlement

Organizing an Emerging Iraqi Shi’i Community in Quincy

When I asked why he no longer wishes to go to Iman Islamic Center, Ahmed reported that there was a problem with the “board,” meaning the Islamic Center’s Board of Directors, which is predominately Lebanese and one Iraqi board member. However, the problem was not with the Lebanese board members, but with one Iraqi board member. While they are all Shi’i, Ahmed noted that the Iraqi board member had been praying in Sunni mosques for last ten years and wanted build a Sunni-Shi’i union in the Center in such a way so as not upset any new

Sunni members. However, as he explained rather heatedly, the conflict was not about whether there should be a combined Sunni-Shi’i membership, but about how it should be accomplished. Ahmed said what made him angry was that “He did not ask, he demanded that we do it!” The Iraqi board member wanted the Shi’i members of the Center to make the weekly du’a (supplication, prayers of request or worship) less visible, particularly ones that were deemed critical of Sunnis, which as Ahmed described were placed very visibly on the wall in the prayer room to indicate which du’a were going to be performed during an upcoming Saturday program. While he did not mind a Sunni-Shi’i union, Ahmed did not appreciate how the Iraqi board member

“demanded” these changes. He said that he was made to “feel like a kid.” He claims that now he only goes to the Center for “ceremonies,” indicating something of superficial nature of the events at the Center. He also reported that now his family “stay[s] at home and sometimes [they]

Ahmed wishes that he and his family could return to Baghdad tomorrow. His hope is to return to Iraq someday in the near future-the sooner, the better. However, since the possibility is still at least three years away, as the family will receive U.S. citizenship at that time, there is a need and desire to recreate and maintain a religious community that deals with the particular needs in which his community is going through as refugees

go to Roslindale.” However, he said that he was not happy with this particular mosque (Islamic Education Center) either, because of the “Iraqis there.” When I expressed surprised at this, he commented that they are “Iraqi Iraqi” meaning they are Iraqis who immigrated in the 1990s and have been here for a long time, and they are not from Baghdad. To Ahmed, the Iraqis who arrived at an earlier period to the U.S. and he said that that there is “a difference between us and those who came before.” He commented that they are not from Baghdad, but from the South; it is significant for him that they are not from Baghdad! In his eyes, Baghdad represents a Baghdad that is modern and cosmopolitan, and this unlike the South: “We have culture in Baghdad, and they (in the South) are not like us.” Ahmed

mentioned this to me at other times in casual conversations that he did not want and was not interested in knowing other Iraqis “who are not from Baghdad.” For instance, he made a reference to some Iraqis he knows in Quincy

as casual acquaintances and prefers to keep it that way: “They are from Iraq but not from us, not from Baghdad.” By this and other similar statements he made clear that there is a preferred “social distance” between specific Shi’i groups from Iraq who are differentiated along a combination of divergent religious ideologies, which is informed by social class affiliation and regional geography.

The regional geographic and social “exclusivism” that was expressed by Ahmed exists among Iraqis. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Batatu illustrates how the diversity of the Iraqi population was distinguished by its “incohesiveness” as a society. Moreover, he notes that this extends to “the social and psychological distance between the urban and

tribal Arabs” as they were quite different in many ways from each other⁽²⁶⁾ Among the urban Arabs, social class and class position to a great degree more strongly developed than the tribal Arabs.⁽²⁷⁾ Walbridge also points to a

When I asked why he no longer wishes to go to Iman Islamic Center, Ahmed reported that there was a problem with the “board,” meaning the Islamic Center’s Board of Directors, which is predominately Lebanese and one Iraqi board member. However, the problem was not with the Lebanese board members, but with one Iraqi board member

more general notion of the “social distance” between the various groups in Iraq, which is not only specific to Iraq, but specific to the Middle East in general. She notes that like other Middle Eastern people, Iraqis define their identities not just in terms of nation and language, but more significantly they define themselves in terms of smaller groups such as clan, village and town.⁽²⁸⁾ Likewise, in the context of North America, Sachedina notes that within the Shi’i community, the problems with cultural diversity are significant: “Thus far it has not been possible for various Shi’i groups from around the world to come together as a single community in North America,...and problems of cultural diversity have been significant in affecting fundamental religious attitudes”.⁽²⁹⁾ However, although Sachedina goes on to mention that it is a common language and national identity are the common denominators among specific Shi’i groups, I would also argue that Ahmed’s comments point to something beyond a common language and national identity. A concrete example of this is Ahmed’s recent

sponsorship of a childhood friend⁽³⁰⁾ and his family to come to the U.S. as refugees. They grew up together in the same neighborhood in Baghdad where their families raised their children together.

“The Lebanese have two faces”

More than anything else, what is clear is that Ahmed and his family are attempting to create an affective sense of the ‘home’ community as well as a feeling of belonging on their terms with his growing circle of friends who are predominantly from Baghdad. This has become more poignant in the present context of conflict and status as refugees in the U.S. since he, his family and his circle of friends can no longer take their daily lives for granted as they may have in Iraq. As I discussed earlier,

Ahmed reported to me that he and his family were attending the Iman Islamic Center in Quincy solely for “ceremonies” while the more intimate religious ritual events were performed in their home or in the homes of his circle of friends.

To Ahmed, the Iraqis who arrived at an earlier period to the U.S. and he said that that there is “a difference between us and those who came before.” He commented that they are not from Baghdad, but from the South; it is significant for him that they are not from Baghdad! In his eyes, Baghdad represents a Baghdad that is modern and cosmopolitan, and this unlike the South

When I asked him to be more specific, he noted disapprovingly of the un-pious “Lebanese behavior” outside of prayer services and specific ritual commemorations: “You know, I thought that when I saw them in the mosque, they are good, they are praying well but then I would see them

in the parties and they would be dancing with women, they were so different. The Lebanese have two faces.” While on the surface it may seem that he is being contrite, it may also point to what Walbridge notes about Iraqis’ sense of themselves as the “keepers” of Shi’ism. When the 1991 Iraqis arrived in Detroit, they arrived with an ardent sense of their faith as Iraq is so centrally located geographically within Shi’ism while Lebanese cannot claim this. Ahmed and his family have come with this same strong sense of faith and piety; when he saw what is described above of the “two faces” of the Lebanese, I suggest that he may have interpreted their behavior as a lack of true religious commitment. Walbridge notes that in Iraq, their lives were surrounded by

Walbridge also points to a more general notion of the “social distance” between the various groups in Iraq, which is not only specific to Iraq, but specific to the Middle East in general. She notes that like other Middle Eastern people, Iraqis define their identities not just in terms of nation and language, but more significantly they define themselves in terms of smaller groups such as clan, village and town

their faith in a way that the Lebanese could not have experienced; their religious leaders strongly believed that there was “only one interpretation of Shi’ism” and a deviation from this interpretation is a breach of one’s true commitment.⁽³¹⁾ I would also suggest that the behavior he observed

disturbed him not only because of a perceived lack of commitment and proper piety, but it also has the potential to influence his wife and children over time.

Adapting to a New Life

When one looks at how a religious community comes together, the organizational structure and the changes in the ethnic membership allow us to see how ethnicity and nationality as well as a desire for a sense of belonging can impact how a religious community adapts itself to a new environment, and it is often not without conflict. As Geertz rightly observed, “Religious faith, even when it is fed from a common source, is as a much a

particularizing force as a generalizing one.”⁽³²⁾ In her study of a prominent Brooklyn mosque, one of the oldest mosques in the U.S., Abusharaf describes this process as “selective adaptation” where Islamic religious practices in the mosque at the structural level were modified and changed selectively to suit the needs and ethnic character of its members. Her description of the changes of how the ethnic character and structure of the mosque changed dramatically from its founding as an African Muslim religious organization, representing the ‘homeland’ as well as acting to legitimate Islam in the context of the U.S., which was multiethnic in nature, to an ethnically homogenized mosque that is now predominantly Yemeni in nature reflects indigenous Yemeni religious practices and worldview.⁽³³⁾ Thus, the mosque (or an Islamic center) acts not only as a place of religiosity, but also one of “community

Ahmed reported to me that he and his family were attending the Iman Islamic Center in Quincy solely for “ceremonies” while the more intimate religious ritual events were performed in their home or in the homes of his circle of friends

consciousness” for Muslim immigrants, whether Shi’a or Sunni, and these changes evolve over time to make the community more aware of their “distinctive identity” as they adapt through modification and renegotiation of their roles in a new society rather than through any “linear process of adaptation.”⁽³⁴⁾ It can also be a source of conflict as Ahmed noted with the “bad behavior” of some of the Lebanese members as well as the Iraqi board member.

The institutionalization of a weekend religious school system for the children in a number of Islamic centers throughout North America is used as a vehicle for socializing the children and sustain their identities as Shi’i Muslims. Sachedina found that a “highly efficient” school system is considered to be only second to the weekly and annual gatherings of Shi’i community for the Imam Husayn. The creation of a system

In her study of a prominent Brooklyn mosque, one of the oldest mosques in the U.S., Abusharaf describes this process as “selective adaptation” where Islamic religious practices in the mosque at the structural level were modified and changed selectively to suit the needs and ethnic character of its members

provides a guarantee that their Islamic moral-religious education will maintain the Shi'i Muslim identity.⁽³⁵⁾ The recent establishment of a weekend school for the members' children, called the Imam Sadik School, as well as a "Sisters Committee" at the Iman Islamic Center in Quincy is a sign of a more solid foundation being built in and by the Shi'i community. Because many of the families have small children, it is very important for the children to learn the tenets of the religion and the Arabic language. Warner argues that "as a religion becomes less taken for granted under the conditions prevailing in the U.S., adherents become more conscious of their tradition, and many become more determined about its transmission."⁽³⁶⁾

According to the website, the "Sisters Committee" is specifically designed for women in order to "promote a positive image of Islam," to help "improve the level of access & equity participation of Muslim women into all facets of American life" among other aspects. As

well, the committee also provides classes for learning how to read for the 'Ashura mourning ceremony (majlis 'aza'), Qur'an reading (tajweed), and assist in teaching Arabic on Saturdays. As I mentioned at the opening of the paper, the Iraqi family does not feel that the Center is their own. But, their children do attend the weekend classes, and it is because the parents are actively aware that as their children enter into Quincy's public school, there

will be obstacles that will make transmission of their identity as Baghdadi Shi'a more of a challenge as the children grow older. As far as how this will work out for the family in the future is uncertain, but they do have examples of other's previous experiences. On one of my visits to their home, Zainab showed me

photos of their friend's daughter graduating with the highest honors from a Quincy public school.

As Abusharaf demonstrates in her study, the social history of any immigrant religious organization as it evolves over time will be

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shaped by its members and the culture of host environment. However, as this family participates in the Islamic Center's activities and events, rather than avoid it, they will indeed have a part in shaping the vision of the Center. The weekend school for the children is key, helping them to maintain their religious identity as Shi'i Muslims. But how their identity as Iraqi, and more specifically Baghdadi, Shi'a will be sustained over time will be determined in how they renegotiate and how much they are willing to modify their role as members of their emerging Shi'i community in the context of the American society.

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committed themselves to going just a week before the tenth day of Muharram, 'Ashura. They called the Foundation to let them know that they were coming as a large group to the majlis al-'aza'. They arrived the day before 'Ashura in order to fully participate in the culminating day in the month of Muharram.

The story of the Battle of Karbala is at the

core of Shi'i identity, and these, particularly the Imam Husayn's martyrdom, can be viewed as the defining meta-historical event in Shi'i Islamic history. The rituals related to the events surrounding the martyrdom of Husayn are relived and recreated through a dedicated and solemn commemoration each

Muharram in New York, 2010

In an effort to organize themselves into a community for this year's Muharram commemoration, Ahmed and his circle of friends and their families decided to go to New York to the Al-Khoei Foundation to participate with other Shi'a from all over the world. They

year. As Nakash notes, "The importance of the rituals of Muharram in invoking the memory of Karbala cannot be overestimated, for it is in these rituals that the moods and motivations that are induced in the believers by the symbol of Husayn's martyrdom surface."⁽³⁷⁾ Thus, it is in these rituals that the world as lived and the world as imagined are fused together. The

significance of the event and its cosmological vibrancy so clearly differentiate the Shi'a from the Sunni tradition of Islam, exposing the historical fissure between the two main branches of the faith. This event not only signifies the centrality of its role in shaping Shi'i identity, but also in shaping the collective memory of the Shi'a.

The communal nature of this ritual is also an integral part of the commemoration. Walbridge argues that more than any other ritual, it is the Muharram commemorations for the Lebanese Shi'a of Dearborn that fill a spiritual void in the lives of people in a secular, materialistic society such as the U.S. Remembering Husayn has been an effective vehicle for maintaining the goal of "sectarian solidarity" in the context of a society that does not wholly accept them as Americans.⁽³⁸⁾

For the Iraqis, because their country is truly central geographically to the events at Karbala,

they can link their struggles as refugees and feelings of social isolation in a new, and often alien environment, to the suffering of the Imam

Husayn. Mary Hegland notes that the image of the Imam Husayn, in the small Iranian town where she had conducted her fieldwork, functions in two ways: One reflects a revolutionary image employed by Khomeini,

but the other shows Husayn as an intercessor between God and man; he was someone who you could turn to in times of trouble.⁽³⁹⁾ Nakash notes that it is "[h]is suffering [that] is taken to be

a source of salvation for the community through its own internalization and emulation of the suffering of the imam."⁽⁴⁰⁾

Victor Turner's conceptualization of ritual is most appropriate in understanding the

Shi'i ritual of Muharram where the structure of ritual allows for its participants to enter a "subjunctive existence" where a liminal space is constructed away from the everyday trivialities and difficulties of life. It is in this space "out

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of time” that believers can reflect upon the “root paradigms” of their faith.⁽⁴¹⁾ Turner emphasizes that “root paradigms” emerge out life crises causing a transformation and entailing some aspect of self-sacrifice that will ultimately benefit the survival of the group.

⁽⁴²⁾ For this Iraqi family, their experience as refugees echoes the story of the Battle of Karbala. Moreover, Nakash notes that one of the main functions of the recitation of the story of Husayn’s martyrdom during the Shi’i memorial service is to have emotion and pain of mourning remain with the participants long after the ritual has finished. With such powerful verses as: “As if every place is for my eyes Karbala and any time is the day of ‘Ashura.” One can understand how the intensity of the story of Karbala can linger long afterward, especially in times of crisis.⁽⁴³⁾

There is no doubt that Ahmed and Zainab as well as their circle of friends participation in the commemoration in New York not only fulfills a need to create a more meaningful sense of community, but also to find a

There is no doubt that Ahmed and Zainab as well as their circle of friends participation in the commemoration in New York not only fulfills a need to create a more meaningful sense of community, but also to find a sacred space where they can reflect and draw strength from the central paradigms that emerged out of tragedy of Karbala

sacred space where they can reflect and draw strength from the central paradigms that emerged out of tragedy of Karbala. As Ahmed mentioned, “The life in the U.S. is very difficult and I am tired, but we will be survived, we will be survived!”

Remembrance of

Karbala allows the Shi’a to claim sacred space in the context of a new and “alien” environment where the role of Karbala becomes central to the Shi’i Muslims of North America.

‘Ashura-1431

“Today, my brothers and sisters, the lovers of Husayn Ibn ‘Ali we are here to remember that day, those moments of the last of Husayn Ibn ‘Ali at Karbala.”

The above words are the opening of the English-language majlis commemorating the death of the Imam Husayn at Karbala in 680 A.D. this year, Islamic year 1431 on the Hejira calendar, at the Imam Al-Khoei Foundation in Jamaica, New York. This was only one of

four 'Ashura recitations which took place at the Foundation on the 13th of January 2010. The three other majalis that were given were in Arabic, Urdu and Farsi simultaneously on four floors of this immense building (see photo below). Thus, the Battle of Karbala is retold concurrently throughout the building to hundreds of men, women and children in their native languages. On the Arabic language website of the Al-Khoei Foundation, there is a brief overview of how the event was conducted:

In an atmosphere of faith, humility and sadness, the Khoei Center in New York performed the majlis al-'aza' on the tenth day of Muharram in the Hijira year 1431. The day started the Center's program for the day of 'Ashura and two full prayer sessions in the congregation, and then a lecture in English with the guidance of the religious advisor of Islam and Muslims, Sheikh Fadel Sahlani. Then his Eminence Sheikh Haidar al-Khatib al-Husseini Al-Shawi read in Arabic the story of the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn. The commemoration was available in four languages: in English, by Hajj Fayyad Jafar; in Urdu by the infallible Mr. Khatib Abdi; and in Persian by Khatib Mr. Rashid Saberi.



The Foundation's efforts to accommodate their believers of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds and traditions can be seen as an attempt by its leaders in the community to recognize the diversity of the Shi'i community in North America (U.S. and Canada) and to bring together the community as one cohesive group for the one event that is central to all Shi'a around the world. It is important to note that the impressive physical space of the Foundation allows for this divergent groups of North American Shi'a to express their indigenously-informed notions of the event.

The Foundation's main mission is to provide a wide ranges of services specific to the needs of all Shi'i Muslims throughout the United States, such as an easy and efficient ways of paying khums, zakat and donating during various times of the year important to

the Muslim calendar such as paying online, through the mail or in person. The name of the Foundation signifies which marji'Ahmed follows (he is muqallid to the marji'). The Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei was the most senior mujtahid in Iraq until his death in 1992 in Najaf. With his death, the Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani is looked upon as the chief authority of the Shi'a, with his opinions having the most weight in the global Shi'i community. This authority of opinion reaches across the Atlantic Ocean to North America, and it is the al-Khoei Foundation that represents al-Sistani in the U.S. through Sheikh Fadhel Al-Sahlan, U.S. representative of Ayatollah al-Sistani.



Majlis al-'Aza', January 13, 2010 (1431)

Although I was unable to retrieve a copy of the video, the photo above offers a sense of this year's (2010) event that Ahmed and

his family and their circle of friends, the first images of this majlis were shown to me by Zainab. From behind curtains that separated the men and women, Zainab video-taped Ahmed in sea of mostly black shirts and pants facing the Imam standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his co-religionists listening to the Arabic-speaking imam, Sheikh Haidar al-Shawi, as they responded in unison to the Imam. My observation of the video in combination with the audio of the ceremony offered me a sense of the starkly emotive and somber atmosphere of the room. As you can observe in the above photo, the room is adorned with banners with the names of the Ahl al-Bayt and black curtains emphasizing the solemnity of the event among the men and women in this large room.

In the photo below, it offers an example of the types of ritual activities that occurred outside in the courtyard of the Foundation. As can be observed, zinjeel (self-flagellation) and latm (chest beating) were performed, while others, like Ahmed, remained inside to continue praying. While discussing the photos, he explained to me that the rituals of self-flagellation were something that he has never participated in, but he did say that it does occur, mainly in Southern Iraq. Again, this suggests the difference between the

urban and tribal Arabs as noted by Batatu. Ahmed said he did not think it was necessary and that many of the men in the courtyard self-flagellating were from South Asian countries such as Pakistan and India.



Foundation courtyard, January 13, 2010 (1431)

Because I observed that some of Zainab's video footage was taken outdoors, I asked Ahmed if he attended the 'Ashura Procession on Park Avenue in Manhattan; he relayed that he did not as he wanted to stay at the Foundation to pray (as an example, the photo below shows the 2002 procession). Ahmed noted that although he did not attend, he did consider it and may go next year. My initial thought was that there was a distinct difference between Dearborn and New York

in terms of how these two Shi'i communities commemorate 'Ashura. I initially understood that Ahmed and his family participated in the procession as it seemed to the case through my observation of Zainab's video. While this turned out not to be the case, the fact that there is annual procession which does occur annually in Manhattan is significant when compared with how 'Ashura is commemorated in Dearborn. Walbridge also notes that while the mosques are "filled to capacity" during 'Ashura, "an outside onlooker from the street would not be aware of the emotional drama inside the mosque. There is no breast beating on the streets, no processions."⁽⁴⁴⁾



'Ashura procession in Manhattan, New York 2002 (1424)

“Good enough to remember the Baghdad days!”

Ahmed reported that one of the most important reasons he wanted to go to New York this year was to participate as a group with those he feels closest to, creating a sense of community among not just his circle of friends, but also with the Shi'i community at-large. He declared that the Muharram in New York “was not bad,” and it was “good enough to remember the Baghdad days.” He said that “‘Ashura is not a day to stay by yourself.” He said that the only difference between New York and Baghdad is that in Baghdad, he would be with all members of his family. Because his father, sisters and brothers and other family members are still in Baghdad, Ahmed reported to me that he would, of course, rather be “home” with his family. He said that one could go to either Karbala or Najaf to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn. However, here he said something of significance that stood out as the difference between here and there. He reported that he misses is the Iraqi dialect of

The three other majalis that were given were in Arabic, Urdu and Farsi simultaneously on four floors of this immense building (see photo below). Thus, the Battle of Karbala is retold concurrently throughout the building to hundreds of men, women and children in their native languages

khutbah, who orates during the majlis al-‘aza’. Interestingly, Deeb remarks on how the older, more traditional female recitors of the majalis (plural form of majlis) shift to an Iraqi dialect during the lamentations because “it is known that Iraqi is the dialect of compassion and longing.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ The goal is to generate a deep emotive and resonant sentiment among the participants. This is an intriguing aspect of the difference between the resettlement country and the host country that would need to be investigated further in terms of how ritual expression is transformed temporally and spatially.

The “Portability” of Karbala

One of the more fascinating notions that struck me during my research is the notion that the ritual events that represent the Battle of Karbala are portable⁽⁴⁶⁾ The sentiment of “Everyday is ‘Ashura and in every land is Karbala” epitomizes this portability. For the Shi’a, this axiom allows the events of Karbala to be temporally, spatially and geographically

unbound. This portability is vital for the maintenance and recreation of Shi'i collective identity. For Iraqi families like Ahmed's, the importance of the portability of the rituals of Karbala act to preserve their particular religious identity as Baghdadi Shi'i Muslims - an identity that tends to be obscured under the larger Muslim identity in the West. This portability acts to preserve the indigenous character of Muharram ritual events, "remembering the Baghdad days" and to overcome a sense of alienation by performing the rituals among one's co-religionists. This portability of the Karbala ritual is distinct in Shi'i Islam in that the Ziyarat Husayn, for example, has become so highly ritualized that it has evolved as a separate ritual where the physical act of visiting the tomb of the Imam Husayn has been replaced by a symbolic one that may be fulfilled by reciting the text no matter where you are.⁽⁴⁷⁾

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The portability of Karbala is also important in keeping the family intact as the rituals are enacted and performed as a family. Schubel points out that the significance of the majlis as a family ritual for Shi'i Muslims in North America "is difficult to overestimate."⁽⁴⁸⁾ He notes that "Majlis is a communal and family event" just as the events at Karbala were.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Hyder recollects his family's first years in College Station in Houston, Texas: "The first few Muharrams in America brought with them the sense of nostalgia for the faraway city of Hyderabad."⁽⁵⁰⁾ The notion of ritual events as a family affair is not just about the members of a family, but also

While discussing the photos, he explained to me that the rituals of self-flagellation were something that he has never participated in, but he did say that it does occur, mainly in Southern Iraq. Again, this suggests the difference between the urban and tribal Arabs as noted by Batatu. Ahmed said he did not think it was necessary and that many of the men in the courtyard self-flagellating were from South Asian countries such as Pakistan and India

those who make up the "fictive kin" where one's circle of friends can be viewed as "relatedness" which highlights their connections as "socially, materially and affectively" significant.⁽⁵¹⁾ For Ahmed, his family and their circle of friends, this type of "kinship" has just

as much import in their lives as their “blood-related” kin, particularly in the context of their forced migration.

For the parents, these rituals sustain their own identity as Shi’i Muslims, and for the children, ensure that these rituals and their meanings carried on to the next generation. Engaging in these ritual activities offer opportunities show how their community is distinct from others. Because these ritual events are communal and familial in nature, the battle of Karbala allows for its members to demonstrate the “root paradigms” of behavior, becoming models of correct behavior for men and women for their children to observe.⁽⁵²⁾ The ritual events of the majlis educate the children through the creation of a total Shi’i environment.⁽⁵³⁾

Claiming space for the particular expression of their faith through ritual ceremonies becomes an important signifier of the survival of their distinctive identity as Shi’i Muslims in North America, precisely because the survival of their faith is part and parcel of the ethos of Shi’i piety. For Ahmed and his family, as refugees, the events of Karbala summon up the painful events of their flight from danger and give them strength. The nostalgia for the “Baghdad days” commemorating Muharram and ‘Ashura, whether in Baghdad, Najaf or

Karbala cannot be denied, especially as it was never his intention to take his family and flee from Iraq. Thus, his sense of exile is further exacerbated by his longing to return ‘home.’ If he had wings, he would fly to Baghdad tomorrow.

Mawlid Zaynab in Quincy



Iman Islamic Center, Quincy Massachusetts

When Zainab unexpectedly invited me to the “birthday” of Sayyedah Zaynab at the Iman Islamic Center in Quincy (see above photo) at the end of our interview, I did not hesitate to say ‘yes,’ but at the same time I did not know what to expect. She had shown me the video tape of Ahmed during the ‘Ashura commemoration in New York and I was attempting to understand the significance of the Mawlid. I was excited

about participating in such an event as it is considered integral to the events of the Battle of Karbala and of the martyrdom of Husayn. The events of Karbala extend beyond the days of Muharram where throughout the rest of the year, the celebrations and commemorations of the births and deaths of those who were present and actively participated in the Battle of Karbala as well as all of the members and descendants of the Ahl al-Bayt.

Sayyedah Zaynab is revered by both men and women throughout the Shi'i Muslim world reflecting her pivotal role before, during and after the tragic story of Karbala. While Sayyedah Zaynab has been invoked in many ways throughout the Shi'i Muslim world throughout Shi'i history, from the ultimate lamenter of suffering, capturing the tears of mourners in her clothing, to the staunch political activist evoking social change and standing up against injustice, she is universally and ultimately understood

as a versatile ideal model of womanhood for all Shi'i Muslim women to emulate.

The Setting of the Mawlid

The Mawlid took place in the Iman Islamic Center, a modest and inconspicuous building

tucked away off of a main street, surrounded by trees and slightly elevated above the main street. The building's unusual shape allows for it to be utilized in multifold ways; it has a large prayer room with a smaller section in the back for women,

which includes a bathroom, for when both men and women congregate on weekends. The male-female rooms are separated by a wall with large windows to allow the women to observe the imam during his sermons. Aside from the women's section, there are several

bathrooms to perform al-wuduh (ablution), and is predominantly used by the men on the weekends in order to maintain a gendered

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One of the more fascinating notions that struck me during my research is the notion that the ritual events that represent the Battle of Karbala are portable

separation. In the main prayer room there is a small stage where the khutbeh is performed. There is also a library with a private room for study.

For the Mawlid itself, there were three sections of 3540- chairs fanned out around the stage area with a large space left open in the center. Around the room, there were several indications of what we were simultaneously celebrating and commemorating. Glittering Christmas garland of red, green and gold was used to write the names of Zaynab, Ali and Mohammad on the walls. There were several long, folding tables off to the left-side for the prepared food that the women made and brought with them for this special occasion. There was a good deal of harissa, a traditional Iraqi lamb and bean dish especially prepared for 'Ashura.

The food tables were placed under a large, silver-embroidered and black bi-lingual tapestry indicating the Ziyarat Husayn. The placement of the food under this tapestry not only indicates the direction of the Karbala, but it also suggests that the food and sweets

are offered in both the names of Zaynab and Husayn as a sacred act of sharing and celebration. In other words, what is a blessed offering to Zaynab is also a blessed offering to Husayn. This deliberate placement of the food is assembled under the Ziyarat Husayn tapestry on the day of the birth of Zaynab reflects and reminds the Shi'i community of the intimately and ever-present historical link between Husayn and Zaynab.

During the different times of the event, there were set times when heavy solemnity came of this group of women. For example,

The portability of Karbala is also important in keeping the family intact as the rituals are enacted and performed as a family. Schubel points out that the significance of the majlis as a family ritual for Shi'i Muslims in North America "is difficult to overestimate

as we were nearing end of the event, seated, we all faced in the direction of the Ziyarat Husayn tapestry and raised our right hands up, open palms and prayed to Husayn and Zaynab. The room fell silent and the children quieted

down. I felt among all of these women a sense of reflection, mourning and appreciation of Zaynab and Husayn. Then the khutbah began to lead the elegiac prayer in a normal speaking voice where the participants responded in unison to the chorus of the prayer.

The atmosphere of the Iman Islamic Center

was a remarkable combination of solemnity and celebration where only women (and their children) participated. This celebration/commemoration of the birth of Zaynab is an annual event where the women were not only reminded of Zaynab's role in the events at Karbala, but she is also used as an illustration of an ideal model of womanhood to be emulated, particularly in the context of their new environment. The celebration of her life entailed stories of her strength and courage, speaking truth to power against the injustices of Umayyad court of Yazid, becoming known as the "Conqueror of Damascus."

Zaynab as an Alternative Feminine Model

For the women who participated in the Mawlid, Sayyedah Zaynab was invoked as an active role model who counters the images of the women they encounter on a daily basis in the U.S. She is the symbol of an alternative model of womanhood in the context of the U.S., a non-Muslim society where they remain

a "double minority." In the beginning of the ceremony, Roua, Haidar's wife, delivered the following speech:

In front of Zaynab who is the model of the Muslim woman as she is epitomized (portrayed) in Islam as providing living proof for the future

generations of Muslims. Whenever we want to search for the model Muslim woman....we read it in the character of Zaynab. And in light of the decline, which has been witnessed of the contemporary woman among us, and

with respect to this decline of women and the loss of values from the life of our youth, we find that our state mind day after day...we are in need of Zaynab's culture in which we will find our alternative to all the imported models (examples) from outside.

Sayyedah Zaynab, may peace be upon her, was the model of the highest of convictions and renunciation and distance of worldly goods and their comfort. She gave up the flowered life of abundance...and she gave up the safety of home and service and servants to go out with brother, Imam Husayn, may be peace be upon him.

For Ahmed and his family, as refugees, the events of Karbala summon up the painful events of their flight from danger and give them strength. The nostalgia for the "Baghdad days" commemorating Muharram and 'Ashura, whether in Baghdad, Najaf or Karbala cannot be denied

Through this part of the speech, we can note that the model of Sayyedah Zaynab that is being invoked is viewed as necessary in the light of the “imported” models that now surround them in the American society. Roua reminds her audience of the sacrifices that Sayyedah Zaynab made for them as she risked her life to preserve the future of the faith, and it is now their responsibility as Shi’i women to preserve her as their ideal role model for women as well as a symbol of the perpetuation of the faith, and through the words of the speech, this call suggests even more urgency because of the environment in which they now live. It is also a reminder for those who have lived here in the U.S. for a long time not to forget the life of Sayyedah Zaynab, and thus not to forget their distinctive religious identity as Shi’i Muslim women, the primary cultivators of the next generation who will be raised in a non-Muslim

This deliberate placement of the food is assembled under the Ziyarat Husayn tapestry on the day of the birth of Zaynab reflects and reminds the Shi’i community of the intimately and ever-present historical link between Husayn and Zaynab

This celebration/commemoration of the birth of Zaynab is an annual event where the women were not only reminded of Zaynab’s role in the events at Karbala, but she is also used as an illustration of an ideal model of womanhood to be emulated, particularly in the context of their new environment

country. For those who are newly-arrived, their identity as Shi’i women is no longer something that can be taken for granted, but rather one

where a conscious and determined effort must be made so that the future generation of Shi’i Muslims will not forget their identity.

As an example of how Sayyedah Zaynab is emulated has changed over time, Deeb’s study

illustrates how Shi’i women in Lebanon have come to utilize Zaynab’s image as an ideal role model that highlights Zaynab’s powerful role in the Battle of Karbala as a social and political activist. Lebanese women are now encouraged by their leaders to become more politically vocal and publically visible in their community.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This is a reflection of the

increasing participation of the Shi’a in the Lebanese political and social landscape. This call of the leaders to emulate the two models of Husayn and Zaynab is to “authenticate” what it means to be Shi’a in

the context of Lebanon and thus relevant in the present political landscape.

While Zaynab's image among Shi'i women in Lebanon has undergone a dramatic transformation representing an image of public and political activism, I suggest that she is also undergoing a transformation as an alternative feminist model of womanhood to counter the model of womanhood in the U.S., which is simply unacceptable to many of these women. What this will mean into the future will be determined by how this emergent Shi'i community in Quincy with the strong identity of the Iraqis as the "keepers" of the faith. The tension also exists between becoming more integrated into the predominantly Lebanese community or breaking off to start a new Shi'i community that is distinctly Iraqi or even a more urbane Baghdadi community as an Iraqi population

continues to arrive over the coming years through the resettlement process as well as through sponsorship of family members.

The Social Significance of Women's Ritual Gatherings

In the public space of the Iman Islamic Center, women were active, noisy, and expressing joy at many points during the Mawlid; it was as much a social occasion where women could enjoy themselves outside of their usual gendered roles as wife and mother as it was a solemn commemoration in remembrance of the Sayyedah Zaynab. As Aghaie notes in his study on the gender dynamics of Shi'i symbols and rituals in Qajar, Iran, the ritual gatherings such as these "were extremely important to women as a means of developing and maintaining a network of friends."⁵⁵

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The impact of migration on women's social networks is significant. As one older Iraqi woman, who has only been in the U.S. for less than year and does not speak English, commented when I asked what she thought of her time her in the U.S. up to now: "Yanni, ghorba!" I found her use of the term "ghorba" salient, because the term in the context of beginning a new life in the U.S., ghorba refers to feelings of living in a strange and alien land, which is quite unfamiliar to the life she had known in Iraq. In Abusharaf's 2002 book *Wanderings*, a study of Sudanese migrants and exiles in North America, her respondents constantly evoked the term "ghorba" meaning a sense of "loneliness, loss, uprootedness, nostalgia, and yearning for the familiar."⁵⁶ Thus, participation in these ritual events, outside their religious or spiritual importance, is necessary for relieving not only the boredom, but the sense of alienation and social isolation that results from the loss of previous social networks of 'home' in a new environment. For example, because Zainab does not speak English very well and does not have many

opportunities to interact with Americans, ritual events such as these become very important in the lives of women such as Zainab who is relatively newly-arrived. Zainab reported to me that this is precisely why she goes where she can spend time her friends.

The women's social networks are reconstituted through these activities and events at the center where they have the opportunity to recreate social networks of friends. Dancing with her friends (and me), allowed Zainab to spend time with her friends

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and socialize. Indeed, Zainab told me that in some respects she prefers having a social network made up of friends rather than of family: "Ahsan!" she commented when I asked if there was a difference between her social networks in

Quincy compared to how it was in Baghdad. In the context of many of the Iraqi women's forced migration, these religious ceremonies are an important opportunity for the development and re-creation of a social network, which has drastically changed since coming to the U.S.

The evident festiveness of this ritual where

the ritual becomes more of a celebration that resembles a birthday allowed the women to recreate a party-like atmosphere much like the ones I attended while living in Syria. These women's parties were expressly for "letting down one's hair" as many did during the Mawlid. It was quite a dramatic transformation the women performed behind the closed doors of the Center. Women wore tight clothing, a good deal of make-up and danced with other the women, including me. What was quite unexpected and fascinating was that the dancing occurred during the khutbeh's rhythmic incantations, along with a backup chorus made up of two young women who kept their hijab on. Many of the women, both Iraqi and Lebanese, began to stand up and dance in the center, which was left open, in front of the stage, and the others who were still seated, both young and old, were encouraged to join and where the children also participated.

The atmosphere of Mawlid resembled, to some degree and at some points, women's

behavior during their participation in maraboutic ceremonies in Tunisia and the Qurayeh in Iraq as described by Fernea and Bezirgan. The female behavior described in both the Tunisian and Iraqi ceremonies is juxtaposed to the men's behavior in public and private spaces. In the maraboutic ceremonies, Ferchiou shows that the attributes of noise, clarity, open milieu, and joy of the female behavior were "attributes of accepted behavior" and was a reversal of their behavior in everyday

life, outside the context of the ritual ceremony. The men's behavior is described as silent, obscure, in a closed milieu with a sense of gravity in the maraboutic and Iraqi ceremonies and is a reverse of the everyday behavior of men.⁵⁷ This was very similar to the behavioral attributes of the women who participated in

the Mawlid. What I found striking was the transformation when the women arrived to the ceremony and when they were preparing to leave; they shed their hijab and abayat upon arrival and re-cloaked themselves upon

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departure, their appearances and demeanor completely changing at both points of the event.

As a role model among Shi'i women, Zaynab becomes particularly crucial as a guide and as an intercessor in the women's "this-worldly" challenges and obstacles as well as their "other-worldly" spiritual lives, particularly in the context of forced migration. The dramatic changes in the lives of the women is having and will continue to have an ongoing impact on their roles as women as well as causing them to renegotiate and modify the organizational structure of the family out of necessity as time goes on. That it takes place through the migration is a gradual, yet a dynamic process. These ritual events, whether somber or celebratory, or both, are vital not only for the maintenance of their identities as Shi'i men and women and their families, but also in the social lives of these women as changes will inevitably impact their lives and roles as wives and mothers. However, Sayyedah Zaynab is viable and versatile role model who women such as

Zainab can emulate and receive strength.

Conclusion

What I found as I have observed and spent time with this family is that is their faith that allows them not to wallow in the pain of ongoing loss and struggle; it is in how the loss and struggle keeps and maintains their faith and provides them strength. The ritual events allow this family to maintain and reestablish a community in the U.S. that resembles their social familial networks back 'home.' While

What I found striking was the transformation when the women arrived to the ceremony and when they were preparing to leave; they shed their hijab and abayat upon arrival and re-cloaked themselves upon departure, their appearances and demeanor completely changing at both points of the event

this may true for other religious groups have come to America as immigrants, refugees and exiles, I suggest that because of the particular nature of their faith-Shi'i Islam- where suffering is a central component of their faith, it allows its believers to directly draw strength

from the faith. Even though it has not been without its difficulties, this family's attempts to find their place in this new environment while maintaining their own identity as Shi'i Muslims in America will be ongoing and will transform their lives as they navigate and negotiate their new life in the U.S.

Notes

- * Heidemarie Woelfel is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Sociology at Boston University. She graduated in 2005 with a Master's in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from the American University in Beirut, Lebanon where she conducted thesis research on internal rural-urban migration of women in Syria. Her current research and teaching areas are the sociology of religion, and international migration with a particular focus on forced migration and refugees in the Middle East.
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- 26 Batatu 1978: 13.
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- 28 Walbridge 2000: 336.
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- 30 Ahmed's friend is the other respondent that I attempted to interview for this paper. Unfortunately, I have been unsuccessful until now, but will not give up. I am afraid that because he does not know me very well, he may be apprehensive, at this point, to being interviewed about his experiences of forced migration.
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