The Aesthetics of ritual: Contested identities and conflicting performances in the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora

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Abstract

What are the processes through which identity change takes place at the individual (micro) and collective (meso) level; and how might an analysis of religious performance and ritual contribute to understandings of such identity change? Through an ethnographic analysis of the Muharram rituals of Iraqi Shi'is in London, I take religious rites as a starting point from which to theorise a performative theory of identity change, and especially to highlight the role of ritual and performance in shaping changing notions of identity at both the individual and collective level. Such a project necessarily engages both with processes of identity change and with the paradox of identity/difference, especially the way in which articulations of subjective identity are ontologically dependent on an external 'other'. Ultimately, I argue that paying close critical attention to the performative and (re)iterative processes of micro-level identificatory practices allows a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which identity change comes to take effect both at the meso and macro levels.

Key words

[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.

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, as well as considerable scholarly argumentation and debate. While acknowledging the complexities and contours of current and ongoing debate in the study of identity, this paper seeks to combine an empirical preoccupation with performative identity and religious ritual with a methodological ethnographic sensitivity to everyday practices in order to understand how micro-level identity change may come to inform both meso- and macro-level political processes. On a theoretical level, I argue that the foregrounding of micro-level practices facilitates a performative understanding of both identity construction and identity change that allows for the isolation of particular processes that contribute to changes at both the individual and collective level. In this way, the micro-level analysis outlined here can also be seen to speak to wider processes of identity change, especially when it comes to mobilising identities for political purposes. Such a project necessarily engages with the paradox of identity/difference that recurs throughout this special issue, especially the way

in which subjective articulations of identity are always-already lacking as a result of their ontological dependence on an external 'other'. Moreover, by isolating the performative enactments of specific identity categories at the level of everyday practice, this paper seeks to trace theoretical and methodological lines in the sand when it comes to the study and analysis of identity change over time.

The empirical case study under scrutiny here is that of religiously devout Iraqi Shi'is in London, specifically the ways in which religious rituals of mourning and commemoration during the Islamic month of Muharram performatively constitute alternative articulations of Iraqi-Shi'a subjectivity in ways that interrogate both the identity categories of 'Iraqi' and 'Shi'a' and the relationship between them. Drawing on my ongoing doctoral research, the paper makes use of empirical data from more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork effected amongst practicing Iraqi Shi'is in London between March 2013 and December 2015, as well as a total of 29 semi-structured interviews and 50 informal interviews conducted during this period. Studying this group of individuals, who form part of a larger Iraqi Shi'a diaspora dispersed across the world,[i] thus necessarily involves engaging with the literatures on migration, diaspora, and religion, and exploring how each of these factors in turn relates to processes of identity change.

Significance of case study

According to the 2011 Census of Britain, there are an estimated 73,000 Iraqi-born individuals living in the UK, with the vast majority concentrated in London (Office for National Statistics, 2013). However, since this figure is neither up to date nor takes into account second or third-generation Iraqis born in Britain (not to mention those born in diaspora who later settled in the UK), it is safe to assume that the total number of diasporic Iraqis in the UK is much higher.[ii] The Iraqi community in the UK, like most diaspora populations, has been deeply implicated in the political and societal changes that have

shaped the Iraqi state from the mid 20th to early 21st century. Indeed, the most significant waves of Iraqi emigration over the last few decades have coincided with a number of key political events in Iraq itself; and different political conditions in the homeland have led to differences in the economic, political and sectarian demographics of the diaspora. By far the largest wave of Iraqi migration to the UK took place under the regime of Saddam Hussain from 1979-2003, and for this reason was mostly (but not exclusively) characterised by middle- and lower-class Iraqi Shi'is (whether practicing or secular), who currently make up the majority of the 15 percent of British Muslims who follow Shi'a Islam (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Rasheed, 1991; Saleh, 2011; Spellman-Poots, 2012). In this sense, both the existence and make-up of the Iraqi diaspora has been intricately tied to the fate of Iraq itself, and the diaspora has historically been extremely influential in opposition politics, including in the 2003 US-led intervention that deposed Saddam Hussain and installed a Shi'a-led government based on sectarian quotas. Moreover, the demographic dominance of Iraqis amongst British Shi'is makes this community an ideal case study for exploring the intra-communal dynamics within British Islam, and in particular of scrutinising the ways in which micro-level identity practices may either fuel or mitigate existing sectarian and political tensions between different Islamic sects in the UK.

Despite the localised geographical focus of London, the transnational dimension of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora – both through enduring links to Iraq itself and as a result of the role of the Shi'a clerical establishment in Iraq and the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran – allows this study to speak to wider processes of identity change that echo across transnational borders. As Ogden (2008: 1) highlights, 'as the location for multiple seats of identity within and across national boundaries, the phenomenon of diaspora is intimately concerned with domestic politics and transnational relations'. At the empirical level, this paper seeks to understand how changes in diasporic identity may take place through performances of religious ritual; while on a methodological level I argue that an ethnographic lens can be a

useful way to highlight micro-level processes of identity change that come to inform meso-level group identities and thus ultimately have the potential to produce new political realities at the macro level. In particular, I employ ethnographic methods to trace the ways in which changing understandings of both 'Iraqiness' and 'Shi'aness' across time and space have come to be embedded in discourses of sectarianism and minority rights that represent a shift away from Iraqi nationalist forms of belonging and towards political and social identities that are explicitly predicated on ethno-sectarian categories of Shi'a religiosity. Significantly, while my empirical conclusions are drawn from a single case study, the theoretical preoccupations that frame this analysis go far beyond this particular case, and rather speak to patterns and processes of (diasporic) identity change more broadly – especially when it comes to the (re)drawing and (re)articulation of in- and out-group boundaries through practices of identification and differentiations (i.e. through engaging with the paradox of identity/difference). In this sense, I draw on my empirical case of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora in order to highlight the need for ethnographic studies of micro-level performative practices in order to understand the processes and mechanisms of identity change across both time and space in ways that impact both meso- and macro-level political processes.

Studying processes of identity change

The paper will begin by outlining my theoretical framework, which draws on elements of diaspora politics, critical IR theory and the literature on identity change to offer a conceptualisation of 'identity' that sees it less as an ontological category of being and more as *an active process of becoming* enacted through *practices of identification*. Central to such a framework is the concept of performativity, which is taken from the work of Judith Butler (1997, 2000, 2006, 2010) to refer to the way in which the identities articulated and enacted by individuals are in fact the *effect* and not the source of such performances. In this way, the theoretical foregrounding of micro-level performative practices allows for a methodological

focus on religious rituals as a way in which to analyse mechanisms of identity formation and change in the chosen case. Empirically, I draw out three performative practices that are implicated in reconstituting Iraqi Shi'a identity in the diasporic community in London and specifically in transforming this identity from a nationalist into a sectarian one. The first of these is the cultural and social conflict between first-generation Iraqi diasporans and the second-generation of British-born Iraqi Shi'is; the second is the political salience of the distinction drawn between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'ism; and the third is the foregrounding of victimhood and contemporary politics in the promotion of international 'Shi'a rights'. Each of these changes points towards an identity shift in which sectarian and religious forms of identity are taking precedence over nationalistic and community ones in both domestic and transnational contexts.

These micro-level changes, I argue, have significant implications at both the meso and macro levels, as epitomised by the recent rise of religious political parties and the sectarianisation of Iraqi diasporic and national politics, as well as rising sectarian tensions internationally (though a full discussion of such implications falls outside of the scope of the paper). Although my theoretical framework prioritises the fluid and sometimes conflicting processes of identity change, my empirical focus on the changing articulations of Iraqi-Shi'a identity in the diasporic context nevertheless seem to suggest that such identity performances are increasingly crystallising around specific claims that are themselves linked to contemporary alignment of power. In particular, the prioritisation of sectarian over national forms of identity by Iraqi Shi'is in London can be seen both as a product of the antagonistic politics of identity/difference currently being played out in and between numerous Middle Eastern states (Iraq being the prime example, but more recently including Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and Bahrain) and as a contributing factor in perpetuating sectarian violence in the Middle East and elsewhere

through the mechanisms of transnational diaspora politics (Adamson, 2002, 2008; Brah, 1996; Koinova, 2009, 2011, 2013; Tölölyan, 1996; Werbner, 2002).

Performing 'identity': Ethnography and the aesthetics of ritual

Despite its centrality to both social and political life, the concept of 'identity' remains hotly contested and treacherous theoretical territory (for a more thorough discussion see Rumelili and Todd, this volume). 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 (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Hall, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, I eschew ontological constructions of 'identity' as a property pertaining to individuals and/or groups and instead draw on the literature of critical IR theory and constructivism to foreground the micro-level articulations and performances of social and political 'identities'. In this sense, my theoretical shift away from an ontological to a processual understanding of identity thus precipitates an empirical focus on the micro-level practices of identification through which individuals and/or groups enact their belonging to various identity categories. It is for this reason that ethnographic methods are favoured for this analysis, since they prioritise the textural details of various 'social process of meaning-making' as embedded in different contexts (Soss, 2006: 139).

While ethnographic methods have historically been marginalised within mainstream political science, there has been a significant resurgence of such methods in recent decades,[iii] and it is my contention that cultivating an ethnographic sensitivity is especially useful in studies of identity and identity change as a result of the way it minimises the analytical difference between both micro- and macro-level identity categories and between researcher and research subject. As Müller (2008: 12) highlights: 'Ethnography is a particularly apt method for elucidating the context and practices of the situated production

of identities, due to the partial immersion of the researchers in the life-worlds of their subjects and the aim of understanding the social field in their emic categories.' For this reason, the ethnographic focus of this paper should be read as a theoretical and methodological preoccupation with the micro-level details of everyday life as translated into political and social practice.

This focus on micro-level practices and processes thus complements my overarching theoretical shift away from a concept of 'identity' as an ontological property and towards the practices of *identification* performed and articulated by the individual. 'Identification' can be understood here as the (always-already failed) attempt by the individual to project or subsume their subjectivity (the fullness of their interior life) into particular discursively-constructed subject positions, or 'identities' (Campbell, 1998; Doty, 2000; Epstein, 2008; Hansen, 2006; Smith, 2000; Zehfuss, 2001). This process of 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 construction (where 'discourse' is defined as the way in which power circulates and saturates social relations and lived experience). Since each realm of discursive hegemony is defined and bound by what lies outside it, its constitutive 'other' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2011), it is never fully whole or complete in and of itself since it is dependent on this other for its very existence. In this sense, identification 'is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination... There is always 'too much' or 'too little' – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality' (Hall, 2000: 17). Herein lies the paradox of identity/difference; in which the identity of the individual is predicated on the existence of a constitutive other to differentiate from the self, and yet the existence of this other simultaneously threatens to destabilise and undermine this identity in the first place. Thus any attempt by the individual to identify with an identity category is therefore equally incomplete and lacking; and thus precipitates a constant re-articulation and re-iteration:

'What we have then… is not identities but *identifications*, a series of failed identifications' (Stavrakakis 1999: 29, emphasis added). Significantly, however, it is precisely in these repeated and failed attempts at identification that the potential for identity change resides.

Such a conceptualisation of identity as the articulation and performance of identification by individuals, thus foregrounds the role of micro-level practices in the construction and consolidation of identity categories. It is here that the concept of the 'performative' – taken from the work of Judith Butler – proves useful in helping to foreground the active practices involved in identity construction and change, and to illuminate the ways in which ritual practices can be seen to be implicated in the mechanisms of such performative politics. In Butler's theory of performativity 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 the case study of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora in order to underline the ways in which articulations of 'Shi'a' religious identity can be enacted through rituals of mourning and commemoration. As performa*tive* and perform*ed* 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 Battle of Karbala during the Islamic month of Muharram, can be seen to function performatively to construct and reify notions of 'Shi'a identity'.

In particular, the aesthetic and performative content of such rituals can be observed ethnographically with reference to contemporary political developments (especially the heightened sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere) in order to reveal the ways in which religious performances contribute to the ongoing construction, negotiation and contestation of communal and individual identities. Ritual 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 convention. The channelling, moulding, and directing of bodies, minds, voices and sounds inherent in ritualistic performances all contribute to the construction of a collectively-articulated religious identity that is politically invested in the foreclosing of all other possible articulations. 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

As with any diaspora 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 Iraqi Shi'is who left Iraq between the late 1970s and early 1990s, and the ensuing generational clash conflict between themselves and the second-generation of British-born Iraqi Shi'is.[iv] This period represents one of the most traumatic and tumultuous times for religious Shi'is in Iraq – spanning the rise to power of Saddam Hussain 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 or were forced out through mass expulsions on the grounds of

being 'Iranian'[v] (members of opposition political parties were also actively persecuted during this period).

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 *hussainiyat* (sing. *hussainiya*), 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 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 (Flynn, 2013). In other words, the mediation of the exile experience through the religious institutions of the *hussainiyat* 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 Hussain on the battlefields of Karbala. 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 context of the diasporic space.

The Karbala paradigm

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'a', 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'a'. The ideological split between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims originally occurred over a succession dispute following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. This initial rift deepened throughout the first 50 years of the Sunni caliphate and culminated in an uprising orchestrated by the Prophet's grandson, Hussain ibn Ali in 680 AD, which resulted in the massacre of his family and supporters just outside the city of Karbala in modern-day Iraq. Although doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam are not always apparent, and the two sects share many similarities when it comes to the everyday practice of Islam, Shi'a Muslims observe a number of different rituals than their Sunni co-religionists; most

notably their commemoration of the Battle of Karbala during 'Ashura and Arba'een, the tenth and fortieth days of the Islamic month of Muharram respectively.

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 many 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 freely 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. It is to this project that I now turn.

Mourning and commemoration: Performing Shi'ism

In a dilapidated ex-warehouse in North London, corrugated iron walls and ceiling dripping with cold October rain, several hundred women have gathered, their black-shrouded shapes indistinguishable in the greenish gloom. The room is crowded and cramped, the odour of bodies, perfume, and food heavy in the air; the women's breath rising in damp tendrils of mist as they chant together the name of one man, repeated over and over in a rising undertone: 'Hussaaaaain, Hussain! Hussaaaaain, Hussain! Children run and skip amongst the huddled shapes, many of whom rock backwards and forwards, a high-pitched wailing emanating from their veiled figures. Some women hold their hands out in front of their faces, palms facing upwards, their lips moving in whispered supplications; others cry openly, tears streaming down their faces, the sound of their laboured breathing mingling with the chants, moans, and screams that fill the room and turn the air solid with sound.

The above vignette, which describes the women's section of a *majlis* (religious gathering, pl. *majalis*) held in Rasul Al-'Atham *hussainiya* on the ninth 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, rhythmical chanting, high-pitched wailing, chest-beating, lyrical singing, and of black cloth (the colour of mourning and death) 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 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 and religious feeling. Such rituals, embedded as they are in the somatic register of corporal movement – supplication, beating, praying, swaying, marching, hitting, etc. – are *performative*; they simultaneously enact the articulation of Shi'a religiosity at the same time as they create and identify with the meaning of that performance as an articulation of 'Shi'a identity'. Each enactment of the Muharram ritual is thus part of an ongoing process of identification that establishes what it means to be 'Shi'a' at the particular temporal juncture in which it is performed.

Generational differences and the transmission of Shi'a identity

The inscription of Shi'a religious identity through bodily performances is especially evident in the emphasis placed on physicality during the 'Ashura rituals, as manifested in practices such as crying, the wearing of black, and stylised forms of self-flagellation. These practices are mostly performed in the pre-scripted social setting of the *majalis*, and are regulated and enforced both by top-down directives imposed by scholarly authority and by informal policing by individuals and collectives within the *majlis* setting. In order to demonstrate their belonging to this unified 'Shi'ism', it is necessary for the individual to engage and participate in certain stylised practices of religious ritual, the reiterations of which serve to performatively constitute the meaning of the Shi'a identity they claim to represent. These rituals are transferred and learned in collective settings through repetition and mimesis. Take the following example, depicting a women's-only *majlis* on the eighth day of 'Ashura 2014.

> Several women came forward to form a large circle, sitting back on their haunches as they thumped their right hand flat onto their chests to the beat, some of them singing along to the lyrics. The *latmiyya* [religious chant] reached a slightly faster section, and the women in the circle all rose as one to their knees and began hitting their foreheads with both hands in time to the music, creating a dull slapping sound over the thumping coming from those around the room still hitting their chests… A young woman, who I guessed was in her early twenties, was sitting with her back to me with a little girl in her lap. The girl must have been about two or three, her thick hair tied in two bunches either side of her head. She was dressed in a black tutu, black opaque tights with white spots and a long-sleeved black top with '*Ya Hussain*' inscribed on it in large white Arabic letters. The young woman held the little girl's hands in her own and began moving them to emulate the older women, making it look as if the little girl was hitting herself in time to the music along with the others.
>
> (Author fieldnotes from *majlis* held at Holland Park Mosque, 31 October 2014)

Here, we see the young woman replicating the stylised movements of Shi'a religious practice using the body of the little girl; simultaneously teaching the child how to perform this form of ritual and marking out her body as recognisably *Shi'a* (the girl's clothes, too, serve to mark her as belonging to a specifically Shi'a aesthetic register at the same time as they mark her out as belonging to Western modes of dress and fashion). In this sense, the young woman is using the little girl to both assert and (re)negotiate what it means to be Shi'a within the context of diasporic London. 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 *hussainiya* where the *majlis* was being held on the tenth night of 'Ashura 2014:

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. In particular, the clash between the older and younger women here is reflective of patterns of generational conflict I have observed throughout my fieldwork, especially when it comes to

the 'correct' way to perform or enact Shi'a religious rituals (as one first-generation Iraqi man noted ruefully: 'traditionally, Shi'a Islam was about being a good Muslim and getting on with people; whereas now [with the younger generation] it's about being *seen* as being Shi'a, as making yourself out to be different').[vi]

Identity/difference: Iraqi Shi'ism and the Iranian 'other'

Through such snapshots, 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. Indeed, of all the *hussainiyat* I attended, three of the five were established and run by Iraqis, while the remaining two were Iranian-run centres. It is this distinction between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'ism, I argue, that has contributed to a form of diasporic identity specifically tinged with elements of Iraqi nationalism.

As a result of the long history of cross-fertilisation between Iraq and Iran, national and ethnic differences between religiously observant Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is in the diaspora are not always immediately recognisable, and there is much overlap between the two communities[vii] (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 'Hussain' 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 *hussainiyat* was cooked in a 'Najafi' style (i.e. from the southern Iraqi city of Najaf) and that she preferred the 'Karbala'i' 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 the relative strength 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 that nevertheless remains ambivalent in its micro-level articulations and performances in a way that serves to problematise the paradox of identity/difference implied in the construction of 'Iranianess' as the other. Indeed, 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 Hussain, along with the simultaneous pursuit of an Arab nationalist assimilationist agenda by the Ba'th Party,[viii] has resulted in problematising 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 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.[ix] In this sense, the affective surplus of meaning produced by the combination of pan-Arab 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.[x]

Sectarianising identity: Shi'ism and the politics of victimhood

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. Perhaps the most evident manifestation of an explicitly *Shi'a* sectarian identity, the annual 'Ashura and Arba'een marches in central London draw on specifically Shi'a forms of aesthetics, ritual practices, and politico-religious discourses in an attempt to visibly foreground Shi'a minority claims and Shi'a rights within the British domestic context. Beginning at Marble Arch and progressing through Hyde Park (although for the last two years the 'Ashura march has moved to proceed up Edgware Rd), the marches draw 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 Hussain. Smaller versions of similar processions in Iraq, Iran, and other countries with significant Shi'a populations, the marches manifest 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'.

In the two years I attended the London 'Ashura march (2014 and 2015), 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', 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 (ISIS).[xi] Such public and visible articulations of Shi'a religious and sectarian identity in explicit opposition to the politics and practises of ISIS draw on contemporary media tropes of (Sunni) Islamism and terrorism to articulate an unequivocally *Shi'a* political and religious message. The visible and public discursive juxtaposition of 'Shi'a-as-victim' with 'Sunni[/ISIS]-as-oppressor' constructs an explicitly sectarian narrative as a way to make specific claims regarding the political place of Shi'ism in the contemporary world. In this way, the marches are seen as a way of publically and visibly claiming a politically-invested manifestation of Shi'a religious identity, couched in the language of international justice and minority rights. As one young British-born Iraqi Shi'i put it: 'It's good to show that we're not

just a minority oppressed group, that we have a presence… that we have a voice'.[xii] Another woman I walked alongside during the 2014 'Ashura march told me that: 'We want people to stop and ask us what it's about. That's the whole point.'[xiii]

Such expressions of a politicised and sectarianised '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'. In contrast to the internally-oriented aesthetics and ritual practices of the Muharram *majalis*, the 'Ashura and Arba'een marches are specifically targeted at those *external* to the British Shi'a community; those who may not even have any previous exposure to Islam or to Shi'ism (Spellman-Poots, 2012). In particular, the foregrounding of Shi'a victimhood through the invocation of the Karbala paradigm is used as a way to tie Shi'a religious identity to contemporary sectarian politics in the Middle East and elsewhere and to make a claim for the politically emancipatory role of Shi'ism.

'Every land is Karbala'

Through an analysis of the Muharram rituals performed by diasporic Iraqi Shi'is in London, this paper has demonstrated how performative articulations of Shi'a religiosity are intersected with contemporary political developments, and are implicated in the mechanisms of identity formation and change through the way in which they both define and enact what it means to be 'Iraqi' and 'Shi'a' in London today. In this sense, the performance of micro-level Shi'a mourning and commemoration rituals can be seen to be deeply embedded in discourses of social convention and communal belonging, and invested in both local and international politics. I have chosen to focus here on three performative practices of identity change that I believe point to a politically salient shift from nationalistic to sectarian identity: cases of intra-generational conflict, constructed differences between Iraqi-Iranian Shi'ism, and the foregrounding of 'Shi'a rights' and

narratives of victimhood. Moreover, I contend that these discursive lines in the sand – in which it is impossible to be both 'Iraqi' and 'Iranian', 'ISIS' and 'Shi'a', 'victim' and 'oppressor' – 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'.

Ultimately, I have shown that an ethnographic study of the micro-level performative and (re)iterative processes of identity change allows a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which identity change comes to take effect both at the meso and macro levels; whether that be in altered articulations of collective identities and grievances or in the kinds of claims such articulations come to make at the national and transnational level. In this way, the micro-level analysis outlined here can also be seen to speak to wider practices of identity change, especially when it comes to mobilising identities for political purposes. The increasingly prevalence of sectarianised forms of Shi'a identification is thus reflective of the global politics of Sunni-Shi'a relations, which are becoming increasingly polarised through the geo-political interests of the Iranian and Saudi states. Moreover, the injunction to *be Shi'a* – to enact a performatively-constituted Shi'a identity – can also be understood as an attempt to fix the meaning of what it means to be 'Shi'a' or 'Iraqi' within the context of ambivalent, shifting, and unstable identity categories that require constant (re)articulation and (re)negotiation in order to be claimed by the individual. In this sense, while 'identity' itself remains fluid and contradictory, individuals increasingly attempt to negotiate this contested terrain by aligning themselves with politically-salient 'shivers' of difference that nevertheless strive to assert the forms of identity they ultimately serve to deny.

23

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Author Interviews

1. K Makiya (12 February 2013)

2. Prof J Sassoon (18 February 2013)

3. Abu Zainab Madani (3 March 2013)

4. D Kashi (6 March 2013)

5. M Madani (13 March 2013)

6. A Madani (6 August 2014)

7. Sayyid F Bahrululoom (12 August 2014)

8. M Al-Khoei (28 September 2014)

9. M Field OBE (3 October 2014)

10. K Makiya (6 October 2014)

11. H Al-Khoei (13 October 2014)

12. D Kashi (second interview) (17 October 2014)

13. M Al Kadhimi (21 October 2014)

14. G Jawad (28 October 2014)

15. H Allawi (31 October 2014)

16. Dr A Al-Ta'i (a.k.a. Abu Abeer Saleh) (6 November 2014)

17. H Al-Hakim (11 November 2014)

18. E Cohen (12 November 2014)

19. E Al-Abadi (18 November 2014)

20. G Fadil (18 November 2014)

21. M Jawad (25 November 2014)

22. J Hassan (26 November 2014)

23. H Tahan (6 December 2014)

24. HH Al-Qarawee (9 January 2015)

25. N Yasin (28 January 2015)

26. Um Nadia (Maha Qamishi) (30 January 2015)

27. M Hariri (20 February 2015)

28. Sayyid Karbasi (20 February 2015)

29. M Allawi (30 October 2015)

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[i] Iraqi Shi'is globally represent a diverse group of individuals from a variety of class, devotional, political, and socio-economic backgrounds. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is solely on first-generation religiously devout Iraqi Shi'is from middle and lower-middle class backgrounds who came to the UK between 1979-1991; and therefore the conclusions drawn here should not been seen as representative of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora as a whole or attempting to homogenise the diversity of this demographic.

[ii] For example, Zainab Saleh (2011) gives the total number of Iraqis in the UK as of 2005 as being between 282,000 and 350,000, while Nadje Al-Ali (2007) gives a lower estimate of 100,000, and the Iraqi Embassy estimates between 350,000 and 400,000. In a comprehensive mapping exercise conducted in 2007, the IOM suggests there are a total of 240,000 Iraqis in the UK, including 125,000 in London alone (IOM, 2007)

[iii] The growing interest in political ethnography as a methodology is illustrated by number of recently published articles and edited volumes, including Joseph, Mahler and Auyero (2007), Schatz (2008), and the review articles Baiocchi Connor (2008), and de Volo and Schatz (2004).

[iv] Second- 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).

[v] During the 1980s, and following the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the ensuing Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussain deported an estimated 200,000 Iraqi Shi'is 'of Iranian origin' (*taba'iyya 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 *taba'iyya Iraniyya* during the Ottoman era in order to escape military conscription (Sassoon 2012; Makiya 1993; Kubba 2003; Salbi 2005).

[vi] Interview 5.

[vii] Indeed, the prevalence of what Gholami (2015) calls 'non-Islamosity', the conscious movement away from Islam by secular and non-practicing Iranians in the diaspora has arguably contributed to an increased affinity between religiously observant diasporic Iranians and their Iraqi counterparts in which Shi'a devotional practice serves as a more salient marker of identity than ethno-religious or national categories.

[viii] Through the manipulation and reinvention of historical memory (Davis 2005), Saddam Hussain'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.

[ix] This is a proposition I explore more fully in my PhD thesis.

[x] This is an interesting theoretical and empirical postulation, and one that I have explored elsewhere, but falls outside of the confines of the present study and as such is not elaborated further here.

[xi] My use of the term 'Sunni' here is reflective of current media and academic tropes, and is not intended to suggest that ISIS are in any way a true reflection of the multiple possible facets and interpretations of Sunni Islam.

[xii] Interview 29.

[xiii] Private conversation with Saja M. during the 2014 London 'Ashura march