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Shiite “Communities of Practice” in Germany

Researching Multi-Local, Heterogeneous Actors in Transnational Space

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Abstract

Although few in number, the various Shiite Muslim communities in Germany are highly diversified in terms of their linguistic, national and ethnic backgrounds and ritual practice. In order to come to terms with these multi-local actors and their specific articulations of Shiism, the article aims at an analytical framework that integrates an open understanding of belonging: employing Leave and Wenger’s concept of “communities of practice”, it argues that a focus on common practice in which heterogeneous actors engage, enables us to grasp, on the one hand, the varying specific characteristics of different groups and, on the other, their mutual belonging to the wider Shiite field.

Keywords

Shiites/Shiism – Germany – communities of practice – learning – ritual

Introduction

The existing plethora of research on Islam and Muslims in Germany focuses on the variety of Muslims who live in Germany, on social and religious practice, or on the way Muslims organise themselves and articulate their specific demands. In contrast to a rather undifferentiated understanding of Islam in media and public discourse, it is by now quite accepted within academia that

"Islam and Muslims in Germany"¹ is a highly diversified field in terms of linguistic, national and ethnic background as well as of religious practice. The title of a collected volume just cited bears witness of the way the topic of the plurality of "Muslim life worlds (*Lebenswelten*)"² is usually (and legitimately) taken up in the literature: the volume consists of 23 articles that address various topics related to Muslim conduct in Germany: "Islam and Social Practice", "Communities and Identities", "Culture" and "Gender",³ among others.

What is interesting for our argument here, however, is that not one of the 23 articles explicitly deals with Shii religiosity or social practice. There are contributions that consider other comparatively small Islamic traditions, such as Alevis or Ahmadis, but Shiis are only to be read between the lines and are mentioned within the articles only as examples or as a deviation from the sample. Absolute numbers and relative proportions of Shiites in Germany may, of course, justify this omission: the number of Sunni Muslims in Germany exceeds the number of Shiis by far; various investigations indicate that there are about 200,000 Twelver Shia Muslims living in Germany.⁴ Hamideh Mohagheghi distinguishes 120,000 Shiis of Iranian origin and about 80,000 of Afghan provenance,⁵ while Jörn Thielmann, according to the results of an investigation by the BertelsmannStiftung, speaks of Shiites constituting 9% (approximately 360,000) of the Muslims in Germany.⁶ Although there are no official data, it is evident from our fieldwork that there are Shii Muslims among the Iraqis, Lebanese and Pakistanis living in Germany. With regard to the degree of

1 This is the title of a collective volume: Al-Hamarneh, Ala & Thielmann, Jörn (eds), *Islam and Muslims in Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

2 Thielmann, Jörn, "Islam and Muslims in Germany: An introductory exploration", in *Islam and Muslims in Germany*, Al-Hamarneh & Thielmann (eds), pp. 1-30, p. 6.

3 Al-Hamarneh & Thielmann, *Islam an Muslims in Germany*, vi, vii.

4 Mirbach, Ferdinand, "Islam in Deutschland, Islam in der Welt", *Religionsmonitor* (2008), pp. 76-83, p. 76.

5 Mohagheghi, Hamideh, "Die Schiiten", in *Muslimische Gruppierungen in Deutschland: Ein Handbuch*, Ina Wunn (ed.) (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), pp. 114-28, p. 123.

6 Thielmann, Jörn, "Vielfältige muslimische Religiosität in Deutschland: Ein Gesamtüberblick zu den Ergebnissen der Studie der Bertelsmann Stiftung", *Religionsmonitor* (2008), pp. 13-21, p. 14. According to official data from the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge on the asylum seekers who registered in Germany in 2014 and 2015, 432,000 were Muslims (see "Mitgliederzahlen: Islam", *Religionswissenschaftlicher Medien- und Informationsdienst e. V. – REMID*, 28 September 2016. http://remid.de/info_zahlen/islam/ (accessed 12.09.2017). If we assume again that 9% of them were Shiites, this gives a number of 38,880 persons. As there are many refugees from Afghanistan, a considerable number of them being Shii Hazaras, one can assume a higher percentage of Shiites among these asylum seekers. The total number of Shiites living in Germany at the time of writing (2017) may consequently exceed 400,000.

institutionalisation, the Iranian Shiis have been represented since 1966 by the Hamburg-based and Iran-funded Islamic Centre, which publishes a regular German-language magazine⁷ and offers a BA degree in Islamic Theology in conjunction with the Al-Mustafa University in Qom. There are also other centres and institutions with Iranian links (such as the Islamisches Zentrum Frankfurt and the Stiftung für Islamische Studien Berlin) or yet others with a more trans-ethnic Shii character (such as Mawkb [sic] Ummul Banin, Essen), which contribute to the heterogeneous field.

This article seeks to develop a perspective on Shii communities in Germany that, on the one hand, is able to analyse the modes and means by which Shii communities constitute and reproduce themselves, and, on the other, grasps the varying engagement of individuals within the communities and these groups' mutual connectivity. This perspective, we shall argue, differs from current studies on Islamicate traditions in diasporic contexts in that it integrates an inherently critical understanding of the very term "community" into its framework and thus makes it possible to question the extent to which explicitly Shiite (religious) practices or uses of specific symbols serve to form a specifically Shiite community in Germany. Confronted with the highly diverse "field"⁸ of Shii Muslims in Germany—Iraqi, Iranian, Lebanese, Afghan, Azeri, Turkish converts and others—the analytical approach followed here has to encompass, on the one hand, the differences in practice and degree of closeness between the various Shiite groupings and, on the other, their common points

7 See Abid's work on this publication: Abid, Liselotte, "Expressing Shi'ite identities in a European context: The example of an Islamic magazine in German language: Al-Fadschr/Al-Fağr from Hamburg", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 103 (2013), pp. 9-24.

8 Thielmann conceptualises the constellations of various collective and individual actors in Islamicate contexts as the "Muslim field". He uses but also distances himself from Bourdieu's term, the "religious field" in that he modifies the conditions and hierarchies that structure the field in Bourdieu's use of it. In Thielmann's perspective, the central structuring characteristic is no longer the hierarchy between laymen and religious specialists, for it is not only religious specialist but also Muslim intellectuals who structure "the field". Furthermore, referring to Foucault's concept of Governmentality, Thielmann goes on to argue that individual conduct does not only relate to these "specialists" but is also legible as "technologies of the self"; see Thielmann, Jörn, "Die Sunna leben in Deutschland: Von der Entstehung islamischer Felder und muslimischer Techniken des Selbst", in *Die Sunna leben: Zur Dynamik islamischer Religionspraxis in Deutschland*, Paula Schrode & Udo Simon (eds) (Würzburg: Ergon, 2012), pp. 149-72, p. 157. Note that the term "field" as used by Thielmann correlates to some extent with the idea of a "constellation of practice" used here.

of reference as "Shiite": How does a specifically Shiite articulation of a collective identity intersect with national or "Islamic" understandings of belonging? To what extent do transnational Ayatollah networks exert their influence on such articulations? In what ways or to what extent—if at all—does the medley of nationally and ethnically diversified, socially stratified and geographically scattered groups and individuals integrate into a common sense of Shii belonging? Our sample mostly consists of these smaller, less institutionalised and younger forms of Shii conduct as these articulations of Shiism in the German diaspora have till now remained outside the scholarly focus.⁹ We selected examples from these mostly Arabic, Turkish and German-speaking contexts and visited their festival activities in order first to map the number, distribution and character of these communities and then to consider their specific articulations of ethnicity in relation to global Shiism.

Some scattered studies on specifically Shii Muslims in the German diaspora have appeared, such as Annabelle Böttcher's overview from 2007,¹⁰ which is based on extensive fieldwork in various Shii communities all over Germany; she is especially interested in analysing the networks of Shiite Grand-Ayatollahs (*maraji*; sing. *marja*) and the distribution of loyalty to them among Shiite individuals and associations in Germany. Böttcher operationalises her work on communities by the patterns of loyalty to the teachings of one specific *marja*. Although she also states that the individuals she spoke with named a specific Ayatollah whom they followed, in practice they would not read books written by the authority in question, but would rather ask a local authority in case of need. Such an important observation invites us to consider other and potentially more fluid and individualised ways of conduct, and the heterogeneous character of the Shiite community itself. Matthias Brückner also addresses the question of community making. He has analysed Shii websites and online discussion forums to identify the means by which Shiite religiosity is articulated

9 The survey "Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland", commissioned by the Deutsche Islam Konferenz in 2009, even draws the conclusion that Shiis in Germany are mostly to be found among the Iranian migrants—a finding that we seek to revise in this paper. See Haug, Sonja, Müssig, Stefanie & Stichs, Anja, *Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland, im Auftrag der Deutschen Islam-Konferenz* (Nürnberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2009), pp. 307f.

10 Böttcher, Annabelle, "The Shia in Germany", in *From Baghdad to Beirut ...: Arab and Islamic Studies in Honor of John J. Donohue S.J.*, Leslie Tramontini & Chibli Mallat (eds) (Beirut: Ergon-Verlag Würzburg in Kommission: 2007), pp. 209-30; Böttcher, Annabelle, "Schiiische Netzwerke", *Zeitschrift für Entwicklungspolitik* 7/8 (2005), pp. 36-9.

and their potential to challenge authority in the German-speaking web space.¹¹ Brückner roughly differentiates between web-presences that seek to represent offline existing communities and institutions and those that engage in forging a “virtual community” that does not have corresponding connections and bonds offline.¹²

In order to address such multi-local and heterogeneous subjects, we employ a conceptual framework first constructed by Jane Lave and Étienne Wenger in 1991. They developed a concept of learning in which knowledge is produced, negotiated and acquired through “mutual engagement” in “communities of practice”.¹³ In 2001, Michael Stausberg argued for this perspective in an essay in which he brought up questions about the possibilities and constraints of the continuous reproduction of religious traditions. In his work, he draws on Lave and Wenger to argue for an understanding of tradition and its continuity as a social process of mimetic learning.¹⁴ Robert Langer has also used this approach—with modifications—to analyse Alevi ritual communities in Germany and Turkey.¹⁵ This approach does not only employ a sensitive understanding of the very character of “community”, its closeness, its connectivity and its alignment to other “communities”, but also yields some other enabling aspects which are, in our view, potentially fruitful for conceptualising a multi-local and heterogeneous subject of study, such as the field of Shiites in Germany. This article is thus also an attempt to test the applicability of this approach and to discuss its possibilities and limits. The material for this

11 Brückner, Matthias, “Schiitische Gemeinschaften im deutschen Webspace”, in *Von Chatroom bis Cyberjihad: Muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive*, Johanna Pink & Matthias Brückner (eds) (Würzburg: Ergon, 2009), pp. 95-132.

12 Ibid., 96.

13 Lave, Jeanne & Wenger, Étienne, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 89.

14 Stausberg, Michael, “Kohärenz und Kontinuität: Überlegungen zur Repräsentation und Reproduktion von Religionen”, in *Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Anders Hultgård zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 23.12.2001*, Michael Stausberg, Olof Sundquist & Astrid van Nahl (eds) (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2001), pp. 596-619. Note the twofold analytical approach to which the title of his study bears witness: Whereas “Repräsentation” indicates the analytical dimension of his thinking for coming to terms with the question of coherence and continuity of religious traditions, the term “Reproduktion” grasps the process of the handing down (“Tradierung”) of religious knowledge itself.

15 Langer, Robert, *Alevitische Rituale im transnationalen Kontext: Religiöse Praxis zwischen türkischer Großstadt, westlicher Diaspora und anatolischem Dorf* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, forthcoming).

study was gathered by ethnographic research among Shiite communities in Germany (participant observation and interviews) as well as by research into sources published by Shii actors, such as websites, social media, forums and printed journals and books between 2014 and 2017.

Conceptual Remarks

If we are to come to terms with the complex constellation of multi-local and heterogeneous actors and their specific articulations of Shiism, as well as their mutual connectivities with their varying degrees of closeness, we must develop an analytical framework that relies on an epistemologically open and flexible understanding of this very "community". This perspective shifts scholarly attention from the social, ethnic, linguistic or other such distinguishing marks and characteristics that may serve to constitute cohesion for a certain community, towards practice. The heuristic value is then that we do not need to define the character of a specific, say, Shiite community, according to certain (potentially essentialising) criteria, but can focus on what these actors themselves do or engage with when they use a common "Shiite repertoire".

It is Lave and Wenger's understanding of the term "community" that is of paramount importance for our argument here: Lave and Wenger and, later, Wenger alone,¹⁶ conceptualised learning in the social context of "communities of practice". The aspect of learning by participation in mutual practice was interesting for Stausberg with regard to the means of learning a religion by participating in rituals, for example. Participation and imitation of others by non-professionals is never, according to Stausberg, a mechanical reproduction of a model, but an individual interpretation bound to individual and specific processes of acquiring the learned content. This rather simple observation triggers Stausberg's important questions on the microphysics of ritual reproduction, "learning of religion" and the allegedly cohesive character of religious and ritual communities in general.

Lave and Wenger's idea of communities of practice brings together the terms community and practice in a way that perceives this common practice as a sufficient marker for the subject in question to be labelled "community" and of its coherence.¹⁷ What may initially seem tautological is an idea of community that is freed from the necessity to define the social, ethnic, linguistic

16 Wenger, Étienne, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

17 Ibid., 72.

or historical denominators that the subjects in question have in common, and to turn the analytical approach into an inherently inductive one, focusing not on (most likely normative) means of belonging but giving the aspect of shared practice centre stage in characterising the community. Furthermore, Wenger argues for three dimensions in which this practice serves as a factor of creating coherence within the community:

1. Mutual engagement
2. Joint enterprise
3. Shared repertoire¹⁸

This focus on practice constitutes an attractive approach for considering heterogeneous and multi-local actors such as Shiites in Germany: it makes it possible, on the one hand, to analyse how the various potential markers of belonging (ethnicity, language, social stratification) intersect or may be overcome by mutual engagement, acting in a joint enterprise and referring to a shared repertoire of authorities, symbols, etc. On the other hand, the aspect of learning and the level of the actors' participation in the community of practice focuses on the constituency of the community, its degree of inclusiveness, its closeness and the connectivity of the actors involved. What binds multi-local and heterogeneous actors together is the space where they interact, where they generate and negotiate meaning in mutual engagement, having a joint enterprise and referring to a shared repertoire of symbols, knowledge, history, etc. This makes these actors legible as a community, but a form of community that encompasses their degree of closeness and belonging only through common practice and interaction—an interaction that may happen only once a year, that may be anonymous or short-lived, but that constitutes a mutual engagement at a certain point in time in a certain place.¹⁹

In Wenger's understanding, many different communities of practice form what he calls a "constellation of practice".²⁰ A constellation, according to

18 Ibid., 73.

19 Frederick Barth and many others after him have analysed community-making, particularly within ethnicities, with a focus on socially and situatively constructed boundaries. While appreciating this early constructivist insight, the approach followed here conceptualises community not (only) via its engagement in boundary making, but in shared practice in general (which may, but need not necessarily, include boundary-work); see Barth, Frederick, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston MA: Brown, 1969).

20 Wenger, *Communities*, 126.

Wenger, is a medley of various "communities of practice" that overlap, share a common repertoire, or have members in common. Yet a constellation is too broad and too fuzzy a social cluster to conceptualise its character and its cohesion via mutual engagement in a shared practice. Rather, the constellation is the assemblage of various communities, while necessarily remaining bound to the practices followed within the different singular communities.²¹ Wenger extends his definition:

The term constellation refers to a grouping of stellar objects that are seen as a configuration even though they may not be particularly close to one another, of the same kind or of the same size. A constellation is a particular way of seeing them as related, one that depends on the perspective one adopts. In the same way, there are many different reasons that some communities of practice may be seen as forming a constellation, by the people involved or by an observer.²²

The constellation, in our example, is the various, heterogeneous, geographically scattered Shiite communities of practice in Germany. The constellation is held together on the one hand by the various practices within the communities and, on the other, by references to shared symbols, common narratives of history, common authorities, expressions and words. However, on the level of practice, the respective communities all have their own practice and their own perception of their part within the constellation.²³ Whereas Wenger holds practice to be the central source of cohesion within a community of practice, other forms of belonging may also be operationalised by "imagination", which goes beyond mutual engagement.²⁴ This is also the vehicle that connects the different communities and their members to a broader constellation.²⁵ Within this concept, the part played by the constellation

21 Ibid., 127.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid. In Wenger's example, a large company would constitute a constellation of practice, while the various branches, such as claims processing centres, higher management, sales offices, etc., form the communities that make up the constellation, which may have very different perceptions of their contribution to the broader constellation.

24 Wenger, *Communities*, 173f. As modes of belonging alongside imagination, he also names "engagement" and "alignment" to define the differing degrees of integration in a community and in a constellation.

25 Wenger explicitly states that his thinking on imagination and community formation is informed by Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities", which he used to come to terms with evolving nationalism. It is these potentially imagined, but no less powerful

remains necessarily vague: it is the community, which is easily operationalised by practice. Thus, in the analytical frame of communities of practice, the specific association of community and practice defines what the community is all about. It uses practice as the main focus of analysis that is “more tractable” than categories such as “culture” or “structure”²⁶ (or boundary, with regard to Barth²⁷).

Shiite Communities of Practice in Germany

The various associations in which Shii Muslims in Germany socially engage most of the time may display national or ethnic affiliations, whereas others articulate a more “Islamic” outlook, or, furthermore, belong to different trans-nationally active Ayatollah networks.²⁸ This also corresponds to the observation Thielmann makes with regard to the broader Muslim field in Germany. According to Thielmann, two general types of institutions structure this Muslim field: nationally affiliated associations such as the common *Türk kültür dernekleri* (“Turkish cultural associations”) and “supra-national” mosque associations, which refer to the collective *umma* as the common denominator of all Muslims, regardless of national background or ethnicity.²⁹

or “objective” forces of belonging, that also make up a constellation out of different communities; see *ibid.*, 294.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

27 Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

28 There are many examples of Shiite communities in Germany organised on a common ethnic or national basis, especially Iraqi and Azeri-Turkish associations. Examples of decidedly trans-ethnic associations, which consequently promote a common German language as a basis for their activities, are the Gemeinschaft der Mitte (Köln) and the Aschura AG NRW (Bochum). The most prominent *maraji'* in Germany are, according to Böttcher “The Shia” 210. Ali al-Sistani, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (d. 2010) and Ali Khamene'i. It remains to be seen how this has changed since Fadlallah's death in 2010, for a prominent Shiite principle says *la qawla li-l-mayyit*—“the dead have no say”, which means that only living Ayatollahs are accepted as sources of emulation (*marja' al-taqlid*), cf. Halm, Heinz, *Die Schia* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988) p. 89. Moreover, we have observed in our fieldwork that people name Ayatollah Khomeini as a “source of emulation”, which suggests that the aforementioned principle may not be strictly observed. The ongoing emulation of Fadlallah after his death is also observed by Shanneik (Shanneik, Yafa, “Gendering religious authority in the diaspora: Shii women in Ireland”, in *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere*, Niamh Riley and Stacy Scriver (eds) (London: Routledge, 2014) pp. 58-67, p. 63. Cf. also Böttcher, “The Shia”, 210.

29 Thielmann, “Die Sunna leben in Deutschland”, 154. Thielmann also refers to this issue as a development since the 1980s: as a ramification of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979,

In what follows, we shall analyse two different types of Shiite communities of practice in Germany. First, we will consider various ritual communities that came together for specifically Shiite (Ghadir Khumm, Muharram) or other Islamic (Ramadan) festival days in the course of 2015. Then, we look at the mutual engagement of partly anonymous actors in various online discussion forums as communities of practice. The connection and relationship between these examples is a mutual engagement in common practice in each case, which constitutes both online and offline communities of practice. The means and modes of interaction may be (and could not be more) different. What connects them is the fact that, in each of these spheres, people engage in practices in which they negotiate content that may be characterised as specifically Shiite: commemorating the nomination of Ali as Muhammad's successor at Ghadir Khumm or asking for religiously legitimate advice in online discussion forums, when the *marja'* of preference does not answer. On this basis, we deem it important to consider these very different practices and the spheres in which interaction is taking place as constitutive of Shiite constellations of practices. They make up only some parts of the mainly ill-defined Shiite constellation in Germany. Its rather vague boundaries are also reflected in the somewhat loose character of the Shiite umbrella organisation in Germany, the Islamische Gemeinschaft der schiitischen Gemeinden Deutschlands e. V. (IGS), which was only founded in 2009 and is still struggling to gain some influence in German politics, as well as in the various communities that are organised within it.

Ritual Communities of Practice

One major task of our research and ethnographic fieldwork among Shii groups in Germany is to make a survey of existing, ritually active communities of practice, to document their distribution, and to identify specific patterns in their linguistic, ethnic³⁰ and social features. In order to achieve this, our first step was to bring together all available data from the small body of existing

the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan up to 1989 and the following Gulf war(s), Thielmann suggests an increasing emphasis on the religious character of self-articulation among Muslims in Germany. This, he goes on to argue, may also be linked with the increasing ethnicisation of Islam in public discourse (ibid., 161).

30 Besides the larger linguistic groups of speakers of Arabic, modern Persian and Turkic languages (which facilitates the use of a common language across certain national, regional or ethnic barriers), there is also a divide to be identified that consists of smaller-scale ethnic categories, such as Iraqi and Lebanese (among the Arabic-speakers), Iranian and Afghan (among the Persian-speakers, or speakers of Farsi and Dari), Azeris and Anatolian Turks (e.g. of Alevi or Sunni descent). This is why we distinguish between the categories

literature on Shii Muslims in Germany, from address lists circulating on the World Wide Web (especially the IGS “mosque list” and an extensive address list on the “Schia Forum”), and from other online sources, such as Facebook and online telephone directories.

Our list of recognisable Shii mosques, centres, communities, organisations, associations, foundations and so on now lists almost 190 addresses throughout Germany. Their distribution follows the common pattern of migration in Germany with a majority in the most industrialised and/or urbanised areas such as the Rhine-Ruhr area (North Rhine Westphalia) and Berlin as well as in south German federal-states such as Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and Hesse, and, to a lesser extent, in Hamburg, Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein, with only a few in Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland, Bremen, Saxony and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and none in the other east German federal-states.

A second step was to identify their linguistic, national and/or ethnic background by analysing the names of the organisations in connection with their activities visible from online sources (see appendix). This analysis was facilitated by the fact that a high proportion of the communities and associations themselves give their preferred or available “contact languages” in the freely available address lists (IGS and “Schia Forum”). According to this philological analysis, 50% are predominantly Arabic-speaking (including specifically Lebanese and Iraqi associations; and some that also list Persian as a second language of communication); 22% are Turkish-speaking (Turkish and Azerbaijani, including two Alevi communities); only 16% are specifically Persian-language based,³¹ of which 2% declare themselves to be specifically “Afghani”; 5% have Urdu as their first language and/or designate themselves as being from Pakistan; 2% use mainly German as their common language. There were some other communities that we could not confidently categorise using this method, which of course only roughly depicts conditions on the ground, as we saw in our fieldwork among selected communities.³²

“linguistic” and “ethnic” in our examples, which does not mean that ethnicities may not also be linguistically constructed.

- 31 Surveys among German Muslims (such as “Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland”) have shown that over 30% of the Iranians describe themselves as less- or non-religious; Haug, Müssig Stichs, *Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland*, 307. This is probably one explanation of why Iranian Shiites are less organised and visibly active in religious activities than other Shiites such as Iraqis, who are rather “newcomers”, and Caferi/Azeri Turks, who are influenced by the relatively high religiosity and level of organisation of the Sunni Turks.
- 32 This data stems from combined online and ethnographic research; the sample consists of a total of 195 communities, associations and organisations. In absolute numbers, there were at the current point of research (February 2017) 97 Arabic-speaking, 43 Turkish/

The second stage in our research work started in 2015. We conducted participant observation in selected communities during Ramadan and Muharram.³³ Methodologically, this included talks and interviews with officials and activists, as well as organisers of and participants in ritual or representational events, both before, during and after the event itself. The interviews were unstructured, but were guided by our research questions concerning the history, formation and interdependence of the observed communities, as well as addressing the interviewees' identity and allegiance. In our communications, we used Arabic, Persian, Turkish and German, although longer interviews were more often conducted in German, with some Turkish. Not all communities and institutions that we visited were active during Ramadan, Ghadir Khumm, and Muharram in 2015. We visited some outside festival seasons, so not all interviews took place in connection with a specific ritual event. On the other hand, in the context of transregional centrally organised events, such as the *Iftar* reception held by the IGS in Berlin, the Ghadir Khumm convention in Hagen (North Rhine-Westphalia), the 'Aşura Konferansı' in Forchheim (Franconia/Bavaria), and the central mourning convention of the 'Aschura AG NRW' in Bochum (Ruhr area), some interviews were conducted with activists from communities and organisations that we did not visit. One of our research questions in that context, besides identifying communities of practice based on mutual religious-ritual activity, asked to what degree we can speak of specifically ethnicity-based, rather trans-ethnic "pan-Shii", or even "Germanised" or German Shii communities.

Also of interest, and partly connected to that question, were references to processes of transfer of religious and cultural repertoire, most prominently the use of different languages, especially German, in religious rituals. One result so far is that there is still a majority of communities of practice that are based on a shared language, such as Arabic (especially Iraqi Arabic), Persian (Iranian and Afghan Dari), Turkish and Urdu, but that there are also communities that try

Azeri-speaking, 32 Persian-speaking (Farsi/Dari)/"Iranian" (including five "Afghani"), nine Urdu-speaking, four German-speaking and ten (linguistically) unspecifiable communities (including the one umbrella organisation, the IGS).

33 The research process started from central events of the umbrella organisation and covered first Berlin and then the Ruhr area, Munich, Nuremberg and the Rhine-Main area including Frankfurt (with the Iranian centre there). Communities from every segment from the Shii population in Germany were selected, including Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan, Pakistani, German converts, Turkish, Azeri and Alevi communities. With the exception of a distinct Lebanese community, all ethnic and national core groups of the Shiite field in Germany are included in the sample.

to provide sermons and ritually chanted poetry³⁴ in both Arabic and Persian, supplemented with sequences in German for the younger generation. In order to achieve this, they often try to find someone who is able to give a sermon or converse in German.

The ethnographic setting of the Shiite communities in Germany is thus still characterised by the results of several waves of migration since the 1960s: Iranians, Turkish labour migrants, and Lebanese, Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani refugees maintain their ethnic identity partly by means of religion and ritual activity. However, there are some German converts, as well as Turkish Sunnis who mainly converted as early as the 1980s being attracted by the success of the “Islamic Revolution” in Iran;³⁵ and several Turkish Alevis, who see their activity within Shii communities or as Shiites not as a conversion but as a “return” to their “true” Karbala and an Ali/Husayn-centred form of Islam.³⁶ Such converts, notably those of German descent, are particularly active in public and association activities, as well as in the IGS, which seems typical for people who turn to a new religion in their adult life.

In the following, we will give some examples of the 33 visited and observed communities, organisations, institutions and collective events,³⁷ which are

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- 34 Although the ritual specialists technically sing religious poetry, the term “singer/singing” is avoided here, as in the original languages (Arabic, Persian and Turkish) “singing” is usually associated with secular contexts. Equivalents to the semantic field of “reading” or “reciting” (analogous to “reading/reciting the Qur’an”) are preferred. It has to be kept in mind that, in reciting or reading (both the Qur’an and other religious texts such as prayers), the people engaged in ritual activity (both specialists and lay) use the techniques usually associated with “singing” in the “Western” sense, such as following a melody, rhythm, modulation and dynamic. However, apart from drums and other percussion instruments during Muharram rituals, no use of musical instruments was observed.
- 35 Germans who converted in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution are also among Esra Özyürek’s interlocutors in her study on conversion to Islam in Germany; Özyürek, Esra, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 1.
- 36 On these articulations of Shiism, see Weineck, Benjamin, “Schiiten, Aleviten und Ehlibeit-Islam: Grenzziehung und ‘Artikulation’ im Kontext schiitisch-alevitischer Gegenwartskulturen in Deutschland und der Türkei”, *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 26, no. 2 (2018, forthcoming).
- 37 There were only four publicly announced events: the central Ghadir Khumm meeting in Hagen, one Ashura procession in Munich, one so-called Aşura Konferansı in Forchheim (Bavaria), and the central Ashura event organised by the *Aschura AG NRW*. All other contacts were visits at communities, usually in conjunction with participant observation during rituals, where we also conducted interviews.

located in Bavaria (Munich, Nuremberg), Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse (Frankfurt) and North Rhine-Westphalia (Bochum, Cologne, Essen, Gelsenkirchen, Hagen).

There are many Iraqi and some Lebanese communities that are especially active on religiously important days, such as during Muharram, and hire large assembly halls, mostly in industrial suburban areas of German cities, in order to provide services for their community and for other Shiites living in the vicinity. As is the case with the majority of Shii communities, they invite religious specialists, preachers and/or reciters for the occasion from their respective countries of origin or from other centres of Shii populations in Europe, such as London.³⁸ One striking example is Mannheim in south-west Germany, where the Iraqis organise such events, parallel to another Lebanese community in the near vicinity. Both communities are still in the process of buying a property to house their community centre; in case of the Iraqis, they are liaising with the Mannheim Alevi community to buy their "assembly house" (the Alevi *cemevis*). In that case, due to the recent migration of people from Afghanistan, a lot of young Hazaras also came to the Muharram evening ceremonies. This was the case in many Shii communities we observed. Refugee participation gives new momentum to the need to provide multi-language services, which is possible as Arabic-speaking clerics often have some command of Persian, having studied for some time in Iran.

Another large Iraqi community observed was one in Essen in the Ruhr area, which had rented a restaurant for the Muharram evenings in 2015. Although, they have a strong Iraqi Arab identity, a considerable number of Persian-speaking Shiites (mostly of Afghan origin) took part in the gatherings. Consequently, besides the Arabic-speaking preacher and reciters imported from Iraq, a Persian-speaking *rowze-khwan* was also invited. In addition, a young second-generation German-speaking person was asked to give a sermon in German. This community in Essen is about to buy a larger house financed by a donation campaign. Also active in this community is a Shii Kurd from Iraq (Feyli), the only ethnically Kurdish Shii that we have met during our fieldwork so far.³⁹

38 Hesse-Lehmann, Karin & Spellman, Kathryn, "Iranische transnationale religiöse Institutionen in London und Hamburg", in *Zuwanderung und Integration: Kulturwissenschaftliche Zugänge und soziale Praxis*, Christoph Köck, Alois Moosmüller & Klaus Roth (eds) (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2004), pp. 141-62, p. 150.

39 Out of ethical considerations, the names and exact locations of communities and event organisers are not given. However, names are given in the case of communities, organisations and individuals who maintain a high profile and official public representation.

In Stuttgart, though not in an institutionalised way as in Essen, there is a shared endeavour to provide space for the Muharram evening and Ashura ceremonies; for some years Iraqis, Afghans and a Pakistani community have rented a hall on the second floor of a Turkish restaurant in order not to celebrate together. Yet, they celebrate their specific Muharram rituals in shifts, first the larger Iraqi community, then the somewhat smaller Afghani congregation, and lastly the very small Pakistani community. Although they have their separate time slots, a certain overlap occurs, when people arriving early join the other community still performing their rituals, or they join together for the evening or night prayers. These overlaps caused by the restricted space and the need to conduct three ceremonies during one evening do not seem to be fundamentally problematic to the participants, and each person pays an equal contribution for the rent of the hall.

The Turkish-speaking communities differentiate themselves according to their roots in east Anatolian Twelver Shiism ("Caferi"; mostly refugees from Russian Azerbaijan, who came to the district of Iğdır after 1918) or as converts from Turkish Sunnism after the "Islamic Revolution" in Iran. Conversion from Sunni Islam to Shiism is in fact quite an important aspect of Germany's Shiite population; during our fieldwork, we encountered numerous interlocutors with a Turkish background who had converted to Shia Islam after 1979. In addition, the Özoğuz brothers, who run various Shiite websites, are converts from Sunni-Hanafi Islam. In studies on conversion to Islam in Europe available so far (such as those by Shanneik on Ireland⁴⁰ or Özyürek on Germany⁴¹), the topic of "inner-Islamic conversion"⁴² in the diaspora has so far not been in focus, just like conversion to other Muslim denominations than Sunni Islam.

Some Turkish-speaking Shiite communities, probably the majority, still very much define their identity in terms of their national backgrounds (and sometimes in terms of their linguistic, Azeri-Turkish identity). However, some communities today (as in Bochum) include a mixture of both types of groups. Another split within Azeri communities was observed: those who orientate themselves more towards Iran (referring to Khamene'i as their *marja'*,

40 Shanneik, Yafa, "Muslim Women in Ireland", in *Muslims in Ireland: Past and Present*, Oliver Scharbrodt, Tuula Sakaranaho, Adil Hussain, Yafa Shanneik & Vivian Ibrahim (eds) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 193-215.

41 Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim*.

42 Brunner, Rainer, "Then I was guided: Some remarks on inner-Islamic conversions in the 20th and 21st centuries", *Orient* 4 (2009), pp. 6-15. On the general issue of conversion to Shiism, see Sindawi, Khalid, "Al-*mustabşirün*, Those who are able to see the light: Sunnī conversion to Twelver Shī'ism in modern times", *Die Welt des Islams* 51 (2011), pp. 210-34.

for example), and those who prefer a dominant "Turkic/Turkish" expression of belonging. Such a split into two distinct congregations was observed in the Ruhr area town of Gelsenkirchen. In contrast, there are two Turkish communities in Nuremberg, one based on a group of converts from Sunni Turkish Islam, and one more Azeri/Caferi oriented. In Berlin, there is an Alevi community that is in the process of becoming a member of the IGS. Their officials try to uphold typical Alevi (ritual) traditions, such as the *cem* congregational ritual, as well as making use of the Shii Islamic ritual repertoire at once.⁴³ Like all the Alevis encountered within the "Shii field" in Germany, they firmly distance themselves from the Alevi umbrella organisation *Alevitische Gemeinde Deutschland e. V.* (AABF), which considers Alevism to be a religious tradition distinct from and "outside" of Islam.

Besides people with roots in Afghanistan participating in other Shii communities in Germany, especially in linguistically related Persian-speaking communities, there are also distinct Afghan communities, such as one in Berlin. It was visited during Ramadan 2015, when a large congregation assembled in a former factory hall, which had been bought by one entrepreneur family of several brothers, who *de facto* led the community and paid for most of the costs.

One small Pakistani community in the Stuttgart area has already been mentioned above. In Berlin, there are at least two, although one is generally only active during religiously important periods of the year. The other, also small, is active in providing courses for children and adolescents. It shares its rooms with an Arabic-speaking community of Iraqi and Lebanese origin. They conduct ceremonies together, somewhat dominated in the "canonical" rituals, such as ritual prayer, by the Arabic-speakers because of their competence in the language, but the Pakistanis have their own rituals in Urdu, usually after the Arabic-speakers have finished. This is another kind of symbiosis, as was described in the Stuttgart case above, yet here on a permanent basis throughout the year in jointly rented premises.

In addition to these rather small and less well-known examples, there are also long-established Shia mosque communities, such as the Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg. This is one of the oldest Islamic institutions in Europe and consists of the Imam Ali Mosque, an Academy and a socio-cultural centre with

43 Apart from these explicit means of referring to a shared repertoire of Alevis and Shiites there are also cases, as in Nuremberg, where gatherings of Shiite organisations take place in the Alevi *cem evi*. According to a flyer for an invitation to Ghadir Khumm organised by the *Ehl-i Beyt Kulturverein e. V.*, the event takes place in the "*Ehl-i Beyt Camii*", which turned out to be the local Alevis' *cem evi*, which the organisation rents from time to time.

a library; it is led by clerics, officially sent from Iran. The same holds true for the much younger Islamisches Zentrum Frankfurt, which has just settled into a new building. It is also led by an Iranian cleric. Both leading clerics are very active in the IGS, which illustrates the desire of the Islamic Republic to take a leading role among the Shii Muslims in Germany. However, besides having involvement by Iraqis, Lebanese and several Turks, the IGS in its head office in Berlin is also influenced by a group of converts with German roots. At the turn of the millennium, they established an association, now based in the same building as the IGS in Berlin-Neukölln. They maintain strong links to the Karbala shrine administration, which also provides considerable funding, for purposes such as the organisation of major events for larger gatherings such as the *iftar* receptions in Berlin. This Iraqi engagement is to some extent in competition with Iranian activities in Germany, as the latter oftentimes comes along with a considerable degree of Iranian national influence, in both a political and a more general cultural/linguistic sense. It can be concluded from our conversations that German converts in particular (when they are not engaged with Iran in a personal way, such as through marriage) sometimes find the Iraqi connections more attractive. They see them as representing a more “authentic” approach to “Islam”, not only for historical reasons (Iraq being the historical heartland of medieval Shiism) but also as being without the “modern” (and in that sense rather unauthentic) associations of an “Islamic *Revolution*” and an “Islamic *Republic*” (not to mention the obstacles that continue to exist when engaging with Iran and Iranian institutions in Germany, in light of embargos and international geo-political tensions). This split is reinforced to some extent by Iranian-leaned communities and organisations insisting on the acceptance of Khamene’i as *marja’*, and so explicitly or implicitly excluding those who emulate another, i.e. non-Iranian, *marja’*.

While we have seen that communities that are linguistically and/or ethnically diverse share spaces for ritual practice and sometimes also engage in ritual practice together, there are also other communities that explicitly try to overcome problems linked to linguistic differences. Both the Gemeinschaft der Mitte in Cologne and the Aschura AG NRW [= North Rhine Westphalia], the latter in one of the Turkish-speaking communities in Bochum, propagate very strongly the use of German in all activities (except the ritual prayers). Second- or third-generation “migrants” from all ethnic backgrounds dominate them. The Gemeinschaft der Mitte in Cologne has its own premises and holds weekly congregational ceremonies, while the Aschura AG NRW is mainly active once a year, as the “Aschura” in the name implies, during Muharram for one major event commemorating Ashura. In both cases, they use German-language lamentation poetry (which is recited to near-eastern melodies) for their

ceremonies. As such, they represent a new generation of Shiites in Germany who declare their active decision to be part of German society and work for Shii Muslims on the basis of that principle. Consequently, members from these communities, especially from the Aschura AG, are very active in the IGS, the chairman of the Aschura AG being recently elected as regional representative of the IGS for North Rhine Westphalia.

However, although there are transferences from German and Sunni Muslim majority contexts, we observed a shared repertoire of specifically Shii character, especially the shared core symbols and iconography of Shiism (Ali, Husayn, the Twelve Imams in general, Karbala, etc.), central texts (prayers and narrations), poetry, melodies and rhythms—a prominent example would be the ritual of chest beating observed across generations in all communities during Muharram—which is a strong argument for perceiving Shiism in Germany as a discernible constellation of several communities of practice.⁴⁴

The practice of chest beating, for example, illustrates how new communities of practice are emerging in the diaspora that make use of differing as well as shared repertoires. As was sketched above, Shiites in Germany usually gather around a core of people with similar national or ethnic affiliations, such as Iraqi, Lebanese, Iranian, Afghan or South Asian. However, as not every city and region has organisations and communities from every ethnic group, people with a Shii identity usually join each other either by using the same localities successively on the same date, or by integrating within one gathering ritual specificities from several (e.g. both Iraqi and Iranian) ritual cultures. In such a context, visitors to the ritual event necessarily participate in ritual activities distinct from the cultural context of their country of origin. This is especially true for the younger generation. For them, there is no conscious awareness of such cultural distinctions, or they may even deliberately negate them in order to cultivate a pan-Shia practice. The example of chest beating illustrates this as, although regional forms of this practice are still discernible, there is an ongoing process of adaptation that is especially

44 Although we focus our analysis on mutual engagement in practice as a common denominator of communities, other aspects of community making may intersect with these forms of belonging and provide cohesion for the groups. In Shiite contexts, the aspect of charisma is of some importance with regard to loyalties to *taqlid*. However, according to our observations, this is subordinate to shared practice in constituting the communities. The community does not define itself via common loyalties to charismatic figures but rather through mutual engagement in ritual practice. As we observed, it is not uncommon that members of the same community of practice refer to a range of *maraji'* when asked about their *taqlid*.

visible in standardised forms of chest beating observable in third-generation German-language based communities (e.g. the *Gemeinschaft der Mitte*, Cologne) or at larger, trans-regional and trans-ethnic events (e.g. the mourning gathering organised by the *Aschura AG NRW*, Bochum).

Online Communities of Practice

While the foregoing examples, as well as Stausberg's use of the concept of communities of practice is operationalised via *ritual* practice as mutual engagement in a joint enterprise and with reference to a shared repertoire, the next example conceives of practice in a different form: Wenger emphasises that practice is achieved through interaction—interaction that in turn need not necessarily be face to face: he also emphasises the possibility of interacting in mutual engagement without geographical proximity.⁴⁵

The possibility of overcoming distance for interaction is but one central characteristic of online communication, aptly depicted in the image of a “global village”. Scholz et al. have emphasised the extent to which increasingly sophisticated online communication has “increased the participative potential”⁴⁶ even of marginalised voices. This enabling and facilitating of interaction in mutual engagement is also a prerequisite to argue for understanding interaction in an online forum as interaction within a community of practice. Here again the focus on practice avoids defining the community via other common social, religious, economic or other characteristics, which is essential if we are to come to terms with the oftentimes anonymous and ephemeral interaction online. Such other potential markers of cohesion and common belonging are often invisible or meaningless on the Internet—also due to the fact that one cannot tell from the username who the “real” person is behind such an avatar.⁴⁷ Thus, Bunt observes that “participation on the Internet *can* be identity-less”⁴⁸

45 Wenger, *Communities*, 74.

46 Scholz, Jan, Selge, Tobias, Stille, Max & Zimmermann, Johannes, “Listening communities? Some remarks on the construction of religious authority in Islamic podcasts”, *Die Welt des Islams* 48, no. 3 (2008), pp. 457–509, p. 462.

47 Krüger, Oliver, “Discovering the invisible Internet: Methodological aspects of searching religion on the Internet”, *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1–27, p. 18.

48 Bunt, Gary R., *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 14.

in order to emphasise how socio-economic boundaries structuring social practice offline are systematically overcome online.

Brückner divides the many different Shii online contents broadly into two categories: Whereas websites are oftentimes conducted by mosque associations or organisations, online forums are usually hosted by private persons.⁴⁹ The latter ones are also the websites we are interested in, because the instant messengers and commentary functions (such as on YouTube) are the vehicle that brings individuals together in mutual engagement. The online discussion room Shia-Forum⁵⁰ is one of the online spaces that present a specifically Shiite character.⁵¹ The page is owned by Fatima Bazzi, who, after the brothers Yavuz and Gürhan Özoğuz, is one of the most active individuals in providing exclusively German-language Shia websites and forums from Germany. The Shia-Forum has 8,399 members⁵² and is also linked to Fatima Bazzi's website al-Shia.de. The various topics that are discussed within the forum may have specific Shiite characteristics, for example, by referring to the sayings of Imam Khamene'i or other Shiite Ayatollahs, while others treat more general topics on Muslim conduct (see Fig. 1). The degree to which specifically Shiite topics are discussed, or to which the participants refer to common Shiite symbols, discourses or semiotics, must be analysed closely for each discussion as it is of course possible and likely that not only Shiites but also other Muslims and non-Muslims take part in these discussions.

For example, in the Shia-Forum there are categories such as "Qur'an and *tafsir*", "Political discussions and latest news", "The Prophet & the Ahl al-Bayt" or "Health and Sport". These headings and the more specific sub-boards constitute, in our view, the joint enterprise in that the individual participants mutually engage, in Wenger's sense. The threads in which these topics are discussed bear witness of the mutual engagement in this common topic as a joint enterprise. Without access to the people behind these usernames, what makes these practices legible as specifically Shiite practices is the way in which the participants refer to a "shared repertoire" of Shiite narratives of history, authorities, symbols or expressions that are part of this repertoire—that is, all possible forms and elements that may be remembered and reactivated in articulating a specifically Shiite identity and that are understood as such among other participants in the community of practice. Similarly, Yafa Shanneik has emphasised

49 Brückner, "Schiitische Gemeinschaften", 127.

50 www.shia-forum.de.

51 As opposed to, e.g. the Muslim Markt forum, which is also owned by Shiites and also hosts Shiite discussion topics, but under the umbrella of a shared "Islamic" identity.

52 As of 8 February 2017.

the importance of “collective remembering” for constructing and articulating a collective Shiite diasporic identity, which may overcome differences between the “various traditions and approaches” among the Shiis in a small community in Dublin.⁵³ She analyses the ways and means by which historical narratives on Imam Husayn’s martyrdom and its collective ritual commemoration serve to articulate both religious and Iraqi-nationalist identity constructions among Shiite women in Ireland. Understanding the community as a “memory community”, her approach also explores how a collectively conducted practice (of lamenting) and the use of a shared repertoire are aligned in order to foster belonging. This shared repertoire is also similar in Wenger’s sense to what Assmann calls the “cultural memory”⁵⁴ of a community. As such, it contains those narratives, practices, symbols and so on, which have been secured, constantly re-enacted over time in a form that prevented them from sinking into oblivion and now function as “recognizable histories”, showing “how history remains relevant and meaningful”.⁵⁵

With regard to the shared repertoire of the Shia-Forum participants, one can regularly see that they quote, for example, the verses of the Qur’an that are understood by Shiite theology as those legitimating Ali’s succession after Muhammad’s death (e.g., Q. 5, 3 or, as in Fig. 2, Q. 5:55-6). Another form of using a common Shiite repertoire is found in references to members of the *ahl al-bayt* or to living Shiite authorities, the *maraji’ al-taqlid*. Although members of communities of practice may emulate different *maraji’*, this is still a specifically Shiite approach to religious authority and learning and therefore serves to negotiate meaning within Shiite communities. Especially in diasporic contexts, as Shanneik argues,⁵⁶ selecting and following one (or even more than one) *marja’* is an important part of exercising agency in articulating a Shiite identity. Yet although the shared repertoire is important for characterising the community, it is, in our view, also the active participation in negotiating meaning that constitutes it.

53 Shanneik, Yafa, “Remembering Karbala in the diaspora: Religious rituals among Iraqi Shii women in Ireland”, *Religion*, 45, no. 1 (2015), pp. 89-102, p. 94.

54 Assmann, Jan, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis* (München: CH Beck, 2000), p. 40. Regardless of terminology, in our view the shared repertoire is but one (very central) element that provides a common frame of reference for the participants in mutual engagement. Practice and the actual use of parts of the repertoire are likewise constitutive of communities.

55 Wenger, *Communities*, 83.

56 Shanneik, “Gendering religious authority”, 58.

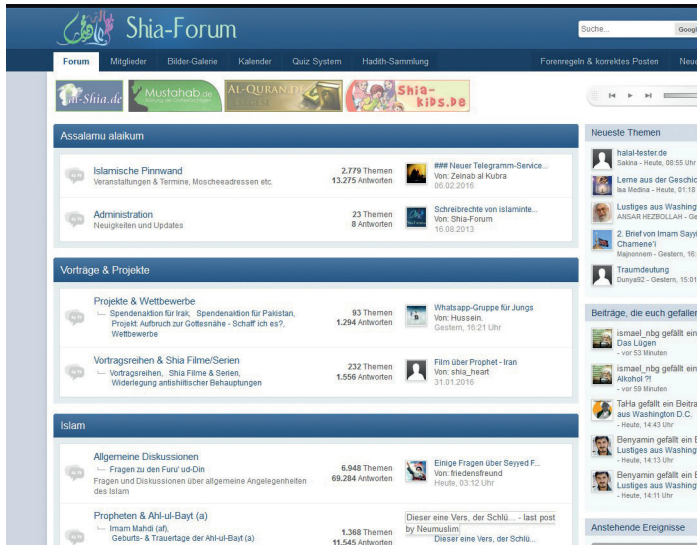


FIGURE 1 Screenshot of the Shia-Forum's main page with some of the different topics under discussion.



FIGURE 2 Screenshot of an initial question that brings up a mutual engagement on the topic of Health and Sport and, more nuanced, on the question whether it is permitted to take certain sleeping pills.

The screenshot from one entry on the Shia-Forum may illustrate how issues are negotiated with references to specific Shiite authorities and a shared repertoire that are part of Shiite history and memory (Fig. 2). The user with the username Ahmad Abdallah, who is posing a question here, not only refers to the Grand-Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah but also posts a Qur'anic quotation (with his own understanding of it) that elaborates on the privileged position of the family of the Prophet and the descendants of Imam Ali within a Shii understanding of Islamic history. In analogy, the other participants of this thread post quotations from hadiths or eulogies on the *ahl al-bayt* in

which they refer to a shared repertoire in their mutual engagement. It is not the topic itself, the content of practice and interaction alone—the participant asks whether it is permitted, according to Fadlallah's *ijtihad*, to take sleeping pills containing alcohol—that embeds this mutual engagement within a Shii constellation, nor is it the joint enterprise they are engaging with here, but the specific references to authorities, and to a shared repertoire of narratives, that constitutes belonging in this community of practice within the wider spectrum of the Shiite constellation in Germany. These points of reference, which bear witness of a Shii frame of articulation and legitimation are, in turn, themselves negotiated in their meaning over time as they are passed from one generation to the other; they do not acquire their meaning by ascription or decision by a central authoritative figure. The mere fact that parts of the repertoire—such as historical narratives—are relevant and meaningful in the present means that they are part of the Shii repertoire. This is the point at which the observer, i.e. the researcher, ascribes belonging when it comes to the characterisation of certain elements of a shared repertoire as “Shii”. Yet, here, we ascribe the Shiite character according to what has been handed down as belonging to Shiism and thereby focus on *emic* perspectives on tradition.

This circumvents some hermeneutically problematic operations of characterising the practices of the groups as specifically Shii from outside: for example, Brückner remarks that some Shiite websites (such as the Özoğuz brothers' Muslim-Markt) present “their confession” as if it represents “Islam in general”.⁵⁷ Such a statement suggests that an *emic* understanding of representing Islam or Muslim conduct might actually be used to conceal allegedly primordial “confessional” differences. Here, Brückner tries to come to terms with the reasons for such a form of representation. But the distinctions made by him, and, broadly speaking, by the Islamic studies tradition, may not be those appropriated by the actors themselves. Thus, Brückner's characterisation of this page—that the Özoğuz brothers express their “confession” as the one true Islam—may not (only) be a strategic operation for *da'wa* purposes, but may rather bear witness to their self-representation and the inherent understanding of belonging. This aptly shows the importance of considering the degree and the forms of the articulation of a specifically Shii identity.⁵⁸ Brückner, here does not only overemphasise (and also misconstrue) the idea of a “confession”; he also does not take into account that such a representation of the self may indeed be “authentic”.

57 Brückner, “Schiitische Gemeinschaften”, 102: “Sie stellen ihre Konfession [...] als *den* Islam dar.”

58 Some members of Shiite associations we met during several festivals also reject the label Shiite as a mere political divide.

With regard to the aspects of the community's organisational intensity and integrative power, one may say that the Shia-Forum quantifies different forms of the users' activities and thus provides interesting data on the community's level of cohesion. The user posing the question discussed above has his level of activity indicated which, in turn, says something about his engagement and the level of his integration into the community of practice. He is answered and helped by other users, among whom is a certain "Aqilah". She has posted over 8,000 entries and also helped the user Ahmad Abdallah to forward his question to Ayatollah Fadlallah, advising him that he needs to be a little patient in waiting for the answer. Such statistics show that the various participants have different degrees of integration into the community of practice, which again should be taken as indicating the varying ways and degrees in which specifically Shiite practices are followed.

Conclusion

The perspective that we have proposed sees various kinds of interaction in different spheres as related via a shared repertoire that ultimately also links these practices to a Shiite frame of reference. The concept of communities of practice enabled us to hold and analyse these different modes of social interaction together and thus draw a picture of an inherently heterogeneous yet also interconnected constellation of Shiite articulations of identity in Germany. Furthermore, applying the concept to the sphere of online discussion forums helped us to perceive rather informal communities of practice as an integrative part of the constellation: People interacting online who would probably never have met offline. It is therefore important to take these forms of (potentially anonymous and ephemeral) practices into account if we are to map how Shiite articulations of religiosity are formulated and the kinds of forms and functions they may take.

The epistemologically flexible term "community" employed here is also able to grasp the shifting relationship between articulating and emphasising religious and / or national affiliation in the context of the diaspora. This is an important aspect that does not only apply to researching Shii Muslims in Europe. At this point, the approach followed here stands with those approaches in scholarship that seek to come to terms with articulations of collective identities that are not necessarily bound to a certain place or national territory. However, the current national situation and its specific regimes of law, knowledge and belonging also yield and foster collective identities very much accommodated to territorial demands. With regard to other European contexts, one may say that an important aspect of negotiating collective

religious identities is also how to cope with, integrate or overcome diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in the diaspora. This of course, also has serious implications for the possibilities of and limits to articulating a specific Shiite individual and collective subjectivity.⁵⁹ Therefore, a critical analytical perspective on the dynamic intersection of linguistic, national, ethnic and religious affiliation is also important for comparative perspectives, as regimes of inclusion and exclusion vary in the wider Europe. The *Gemeinschaft der Mitte* referred to above is an example of such a specifically German expression of Shiism: the consequent use of the German language not only influences its public forms of communication, but also deeply affects the liturgy in ritual practice, where Arabic / Persian is also replaced by German eulogies on Ali or Husayn. The community's practice is adapted to the German-speaking context in which many participants are not able to use the language of their ancestors. Here, the "shared repertoire" referred to in mutual engagement still links this community to the broader Shii constellation, its shared narratives and symbols, which are not necessarily bound to the language spoken.

Our suggestion that all the different forms and modes of collective practice can be conceptualised as related to the wider constellation of Shia practice in Germany opens up two dimensions. Just as Stausberg uses the concept to consider the *Repräsentation* and *Reproduktion* of rituals and religions, the way we used the concept of "communities of practice" likewise opens up a perspective on collective practices. On the one hand it is an analytical perspective that sees the various communities of practice related via the usage of shared Shii repertoire, which in turn has grown throughout history and thus provides narratives, symbols or terminology that make it possible to label these communities "Shia" by an outsider. On the other hand, these references are also used (whether consciously or not) by the actors themselves to articulate their individual and, in shared practice, collective identities as belonging to a broader Shii constellation. The very term "constellation" is thereby not exclusively applied to the Shii Muslims in Germany but may also include the idea of Shiism in general or may also be called—depending on the different backgrounds of individual scholars—a "field", just as the "shared repertoire" of the actors may also be conceptualised as "cultural memory", or "archive". Yet, regardless of the terminology used, what becomes obvious from our discussion is the need for an approach that is sensitive to allegedly "confessional" disjunctures, shared histories and common experiences alike.

59 Shanneik, "Gendering religious authority", 59.