

Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe

Local and Transnational Dimensions: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This article provides an introduction to the special issue on *Mapping Shia Muslim Communities in Europe*.¹ With six empirically rich case studies on Shia Muslim communities in various European countries, this issue intends: first, to illustrate the historical developments and emergence of the Shia presence in Europe; second, to highlight the local particularities of the various Shia communities within each nation state and demonstrate their transnational links; and third, to provide for the first time an empirical comparative study on the increasingly visible presence of Shia communities in Europe that fills an important gap in research on Muslims in Europe.

Keywords

muslims in Europe – Shia Islam – diaspora – transnationalism

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1 Throughout the special issue, the authors refer when talking about Shia to Twelver Shia, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Introduction

The presence of Muslims in Europe is not a new phenomenon and goes back to the time of Muslim occupation of al-Andalus, but it also has roots in the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Europe as well as European colonization of various Muslim territories.² The demographics of Muslims in Europe changed, however, after World-War II. Starting mainly with male labour migration from former European colonies—the so-called “guestworkers”—followed by family reunification and an increasing influx of refugees and asylum-seekers, particularly since the late 1970s, the numbers as well as the visibility of Muslims in Europe have increased over recent decades. Muslims living in Europe not only come from diverse ethnic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, but also from a variety of Muslim sectarian groups.³ The presence of Shia Muslims in Europe, for example, goes back to Shia communities such as Alevi, mainly from Turkey, but it also includes an increasing number of European converts to Shia Islam.⁴ There is also a significant Azeri Shia presence in countries of Eastern Europe that were part of the Soviet Union, as well as followers of the Shia-oriented Bektashi Sufi order, which experienced a revival in Albania and the countries of former Yugoslavia after the collapse of Communism in the early 1990s. The Shia presence in Europe is primarily due, however, to various migratory patterns going back to the nineteenth century, when students of South Asian backgrounds came to the UK to study,⁵ followed by a wave of students, particularly in the 1970s, from countries such as Uganda (Khoja Shia), Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. Business people also came from Iran and other Gulf countries to pursue trade⁶ or other professional activities in Europe.⁷ The Iranian Revolution in 1979, followed by the three Gulf wars and the toppling of

2 Bader, Veit, “The governance of Islam in Europe: The perils of modelling”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33, no. 6 (2007), pp. 871-86.

3 For more on the Muslim presence in various European countries, see Scharbrodt, Oliver et al., *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol. 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

4 Shanneik, Yafa, “Moving into Shia Islam: ‘Process of subjectification’ among Shia women converts in London”, in *Moving into and out of Islam*, Karin van Nieuwkerk and Egdunas Raciūnas (eds) (Austin: University of Texas Press, forthcoming).

5 Ansari, Humayun, *“The Infidel Within”: Muslims in Britain since 1800* (London: Hurst, 2004).

6 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.

7 Van den Bos, Matthijs, “European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites’ Organization in Britain and the Netherlands”, *Ethnicities*, 12, no. 5 (2012), pp. 556-80.

Saddam Hussein in 2003, as well as the rise of the so-called Islamic State, all led to waves of migration of Shia from the Middle East seeking asylum and refuge in various European countries.

With the increasing Shia population in Europe and also due to the marginalisation of Shia in pre-2003 Iraq and other countries in the Gulf region, many prominent religious and political figures of the Shia world established their headquarters or liaison offices in Europe. These offices started to develop a Shia “infrastructure”⁸ to cater for the religious and political as well as ethnic linguistic diversity of the Shia presence in Europe. London, for example, has developed into the “Shia hub” of Europe. Since the 1990s, various influential Shia clerical authorities, such as Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu’i (1899-1992) and Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei (b. 1939), have established various Shia religious, research and educational centres, as well as private primary and secondary schools.

Despite this changing nature of the growing Shia presence in Europe with its established infrastructures, influenced and financially supported by various religious authorities and establishments and political parties within as well as beyond Europe, Shia communities and their members still have links with their societies of origin. The significance of these transnational networks within a European context has not yet been sufficiently studied. With the increasing political instabilities in the Middle East over the last thirty years, Europe has been a useful space for oppositional political parties to develop and, through migrants’ transnational links, they have impacted in various ways and degrees on the political, social but also religious dynamics in the region.⁹ London in particular has become home to various political movements that form parties in opposition to various governments in the Middle East. The Islamic Da’wa Party, the main Shia Islamist party of Iraq, is one such political movement that grew in power after the toppling of Saddam Hussein and has become the main party of government since 2005.

8 For more on the Muslim infrastructure in Europe, see Gerholm, Tomas & Lithman, Yngve Georg (eds), *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* (London: Mansell, 1988); Allievi, Stefano, “The Muslim community in Italy”, in *Muslim Communities in the New Europe*, Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock & Bogdan Szajkowski (eds) (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996), pp. 315-27. Nielsen, Jörgen, *Towards a European Islam* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Grillo, Ralph, “Islam and transnationalism”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30, no. 5 (2004), pp. 861-78.

9 For similar arguments, see Al-Ali, Nadje & Koser, Khalid, “Transnationalism, international migration and home”, in *New Approaches to Migration?: Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*, Nadje Al-Ali & Khalid Koser (eds) (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-14.

The extent to which geo-political developments in the Middle East influence the political, social, economic and legal lives of Shia diaspora communities in Europe is one of the main focuses of the articles in this issue. Shia Muslims in Europe constitute a “minority within a minority”¹⁰ and are characterised by being highly diverse in terms of their ethnic background, ideological orientation and socio-political and migratory status. What are the lived realities of Shia communities living in minority contexts in various European countries as articulated through their own narratives? How do Shia communities and individuals relate to religious texts and authorities in the diaspora? How are religious identities translated into religious practices within diasporic spaces? How is the process of religious identity formation negotiated between various generations of Shia in different European contexts? The purpose of this issue is to explore these questions and to stimulate new ideas for future topics and areas of research on Shia Islam in Europe, as well as on other Shia groups such as Zaydis and Ismailis that are beyond the scope of this particular issue.

State of the Art

Shia Islam in the West has for too long been subsumed under broader general narratives and the normative Sunni tradition,¹¹ with less attention given to the specificities of the Shia experience. This has reduced a diverse and shifting reality to a few lines, hardly enough to cover the multiple ways there are of being Shia in the West. There have, of course, been a number of notable exceptions to this general rule. However, these exceptions have often remained siloed within various sub-disciplines or fields of research. Three core themes dominate the academic study of Shia Islam: studies that focus on specific, nationally understood diaspora groups; studies that take a broader view of Shia Islam as an inherently transnational religio-social tradition; and studies that look at specific geographic regions and the communities that share space within these regions. Although there has been some overlap between these fields of research, it remains possible to categorise the still surprisingly small number of studies on Shia Islam in this way.

10 Sachedina, Abdulaziz, “A minority within a minority: The case of the Shi’a in North America”, in *Muslim Communities in North America*, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & Jane I. Smith (eds) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 3-14.

11 A number of studies with a securitisation focus have focused on the Sunni/Shia divide. For a prominent example, see: Nasr, Vali, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

While it is not the only Shia dominated diaspora group,¹² the Iranian diaspora provides an important touchstone for any academic study of Shia Islam globally. The work of both Katherine Spellman-Poots¹³ and Reza Gholami¹⁴ focuses on this single nationally defined diaspora group: the Iranian diaspora in the UK. Although the focus is on this specific diaspora group, it is a diaspora dominated by the Shia religious tradition, either through diasporic participation in Shia religious rituals and activities, or by being defined in opposition to the current, politico-religious regime in Iran.

The influence of Iran, and of the Iranian diaspora, on the global Shia population has been addressed specifically by academics seeking to understand the place of Iran in the global geo-political landscape.¹⁵ There has emerged through this work an idea of Shiism as a religion of protest, of revolutionary export spreading from Iran. Sabrina Mervin's¹⁶ work on the Shia worlds and Iran provides an example of this type of research on Shiism. Hamid Dabashi¹⁷ makes explicit the narrative that Shiism is a religion of protest in his 2011 book of the same title. Again, this link between Shia Islam and revolutionary action is a key theme in Laurence Louer's¹⁸ exploration of transnational Shia networks in the Gulf region. Louer's *Transnational Shia Politics* (2011) also introduces the second core theme under which Shia Islam has largely been studied to date.¹⁹

12 For an alternative Shia diaspora experience, see Leichtman, Mara A., *Shi'i Cosmopolitanisms in Africa: Lebanese Migration and Religious Conversion in Senegal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

13 Spellman, Kathryn, *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004); Spellman-Poots, Kathryn, "Manifestations of Ashura among young British Shi'is", in *Ethnographies of Islam: Ritual Performances and Everyday Practices*, Pierret Pinto Dupret & Kathryn Spellman-Poots (eds) (London: Edinburgh University Press & The Agha Khan University, 2013).

14 Gholami, Reza, *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora* (London: Ashgate, 2015).

15 For an example of this, see Radhuka Gupta's work on the influence of Iran on Shia networks between India and West Asia: Gupta, Radhika, "Experiments with Khomeini's revolution in Kargil: Contemporary Shi'a networks between India and West Asia", *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2014), pp. 370-98.

16 Mervin, Sabrina (ed.), *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran* (London: Saqi & Institut Français du Poche-Orient, 2010).

17 Dabashi, Hamid, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

18 Louer, Laurence, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2011).

19 For further development on Shia Islam as an inherently transnational tradition, see van den Bos, "European Shiism?", 556-80.

As for Shia diaspora groups within particular geographic regions, and specifically in the Western context,²⁰ a small number of works have been published in recent years. Perhaps the best known of these is Liyakat Takim's²¹ investigation of the Shia communities of North America, particularly the USA. This work draws on the less known but incredibly rich ethnographic research of Linda S. Walbridge²² on the Lebanese Shia community of Dearborn, Michigan. First-hand accounts of life in the Shia diaspora are also published, both by publishers connected to specific religious centres, which tend to focus more on theological discussions, and by more main-stream publishing houses.²³

Perhaps surprisingly, given the size of the population, there have been a number of studies on Shia Islamic communities in the Republic of Ireland. Kieran Flynn's²⁴ work looks at the development of Shia communities in both the UK and the Irish Republic, investigating the interfaith opportunities between Shia communities and Christian groups, particularly in relation to Irish Catholic networks. Oliver Scharbrodt,²⁵ as part of an extensive research project looking at Muslims in Ireland,²⁶ has devoted particular attention to the manner in which Shia groups in Ireland present themselves as the "moderate face" of Islam. More recently, Yafa Shanneik²⁷ has explored ideas of religious

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- 20 For an example of this geographically bounded thematic approach, outside of the Western context, see Shaery-Eisenlohr, Roschanack, *Shi'ite Lebanon: Transnational Religion and the Making of National Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
- 21 Takim, Liyakat, "Foreign influences on American Shi'ism", *The Muslim World*, 90 (2000), pp. 459-78; Takim, Liyakat, *Shi'ism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
- 22 Walbridge, Linda S., *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit MI: Wayne State University Press, 1996).
- 23 An example of the latter type of work on Shia Islam can be found in Imam Hassan Qazwini's very readable 2007 book, *American Crescent: Qazwini, Imam Hassan, American Crescent: A Muslim Cleric on the Power of his Faith, the Struggle against Prejudice, and the Future of Islam and America* (London: Random House, 2007).
- 24 Flynn, Kieran, *Islam in the West: Iraqi Shi'i Communities in Transition and Dialogue* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013).
- 25 Scharbrodt, Oliver, "Shaping the public image of Islam: The Shiis of Ireland as 'moderate' Muslims", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 31, no. 4 (2011), pp. 518-33.
- 26 Scharbrodt, Oliver et al., *Muslims in Ireland: Past and Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
- 27 Shanneik, Yafa, "Gendering religious authority in the diaspora: Shii women in Ireland", in *Religion, Gender and the Public Sphere*, Niamh Reilly & Stacey Scriver-Furlong (eds) (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 46-58; Shanneik, Yafa, "Remembering Karbala in the diaspora: Religious rituals among Iraqi Shii women in Ireland", *Religion*, 45, no. 1 (2015), pp. 89-102.

authority and the development of female Shia ritual²⁸ practices in Ireland. This work, with its focus on gender dynamics within Shia communities, is reflected in the work of Marianne Holm-Pedersen,²⁹ who has looked specifically at Iraqi Shia women in Denmark,³⁰ and Ingvild Flakerud, who works primarily on the Iranian Shia experience, both in Iran and in northern Europe.³¹ This focus on gender and the experience of Shia women specifically points to the development of Shia-focused studies beyond the three core themes previously outlined. While a careful reading of the titles mentioned in the footnotes above will point to areas of overlap between the core themes, there remains a siloisation between different, and often competing, fields of academic endeavour. As the work of Shanneik, Holm-Pedersen and Flakerud has demonstrated, there is now space to move beyond bounded understandings and examine in detail aspects such as gender, identity,³² belonging etc., within the context of Shia communities. Such developments will be welcomed by all interested in a more

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- 28 Ritual, specifically around the annual commemoration of Ashura, is the aspect of Shia religious life that has been most extensively covered in the academic literature. For varied examples of this, see Ilahi, Shereen, "Sectarian violence and the British Raj: The Muharram riots of Lucknow", *India Reviews*, 6, no. 3 (2007), pp. 184-208; Chelkowsi, Peter, "From the sun-scorched desert of Iran to the beaches of Trinidad: Ta'zieh's journey from South Asia to the Caribbean", *The Drama Review*, 49, no. 4 (2005), pp. 156-70; Norton, August Richard, "Ritual, blood, and identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon", *The Drama Review*, 49, no. 4 (2005), pp. 140-55; Fernea, Elizabeth, "Remembering ta'ziyeh in Iraq", *The Drama Review*, 49, no. 4 (2005), pp. 130-9; Nakash, Yitzhak, "An attempt to trace the origin of the rituals of Ashura", *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, 33 no. 2 (1993), pp. 161-8; Deeb, Lara, "Doing good, like Sayyida Zaynab': Lebanese Shi'i women's participation in the public sphere", in *Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies*, Armando Salvatore & Mark LeVine (eds) (New York: Palgrave, 2005a); Moss, Dana, "Imam Husayn is love: Individualization of Shia practices in Britain", *ISIM Review*, 22 (2008), pp. 44-5; Hoogland, Mary, "Religious ritual and political struggle in an Iranian village", *MERIP Reports*, 102 (1982), pp. 10-17.
- 29 Holm-Pedersen, Marianne, *Iraqi Women in Denmark: Ritual Performance and Belonging in Everyday Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
- 30 For more ethnographic studies on Shia female ritual practices, see Aghaie, Kamran Scot, *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam* (Austin: Texas University Press, 2005).
- 31 For the most recent example of Flakerud's work, see Flakerud, Ingvild, "Aruze Qasem: A theatrical event in Shia female commemorative rituals", in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam*, Fahmida Suleman (ed.) (London: Azimuth Editions, 2015), pp. 202-11.
- 32 For an earlier exploration of Shia Islam and identity, see Ridgeon, Lloyd, *Shi'i Islam and Identity: Religion, Politics and Change in the Global Muslim Community* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

complex and nuanced academic understanding of global Shia Islam. This complexity is reflected in the articles collected within this special edition.

Overview of this Special Issue

Sufyan Abid's article investigates Ashura commemoration among Twelver Shia Muslims of South Asian background in the UK. Supporting his argument with very original material from his fieldwork in London and an in-depth historical perspective, Abid argues that the centrality of the Shia religious centre (*husayniyya*) as the space of definition of South Asian Shia identity is not a new phenomenon, but constitutes a continuity in the history of South Asian Shiism. The article explores how different groups of Shia Muslims of South Asian background—such as Punjabi, Urdu-speaking, Pakistanis, Indians, Hazaras and Sindhis—living in London are uniquely asserting their ways of commemorating Ashura in Shia public spheres.

Several articles provide original conceptual frames that address the issue of the heterogeneity of the Shia minorities and what unites them with one another: Robert Langer and Benjamin Weineck's article on Shia communities in Germany from various countries of origin—such as Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Turkey etc.—and also including converts provides an analytical framework that integrates an open understanding of belonging using the concept of “communities of practice” developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger.³³ The article argues that a focus on the shared practices of heterogeneous groups enables us to grasp both the specific characteristics of different groups and their mutual belonging to the wider Shia field. Taking a similar position that is willing to complicate issues of multilocality and transnationalism, Marianne Bøe's and Ingvild Flakerud's research on Shia Muslims in Norway presents both the local particularities and the transnational links with their countries of origin of emerging Shia communities in Oslo and on the west coast of Norway.

Along the same line of seeking to explore the common within the heterogeneous, Annemeik Schlatmann's article, on very diverse Shia communities in the Netherlands, looks at the particular experience of the use of Muharram rituals by young Dutch Shia as an attempt to bridge ethnic boundaries between diverse Shia Muslim communities—originally from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq and, in smaller numbers, from Turkey and Pakistan—and discusses how Muharram rituals are reinterpreted and given new meanings.

33 Lave, Jean, & Wenger, Étienne *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Some articles in this issue look more carefully at the link between Shia rituals and identities and ongoing political issues. Marios Chatziprokopiou and Panos Hatziprokopiou's article explores Ashura in Piraeus, Greece, in the context of the economic crisis and the rise of the far-right in that country. The authors analyse the meaning of the Karbala narratives and practices in relation both to the current political oppression of Shia minorities and to equivalent acts of faith of the Greek cultural context. The article looks at the interrelations between migrant Shia and the way ideas regarding the "national self" are manifested in symbolic uses of blood: from murderous threats received by Neo-Nazi groups, to the Shiites' proposal of a blood-donation campaign during Ashura, which was rejected. Also linking Shia minorities' experiences to political issues, Iman Lechkar looks at the particular case of Moroccan Belgian Muslims in Brussels who have converted from Sunni to Shia Islam. In her article, she discusses the local effects of the Syrian civil war, the new revival of Shia interests, and the discourse of morality developed by Shia communities in Brussels in response to terrorist violence. Lechkar shows how Moroccan Belgian Shia Muslims have developed their own discourse and narratives about the issue of terrorist violence, which are marked by the promotion of Shia Islam as a form of Islam that is peaceful and tolerant.

Conclusion

Much of the literature on Islam or Muslims in the West focuses on the majority position of Sunnis, giving little attention to the Shia population. This special issue brings together for the first time studies by researchers working on Shia Muslim communities in a number of European countries. It maps the historical development of Shia Muslim communities and their changing demographics, as well as investigating their local- and trans-local communal and organisational connectivities and religious ritual practices within a European context. This special issue contains articles based on empirical research that make possible comparative study of the increasingly visible and growing presence of Shia communities in Europe in various national contexts. By so doing, it contributes towards complexifying academic and public debates on Muslims in Europe and on Islam more generally, and offers a solid basis for future analysis of the diverse presence of Muslims in Europe and their various transnational connections.

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