Marjaʿiyyah from Below: Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religious Authority

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Marjaʿiyyah from Below: Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religious Authority

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ABSTRACT: Studies of the *marjaʿiyyah* often focus on the religious authorities themselves and more rarely on the followers – *muqallid*s – of various *marjaʿ*s. This article presents reflections from an ethnographic study of the meaning and perception of the *marjaʿiyyah* among Shiʿa lay Muslims in Kuwait. The Shiʿa in Kuwait form an ethnically varied minority, and most enjoy a good position within the Sunni regime in comparison to other Gulf countries. They follow a number of different *marjaʿ*s, and to many Shiʿa in Kuwait, the advice of the *marjaʿ* and the question of which *marjaʿ* to follow are quite important. The article focuses on the methodological issue of lay perspectives of the *marjaʿiyyah*, suggesting how ethnographic approaches may enrich the study of religious authority. In the article, I primarily follow ʿAlī, a key informant among others in my fieldwork, and I particularly address what must be the point of departure for the institution of the *marjaʿiyyah*, as seen from the perspective of the *muqallid*: the uncertainty of religious affairs where the *muqallid* renders authority to the *marjaʿ*.

KEYWORDS: *marjaʿiyyah*, *muqallid*, Kuwait, anthropology of Islam, uncertainty

Introduction[1]

ʿAlī is searching for a new *marjaʿ*. Since Shaykh Mirzā Ḥasan died ten years ago he, as a follower of the Shaykhiyyah line in Kuwait, has felt a void. ʿAlī now waits for a new *marjaʿ* to announce himself in the Shaykhiyyah line, but while that has not happened, he travels to many

*ḥussayniyyah*s and religious groups in search of an authority to follow. 'It is confusing not to have a *marjaʿ*; there are many things you need to know,' he explains to me. ʿAlī is worried both for himself and for others, who now have no *marjaʿ* to emulate, and he has proposed himself as a representative (*wakīl*) for different *marjaʿs*, so that people can pay their *khums* through him.[2] Thus he currently travels to many places in Kuwait in order to help others with this issue.

I follow ʿAlī on these uncertain travels, in Kuwait and, metaphorically speaking, in the landscape of the *marjaʿiyyah*, to better understand this search for a religious authority to emulate and the importance of *marjaʿiyyah* to the *muqallid*s, the lay Shiʿa Muslims. This is the topic and perspective of this article. More generally, I will investigate how a perspective on *marjaʿiyyah* from below, from the perspective of the *muqallid*, may enrich the understanding of *marjaʿiyyah*. Some studies, most recently Mottahedeh (2014) and Corboz (2015), and from an anthropological perspective Walbridge (2001), have pointed to the importance of the *muqallid* in constituting the very role of the Shiʿa institution of *marjaʿiyyah*. As Elvire Corboz concludes her recent monograph on clerical families in and of Najaf, 'without a community recognising its leadership, the Shiʿi religious establishment would not have any *raison d'être*' (Corboz 2015: 189). However, all these studies on *marjaʿiyyah*, as well as many others, have tended to focus on the role of the *marjaʿ* rather than the *muqallid*. The focus on the *marjaʿ*s themselves is only natural within scholarly research and the attempt to grasp the notion of the *marjaʿiyyah*. When I take another approach here, it is not to criticize these other studies, but only to suggest that perspectives from below, the perspectives of the *muqallid*s, may enrich the understanding of what the *marjaʿiyyah* means to ordinary Muslims (see also Clarke and Inhorn 2011, and Spellman-Poots 2012, to whom I will return below). This perspective is inspired by recent propositions to enhance the 'anthropology of Islam' (Marranchi 2008; Kreinath 2012) and 'ethnographies of Islam' (Dupret et al. 2012), and I will discuss what such an approach may entail. Not only, I suggest, may anthropological approaches strengthen the understanding of the lay and everyday perspective of the *muqallid* and on *marjaʿiyyah* from below, it will also address the ambiguities and uncertainties of Muslim life within the framework of the *marjaʿiyyah*. To this end, I will add, anthropological approaches may strengthen a focus on the spiritual and cosmological aspects of everyday life and lay Shiʿa thought rather

than a conventional focus on identity and power politics, which has also inspired much research on Shiʿa Muslims, in particular in the Arab world (Nakash 2006; Nasr 2006; Louër 2008, 2013). For ʿAlī, and many other informants, it seemed not so important whether his *marjaʿ*-to-come would be a good community leader and speaker for the rights of the Shiʿa minority group. More important was that he must be a good Muslim with a solid knowledge of Islam and, to some, perhaps even with a personal experience of seeing the Mahdī or other Imams.

Searching for a marjaʿ

I first met ʿAlī at the Ḥussayniyyah Shīrāziyyah in Bneid al-Gar, one of the first suburbs to emerge outside the walls of old Kuwait City and a cultural centre for Shiʿa Muslims with several *ḥussayniyyah*s.[3] It was only a week into my fieldwork, and I was looking for people who could introduce me to the field of Shiʿa in Kuwait. Some men gathered outside the *ḥussayniyyah* most nights, and I had been sitting with them, sipping tea and making small talk to get a feel for what was going on. This Saturday night was the first of my visits there when there was a sermon at the *ḥussayniyyah*, and more people joined us on the benches outside, before the sermon started. ʿAlī was one of the men I had not seen before, and he was immediately remarkable because he was the only one in this crowd to wear a black *bisht* (cloak) over the typical white *dishdashah* (gown). I had been to other *ḥussayniyyah*s at this point but had only seen the *bisht* worn by *shaykhs*, the preachers, but unlike ʿAlī, they would also typically wear an *amāmah* (turban) to signify their religious education and status, either black if the shaykh was a *sayyid*, a descendant of the prophet, or white if not. ʿAlī wore a white *ghitrah* (headscarf) as most other men, and he was not a shaykh. He did, however, clearly have a special role or status among these men, greeting everybody and as soon as he learned about my interest in the Shiʿa in Kuwait, he said in English: 'Maybe I can help.' Not only because of his English skills (which, admittedly, were a great help, and which he owed to his few years as a young student in the UK, training to become a teacher in Kuwait), but primarily because of his deep involvement with the religious milieu of Kuwait, and as it would later appear, because he was searching for religious knowledge and certainty of *marjaʿiyyah* lines as I also was.

Already on the bench outside this *ḥussayniyyah*, ʿAlī confided that he was new to this place, as was I. He used to go to a *ḥussayniyyah* inside old Kuwait City, the Hussayniyyah Jaʿfariyyah, one of the grandest *ḥussayniyyah*s in Kuwait and a well-established centre for the Shaykhiyyah line of Shiʿism.[4] However, as mentioned above and as ʿAlī explained to me here, the spiritual leader of the Shaykhiyyah, Mirzā Ḥasan (al-Ḥāʾirī al-Iḥqāqī), died in 2003 and his son Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh had not yet taken over the leadership.[5] 'We call this a *marjaʿ*', ʿAlī explained, since I had not yet introduced this as the main focus of my research. Anxious about the lack of leadership and the uncertainty of when and whether Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh would be ready to assume the role of the *marjaʿ*, ʿAlī had started to visit other places and *ḥussayniyyah*s to see if he could find an alternative *marjaʿ* from whom to seek advice in religious matters. Like others whom I later met, ʿAlī had in particular found this *ḥussayniyyah* appealing, following the *marjaʿiyyah* of Sayyid Ṣādiq al-Shīrāzi in Qum, a brother of the late Sayyid Muḥammad al-Shīrāzi who had himself founded this *ḥussayniyyah* and the Shīrāziyyah community in Kuwait, when he was residing here after leaving his religious institution in Karbala (due to the threat of Saddam Hussein in Iraq). Muḥammad al-Shīrāzi had later moved on to Qum to join and not least to affect the Islamic revolution in Iran, where he ended up representing a strong alternative to the idea of *wilāyat al-faqīh* as envisioned by Ayatollah Khomeini, suggesting that this institution should not consist of one supreme leader but a council of ulema – the educated shaykhs – a *shūrā al-fuqahāʾ* (council of jurists). In present Kuwait, the *ḥussayniyyah* was led by Sayyid Aḥmad al-Shīrāzi, a son of Sayyid Ṣādiq and his representative in Kuwait. ʿAlī had met several times with Sayyid Aḥmad in person, he liked him, and he had therefore started going to this *ḥussayniyyah* rather than the one in Kuwait City.

Sayyid Aḥmad was also the preacher this Saturday night, and while I was talking to ʿAlī, the Sayyid arrived at the *ḥussayniyyah*. 'We should stand', explained ʿAlī, and the other people in the small front court also rose up to respectfully greet the preacher. Some approached him and kissed him on his forehead. There was clearly a great respect for this man which added to his formal and charismatic appearance in fine robes, *bisht*, and, because a *sayyid*, black *amāmah*. A group of primarily young people followed him as he entered the front court and went on to the inner hall of the *ḥussayniyyah*. ʿAlī invited me to join him inside, and he asked some others if my participation, as a non-Muslim, would

be acceptable. I was happy to participate. The hall of the *ḥussayniyyah* was soon full, as more than 100 people showed up for Sayyid Aḥmad's sermon. His speech was creating deep emotions, preparing the audience for Muharram which was only a few days away. People were crying, and the soft and low voice of Sayyid Aḥmad seemingly intensified emotions. When the Sayyid spoke about Imam Ḥusayn's mother Fatimah, who had beaten herself on her cheeks when learning about Ḥusayn, many in the crowd also themselves beat their own cheeks. Sayyid Aḥmad clearly had great charisma and an ability to stir emotions in his listeners, but as I was soon to learn, he was more than a good *khaṭīb*, or reader of sermons. He was also a knowledgeable and highly respected *mujtahid*, a learned scholar of Shiʿa theology.

After the sermon, I was invited to speak to Sayyid Aḥmad, waiting together with others to have a chance for a personal conversation. I explained to him that I had come to Kuwait for a few months to learn about the Shiʿa. He was not impressed. How did I think that I could learn about Shiʿa Islam in a few months? Shiʿa Islam is based on the Holy Qurʾan and on a thousand books of *hadith*, and it would take years to study all of this. But he encouraged me to study this body of knowledge, because I should study Islam as such rather than study the practices of Muslims.

This is the problem. I want to know about Shiʿa Muslims, their practices and interpretations and what religion means to them, but Sayyid Aḥmad (and all his and other followers) believes that the practices of Muslims are not necessarily in line with true Islam, and that I should instead study true Islam. I tried to explain to the Sayyid that he and others have studied Islam for many years and know Islam very well, but that I would rather understand Islam through the people in Kuwait. The problem, as he and others see it, is that religion is perfect, but people are not. He mentioned Imam ʿAlī as example. He was the perfect leader, the best example of a human being, and we can follow his example, but we cannot be like Imam ʿAlī; there is nobody like him. Therefore I should study Imam ʿAlī to learn from him, not the imperfect Muslims who follow Imam ʿAlī.

We departed on that note, and although we agreed to meet again, we never did. My interest – and the argument I forward in this article – is to study the imperfect Muslims, the *muqallid*s, rather than what Sayyid Aḥmad justly refers to as 'true religion'. What I find interesting is the

recognition that the individual Muslim (lay or learned) is imperfect, and that true Islam is difficult to grasp and to live by. Ordinary Muslims – at least many of the Shiʿa Muslims I have met during fieldwork – are uncertain of their own ability to live a proper Muslim life; they feel that they deviate from the straight path and need help from their *marjaʿ* to have guidance and to better themselves. They acknowledge their own imperfection in their wish to follow the path of Imam ʿAlī as the first of the infallible, perfect Imams. My scholarly, anthropological interest, therefore, is directed towards people like ʿAlī, who out of anxiety has left his former religious community and is now searching for a new one because he needs a *marjaʿ*, a religious authority from whom he can seek advice and guidance in a contemporary life full of questions, deviations, and temptations to not do the right thing. ʿAlī, in this way, is like most people, although he has apparently taken it on himself to actively find a solution to his religious anxiety and is perhaps more openly searching for direction than many other people. ʿAlī also explicitly notes how it is not only for his own sake that he is searching for the right path and a new *marjaʿ* to follow, but also and not least for the young people who must have deeper troubles than himself: ʿAlī has for most of his life learned from the former *marjaʿ* and can still rest on many of his directives, whereas young people must find a leader now, one who is alive and whom they can go to.[6] It is important for the young people, coming of age in modern society, to have somebody to guide them and to turn to with questions of religious and moral affairs.

So ʿAlī travels to various *ḥussayniyyah*s, both in his own search and to talk to his peers about the possibilities of the *marjaʿiyyah* in the void of a Shaykhiyyah religious leader. I travelled with him, every other day going to a new place together, in my own search for an understanding of the meaning and importance of the *marjaʿiyyah*. My ethnographic interest in lay perspectives and the uncertainties of the ordinary Muslims made me go with ʿAlī as a key informant rather than with Sayyid Aḥmad, who could have taught me a lot about what he, as a *mujtahid*, would put forward as true Islam.

For ʿAlī – and many others who these years move at least partly away from the Shaykhiyyah and the Jaʿfariyyah centre in old Kuwait city – it was not of great importance that Sayyid Aḥmad was a representative of the Shīrāziyyah line and not an adherent of the Shaykhiyyah school of Islamic thought. This may come as a surprise, since the Shaykhiyyah are

known to be quietist and primarily consist of the ethnic *ḥasāwī* group, the Shiʿa tracing their origins to the Eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and an old and well-established group in Kuwait (see Matthiesen 2014). The Shīrāziyyah, on the other hand, are known as an activist group, if not currently in direct political opposition in Kuwait. The Shīrāziyyah gained their popularity due to working for social, religious and political awareness in the 1970s and 1980s, in the beginning inspired by the movement for the Islamic revolution in Iran (see above and Louër 2008; Matthiesen 2015). However, today both the Shaykhiyyah and the Shīrāziyyah are critical of the development of the Islamic republic in Iran and against the contemporary political conception of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, whose adherents are seen as the decisive Other within some segments of the Shiʿa Muslim community in Kuwait. And not the least because both the Shaykhiyyah and the Shīrāziyyah are both strong local groups, whereas a *mujtahid* like Sayyid Aḥmad is highly respected and at the same time very approachable. Hence, a number of Shaykhiyyah followers have moved at least temporarily to the centres and *ḥussayniyyah*s of the Shīrāziyyah.

This marks another important point of my ethnographic interest in the Shiʿa of Kuwait. The interest of most of the Shiʿa I met seemed to be more in being a good Muslim and a good human being, and searching for advice in these matters, rather than in political questions of changing Kuwait or the wider world along Shiʿa lines, or in demarcations of various religious and ethnic groups as politically different from one another. My ethnographic approach showed a great affinity between for example Shaykhiyyah and Shīrāziyyah followers, even if they would be thought of as distinctly different in political and theological terms.[7] Ethnography follows the people, like I followed ʿAlī, and the point of departure is the everyday practices and concerns of lay people rather than fixed identities, dogmatic backgrounds, and political ideologies.

Marjaʿ *and* muqallid

Of course I am not alone in taking this approach. Recently, anthropologists such as Kathryn Spellman-Poots and Morgan Clarke have directed attention to the perspective of the *muqallid* and suggested an ethnographic approach to the study of the *marjaʿiyyah*. Spellman-Poots has co-edited

one of the important new books arguing for 'ethnographies of Islam' (to which I will return below), and in her own contribution she focuses on negotiations of the Ashura ritual among British Shiʿa, which also involves negotiations over which *marjaʿ* to follow (Spellman-Poots 2012: 41, 48). She notes how the practices and manifestations of Ashura showed 'how different interpretations of the supreme leaders' *marjiʿi* in Iran and Iraq and the view of young British-born lay leaders are sifted through and used to legitimise new meanings and embodied realities of Ashura rituals in the UK' (Spellman-Poots 2012: 48). Likewise, one of my fellow scholars in the 'negotiating authority' project that I am part of, the scholar in religious studies Ingvild Flaskerud, takes an ethnographic approach in studying the perception of the *marjaʿiyyah* among Norwegian Shiʿa. But these studies may of course be carried out in the Middle East as well. Among the contributions from Morgan Clarke is an article from 2011, written together with medical anthropologist Marcia C. Inhorn, based on a study of fertility treatment in Lebanon and focusing on the way this issue showed a relationship between the Shiʿa *muqallid* and his or her *marjaʿ*. Like I do here, Clarke and Inhorn note how lay perspectives on the *marjaʿiyyah* are rather limited in academic writing (Clarke & Inhorn 2011:410). However, they do reach a number of interesting conclusions that may contextualize what I am discussing here. First of all, only a limited number (20%) of their Shiʿa informants express a relationship to a particular *marjaʿ*, and most are not much concerned with religion.[8] The majority of those who do emulate a *marjaʿ* have a working class background, and the only two *marjaʿ*s mentioned to the anthropologists were the Lebanese *marjaʿ* Sayyid Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh (d. 2010) and the supreme leader of Iran Sayyid ʿAlī Khāmeneʾī. As Clarke and Inhorn remark, both these *marjaʿ*s are controversial figures – the latter just as much a political than a religious figure as head-of-state and the former seen as 'reformist' and very independent from the clerical establishments in Qum and Najaf.[9] Also the scene might have changed after their study was carried out in early 2003, which was the year Sayyid ʿAlī Sistānī began to rise in international recognition from his residence in Najaf, after the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, based on interview information they explain the preference for Faḍlallāh with the fact that he is a local *marjaʿ* with a particular eye for Lebanese concerns. This resonates well with my own findings in Kuwait, exemplified in ʿAlī's story above. Like many others, ʿAlī had followed the local Shaykhiyyah *marjaʿiyyah*, and only with the void of a *marjaʿ* in this line had he searched elsewhere,

preferring another line with a local touch. Kuwaitis regard the Shīrāziyyah as a group of local descent (albeit with transnational affiliations and aspirations), since it was established when Muḥammad al-Shīrāzi was based in Kuwait and still with his highly respected family in charge. Many Kuwaiti Shiʿa, moreover, mentioned that Sayyid ʿAlī Sistānī is very popular in Kuwait, and he is also almost local and at least quite approachable, since his residence in Najaf is only a few hours' drive from Kuwait, and many Kuwaiti Shiʿa travel there routinely, often on pilgrimage (*ziyārah*) to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. Faḍlallāh and Khāmeneʾī, on the other hand, are widely regarded with scepticism among Kuwaiti Shiʿa. Sistānī was often mentioned as a *marjaʿ* who my informants would emulate and whom they knew many followed, but apart from Sistānī those primarily mentioned were a number of more or less local *marjaʿs* – for example the *marjaʿ* of the *baḥārnah* ethnic group, Muḥammad al-Khāqānī, residing in Kuwait; the Iranian *marjaʿ* Vahīd Khurasānī who used to preach in Kuwait and is married to a Kuwaiti; and the *marjaʿ* ʿAlī Musawī who resides in Basra just north of Kuwait and who is the *marjaʿ* of a particular *ḥussayniyyah* in the Bneid al-Gar neighbourhood, and only this in Kuwait. Sistānī was the 'international' *marjaʿ* with the greatest following among my informants. He seems also a safe and uncontroversial choice for many, and is widely regarded as the *aʿlam* of the *marjaʿ*s, the one with the highest knowledge. One man in his fifties explained to me how he had only chosen his *marjaʿ* a few years back, and he did not know anything about the different *marjaʿ*s. 'I asked my family, can I choose him (Sistānī), and they said yes'. No further explanations or studies necessary, Sistānī is the safe choice.

In my study I did not find that *marjaʿiyyah* is only a concern of a minority of Shiʿa and primarily from the working class, as did Morgan and Clarke in Lebanon. For one thing, the working class is something completely different in Lebanon than in the Gulf States, where it almost exclusively consists of migrant labour (Longva 1996; Khalaf, AlShehabi & Hanieh 2015). The Shiʿa, I would say, are primarily middle class, consisting of many well-educated employees in government offices and others who are business men and women of various sorts and levels – some no doubt very rich, well-situated and influential and therefore to be regarded upper class. In general, the Shiʿa in Kuwait enjoy a good social position and feel acknowledged as part of Kuwaiti citizenry – the Kuwaiti case is often described as a 'the only sectarian success story in the Arab world' (Fuller & Francke 1999).[10] To continue with the example

of ʿAlī, he came from an old coppersmith family in Kuwait City, a family of craftsmanship as many of the Arab Shiʿa (both *ḥasāwī* and *baḥārnah*), and he recalled that they had a very big house and that his father had developed his skills and had become the first car mechanic in the court of the Āl Ṣubāḥ ruler of Kuwait. ʿAlī himself was trained as a carpenter and was enrolled in public education and given a stipend to study teaching in Birmingham and Bournemouth in Britain for two years, back in the 1970s. He had worked as a teacher for many years but retired already in 1993, in his early forties, since he got more and more engaged as a personal assistant to the then Shaykhiyyah *marjaʿ*, Mirzā Ḥasan. He was therefore deeply involved with and knowledgeable about the Shaykhiyyah line, and therefore it was a difficult choice for ʿAlī to leave this group, but all the more necessary since he feels that its legacy is not properly taken care of without a residing *marjaʿ* in Kuwait.

ʿAlī, then, is probably more committed to questions of the *marjaʿiyyah*, and also more soul- searching, than most Kuwaitis – for example he stands out as much more conscious of his religious motivations than the other informant referred to above as a self-descriptively ignorant Sistānī follower – but on the other hand, and as I will further discuss below, they are both uncertain of their religious acts.

All ethnographic studies are situated and dependent on the particular individuals and groups that the ethnographer gets in touch with. While this should of course not be wholly coincidental, it is always specific to the focus of the researcher and the situation he or she finds himself or herself in. Clarke and Inhorn based their fieldwork (or this part of it) at a fertility clinic and obtained a seemingly representative sample of young couples from different walks of life in Lebanon – Shiʿa and non-Shiʿa, religious and non-religious, and from different classes. I, on the other hand, chose to base my study in the various *ḥussayniyyah*s in Kuwait, in particular in the Shiʿa centre of Bneid al-Gar, to get a deeper understanding of religious practices and various *marjaʿiyyah* lines and concerns of various such religious centres. Therefore I have primarily met religiously-oriented Kuwaiti Shiʿa with an active approach to religion. It is probable that for other Kuwaitis, *marjaʿiyyah* is a matter of less concern, just as for many of Clarke and Inhorn's Lebanese informants, perhaps in particular among the young people whom ʿAlī has set out to help: as he explained himself they might be confused and not know who to follow, but as others noted they might not really care. However,

from my many meetings and interviews it is clear that *marjaʿiyyah* does matter in Kuwait, that many feel the need of a *marjaʿ* to guide one's moral path and the quest of being a good Muslim and a good human being, and that many choose a contemporary *marjaʿ* or line of *marjaʿiyyah* that they can have some kind of direct access to due to their ongoing need for advice. The fact that this need is ongoing, and perhaps even an increasing concern in modern times where, due to material and media-born globalization, one's morality is often questioned, may testify to the contemporary importance of the *marjaʿiyyah* among the *muqallid*s, and, I suggest, a stronger focus on the *muqallid*'s perception of the *marjaʿiyyah* and various *marjaʿ*s. This perspective is what I would call an anthropological approach to the *marjaʿiyyah*.

What does 'anthropology of Islam' imply?

As noted in the introduction to this article, a number of recent works have taken up the discussion of what an anthropology of Islam may mean (e.g. Kreinath 2012; Dupret et al. 2012; Marranchi 2008). They do so in part by focusing on the history of anthropological work on Islamic societies, and the development of various approaches to this field, but they also put forward particular ideas as to how anthropological perspectives and methodologies may contribute to the overall study of Muslims and Islamic societies. I suggest that this double aspect of 'perspectives and methodologies' should be duly noted, and that there is a difference between the two. An anthropological approach to Islam is based on a particular ethnographic methodology, and this methodology may enable new perspectives. Thus, I suggest, an anthropological approach is more than a particular methodology. Let me explain both 'methodology' and 'perspectives'.

Anthropologists study Muslims rather than Islam. This is a common and main point of the three works referred to above, and of anthropologists working with Islamic societies in general. In this article I have given the example of an important crossroads in my fieldwork, when I went with ʿAlī in his search of a new *marjaʿ* rather than with the *mujtahid* Sayyid Aḥmad in his advice to study the Islamic sources. An anthropology of Islam is not really about Islam, at least 'true Islam' as it legitimately is for Sayyid Aḥmad and for most Muslims, but about the

life and practices of people who call themselves Muslims and have some kind of relationship to what they see as Islam. As Jens Kreinath opens his reader, a collection of seminal articles in the anthropology of Islam, in particular from recent decades:

> The anthropology of Islam [...] aims to examine the ways in which religious, ethical, and theological teachings are instituted and work within the social world. For example, how these teachings are negotiated by Muslims within networks of social relationships and how these negotiations affect the peculiarities of everyday life and vice versa. (Kreinath 2012: 1)

And just like Kreinath, Gabriele Marranchi asserts that 'The anthropology of Islam is not theology. This means going beyond the question of Islam or Islams, and observing the dynamics of Muslim lives expressed through their ideological and rhetorical understanding of their surrounding (social, natural, virtual) environment' (Marranchi 2008: 49-50). Finally, in the introduction to a variety of 'ethnographies of Islam', the four editors, among them Spellman-Poots, state that 'From the point of view of social sciences, "Islam" is neither a set of practices and beliefs precisely bounded by textual "orthodoxy", nor just any social practice carried out by people who happen to be Muslim; discourses and practices are "Islamic" when Muslims refer to them as such' (Dupret et al. 2012:2).

Based on ethnographic methodologies such as participant observation and interviews with different people, often with different understandings of what Islam is, and what Muslim life is and should be, we as scholars get a deeper understanding of lived Islam and how the scriptures are negotiated and lived by, and how 'Islam' as a category may or may not play a role in daily life.

I believe that this approach is an important aspect of, and contribution to, the study of religion and religious life, and in many societies where Islam plays an important role, it is also an important aspect of understanding society. However, as I suggest, and in line with the references above, an anthropological approach is more than its methodology. Based on the methodology we may reach findings which are very different from what we would find in studies of sources and intellectual writings and interpretations. Learning how lay Muslims live their daily lives may tell about their thoughts and concerns, and these

may be different from what we find in books. For example, an important aspect of being Shiʿa in Kuwait, as in the case of ʿAlī that I have put in focus here, is the uncertainty with which the question of *marjaʿiyyah* is entangled. Not only is ʿAlī uncertain of which *marjaʿ* to follow, and feels uncertain in his life without a *marjaʿ*, uncertainty is also at the very core of the notion of the *marjaʿiyyah* itself: the *muqallid* accepts his own imperfection and anxieties, his own lack of knowledge and certainty, and puts these in the hands of a *marjaʿ*. Thus, ʿAlī's uncertainty increases when there is a void of a *marjaʿ* in his life and social group, and his social uncertainty increases since he has felt a need to leave his social group, the community of *ḥasāwī*s who used to follow the Shaykhiyyah line.

One uncertainty among the (former) Shaykhiyyah followers is whether Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh, the expected *marjaʿ*-to-come who is still relatively young (around 50 years), will ever feel ready to announce his *marjaʿiyyah*. This may depend on many things: his studies and credentials among the ulema in Iran, and his personal ambitions which seem at the time more concerned with the world of business. Others suggested that Iran prevented Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh from coming to Kuwait as a *marjaʿ*, since Iran 'only allows their own *marjaʿ*s', as one informant had it. And yet others argued that to be a *marjaʿ*, Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh would need to have a vision (*ru'yā*) of the Mahdī – the twelfth and last Imam, who went into occultation in the third *hijrī* century and who the *marjaʿ*s are, in the theory of this institution, meant to represent. An informant who still sees the Shaykhiyyah as his primary religious affiliation and who often visits their mosque and *ḥussayniyyah* in old Kuwait City explained to me how a *ru'yā* was necessary to become a *marjaʿ*, and to his knowledge Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh had not yet had such a *ru'yā*. This divine acknowledgement of a candidate's readiness to become *marjaʿ* is of course by nature uncertain, not least in the interpretation of the *muqallid*. Has he or has he not had a *ru'yā*? Does someone claim to have *ru'yā* who has not? Will the Mahdī really appear, and how can one be sure that it is the Mahdī?

Such spiritual concerns – which may or may not be in concordance with textbook Islam – can also be documented by ethnographic methods and approaches, and they may address a scholarly focus on spirituality and cosmology that more conventional focuses on *marjaʿiyyah* theology and politics more rarely entail.[11] Anthropological approaches to Islam are about Muslims and not least the life and practices of lay Muslims, and this focus may also address alternative types of knowledge and concerns.

ʿAlī, my key informant in this article, did not agree that Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh would need to have had a *ru'yā* to become a *marjaʿ*, but felt that he did need to sit with him in person to know that he had the capabilities to be his *marjaʿ*. As anthropologists of Islam, we must pay close attention to the varieties of interpretations, and of practices among Muslims; these varieties are what shows the reality and complexity of Muslim life – while some Muslims argue that a *ru'yā* is necessary, others may find this irrelevant to the qualities of a religious leader, and some may find *ru'yā* claims not trustworthy, even bizarre. ʿAlī did, however, believe in *ru'yā*s and Mahdī visions. Actually, he might himself have seen the Mahdī, once when he was on pilgrimage to Mecca. Right there at the Kaʿbah, he saw a man performing *ṣalawāt* – the specific Shiʿa praise to God and Ahl al-Bayt – and according to ʿAlī, *ṣalawāt* is not usually done at the Kaʿbah, at least not unpunished by Saudi authorities. But the guard near the scene, who definitely registered the *ṣalawāt*, did not take any action, and therefore, ʿAlī believes, it must have been the Mahdī.

Was it the Mahdī or not? We'll never know, and this basic uncertainty is a significant aspect of any belief system (for, as has been noted, 'belief without doubt is the same as "knowledge"' (Pelkmans 2013: 4)), and specifically so in Shiʿa Islam. Scholars of Shiʿa Islam may be able to explain away such uncertainties, with reference to proper sources, but to many lay Muslims, uncertainty is part and parcel of their daily life and religious imagination. The *marjaʿiyyah*, I suggest, is a particular institution of this uncertainty, since it is rooted in the uncertainty of the lay Muslim, and this uncertainty is accentuated as the question of who is the right *marjaʿ* and what is the right path is an open question.[12] This is the case for many Kuwaiti Shiʿa today, as there are several potential *marjaʿ*s to choose from, and it is not least the case for those who feel a void in the *marjaʿiyyah*, as for ʿAlī, who I have followed here in his search for a new *marjaʿ* after the death of his former Shaykhiyyah leader. Anthropological approaches to the study of Islam, in this case Shiʿa Islam and the *marjaʿiyyah*, may enable us to grasp this uncertainty both by way of its grounded fieldwork methodology and by way of the perspectives which come out this. There are many possible perspectives which may come out of an anthropological approach; in this article I have focused on the uncertainty of the *muqallid*, an uncertainty which must therefore be understood as a central aspect of the *marjaʿiyyah*, and perhaps of both Muslim and human life.

Notes

[1] The present study is based on a postdoctoral project as a part of a Nordic research network focusing on 'Negotiating Authority in Contemporary Shiite Thought and Practice', led by Professor David Thurfjell, Södertörn Högskola, Stockholm, and funded by the Swedish Research Council. For this project, Thomas Fibiger carried out ethnographic fieldwork among Shiʿa Muslims in Kuwait in 2013 and 2014. Previously, Fibiger carried out extensive fieldwork in Bahrain, focusing on issues of historicity in religious and political imagination among contemporary Bahrainis. This paper was presented at the Shiʿi Studies: Past and Present conference at The Islamic College, May 2015.

[2] Thus he is, or wants to be, *wakil akhaṣṣ,* an authorized collector of *khums* that the *marjaʿ* distributes. Another kind of representative is the *wakil ʿāmm* (representative in everything) who is a *mujtahid* (high ranking religious shaykh) who can give advice on behalf of the *marjaʿ*. Due to confidentiality I will not disclose which *marjaʿ*s ʿAlī has attempted to represent.

[3] Most Kuwaiti Shiʿa have now moved out of this neighborhood, invited by government housing schemes aiming to spread the population of Kuwait, and Bneid al-Gar is today primarily inhabited by migrant labour. The *ḥussayniyyah*s of the area are however still frequented by the Kuwaiti Shiʿa, and the area has developed into something like a 'heritage center' for the Shiʿa, as one informant termed it.

[4] It was the mosque adjacent to this *ḥussayniyyah*, the Imam Ṣādiq Mosque, that was the target of a suicide bomber in June 2015, killing 27 people and wounding several hundreds, during Friday prayer.

[5] Informants mentioned that Mirzā ʿAbd al-Rasul, a brother of Mirzā Ḥasan, was a *marjaʿ* for a short period after Mirzā Ḥasan before he died too. The *marjaʿiyyah* of Mirzā ʿAbd al-Rasūl is not mentioned by Toby Matthiesen in his recent article on the history and profile of the Shaykhiyyah line (Matthiesen 2014). Like my informants, Matthiesen mentions that there are other contenders to the Shaykiyyah *marjaʿiyyah* after Mirzā Ḥasan, acknowledging that this is a 'source of tension' (Matthiesen 2014: 399). No one I met regarded these as proper alternatives to their *marjaʿ*.

[6] According to most *marjaʿiyyah* schools, as well as informants and literature (e.g. Walbridge 2001: 231), one should choose a *marjaʿ* either by studying their various *risalah*s (collections of commentaries) and/or by consulting two trustworthy men (e.g. shaykhs) to point out a suitable *marjaʿ*. One should choose a *marjaʿ* who is alive, but can stay with this *marjaʿ* also after his death. The *marjaʿ* is, or has always been, male, although some scholars hold that it is possible for a female to become *marjaʿ* (on female religious authority, see Künkler & Fazaeli 2011).

[7] Matthiesen (2014: 398) also notes the close relationship between the Shīrāziyyah and Shaykhiyyah in Kuwait, suggesting that one reason is their common marginality in relation to dominant Shiʿa international trends represented by people such as Sistānī or Khāmeneʾī.

[8] Those not concerned with religion often describe themselves as 'modern' and 'open-minded', but Clarke and Inhorn note that those following the Lebanese *marjaʿ* Sayyid Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh describe themselves with exactly the same terms (see also Deeb 2006).

[9] For discussions of the reception of Sayyid ʿAlī Khāmeneʾī as *marjaʿ*, see eg. Walbridge (2001) and Mavani (2013).

[10] I have reservations with this simplification but will leave that for another discussion (see also Matthiesen 2013).

[11] The concept of the *ru'yā* is not mentioned in academic introductions to the *marjaʿiyyah* such as Mottahedeh (2014), Corboz (2015), or Walbridge (2001). A potential *marjaʿ*'s *ru'yā* visions may be peculiar to the Shaykhiyyah school, since its founder Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsaʾi claimed to base his knowledge on visions of the Imams and the Prophet (Matthiesen 2014: 387). For more on the *ru'yā* as an ethnographic Islamic phenomenon, see Mittermaier (2012).

[12] As well as in what domains the *marjaʿ* holds authority, what kind of questions the *marjaʿ* may answer, and how moral authority is distributed between the *muqallid* and the *marjaʿ*. I did not find room for these important questions in this article.

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