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Towards a United Shia Youth Community

A “Dutch” Muharram Gathering

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Abstract

Twelver Shia Muslims in the Netherlands, a minority within the Muslim minority, are living as an ethnically fragmented community that is organised along ethnic lines.¹ In recent years, Shia young adults started to realise that maintaining the Shia tradition in the Netherlands requires uniting on what binds them—Shia belief and the Dutch language. In 2011, on the occasion of Muharram, youth organisations organised the first joint Dutch-language gathering for all Shia youth in the Netherlands. In order to fulfill the widely felt need of youth for knowledge about Shia Islam and its practice in the Dutch context, the structure of this gathering was different from traditional Muharram gatherings. In the absence of a Dutch-speaking religiously trained authority familiar with the everyday Dutch life of Muslim youth, a youth leader fulfilled the role of lecturer. This article focuses on this Muharram gathering.

Keywords

Twelver Shiism – Muharram – Netherlands – Shia youth – youth leadership – community building

Introduction

Shia Muslims are a minority within the Muslim minority in the Netherlands, where the vast majority are Sunni Muslims. Only about ten to fifteen percent of

1 In this article the terms “Shia Islam” and “Shia Muslims” refer to Twelver Shiism and Twelver Shia Muslims.

the estimated 825,000 Muslims in the Netherlands are Shia. The Twelver Shia Muslim population in the Netherlands, the largest community within the Shia branch, mostly consists of people originating from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, who arrived in the 1980s and especially the 1990s as political refugees and asylum seekers, among them many children. Some smaller Shia populations from Pakistan and Turkey settled in the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s as guest workers.² The children of the families who migrated to the Netherlands at that time are now young adults, building their future in the Netherlands.

Shias in the Netherlands are a fragmented community. They are mainly organised along ethnic lines, in Shia associations consisting of people of the same ethnic background and speaking the same language. Of the approximately 500 mosques in the Netherlands, only six are Shia mosques. Shia places of gathering are mostly *husayniyyas*, which are spaces that are hired by Shia associations for their religious gatherings and commemorations. For those occasions, preachers and scholars are often invited from Iran or Iraq, the countries where the Shia authorities and their seminaries are located.

Unlike Sunni Islam, the organisation of religious authority in Shia Islam has a highly hierarchical structure. At the top, there are grand-ayatollahs, in Arabic called *maraji' al-taqlid* (sing. *marja' al-taqlid*, meaning "source of emulation"), who operate from their seminaries in the main centres of Shia learning in Iran and Iraq. Based in the Middle East, these religious authorities provide religious guidance in the form of religious regulation to Shias living in the West. Their websites are accessible in various languages, such as Arabic, Farsi, English and French. However, the grand-ayatollahs are not able to rearticulate the Shia tradition in Dutch or to take specific local circumstances into account.

In the Netherlands, there are no religiously trained figures with a reputation for being engaged with issues of Muslims in Western societies. Shia youngsters notice that they cannot expect religious guidance from the sheikhs in the Netherlands, as the following words of Kamran (23, Afghanistan, university student) testify:

We will lose our identity. Our own organisations and mosques do not develop at all. Not at all. To date the Dutch language is not used, in none

² The estimated number of Twelver Shia Muslims in the Netherlands is between 72,000 and 79,000. Based on origin, approximately 40% are Iranian, 42% Iraqi, 7% Afghan, 8% Turkish and 3% Pakistani. For more detailed information on the numbers and assumptions behind these estimations, see Schlatmann, A., "Shi'i Muslim youth in the Netherlands: Negotiating Shi'i fatwas and rituals in the Dutch context" (PhD dissertation, Utrecht University, 2016).

of the Shia mosques! [...] So far there is no real sheikh in the Netherlands who speaks Dutch, or even English. Young people are longing for Shia lectures, based on Shia sources, in the Dutch language. But this does not exist.

For their religious education and guidance, Shia youth depend on their parents, who are often unable to guide them either. Many of my interlocutors referred to their parents as people who live “with one, and even maybe two feet” in their country of origin. According to Waiel al-Khateeb, co-founder of AhlAlbaytYouth, the oldest and largest Shia youth association in the Netherlands, a large part of the older generation is mainly focused on their own concerns and problems with settling in a new country. They want to maintain links with their homeland and cling to their familiar lifestyle and way of practising their religion. Al-Khateeb said,

The generation now in adolescence is a forgotten generation in the Shia communities. Their faith is never addressed, they are never asked what their needs are. [...] The older generation mainly tried to perform and preserve all rituals and habits exactly like they knew them from their home country. These adults are looking back. Young people want to look ahead; they as a matter of course have new questions related to modern times and to Western society. Their parents cannot answer these questions. They cannot even empathise.

These statements correspond to the observations of Mandaville that young Muslims are dissatisfied about the inability of the older generation to engage with Western society and to deal with the questions and issues regarding Islamic practice in this particular environment. Mandaville points to the importance of language and the necessity of developing the Islamic tradition in Western languages. He questions whether Islamic centres of learning are equipped for that task.³

Shia youth in the Netherlands are concerned that the Shia tradition in the Netherlands will be marginalised as a result of, first, the Dutch public debate, which is aiming for assimilation of Muslims, and second, the fragmentation of the Shia community as a result of being small and divided. Furthermore, young Shias lack knowledge about the Shia faith and attention from the older

3 Mandaville, P., *Transnational Muslim Politics; Reimagining the Umma* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 122-4.

generation to help them deal with the problems they experience in everyday Dutch life with regard to Muslim practice and Shia identity. They have started to realise that, in order to survive as a minority tradition and building a vibrant Shia community, they need to bridge ethnic boundaries, maintain a collective Shia identity, and develop Shia knowledge for the Dutch context and in the Dutch language.

This article follows Talal Asad's idea of Islam as a living and constantly changing discursive tradition, which he described as "a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present".⁴ One of the key components is the question of knowledge production and religious leadership in a diasporic Shia youth community. Many studies indicate an ongoing fragmentation of religious authority structures⁵ and an increasing trend to gain Islamic knowledge from a variety of sources, among them the Internet and peer-learning in individual settings and associations.⁶ Van Bruinessen, however, contradicts the view that religious authority is becoming fragmented. He concludes that peer-learning has become important for the acquisition of religious knowledge, but that this has not replaced established religious authorities or affected their status.⁷ In this article, I argue that, in the case of Shia Islam and Shia migrant communities, Shia religious authorities even support the development of local Islamic knowledge by youth leaders. These efforts of youth associations strengthen their position.

This article is based on developments within the Shia youth community that occurred during my PhD research, which is about the influence of Shia religious regulation for Muslims in the West on the lives and religious practices of young Shias.⁸ For this research I had in-depth interviews with 35 Shia young adults of different ethno-national origins, 14 men and 21 women aged between 17 and 32. The interviews were conducted in Dutch between July 2009

4 Asad, T., *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* [Occasional Papers] (Georgetown: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University: 1986), pp. 14-15.

5 Peter, F., "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam", in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 17, no. 1, (2006), 105-118.

6 Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics*; van Bruinessen, M.M., "Producing Islamic knowledge in Western Europe: Discipline, authority, and personal quest", in *Producing Islamic Knowledge: Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe*, M. van Bruinessen and S. Allievi (eds) (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-27, esp. 22-3.

7 Van Bruinessen, "Producing Islamic knowledge", p. 23.

8 Schlatmann, "Shi'i Muslim youth in the Netherlands".

and January 2012.⁹ I also attended gatherings of Shia youth associations, joined Muharram commemorations of the Afghan, Iranian and Iraqi communities in 2009 and 2010, and followed debates of Shia youth communities on the Internet and social media.

Muharram: The Shia Ritual Par Excellence

In the absence of Shia religious authorities who are familiar with Dutch society, leading figures in the various ethnic Shia youth associations who recognised the needs of their peers put their heads together in 2011 and took the initiative for a Dutch-language gathering for all Shia youngsters. Their aim was to address the problems Shia youth are facing as Muslims in Dutch society.

The organisers deliberately planned this joint gathering during Muharram. Even Shias who are not active religious practitioners during the year identify as Shia Muslims during Muharram and take part in Muharram gatherings. Devotion to *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet and his progeny, the Imams) is a central tenet in Shia Islam. The event commemorated is the Battle of Karbala, which ended with the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Imam Husayn. This battle took place in the year 680 (61 AH) near Karbala, a city in today's Iraq. During the first ten days of Muharram, the suffering of Imam Husayn and his party at the camp of Karbala is memorialised and relived. The climax of the commemorations is on the tenth day, 'Ashura, the very day that Imam Husayn was killed by Umayyad troops led by Yazid. "Karbala" marks the final division between Sunni and Shia Islam, and Shia Muslims consider it the founding narrative of Shia Islam.

The traditional Muharram ritual is a collective lamentation for the death of Husayn in the form of an elegy that narrates the events of Karbala. In this highly emotional ritual, religious traditions are combined with cultural ritual elements that vary between ethnicities, such as a passion play and self-flagellation.¹⁰ Muharram gatherings are a statement of piety as well as a means to reinforce Shia belief and identity in a communal setting.¹¹ For the older

9 The names of interviewees given in this article are pseudonyms.

10 For Muharram rituals in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon see Aghaie (2004), Deeb (2005, 2006), Halm (1997) and Nakash (2006).

11 Schubel, V., "The Muharram majlis: The role of a ritual in the preservation of Shi'a identity", in *Muslim Families in North America*, E.H. Waugh, S. McIrvine Abu-Laban and R. Qureshi (eds) (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1991); Walbridge, L.S., *Without*

generation of Shia migrants, commemorating the Karbala tragedy offers a possibility to identify with personal loss, to express sorrow, and to experience communality. Those who have lost their family and their social network, and in a way their future, see Muharram as a ritual in which one's own identity is confirmed and associated with the religious narratives and the history of Shia Islam.¹²

There is, however, a significant generation gap in the perception of Muharram between the older and the younger generation. Whereas for the older generation lament about the martyrdom of Imam Husayn is the purpose of Muharram commemorations and relates to their own sufferings, youngsters do not experience personal loss or grief. In the eyes of some youths, the social meaning of the Muharram commemorations overshadows the religious and spiritual character of the gathering,¹³ as demonstrated in the following words of Homayra (22, Iraq, university student),

The meaning of 'Ashura? Well, you go to the *husayniyya*, something is read aloud in Arabic, then you sit like this [bends her head and puts her hand before her eyes], you eat something, you are gossiping, and then you go home.

Youth want to give meaning to Imam Husayn's life in ways that connect to their Dutch daily reality. According to my interlocutors, the latter element is completely missing in traditional Muharram rituals. The Afghan dentist Rafi (30) said,

Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 91-7.

- 12 Holm Pedersen, M., "The commemoration of Muharram: Ritual practice and notions of belonging among Iraqi Shi'a Muslims in Copenhagen", International Colloquium 'Shiites in Europe', 25-26 September 2008, PRISME/SDRE, Université Robert Schuman, Strasbourg; al-Khalifa Sharif, T.H., "Sacred narratives linking Iraqi women across time and space", in *Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip Hop*, M. Cooke and B.B. Lawrence (eds) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), pp. 132-54, esp. 132-3; Shanneik, Y., "Remembering Karbala in the diaspora: Religious rituals among Iraqi Shii women in Ireland", *Religion*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2015), 89-102.
- 13 See Flaskerud, I., "Women transferring Shia rituals in Western migrancy", in *Women's Rituals and Ceremonies in Shiite Iran and Muslim Communities*, P. Khosronejad (ed.) (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2014), pp. 115-34.

You know, what the *mullahs* say, what the clergy say during Muharram, I already know it all. From the moment they start talking I already know where they are going to end up. It is not for that reason that I attend the gatherings. It is for the sake of our Shia belief. On the tenth of Muharram, you should just go. It is good to go there. It is not good to stay at home. We go there to keep our tradition alive.

This statement illustrates that Shia Muslims feel committed to attending religious gatherings during the first ten days of Muharram to keep their minority tradition in the Netherlands alive. In what follows, I will give a detailed description of the first joint gathering.

A Muharram Gathering for Youth by Youth

In the autumn of 2011, announcements of a “unique Muharram gathering”, to be held on 3 December, began to appear in social media. On the flyer that circulated on Facebook, all Muslims were invited for a Muharram gathering in Dutch, organised by six Shia youth associations: AhlalbaitYouth, Ahlalbait4Everyone, and the youth branches of Sadeqiya, Al-Iman, Hussaini Mission, and Alcauther (two Afghan, a Pakistani and an Iraqi foundation, respectively).¹⁴ This gathering was indeed unique. Never before had a Muharram commemoration been held in Dutch and never before had there been such cooperation between ethnic-Shia youth associations.

Creating unity started with the formation of an ethnically mixed organising committee. One of the members of this committee, the Afghan university student Pardis (22), told me that cooperation went really well right from the start: “It was great to work with so many young people who get along well and have a common goal.” In the ethnic-Shia associations where the elderly are the ones who decide, there is a lot of mutual competition and discord, she explained: “There is always criticism, fuss, talk about who has the best programme.” In

14 See the websites www.ahlalbaitjongeren.nl, www.ahlalbait4iedereen.nl, and Facebook groups <https://www.facebook.com/ahlalbaitjongeren/?fref=ts>, <https://www.facebook.com/Ahlalbait4iedereenIslam-157329264360937/?fref=ts>, <https://www.facebook.com/culturele.stichting.sadeqiya/?fref=ts>, <https://www.facebook.com/imanjongeren/?fref=ts>, <https://www.facebook.com/Hussaini-Mission-Nederland-197962316892668/?fref=ts> and <https://www.facebook.com/stichting.alcautherjongeren.5/?fref=ts> (accessed 2 March 2016).

those associations, young people do not experience that the time and energy they devote to communal gatherings is rewarding, she said, while organising this joint gathering together with members of different youth associations was immensely rewarding. "We all thought: 'This is important, for all of us!'"

Sharing Religious Knowledge instead of Communal Mourning

When designing the programme for the gathering, instead of the traditional Muharram rituals the organisers took the needs of youths as a starting point. Their aim was to compose an informative programme by focusing on the meaning of Muharram in today's world.

The joint Muharram gathering was different from traditional Muharram rituals in many respects. First, as already mentioned, the language was Dutch and it was open to Shia youth of all ethnicities. Second, the programme was strictly scheduled and had a predetermined start and end time, from 2 until 5 p.m.. The organisers kept in mind that the concentration and attention span of attendees would be limited, and also that young people have busy schedules, with study, sports and weekend jobs. The youth gathering was therefore announced two months in advance, via websites and on Facebook, whereas commemorations organised by the older generation are mostly communicated at short notice.

Third, the programme for the gathering was composed with the specific aim of transferring religious knowledge and understanding in relation to the Dutch context. The lecture was chosen as the opportunity to link the morals and values inherent in the Muharram narrative with daily life in the Netherlands. Traditionally, the sermon consists of narrating a part of the events of the suffering and battle of Imam Husayn and his party during the first ten days of Muharram in a lamentation style, in order to arouse the emotions of the audience. However, those sermons, according to the organisers, lack any explanation about the meaning of the narrative in everyday Dutch life. In this youth gathering, the knowledge aspect was much more important than the emotional aspect.

It was decided that a lay preacher would deliver the lecture. This lay preacher was Waiel al-Khateeb, a leading person in the Shia youth community who was also one of the initiators and a member of the organising committee. Al-Khateeb (29, Iraq) studied medicine in the Netherlands and is working as a medical specialist in a Dutch university hospital. He is also leader of Ahl al-Bayt Youth association. Al-Khateeb's personal history reflects that of many Shia young adults. His parents are both highly educated, but their knowledge about Shia belief is limited. Thanks to his own research, his family network in Baghdad, and his command of Arabic and English, al-Khateeb has gained

a lot of religious knowledge. However, he does not have any training in a Shia institute of religious education.

Space and Audience

When I entered the al-Iman *husayniyya* in Rotterdam on 3 December 2011, I was among the first attendees. One of the “leading ladies” in the Shia Afghan youth community welcomed me. She told me that all the organisers were thrilled by the idea of this gathering. “We are realising today what our parents have never been able to achieve! We are united by the Dutch language now,” she said.

The *husayniyya* was decorated as it always is, with distinctly Shia black and green banners with Arabic calligraphy in gold and green on the wall, along with framed pictures of shrines of the Imams. The space has a carpeted floor without chairs, and a pillar in the middle that serves as the separation point between the space for men and women. There are two entrances, one in the front and one in the rear, which makes it possible for men and women to enter and leave the room without passing through each other’s area. On the rear wall is a life size image of a *mihrab* (a niche in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca), and on the opposite wall a raised dark-coloured seat is placed, with a few steps leading up to it, looking like a very small *minbar* (Islamic pulpit). In front of it is a microphone.

In the next twenty minutes the room gradually filled with young men and women. For the first time, I saw crowds of young Shias of different ethnic backgrounds gathering together. Men dressed in dark clothes, modern and casual, with short hairstyles and many trimmed beards. Among the women, Iraqi or Afghan backgrounds were visible by their style of dress. All of the women wore *hijab*, mostly black for the occasion of Muharram. Iraqi women were wearing traditional long *abayas* and showed no traces of make-up, whereas Afghan women were dressed very fashionably, some with tailored jackets and fashionable trousers. Their faces and eyes showed heavy use of eye make-up.

It struck me that most of the young women of Afghan origin had their headscarves draped with much more care than I had seen earlier in Afghan gatherings. When I mentioned this later to one of my Afghan interlocutors she said,

Indeed, you are right. Usually we just throw something over our head. But you know, women with an Iraqi background always wear very neat *hijab*, so instinctively you keep this in mind. We [Afghan women] already attract attention because of our much tighter clothes and our use of make-up.

The *husayniyya* was already prepared for prayer in the direction of the wall with the image of the *mihrab*. With ribbons and *turbahs*, the small clay tablets that Shias use for prayer, rows had been created facing the *mihrab*. Men were seated in the front part, women in the rear, but there was no visible separation between the sections for men and women, apart from the pillar serving as a symbolic dividing line.

The Lay Preacher: Religious Understanding, Shared Experience

As announced in the programme, the gathering started promptly at 2 p.m., after the congregational prayer. After a recitation of *ziyarat al-warith* by one of the attendees, “brother Waiel” climbed up to the pulpit for his lecture and asked the audience for a loud *salawat*, which is an Arabic phrase meant to greet *ahl al-bayt*.¹⁵ Al-Khateeb took his place on the seat, dressed in what he called his “Muharram outfit”—a black *dishdasha* (ankle-length garment with long sleeves) and a black prayer cap. After a first *salawat* he asked for a second *salawat* “for the love of *ahl al-bayt*” and a third “for the appearance of our Imam”. Imam Husayn was praised in Arabic and Dutch alternately. After another *salawat* for Imam Husayn, al-Khateeb, in his position as preacher, welcomed everyone, with a special welcoming gesture to the turbaned visitor, Sheikh al-Jizani, a representative of Ayatollah al-Hakim, a member of the highest Shia authority in Najaf, Iraq. The sheikh had arrived just before the lecture and was seated in the front row.

Why was this religious authority a member of the audience and why did he not go up onto the pulpit? When I asked al-Khateeb afterwards, he told me that this scholar had indeed offered to give the sermon. However, the organisers considered a traditional sermon in Arabic not appropriate for this special occasion and the Dutch character of the gathering. Instead, they agreed with the sheikh that he would be available after the meeting for those who had individual questions about the observance of Islamic rulings.

What more did al-Khateeb have to offer to this meeting than the religious scholar, who was an expert in Shia law and jurisprudence? One essential point was his command of the Dutch language. Another key factor was his understanding of what it means to live as a young Muslim in Dutch society. This is a matter of personal experience: how it feels to be a member of a minority,

15 A *ziyarat* is a form of supplication. *Ziyarat al-warith* is recited on the day of Ashura to show feelings of grief and loyalty to *ahl al-bayt*, who, in Shia Islam, consist of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima Zahra, his nephew and son-in-law Imam ‘Ali, the two sons of ‘Ali, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn, and the nine descendants of Imam Husayn.

how Islamophobia affects daily life, how a Shia young person may feel lost because of his or her lack of religious knowledge and parental understanding, since parents cannot empathise with the problems their children experience in Dutch society. In his lecture, al-Khateeb showed that he knew and understood the inner world, ideas, emotions, doubts and imagination of Shia youngsters, so he was able to hold their attention from the first to the last minute of his lecture.

Al-Khateeb was convincing in his role as a preacher for this audience because, apart from knowledge and experience of Dutch society, he also demonstrated thorough religious knowledge. He quoted verses from the Qur'an and the traditions in Arabic, gave the Dutch translation, and then explained the meaning and significance of each verse or statement. In that way, he made Islamic sources accessible, understandable and interesting for the young audience. Furthermore, by mentioning specific similarities between the Bible and the Qur'an, he demonstrated that his knowledge was not limited to Islamic sources, but that he had also studied Christianity, the main religion in the Netherlands.

The Lecture

In his lecture, al-Khateeb discussed the position of Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands. He addressed questions that confront every Muslim young person in the Netherlands, such as matters regarding the inequality between men and women in Islam. In simple and understandable language, al-Khateeb responded to these questions from an Islamic perspective and explained that justice was inherent in the Islamic law system. Thus, he gave young people confidence about their own beliefs and about their ability to rebut the statements of their non-Muslim peers.

When talking about the current negative attitude to Islam in the Netherlands, al-Khateeb argued that every member of a faith community is a representative of that religion, and that one can only fulfill the role of "ambassador of Islam" by participating in Dutch society and by demonstrating correct religious practice and conduct. This also involves resisting the temptations in Dutch society that distract from the religious duties and incite committing sins. Emulating *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet and the Imams, and living according to the regulation of the *marja' al-taqlid* provides strength, he said.

Then followed the lamentation part of the gathering. As an expression of mourning for Imam Husayn, al-Khateeb alternated between speech and chanting to narrate the events of the battle. The audience started sobbing softly, as it is believed that the shedding of tears for Husayn will be rewarded and give easier entrance to a good afterlife. However, compared with the traditional

Muharram gatherings, this sobbing was brief and restrained, and no boxes of Kleenex tissues were passed around, which is something I witnessed in traditional Iraqi, Afghan and Iranian gatherings.

We see that al-Khateeb conveyed the command of the highest Shia authorities, which involves on the one hand correct individual religious practice, and on the other contributing to presenting a positive image of Islam. He countered the Dutch public debate on Islam and the integration of Muslims. Finally, by linking these aspects to the virtues of the family of the Prophet, and especially to the fortitude and courage of Imam Husayn, he reinforced the sense of belonging to the Shia community.

Explanation and Discussion on Religious Regulation

After the lecture, one of the members of Ahl al-bayt Youth gave an elementary explanation of Islamic jurisprudence, clarifying the categories of actions from *halal* to *haram*. The examples he gave of how to apply these categories in daily life focused on prayer. In my opinion, the knowledge he presented was very basic but I afterwards learned from Pardis, one of the organisers, that many attendees found it difficult. "Make no mistake," she said. "Many young people have absolutely no idea about these regulations."

The theme of the discussion that followed was how to find a balance between obligations imposed by Dutch society and religious obligations. Although the moderators tried steering the discussion in the direction of giving priority to observing religious practices, those who contributed to the debate emphasised that, as an individual Muslim, one must conform to the Dutch system. One of the moderators concluded that although acting in accordance with the letter of Islamic regulation is preferable, acting according to its spirit is sometimes the best option.

This interactive part of the programme showed that, in many cases, the transmission of Islamic knowledge through parents does not extend beyond basic information, and the Internet does not provide this knowledge in Dutch, so the gathering organised by youth associations fulfils a great need for Islamic education in Dutch.

The Shaykh: Individual Advice about the Correct Observance of Religious Rulings

After the debate Sheikh al-Jizani, who had been in the audience during the gathering, said he was proud of "the beautiful commemoration of Imam Husayn" and the large attendance. He praised the initiative of the young Dutch Shias to organise this new form of Muharram gathering. The sheikh spoke in Arabic, which was translated on the spot by al-Khateeb.

Afterwards Sheikh al-Jizani was available for question-and-answer sessions, one with men and one with women, translated by a youngster who spoke Arabic. Groups of attendees gathered around him. "Such opportunities are always made use of, especially when we have an authority from Najaf," al-Khateeb said when I met him later. "Questioning a religious scholar face-to-face is much easier than through the Internet, because one can explain one's question more fully if necessary." He himself could only stress the importance of Islamic regulations and compliance with them, but the practice of interpreting the texts was a matter for jurists, he explained.

Imagining a Shared Future

The ceremony ended with a communal meal. Men and women were sitting separately along rows of plastic sheeting unrolled on the ground. The women I spoke with during this meal were elated. They told me that they had learned a lot about their religion at this gathering. One of them said, "I gained knowledge in my own language, because in Dutch I can understand things much better." Converts confided to me that they felt for the first time a sense of belonging to the Shia community. Many of those I spoke to during meal said: "This should be repeated next year!"

The overwhelming interest in and positive response to the Muharram gathering in 2011 underlined the great need for religious understanding and knowledge to be transmitted in Dutch and for connections to be established throughout the wider Shia youth community in the Netherlands. Shia youth organisations have responded to these needs by organising joint meetings ever since. The Muharram meeting in Dutch for Shia youth of all ethnicities became an annual event from 2011. In 2015, the fifth such occasion, it was announced as "the annual joint Muharram gathering" and had the theme, "Preserving our faith". The number of participating youth organisations had risen to nine.¹⁶ In these meetings the permanence of the message of Muharram and its applicability in the modern era and in Dutch society are emphasized. Themes such as freedom, justice, perseverance and unity are explained and discussed in light of the position of Muslims in the Netherlands and the current Dutch Muslim debate.

16 Five of those took part from the outset: AhlalbaitYouth, Ahlalbait4Everyone, Iman Youth, Sadeqiya Youth, and Al-Cauther Youth. Four foundations joined in later years: Al-Mahdi Foundation, AhlulbaytNoord, Ale Rasul, and an Iraqi student foundation.

The Muharram meeting of 2011 revealed the enormous need for an authoritative person who is able to explain the Shia faith in the Dutch context. Although the lay preacher who played a key role at that gathering had no professional religious education, his knowledge and understanding of Shia belief and the Arabic language, combined with his charismatic personality, ensured that Shia youngsters accepted him as an authority. His first language is Dutch, and he shared with his audience the experience of growing up and being part of Dutch society as a Muslim young man. From being a leading figure in the Iraqi Shia youth community, he became known after Muharram 2011 as an authority among Shia youngsters of all ethnicities. Even though he is not and does not present himself as a sheikh, this man offers what young Shia Muslims are longing for: Shia lectures, based on Shia sources, in Dutch. Wael al-Khateeb was respected among members of the Iraqi association AhlAlbaitYouth before Muharram 2011, but after that meeting his fame as a young preacher grew among all Shia young people in the Netherlands and other youth associations began to invite him as speaker. One of the attendees at a meeting of AhlAlbait4Everyone said, "Brother al-Khateeb is a speaker you want to keep listening to." In the past few years, al-Khateeb has increasingly taken up a position as an authority within the Shia youth community.

It is worth noting that the united Muharram gathering also revealed the internal power dynamics within the Shia youth community, that is, between youngsters of different ethnicities. An earlier attempt at establishing a multi-ethnic association for young people of Iraqi and Afghan background failed in 2007 because of different views about veiling. The Iraqi-Shia community attaches great value to it and follows the rules of the Shia religious authorities strictly, so the "Iraqis", who constituted the majority, insisted that women must wear the headscarf during gatherings. "Afghans", on the other hand, who tend to have a more flexible approach to veiling, wanted women to wear the headscarf only on a voluntary basis. This dispute led to a split and, as a result, AhlAlbaitYouth became a predominantly Iraqi association and Afghan youngsters founded Sadeqiya Youth. The fact that all the women of Afghan background in the united gathering wore a perfectly draped headscarf indicates that for this special occasion they eventually adopted the strict Iraqi veiling rules. Knowing that the Shia authorities prescribe veiling, they wanted to be seen as equally good Shia Muslim practitioners by their Iraqi co-religionists. And, apart from that, they wanted to contribute to the aim of being a united community and to avoid the re-emergence of tensions.

In the perception of Shia youngsters, the Muharram gathering of 2011 turned out to be the beginning of a "Dutch" Shia youth community. The joint Muharram gathering has become an annual event and Shia youths and youth associations

have organised joint activities ever since, throughout the Netherlands. Ethnic boundaries clearly no longer hamper contact between them. Rather, the sense of unity gives young Shias self-confidence and the prospect of a shared future as Shia Muslims in the Netherlands.

As regards the effect of the joint gatherings, I mention as an example a conversation I had in January 2015 with three Shia young men, two of Afghan origin and one from Iraq. Before the joint Muharram gathering of 2011, these three men did not know each other. That first joint gathering was really the beginning of a process of change, they told me, for them personally as well as for many other young Shias. Having joint gatherings as spaces of Shia knowledge and debate eliminated the ethnic boundaries that had existed before. Together, these young men started a project to introduce Imam Husayn as a role model “for everyone”, including the Dutch public. As part of this project, a group of Shia youths of various ethnic origins had recently handed out hot chocolate in a shopping area in The Hague and got into dialogue with the Dutch public about Islam and the message of Imam Husayn. “Five years ago, this was unimaginable. We now operate much more together, there is a sense of unity that gives spirit and self-confidence,” one of the men concluded.

Conclusion

Shia Muslims are a diaspora community in the Netherlands, strongly divided on the basis of ethnicity. They form a minority within the Muslim community in the Netherlands, almost 90% of which is Sunni. The older generation, including sheikhs in the Netherlands, do not speak Dutch, do not identify with the Netherlands, and do not empathise with the problems of the youth generation in Dutch society. The younger generation realise that, in order to keep their tradition alive in the Netherlands, they need to form a united Shia community, by taking the Dutch language as a binding element and rearticulating their religious tradition in terms that apply to Dutch circumstances.

The Muharram gathering explored in this article, the first of its kind, differs in various respects from traditional Muharram gatherings. In language, form and content, the youth gathering reinterpreted the tradition in a way that met the needs of Shia youngsters in the Netherlands. This reflects the idea of Talal Asad that a living discursive tradition is able to adapt to new circumstances.¹⁷

The decision to organise this joint meeting during the month of Muharram appealed to Shia identity, with its devotion to *ahl al-bayt* and its emotional

17 Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*.

involvement with the founding narrative of Shia Islam, the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. Both elements are central during Muharram. Even Shia Muslims who do not observe Islamic rules and practices in their daily lives identify as Shia during Muharram, and attend the meetings. Hoping for a high attendance at the first joint gathering, the organisers knew that Muharram would provide the best opportunity.

The first and most important new element in this gathering was the use of Dutch, the first language of young Shia Muslims in the Netherlands. The transfer of knowledge about their faith therefore works best in Dutch. Having language and vocabulary available in Dutch also facilitates explaining faith issues to their non-Shia peers. In addition, unlike traditional Muharram gatherings, this event was planned and communicated well ahead through social media, and had a clear time schedule.

Traditionally, the emphasis in Muharram gatherings is on emotion and lamentation for the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. This youth event, however, was meant to transfer Islamic knowledge in a way relevant to Dutch society. Lamentation was made subordinate to the lecture.

The lecture was given by youth leader, al-Khateeb, a charismatic person who had studied Shia Islam intensively but who was not a sheikh or religiously trained in any way. Everyone listened to him carefully, as his knowledge and understanding of Shia belief, combined with his personal experience of growing up in the Netherlands as a Shia Muslim, matched both their need for knowledge and their experience. In his lecture, he touched on the public debate on Islam, the position of individual Muslims, and the temptations in Dutch society. He also addressed the Dutch criticisms of Islam that had an impact on young Muslims, and gave answers from an Islamic perspective. By drawing attention to the virtues of *ahl al-bayt*, the justice in the Islamic law system, and the guidance of the religious authorities through their religious rulings, he called on young people to stick to Muslim conduct and practice.

The extent to which this meeting met the need of youngsters for religious knowledge became clear in the discussion about the observance of religious obligations in Dutch society that was next on the programme. Some of the attendees lacked even basic religious knowledge. This shows that the production of Islamic knowledge in Dutch is indispensable to keep them involved in faith and religious practice.

A representative of the Shia religious authorities in the Middle East who attended the gathering expressed his approval of the lecture and the meeting as a whole. At the end of the programme this Shia scholar answered the young people's individual questions on Islamic practices.

The present case shows that the youth leader and the Shia scholar were complementary to each other in the transfer and production of Islamic knowledge, and also that the hierarchical structure of Shia authority requires the rearticulation of traditional knowledge in a way adapted to local circumstances. So, local initiatives by youth associations reinforce rather than undermine the status of Shia authority.