



Twelver Shia in Edinburgh: marking Muharram, mourning Husayn

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Abstract

Research on the Shia in Scotland and of their spaces of worship and gathering continues to be under-represented in the research field of Muslims in Britain. According to the 2011 census, there are just under 77,000 Muslims in Scotland, with Edinburgh, its capital, home to about 12,400. This article aims to fill in some of these gaps by focusing on a Muharram procession emerging out of a Twelver Shia *imambargah* in Edinburgh. Drawing from fieldwork conducted from 2011 to 2013, the article provides an ethnographic account of this annual *jaloos* (ritual procession) in Leith district, examines its evolution, and analyses the *jaloos*'s signage and related proclamations in English and Urdu. In juxtaposing these elements, I argue that even as the procession is a normative means to commemorate and transmit the core values of the Twelver Shia through the events of Karbala, it actively engages with and responds to stereotypes about Muslims in the West and thus serves simultaneously as a wider public presentation on, and defence of, Islam. By closely examining these Muslims' public performance of Islam, this article offers a case study of an alternative narrative of Muslims in Britain and sheds new light on the rituals and experience of the Twelver Shia in Scotland.

Keywords Shiism · Scotland · Muharram · Ashura · Ritual · Public space

In light of the relative dearth of scholarship on the Shia in Scotland and of their religious spaces, this article focuses on an annual ritual procession emerging out of a Twelver Shia *imambargah* in Edinburgh, Scotland, which situates it both within a pivotal event in Shia history, and its contemporary relevance in the city. The primary purpose of *imambargahs* is

Edinburgh's Shia comprise not only the Twelver Shia who are the subject of this study, but also the Ismaili Shia as well as the Alawi and Alevi communities, all of whom are significantly under-researched both in the Scottish context and the wider field of Muslims in Britain.

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to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn b. Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and third Shia imam.¹ These ‘permanent Shi i ritual-oriented buildings’, are sites ‘for various stationary rituals, the departure and arrival point for processions, and the repository for symbolic objects used in different ceremonies’ (Chelkowski 2015: 190). Drawing upon fieldwork from 2011 to 2013, it begins by providing an ethnographic account of this procession. Next, the article examines how the procession has evolved in the short time since it first took place, describing the community’s demographics, its messaging and signage. Throughout, these descriptions are deliberate, for ‘an adequate description is nothing less than a thorough analysis of a chunk of the world as it actually functions’, and in this way, aiming to bridge a ‘descriptive gap’ which often ‘seek[s] for the nature of things instead of their workings’ (Dupret et al. 2012: 1).² In examining how the procession unfolds, the article also poses the question of what meaning the processionists are producing, both for themselves and others. As such, the article then analyses these signs and messages as well as the procession’s associated public speeches in English and Urdu. In juxtaposing these two elements, I argue that even as the procession is a normative means to commemorate and transmit the core values of the Twelver Shia through the events of Karbala, it actively engages with and responds to stereotypes about Muslims in the West and thus serves simultaneously as a wider public presentation on, and defence of, Islam. By closely examining these Muslims’ public performance of Islam, this article offers a case study of an alternative narrative of Muslims in Britain and sheds new light on the rituals and experience of the Twelver Shia in Scotland.

Jaloos: A Muharram procession

Founded by the Wali-Al-Asir Trust in August 1989, the *imambargah* in Edinburgh’s Leith district describes itself simply as a ‘Shi a Community Centre’ and an ‘Imambargah following the Shi a Ithna Asheri (Twelver) school of thought, based in Edinburgh’.³ It is indistinguishable from the other buildings around it on Great Junction Street. There are no domes or minarets or arches – indeed, nothing at all externally and stereotypically to indicate that Muslims regularly gather here for prayer and ritual practice. Once a year, however, during the Islamic month of Muharram, these Muslims make an unmistakable, conscious and public declaration of their presence. This takes place in the form of what they call a *jaloos* (from Urdu, lit. ‘procession’), which emerges from the *imambargah* on King Street, stepping off onto Great Junction Street and marching on to the statue of Queen Victoria at the Foot of Leith Walk for speeches, before doubling back for more private rites.

¹ *Imambargahs* are also variously known as *ashurkhanas*, *azakhanas* or *imambaras* in India and as *husayniyyas* in Iran. The term *imambargah* is most commonly used in a Pakistani context. See Calmard 2004.

² Dupret et al. sound a cautionary note in this regard: ‘Instead of attempting to describe the social world as it unfolds when empirically observed, researchers often lose the actual object of interest and propose new narratives in its place that are devoid of the contextual and praxiological specificities of any actual situation. This holds especially true where religious phenomena are concerned’ (2012: 1).

³ See www.facebook.com/WaliAlAsirTrust/about, last visited 20 February 2017.

Historical background

Such processions constitute one of a series of mourning rituals held around the world by Twelver Shia Muslims during Muharram to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn, the younger son of Ali b. Abi Talib, himself the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima, in Karbala, southern Iraq, in 680 CE.⁴ The historical details below are worth revisiting briefly because they constitute fundamental tropes invoked and remembered publicly and repeatedly in the Muharram procession in Edinburgh.

‘Ali was the fourth and last of what later Sunni Muslim tradition called the ‘rightly-guided caliphs’. Upon his death in 661, Mu awiya, then governor of the wealthy province of Syria quickly consolidated his power, becoming the de facto fifth caliph of the now greatly expanded Muslim empire. Husayn took up arms to reassert his own rights to the caliphate when Mu awiya died and his son Yazid succeeded him. However, his rebellion failed — Yazid’s forces quickly intercepted Husayn and his army, cutting them off from supplies of fresh water at Karbala. Surrounded by desert, weak with hunger and parched with thirst, Husayn’s numbers dwindled. Over the next ten days, scores were killed: followers, friends and family, including his six-month-old son, Ali al-Asghar, shot, according to tradition, by an arrow through the neck as he was held up in the air in a desperate plea for water. On the tenth day of Muharram 680, Husayn was decapitated, his body trampled on by horses.⁵ The killing of the Prophet Muhammad’s own grandson, let alone its brutality, shocked the populace, and for the Shia particularly, it became a pivotal moment, infusing in them ‘a new religious fervour’ consolidating their ethos and identity (Daftary 2013: 33). Thus, from early on in Islamic history, religious, social and political discord became associated with a particular kind of governance, leadership and authority.

Contemporary commemorations in Edinburgh

The first Muharram procession in Edinburgh took place in November 2011. When I witnessed it in November 2012, it comprised some 150 men and 50 women, including children, and was organised as a prelude to a larger procession in Glasgow a few days later. Some of the processionists held aloft standards on which hung black cloth banners in various shapes and sizes edged with golden tinsel and calligraphic embroidery in blue, green and red. Others carried simpler motifs in the form of silver and blue floriated flags. The tips of some poles ended in a stylised representation of a hand atop a crescent. On one flagpole, wrapped in layers of cloth, sat a gold pot, on top of which rested another stylised hand.⁶ Both men and women carried these standards, although the women’s were smaller.

Most of the processionists wore black or dark blue clothing comprising either plain *salwar kameez* (trousers and shirts) under grey, black or blue winter jackets. Women,

⁴ For a historical overview of these processions, see Chelkowski 1994. For an ethnographic account of these processions in London, see Spellman-Poots 2012. Bøe and Flaskerud (2017) provide details for processions in the hitherto unstudied context for Oslo and Bergen in Norway.

⁵ For a detailed account of the battle at Karbala, see Jafri 2000.

⁶ For a wide-ranging survey on this motif, generally known as the *khamsa*, but here likely representing the hand of Abu al Fadl al- Abbas, half-brother of Husayn and a key figure of Karbala, see Suleman 2015.

who marched behind the men, almost uniformly sported black trousers or blue jeans covered either by dark manteaux that fell at least below the knee, coupled with a black hijab (sometimes banded green), or a full black chador. Among some women, a slightly more colourful *kameez* was evident. Several men also wore *salwar kameez* ensembles where only the *salwar* was white but the *kameez* was black or blue. Grey hoodies were also a popular choice among younger men, as were jeans, usually blue, occasionally beige.⁷ Some of these men also walked barefoot. Like all the women, several men had their heads covered, usually with a woollen hat, although this appeared more a practical measure to keep out the cold than to fulfil any religious requirement. Only one or two men wore turbans, which identified them as clerics (*mullahs*) of the community. Among both sexes, quite a few had additionally donned fluorescent yellow vests and it was they who flanked the other processionists, keeping them safe from traffic. A few, mainly children, wore slightly more colourful pinks, blues or browns. Many of these details offer a close ethnographic parallel with processions in Toronto, Canada (Schubel 1996: 198–201). In Edinburgh, as we shall see, they are also important for how they change and develop in the years that follow.

The procession took its time to head back to the *imambargah*. It had five distinct phalanxes. The primary standard bearers led the way, followed closely by a group of male singers to whose songs and chants the rest of the processionists rhythmically struck their palms on their chests. Every few minutes when the processionists would stop, the chorus formed a circle, which signalled to the men alongside or behind them the onset of a rather more elaborate and ritualised chest-beating that never failed to stop even the most hurried passers-by in their tracks for its distinct style and faster tempo. Holding alternate hands high in the air, this third phalanx comprising primarily young men would bring them down on the opposite side of their chests while simultaneously bending their knees. This movement was usually accompanied by a sharp exhalation of the breath, ‘Hu!’ at each strike, which helped maintain the rhythm and so amplified the thumping of their hands on their chests, that it could be heard on the opposite side of the street. Behind them, older men, some of whom also bore standards, kept up with the increased pace without, however, changing over to this more involved rite, which in the South Asian context is commonly known as *matam*. The women and teenage girls who made up the final phalanx behind them did likewise, engaging only in light tapping, never chest-thumping. Despite also holding aloft standards, the women were not organised into sub-groups and thus appeared undifferentiated from each other. They also did not sing. The children in the procession tended, unsurprisingly, not to observe these boundaries, and depending on their age and sex often milled back and forth between their parents or chattered amongst themselves. While some processionists looked forlorn, others smiled and exchanged pleasantries with each other. Yet others, mostly men, would periodically check their smartphones or use them to take pictures and videos of the procession itself. A number of them also wielded dedicated cameras and camcorders. Slowly, the processionists filed into the *imambargah*, thus marking the end of the public procession.

⁷ For a fascinating ethnographic study on how jeans enable people, especially immigrants, to fit in and be ‘ordinary’, see Miller and Woodward 2012.

Public reaction

Public reaction to the processions in both 2012 and 2013 ranged from mild shock and bemusement to predictable mutterings about holding up traffic unnecessarily. Cars honked insistently and more than a few passers-by asked each other aloud what was happening. Despite the biting wind, people stopped to watch the processions more closely, snap photographs and videos and accept flyers from the mourners.⁸ The high street was bustling on both occasions. That the 2012 procession took place on a weekend and the 2013 one on a weekday made no difference either in its reception by potentially different members of the public or indeed on the level of participation and engagement by the community itself, which incorporated men, women and children, ranging in age from babies to individuals in their sixties. In other words, they represented a cross-section of the community (the broad demographics of which we shall turn to shortly) who had been deliberate about carving out time from either weekend leisure or workday responsibilities. For some, particularly the men, this was not just one day, but potentially another, too, given that a number also likely participated in the Glasgow processions.

If the passers-by were generally curious, the shopkeepers, store managers and assistants whose businesses along Great Junction Street comprised fishmongers, convenience stores, corner supermarket chains, drapers, travel agencies, betting shops, and fast food outlets, were distinctly and almost uniformly wary. As community members went up to businesses to hand out flyers, many kept their doors closed, and where some accepted the flyers, they did so heads cocked and with their bodies held close to the partially opened door, a ready hand on the door handle. This unease may partly be the result of perceived parallels with the Orange Order, which until recently conducted two annual parades in Leith.⁹ Historically, the Orange procession or ‘walk’ was a public celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Boyne and ‘often the harbinger of serious disorder’, which ‘angered and offended’ Irish Catholics by their ‘ritual displays of Protestant tribalism’ (Marshall 1996: 12). As such, the retailers may have simply been exercising caution about the alien and unknown turning up on their doorsteps. Given the history of sectarianism in Scotland, the threat of violence, whether real or imagined, is hardly trivial, regardless of the religious tradition being represented. Ignorance, too, cannot be a discounted as a factor — despite the handouts explicitly narrating the story of Karbala and the role of Husayn, several passers-by in 2012 stopped to ask me if the procession was about the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁰

⁸ For a comparative Sufi *zikr* procession, see Werbner 1996.

⁹ The Order is named after King William III, the Prince of Orange, whose victory at the Battle of Boyne in 1690 ‘secured the future of the Reformed Faith in Ireland’ (Marshall 1996: 6). Primarily a working-class organisation and ‘in effect organised militant Protestantism’ (Marshall 1996: 9), the Order in Scotland dates back to the Industrial Revolution for Irish migrant Protestants concerned about distinguishing themselves from their Catholic counterparts. According to Michael J. Rosie, the Order moved their march to Regent Terrace with the onset of tramworks in Edinburgh: ‘An ageing membership valued the removal of a big hill from their parade (!) and they’ve never attempted to resurrect the ‘traditional’ route. Orange parades in Edinburgh rarely get any press coverage — and very little is written on the [Order] in Scotland, let alone Edinburgh’ (Personal email, 13 November 2014).

¹⁰ I also learnt some weeks later that one of the sergeants policing the procession had been asked by a member of the public if the group was protesting against the Christmas tree!

Development and change

Demographics

A full-length YouTube video of the first procession in Edinburgh in November 2011 uploaded by a community member (Sheikh 2011) contrasts starkly with my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013. Most apparently, there are double the number of people participating in that first procession than in my ethnographic observations in subsequent years. An analysis of the video itself suggests several constituent elements of their identities.

In terms of their civic identity, the majority of processionists in 2011 were likely from Glasgow, where there is a larger population of Twelver Shia (and indeed other Muslims more generally). This is borne out by the presence of many individuals in this footage who also appear in other videos of the community that are explicitly identified as Glaswegian as well as from my own footage and engagement with the community in Edinburgh over the course of my research.¹¹

The processionists' linguistic origin and identity can be similarly discerned — over the general hubbub of the procession, one can hear the distinctive lilt of Persian being spoken by men and children amidst the mass of people otherwise speaking Urdu or English. In this regard, the Twelver Shia in Edinburgh likewise comprise both Pakistani as well as Iranian diasporic communities, with the former constituting an overwhelming majority. My own interactions also suggest a small contingent of South Asians from parts of East Africa. Although transient university students make up some of community, notably among the Iranians, all of these groups have settlement histories in Edinburgh that go back at least 30 years, often more.¹² In 2012 and 2013, only a handful of the processionists were Iranian, one of whom said to me that the procession was really a Pakistani affair, and that while theirs in Iran were rather different, it was important to show up to this one as a demonstration of solidarity.¹³

Finally, with regard to gender, the (male) videographers seem more focused on capturing what is happening around the men. While women appear in the videos, they get much less airtime. Despite the difficulty of estimating the number of women in the 2011 procession, it is important to note that in successive years while men constituted the bulk of the processionists, women made up a quarter of their ranks. In these years, while the men recited longer ritual chants and thumped their chests, the women, some of them pushing prams or buggies, were significantly quieter — almost silent, chanting ‘*Ya Husayn, Ya Husayn*’ (‘O Husayn, O Husayn’) so softly as to be heard only when the men were silent or if one were very close to them. In the context of Karbala, as in

¹¹ I was unable to determine why there was such a large Glaswegian contingent. Perhaps they were offering the kind of organisational experience familiar to larger groups as well as moral support in the form of making the community's presence in Edinburgh more visible for their first procession.

¹² Specific details on the national or ethnic origins and intra-religious diversity of Scotland's Muslims is harder to come by. Seminal studies by Wardak (2000), Qureshi (2006) and Hopkins (2007), for example, focus on Sunni Pakistanis. Bonino (2017) offers valuable insights from a slightly more geographically diverse pool of interviewees, including those from East and North Africa. Drawing from the 2011 Census, both he and Elshayyal (2016) provide useful breakdowns and analyses of the ethnic origins of Muslims in Scotland, but these are constrained by the census categories for ethnicity. Little or no mention is made, therefore, of Iran and the Shia.

¹³ For an example in the Netherlands of how different Shia youth groups have used Dutch to address the challenges of the diversity of their ethnicities and national origins, see Schlatmann 2017.

many others, battle and martyrdom are arguably gendered experiences that dialectically reinforce the role and performance of men over women, at least in public commemorative rituals. As Hegland notes of Twelver Shia women in Peshawar, Pakistan, they face ‘symbolic complexes that reinforce men’s role as repositories of holy power and succor’ (1998: 240). While the women had a less performative role, they worked in concert with the men and were integral in disseminating the central message of the procession to the wider public. Certainly as girls joined boys in distributing flyers and women bore banners with slogans, they demonstrated that the sexes were equal participants in the procession. More broadly these Muslims provided a very clear example of veiled women in the West actively participating in the public sphere, contrary to stock tabloid notions of their passivity.¹⁴

The figure of Zaynab bint Ali, the sister of Husayn, is an important historical example of such participation, and an almost certain inspiration for the female faithful in Edinburgh.¹⁵ The eloquence of her complaint at Yazid’s court in Damascus (recorded in Tayfur 1987)¹⁶ after the massacre at Karbala is popularly held up as a model of speaking truth to power, invoked and remembered by men and women alike. Indeed, Zaynab’s esteem is reflected in many of the elegies sung by the male processionists.¹⁷ Of course, Zaynab is no ordinary woman. For many Twelver Shia, she is an extended member of the *ahl al-bayt*, literally ‘people of the house’, referring to the family of the Prophet. Her mother, Fatima, is properly of the household of the Prophet and progenitor of the Shia imams. In this regard, Fatima is revered not merely by virtue of her filial relationship with the Prophet, but in and of her own right (Pinault 1999: 72–75) and as evidenced by the number of lectures extolling her and uploaded to YouTube.

Messaging

Aside from the make-up of the processionists, a second change had to do with the community’s increasing efforts after 2011 to disseminate the message of the procession to the wider public. Whereas in 2012 only a handful of adults handed out flyers, several more did so in 2013 including, notably, boys and girls aged twelve and above. All of these pamphleteers actively went up not only to passers-by, but also shops and businesses on both sides of the street. As noted earlier, these flyers narrated not only the story of Karbala and the reason for the procession, but also pointed people to online resources such as the London-based website whoishussain.org, inaugurated in 2012 (Figs. 1 and 2).

The processions also appear, from associated YouTube videos and flyers in print and social media, to have been organised partly and jointly by different institutions and groups within the community including the Imamia Islamic Mission, also known as the Wali-Al-Asir Trust, and itself the site of the *imambargah*; the Jafaria Foundation, which has its own centre just out of Edinburgh in Dalkeith, and the Edinburgh Ahlul Bayt

¹⁴ Schubel notes for his study in Toronto that ‘women marched separately from the men, at the rear of the procession, whereas in Pakistan women generally do not participate in processions’, and that the ‘increased presence of women in community activities is a common theme throughout [the] essays’ in the volume to which he has contributed (1996: 198).

¹⁵ Although I was unable to speak with any of the female processionists, Schubel (1996) makes a similar observation for his comparable study in Toronto, Canada.

¹⁶ An English commentary and translation is provided by Ayati (n.d.)

¹⁷ Several examples of elegies, including of women other than Zaynab, feature in Pinault 1999: 83–92.

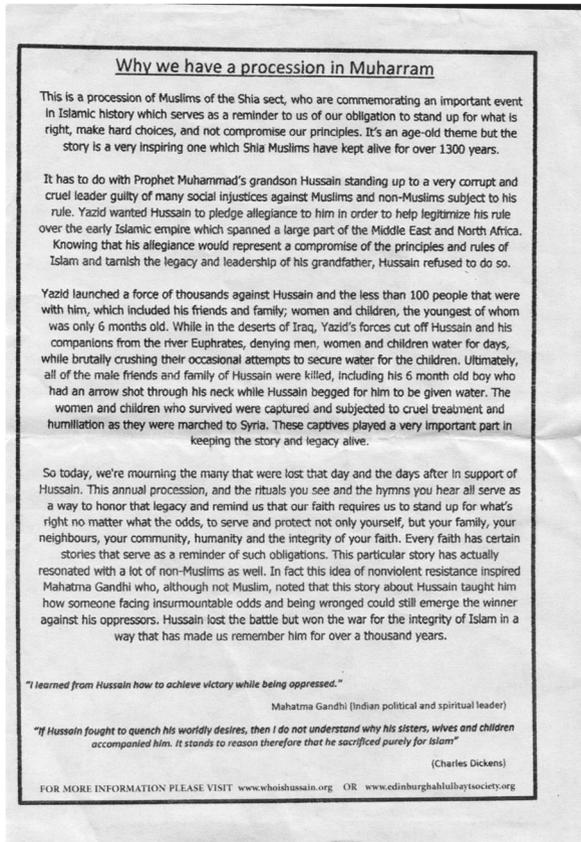


Fig. 1 Image of flyer handed out to the public explaining the Muharram procession in Leith, Edinburgh, 2013

society, founded in 2011, which appears to have been incorporated into the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society (SABS) from around October 2015, and in October 2016 also included the Lady Sughra Society and the SABS Health Awareness Campaign. The Wali-Al-Asir Trust is a registered charity and parent organisation of the Imamia Islamic Mission. As noted on the Scottish Charity Register, the Trust aims

- (a) To advance community development by providing a community centre for social and religious activities to be carried out.
- (b) To advance religion by providing a place for religious services, for the perpetuation and propagation of (Shia) Islam, within our community and to spread the Light of Islam and peace in the world.
- (c) To promote equality, diversity, spiritual well-being, religious tolerance and harmony for the public benefit by fostering better relation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.
- (d) To promote daytrips, gatherings, meals for disabled aged and isolated members of the community.¹⁸

¹⁸ The Wali-Al-Asir Trust was registered as a charity (SCO43534) on 1 November 2012. According to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR), these objects are taken directly from the charity's constitution. See www.oscr.org.uk/search/charity-details?number=SCO43534, last visited 20 September 2018.

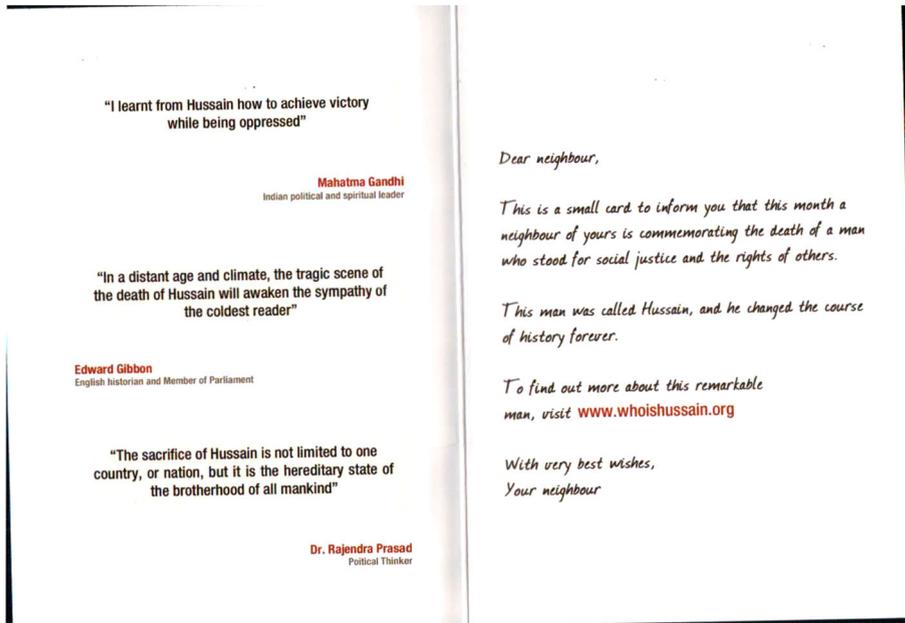


Fig. 2 Image of card handed out to the public during the Muharram procession in Leith, Edinburgh, 2013. While the external endorsements on the left serve to universalise Husayn's martyrdom, the note on the right is explicitly localised, with no less than three references to 'neighbour', situating the commemoration within the local community

The Jafaria Foundation was established in 2006, its stated aim 'to spread the Light of Islam in the world with peace. Our mission is to teach everyone according to the teachings of the holy Masoomeen (A.S.) [Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and the Twelve Imams]' with programmes including 'Majalis, Jashans, Milads and lectures [which] are held to teach the followers of the Ahlulbayt (A.S.), how we should spend our lives according to Islam, purely reflecting the lifestyle of the Masoomeen (A.S.)'.¹⁹ For its part, the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society aims 'to meet the needs of the Scottish Shia Muslim community and the breadth of society in general across the cultural, social, political and religious spectra'.²⁰

All three organisations reflect a largely Pakistani constituency, and smaller numbers of Iranians and East Africans of South Asian origin. While the Wali-Al-Asir Trust and the Jafaria Foundation are more internally oriented, the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society additionally has an explicit outreach agenda, evidenced not least by an endorsement by Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's First Minister, on their webpage.²¹ Judging from a number of events I attended, it also appears to be run by a younger generation of community members, aged in their late 20s to their mid 40s. The precise networks of relationships between these groups is beyond the scope of this study, but it suggests that while religious allegiance in matters of interpretation of the faith may be pledged to key *marja'-i taqlid* in the conventional Twelver Shia fashion, there exist several diffuse and

¹⁹ See www.facebook.com/JafariaFoundation/about, last visited 20 February 2017.

²⁰ See www.scottishahlulbaytsociety.org/about-us, last visited 20 February 2017.

²¹ See www.scottishahlulbaytsociety.org/about-us, last visited 20 February 2017.

relatively decentralised associations and, potentially even rival, models of leadership and authority in terms of the social governance of the Edinburgh community.

Signage

The most visible change over the period of study, however, has been in the standards, banners and flags heralding the processions. These *a'lam*, as they are known collectively, underwent a major transformation in 2013, which took place across three registers.

The first was an increase in the number and colours of these flags — orange shades and purple hues now accompanied the blacks, reds and greens of the previous year. Correspondingly, what the processionists were wearing had become progressively darker, more monotone, even amongst the children. As such, the contrast between the black-swathed processionists and the flags they were carrying was all the more striking, reinforcing the visual and psychological sense that this was not a random group of protesters, but a community bound by faith. Despite the bright colours and greater emphasis on the banners, it remained impossible to mistake this parade for a festival. There were no fancy costumes or bands playing joyful music; the elegies and chants were distinctly plaintive and mournful, the self-flagellation unmistakable. Cementing this presentation was a second change — the introduction of large, plain white flags, with red stains on them. Dramatic in their simplicity, they represented the blood of Husayn. The reasons for these changes are difficult to determine, but with the tentative success of the procession in 2011, organisers may have felt increasingly confident to inject a little more drama and flair in the years that followed, and which mapped practices back 'home'. In any case, and as Flaskerud notes in her visual analysis of Iranian *parchams* or wall hangings commemorating the battle of Karbala, even as '[p]oetry and eulogies enhance a sad emotional temperament (2010: 107)', the 'visual language' (2010: 107) of 'signifying devices: the iconographic sign, inscriptions and colour symbolism' (2010: 106), 'phrases a visual lamentation (2010: 107). Much as 'the manipulated voice of a storyteller and an elegist, ... colour functions to instigate in the recipient sad emotions and mournful attitudes' (Flaskerud 2010: 107).

The third and most important development was the introduction of English signage. In contrast to previous years, 2013 saw the introduction of large, black horizontal banners, held up at each end by a different individual.²² The first of these banners to be unfurled (Fig. 3) carried a picture of a golden dome at its left and a minaret, also golden, at its right. Between these two images, which depict iconic elements of Husayn's shrine in present day Karbala, in white sans serif letters, were the words: 'To me death is nothing but happiness and living under tyrants nothing but living in a hell.'²³

Minutes later, the women bringing up the rear of the procession raised a banner (Fig. 4) with an equally terse message, all in white except for the last word, which was rendered in red: 'Everyday is ASHURA & every land is KARBALA.' Two images, again elements from the shrine in Karbala, formed the backdrop of this banner; on the left a massive blue arch, with two minarets rising behind it. On the right, in close-up, was another minaret, identical to the one in the first banner.

²² See Bøe and Flaskerud (2017) for examples of similar banners in Norway.

²³ A detailed analysis of this and other signs follows in the next section.



Fig. 3 Male processionists hold aloft a black horizontal banner which reads, 'To me death is nothing but happiness and living under tyrants nothing but living in a hell.' Other processionists in fluorescent vests flank the Muharram march, looking out for traffic in Leith, Edinburgh, 2013

Back in the front, two children walked hand-in-hand underneath another banner (Fig. 5), the older child holding aloft a pole about half his height wrapped in white cloth atop which rested a stylised gold hand. In a solid, white, sans serif font it read: 'Fight terrorism through justice do not pass a verdict relying on probability'.



Fig. 4 Women bring up the rear of the Muharram procession in Leith, Edinburgh, 2013 with an English-message banner which reads, 'Everyday is ASHURA & every land is KARBALA'



Fig. 5 A brief pause of the Muharram procession in Leith, Edinburgh, 2013. The English-message banner reads, ‘Fight terrorism through justice do not pass a verdict relying on probability’. Note the variety of *alams* held aloft by the male processionists, including two stylised hands, one held by the child in the foreground

Within a short while all the banners in English faced outward, parallel to the procession itself, helping onlookers read them better. Any question as to the identity of these people was addressed by an additional banner with the same san serif writing, ‘SHIA MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SCOTLAND Ashura Procession’ emblazoned across it (Fig. 6).

The drama that all of this creates has obvious parallels to Easter passion plays in other Western cityscapes, exemplified by Oberammergau, Germany, historically, or given contemporary art house treatment as in *Jesus of Montreal* (Arcand 2006). Chelkowski also notes historical ‘similarities between the Muharram processions’ as recorded in Safavid Iran, ‘and the European medieval theatre of the Stations [that] are obvious’ (1977: 33). Edinburgh itself is no stranger to the passion play. The Princes Street Easter Play, for example, a community theatre production, has been putting on performances since 2005. Its 2014 production, *The Edinburgh Passion*, at Princes Street Gardens drew a crowd of 1500-2000. Focusing, predictably, on the referendum for Scottish independence, its stated aim was ‘to reach people who might know very little of the original story and it seems to have worked well’ (Princes Street Easter Play 2014). If this ignorance of the Easter passion, a fundamental Christian story, is credible within the Scottish context, let alone a wider Western European one, then common knowledge of an equivalent Muslim narrative, as told through the Muharram procession, is practically non-existent. There is, of course, an important caveat. While the *jaloos* re-enacts the lamentation processions of the eighth century and penitence, it is not, however, the *ta’ziyeh*, the ‘only indigenous drama engendered by the world of Islam’ (Chelkowski 1977: 31), and which is the passion proper in especially the Iranian Shii context. Rather, the procession is a shorthand for the story, indicating it without actually performing it.



Fig. 6 Male Muharram processionists on their way back to the *imambargah* in Leith, Edinburgh, 2013 hold aloft a banner reading, ‘Shia Muslim Communities of Scotland Ashura Procession’. One of the processionists at the centre of the image can be seen walking barefoot

As we shall see in the next section, participation in the *jaloos* serves two main functions. Firstly, through the signs and flyers, it presents a valuable opportunity to educate those unfamiliar with the story of Karbala and thereby potentially better communicate the community’s history and values. Secondly, in the very act of processing as an act of Islamic worship, it also co-opts these spectators into joining believers to bear witness to its eschatological significance. Documenting the event was thus an important aspect of the procession, demonstrated by the obvious care that the traffic chaperones took not to block the view of those wielding the smartphones, cameras and camcorders mentioned earlier, even when they were being held by those of us who were not part of the procession at all.

This documentation extends the idea of bearing witness — it is not only a record of the day of the procession but also whenever it is viewed, particularly by others online, that day as well as the original day of Ashura is remembered and so one participates in the ritual anew. Given the number of days marking the deaths of various holy figures within the Twelver Shia tradition, the formative event of Karbala is never far from the ‘collective memory’ (Halbwachs 1992) and ritual calendar of the community. In ‘doing *da’wa*’ or ‘spreading the message’ in this Shia way, the specific story manifests an eminently relatable universal archetype: the suffering of an inspired but subversive man who stands up against the status quo dies so abject a death that he becomes a tragic hero, with the promise and power of redemption that is embedded in each re-enactment, remembrance and commemoration. As Ayoub notes in his classic study of the events of Karbala, ‘the literature which this popular piety has produced is vast, highly emotional and even fantastic, especially to the modern western reader’ (1978: 7).

Reading the signs

All the participants in the procession already knew the story of Karbala — indeed, the previous nine nights inside the *imambargah* had been spent lamenting every tragic death of the family of the Prophet, recounted as it was in graphic, mournful detail in the sermons delivered by *mullahs* in English, Urdu and Persian — so while public penitence of the community is an integral part of the procession and its spiritual efficacy, all of the associated outward-facing English messaging is evidently directed externally. However, even in their didactic role, the messages are somewhat undermined by their oddness.

Take the first banner, ‘To me death is nothing but happiness and living under tyrants nothing but living in a hell’ (Fig. 3). To the uninitiated, even in plain English, the equation of death with happiness comes uncomfortably close to the kind of suicide-bombing language and logic that frequently assails us on media, new and old.²⁴ However, the statement is actually a translation of hadith attributed to Husayn and used as the rallying catchphrase, as captured on publicity and marketing material as well as on social media, for Muharram commemorations not just in Edinburgh but in English-speaking Twelver Shia communities around the world.²⁵ More scholarly treatment published in Qum, Iran translates the hadith as ‘I consider death as happiness and life with the wrong-doers as boredom’ (Shu’ba al-Harrani 2000). This latter translation, in turn, is invoked in equally nuanced explications elsewhere.²⁶ But by and large, there seems to be a consensus on the first form for the hadith’s English standardisation. For popular religious discourse, therefore, the first translation makes for a punchy insider slogan, however obscure, and even potentially misleading its implications, for outsiders. As such, what might appear to outsiders as a nihilistic community statement is to insiders an assertion of identity and meaning, which is rooted in a pivotal historical event.

While an increasingly secularised society may not normally associate death with happiness, the notion of ‘living in a hell’, however, retains its symbolic power. In the context of Karbala, Husayn’s death is not meaningless. For believers, as evidenced by the plethora of hadiths that arose after it, it was foretold. Framed as part of a divine plan, Husayn’s role *was* to be martyred and this martyrdom helped spread the message (Pinault 1999: 71–72). In this way, the banner emphasises the importance of standing

²⁴ This quite aside from an uncanny and altogether unfortunate similarity with Jim Jones: ‘But to me, death is not — death is not a fearful thing. It’s living that’s cursed’ (quoted in Maaga 1998: 149).

²⁵ At least in 2013 when I was doing the fieldwork, and a Google search resulted in thousands of hits for the exact phrase in a variety of locations, screenshots of which, however, I neglected to take then. Continuing technological advances and optimisations in search algorithms (see Pariser 2012 and most recently Lanier 2018) make it difficult to replicate those search results. Repeating it nonetheless in October 2018 for the partial phrase ‘to me death is nothing but happiness’ resulted in ‘about 3500 results (0.59 s)’ across a variety of websites both institutional and personal, as well as a number of social media platforms, including Facebook, Flickr, Pinterest, Twitter and Tumblr, evidence of its enduring appeal. See, for example, https://twitter.com/Tahahaider_/status/1039808971232763904, 12 September 2018, for Twitter. On Facebook, see <https://www.facebook.com/Syedbilgrami110/posts/for-me-death-is-nothing-but-happiness-and-living-under-a-tyrant-is-nothing-but-h/1557548330971233/>, 27 September 2017.

²⁶ See, for example, <http://www.shiachat.com/forum/topic/235017985-please-translate-this-hadith-to-full-arabic-text/> which has an ‘Advanced Member’ of the forum write in: ‘This is part of a larger narration, and obviously this is badly translated by whoever did it.’ (Accessed 1 October 2016).

up and speaking out against tyranny and injustice, whatever the cost. It also headlines the context of the speeches we shall examine shortly.

The second banner, which the women had unfurled, namely, ‘Everyday is ASHURA & every land is KARBALA’ (Fig. 4), points to the kind of struggle that most Muslims will refer to as, and what in Western popular discourse is a dreaded word, namely, ‘jihad’. ‘Jihad’ (‘struggle’, ‘striving’, ‘effort’, and by these extensions the paradoxically reductive ‘battle’ or ‘war’ beloved of extremist Muslims and the far right) shares the same root as the term ‘ijtihād’, commonly translated in the context of the development of Islamic law as ‘independent reasoning’. As Schubel’s study also illustrates, this is a popular procession banner, and in Toronto, too, borne by women (1996: 200). And so, when ‘Everyday is ASHURA...’, the tenth day of Muharram, when one of the two beloved grandsons of the Prophet, whom he would indulge to clamber upon his back during prayer, is brutally murdered, it is an ever present reminder for believers to be mindful of the deliberate as well as the unthinking, the major and the minor, wrongs, injustices, infractions, and unkindnesses, they face or dispense every day. The second banner thus articulates a clear challenge and public accountability of this principle in Islam: Do the faithful bear witness to these struggles and rise to address them within themselves (the ‘greater jihad’ of most of Islamic history, theology and jurisprudence) as well as in others, or do they look away in weakness, fear and discomfort? Furthermore, if ‘every land is Karbala’, then together with the fourth banner discussed below, the community is arguably reflexive – it is asking its members and telling the wider public what it is willing to volunteer and/or sacrifice to say no to these injustices, not only in the historical heartlands of Islam, but also in the contemporary societies beyond, and which for many Muslims is now also home.

This is not to suggest that such sacrifice and volunteerism is, or should be, violent. In fact, any hint of violence is immediately rejected by the third banner, ‘Fight terrorism through justice do not pass a verdict relying on probability’ (Fig. 5). After the identity banner discussed below, it is probably the most comprehensible of the four English messaging banners. In asserting the importance of fighting terrorism while simultaneously cautioning the making of snap judgements, the banner also points to a larger faith community feeling under pressure (e.g. Abbas 2005). The underlying message here is that the simple fact of being Muslim should not automatically brand oneself to others as an extremist, someone to be feared and loathed as alien and other. The phrase is also somewhat technical in its use of ‘verdict’ and ‘probability’, which are hardly slogan friendly. A verdict suggests a final, authoritative judgement, rational and arrived at by due process. Juxtaposed with ‘probability’, it highlights the mutual exclusivity of the two concepts and the irony of conflating religious identity with extremism under the veneer of the law. Justice, therefore, becomes an important element of this discourse. This is not merely a this-worldly justice, the outcome of a rule of law that is dispassionate and logical. It is justice in its teleological sense, and in its specifically Shia conception, inextricably intertwined with love, devotion and loyalty (*walaya*) for God, the Prophet and his family, specifically his descendants, the imams, who issue from him.²⁷ Imbued with these ethics, this justice is a reminder of divine rights and authority due to the family of the Prophet but usurped for political expedience and accompanied

²⁷ For *walaya*, which ‘may be considered the very substance of the Shi’i faith in general and Imami beliefs in particular’, see Amir-Moezzi, ‘Notes on Imami *Walaya*’ (2011: 231–275).

by unfathomable cruelty. In this regard, and as we shall see next, this is also part of an effort to publicly differentiate Shia Muslims from extremist forms of Islam.²⁸

As a statement of identity, the fourth banner, ‘SHIA MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SCOTLAND Ashura Procession’ (Fig. 6) is relatively straightforward. Yet it, too, reveals several points. Firstly, there is the explicit invocation of Shiism. Sunni events, at least in Edinburgh, do not identify themselves as Sunni — as a majority group, its members take the privilege of its proportion and normativity for granted. Being Sunni is being ‘properly’ Muslim in popular insider perception and conversely, being Muslim is being Sunni. There is rarely a need to qualify it because it is the majority view. Being a Shia, however, is a minority view and explicating it as such on a banner suggests an element of necessary and deliberate distinction from the majority ‘other’.²⁹

This fourth banner also refers to ‘communities’. The ‘Muslim community’ is used widely by journalists, politicians and Muslims themselves. This usage in the singular, however, erases important differences in terms of heritage, country of origin, languages, beliefs, practices, and, therefore, Muslim ‘positions’ on a variety of issues, including, for example, the practical (as opposed to the ideal) role and status of women, veiling, law, faith schools, iconography, etc. The plural on the banner, however, makes this diversity very clear, and all the more striking for the numbers involved in the procession. These numbers are small enough for the encounters to have a real impact in terms of a dialectic understanding of one’s own identity vis-à-vis the other. As we have already seen, the processions included Pakistani, Iranian and East African Twelver Shia. The banner thus acknowledges a real, meaningful, and abiding encounter of the community with its own diversity because there are ethnic, linguistic, and national differences sheltering under the umbrella of an ostensibly single religious identity. A further difference that cuts across all of these categories is generational, for within these groups are also those who have acquired a Scottish identity by settlement or imbibed it through birth.³⁰ This is not to say such diversity is not evident in other religious spaces in Edinburgh such as the Central Mosque,³¹ only that the larger numbers there mean that the differences tend to get diffused. This is because broadly similar smaller groups tend to congregate into larger normative, majoritarian ones. Therefore, encounters with difference are less likely in these larger groupings to pose doctrinal or practical challenges. As a long-standing white Scottish convert observed wryly to me about the Central Mosque, it is a great place for prayer, but not to talk about Islam in this way.

²⁸ For an example of efforts at such differentiation among Shia Muslims in Belgium, see Lechkar, which focuses on crying as a ‘specific Shi’a disposition...fundamental if one wants to be a “true” Shiite’ (2017: 241).

²⁹ The diversity illustrated in this kind of alternative and diasporic Muslim identity is important for the reasons outlined shortly. For an example of Muslim diversity, specifically as it relates to religiosity, see Gholami (2016), who examines it in relation to the understudied area of secularism in diasporic Muslim communities.

³⁰ Bonino notes that ‘Scottish Muslims feel more Scottish (24%) than English Muslims feel English (14%)’ (2017: 67). Importantly, however, ‘Muslims in Glasgow and Dundee ... record higher feelings of belonging to Scotland and lower affiliations to their non-UK ethnic identities compared to Muslims in Edinburgh and Aberdeen’ (Bonino 2017: 68–69). This is because Arabs comprise at least 15% of the local Muslim population in these two cities, and because of the turnover of people in these economic hubs. In Glasgow and Dundee, however, Pakistanis make up at least 50% of the local Muslim population (Bonino 2017: 68–69). There is no quantitative data available at present which allows for an analysis of Scottish identity and belonging vis-à-vis the intra-religious diversity of Scotland’s Muslims, let alone the diversity within the specific Shia group under discussion.

³¹ Formally ‘Mosque of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques & Islamic Centre of Edinburgh’.

This brings us to the final point on reading signs: the banner does not reference Edinburgh alone, but the whole of Scotland. As such, the procession incorporates other cities, notably Glasgow, as discussed earlier, and potentially smaller centres such as Dundee and Aberdeen too.³² It does not, however, invoke the rest of the UK. Whether this is a function of Scottish nationalism and efforts by the Twelver Shia to present themselves as part of these dynamics, or just a simple assertion of Scottish affiliation and identity, the important point is that it suggests a certain autonomy in relation to larger Twelver Shia institutions and organisations that are based primarily in England.

There is, thus, a duality of messages: one that speaks to outsiders and another that speaks to insiders. There are disconnects, of course — outsiders arguably would not fully understand the messages directed at them.³³ In Toronto, too, Schubel also notes that ‘despite the attempts of the community to use the julus for education about ... Islam, the press seemed more interested in asking questions about their reaction to the attempted Islamic coup that had just taken place in Trinidad. They were seemingly uninterested in the religious significance of the procession’ (1996: 198). Bøe and Flaskerud (2017) record the same kind of press indifference to the Muharram procession rituals in Norway. Pinault also describes a similar ‘ritual opacity’ (Grimes 1990) for observers of an Indian diasporic procession in Chicago in 1994 (2001: 218–219). Nonetheless, this duality is not limited to the messages on the banners. As we shall see in the next and final section, it is also reflected in speeches made in both English and Urdu, which not only elaborate upon these messages but also further extend the community’s engagement and interaction with itself and with outsiders.

Public speeches, private meanings

The middle of the march from and back to the *imambargah* was marked by a stop at the square that sits at the crossroads of Great Junction Street and the Foot of Leith Walk. The processionists filed into the square, the young men spreading out in rough rows parallel to the Foot of Leith Walk, while the women stood behind them. The remaining men formed concentric half circles, clustering around the foot of the statue of Queen Victoria. Several processionists holding ‘*alams*’ stood against the curved railing that demarcates the square from the crossroads. As before, these faced outward, clearly visible to both motor and pedestrian traffic. Even though traffic was flowing again, it was clear that there was a demonstration going on. All around the square, shoppers came in and out of stores, while other members of the public sat, stood, and milled about. After a further round of ritual chest-thumping by the younger men, several other men came forward to deliver speeches in quick succession.

The English speeches

In 2013, three speeches were delivered in English. Varying in accent and inflection they reflect the blended identities of the speakers and, therefore, the community as a whole.

³² A number of posters at the *imambargah* advertised these cities as sites for Muharram commemorations in 2014.

³³ As in the perception noted earlier about the procession being a protest about Christmas trees.

More importantly, the speeches demonstrate how the community not only articulated these identities to itself, but also presented and represented them to an ‘other’. In elaborating upon the banners’ English messaging in the procession proper, they seamlessly invoked the formative history of the community, transmitted its values and traditions, and spoke to wider concerns of contemporary relevance to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The first speech was delivered by a layman. It began explicitly with the narration of the story of Husayn and the fate of his immediate family (‘... he sacrificed his whole family, and in particular, at the end, even a six-month-old son, Ali al-Asghar’). It then rapidly coupled a historical martyrdom with modern notions of freedom and human rights:

This gathering, this processing today, we are reminding ourselves, and our host nation, that when it comes to the freedom and human rights, we the Shia Ali *ahl al-bayt* ... will always, stand shoulder to shoulder, in ensuring there is no encroachment, no adulteration, and no loss of human rights and freedom for the people, whoever they are, whatever they do.

In so doing, it also subtly made the point that despite seeming differences between religious ideas and secular ideals, they share the same values, that even though ‘the events of Karbala, and the sacrifice of Imam Husayn, for this freedom, took place 1400 years ago, but we the Shia ... will carry on marching, and reminding everybody, of how precious this freedom is’. Importantly, it carved out a public space for the expression of religious identity but situated it within the larger discourse of human rights and ‘freedom for the people, whoever they are, whatever they do’.

Embedded in this notion of identity was also the value of service to others in the remembrance of the imam. A key example of the practical application of service was evident in the community’s blood drives during this month, held under the wider auspice of the Islamic Unity Society, which organises the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign, and advertised on posters inside the *imambargah*.³⁴ These drives consciously transformed an older, controversial ritual of shedding one’s own blood through violent self-flagellation, practised by some Twelver Shia as penitence for historically failing Husayn, into a life-giving act of real impact and material consequence in the present.³⁵ In doing so, they also explicitly invoked Qur an 5:32 for sanction of the practice (‘And whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved the whole of

³⁴ See Spellman-Poots (2012: 46–48) for an account of the campaign in London, UK, and Bøe and Flakerud (2017) for Norway, which is sometimes ‘documented with “selfies”, thus making individual actions publicly known and part of a collective effort performed in Muharram’ (195). In Greece, however, Chatziprokopiou and Hatziprokopiou (2017) relate the political rejection of such a campaign.

³⁵ See Chelkowski (1994) for a general overview of the degrees of this ‘self-mortification’ ritual. Pinault (2001) provides ethnographic accounts of this practice and its contestation in a number of towns and cities in India. Spellman-Poots (2012) highlights the diversity of opinion on the issue among young Twelver Shia in London. More recently, Dogra (2017) illustrates how debates about its validity in its original contexts in Iran, Iraq and India have been transplanted to Twelver Shia communities of South Asian backgrounds in London and root an ongoing struggle for their authority and authenticity. In Greece, Chatziprokopiou and Hatziprokopiou (2017) document that the practice began privately as far back as 1978. The use of blades at the climax of the procession takes place ‘in the open air’ just outside one of the community’s premises, with official sanction since 2004 (2017: 204).

mankind’), reinforcing notions of Husayn’s intercessionary and salvific capacities through, as mentioned earlier, the foretold spilling of his blood at Karbala. In this vein, the speech carried on to make abundantly clear that this precious freedom ‘required the sacrifice, and the blood of Imam Husayn and his family’, and that the community be given ‘the *tawfiq* [strength/good fortune], to carry on, in the service and remembrance of Imam Husayn’.

Several proclamations in Urdu and Arabic followed these statements before this speech came to an end. The first of these proclamations enjoined the processionists to recite the *salawat*.³⁶ The remainder map onto the Muslim creed or *shahada*, the declaration of faith,³⁷ before calling one last time for the *salawat*.

The second speech was delivered by a cleric and added detail:

1400 years ago our imam, in the desert of Karbala he remembered you. He said, ‘O Shias, upon you is peace. O Shias, whenever you drink water remember my thirst, for I, was slaughtered, and wasn’t given even a single drop of water. Not only was I slaughtered, horses ran over my body’, and such was his state, that when Lady Zaynab came to his body, she didn’t recognise him.

It also took a deeper historical turn. However, in its explication of hadith of the Shia imams and Qur’anic verses,³⁸ it was clearly geared towards the community and, potentially, its younger members. Coupled with an emotional appeal and graphic first-person narration, this introspection became an integral and socialising practice of the faith, transmitting the community’s specific ethos and values.

Yet, here too, there was an element of reaching out beyond the community, for in narrating the sorrow of Husayn’s son and successor, Imam Sajjad, the cleric referenced the Qur’anic story of Joseph and Jacob. Noting how Jacob lost his sight from crying at having lost only one of his sons, Joseph,³⁹ the Imam, said the *mullah*, had chided a disciple for being unjust by asking why he had cried for 14 years when ‘in front of me, the kin of my family was slaughtered!’ Here, the speech drew parallels with the suffering of characters of an even older story, familiar to believers in the other Abrahamic traditions, thereby seamlessly melding two different pasts. As before, the speech came to an end with a processionist enjoining the crowd to recite the *salawat*.

The third speech was delivered by another layman. It began by welcoming ‘you, the sons of Husayn and daughters of Zaynab!’ before specifically invoking the notion of ‘not [being] a minority’. But, of course, they were — a crowd of 150 does not a majority make. Twice, the speaker proclaimed that they should ‘not be undeterred [sic] by the like [later, ‘lack’] of our numbers’, and juxtaposed this with the defiant assertion

³⁶ Supplicating the Divine by invoking His attributes is part of the regular practice of the faith for Muslims of all stripes and colours, as is calling upon Him to bless Muhammad and his descendants. The latter practice, called *salawat*, is often understood as an appeal to God for Muhammad to intercede for his community. See also Rippin (2014). Shia Muslims have the additional recourse of calling upon their imams in this intercessionary capacity as designated inheritors of the mantle of the Prophet. Invoking Husayn, the martyr par excellence of Islam, thus comes naturally for many Muslims as part of their respective communities of interpretation.

³⁷ To which the Shia under discussion here, as elsewhere, add the shibboleth, ‘Ali, the commander of the faithful, is the friend of God’.

³⁸ E.g. Qur’an 42:23 on kindness to the Prophet’s family.

³⁹ Qur’an 12:84

that they were not a minority. In doing so, the speaker effectively reminded the processionists that even though few of Husayn's companions remained to fight by his side,⁴⁰ and thereby met their tragic ends, they ultimately possessed a moral and spiritual triumph over their executioners. Husayn had two options:

One is to unsheath the sword, or the second is humiliation. We will never be humiliated.⁴¹ Imam unsheathes his sword. And he took everything on. Imam said, Ali ibn Abi Talib said, 'Let them be. If, I, were to die, and be burned, and then, my ashes were to be scattered in the air, and if that, happened to me, 1000 times, then I will not leave you! *Ya Husayn!* [O Husayn!] *Labbayk ya Husayn!* [I am here, O Husayn!]

At this point everyone joined in to the call to Husayn, repeating it seven times, before trailing away.

Taken as a whole, the three speeches summarised here were characterised by the religious, social and political concerns of the historical tragedy of Karbala. Importantly, however, they all made direct links between this history and action in the present day. This living and lived tradition is a key example of another kind of practice of faith; one where action in this world for reward in the next is not merely limited to rote ritual. Linguistically, the speeches also employ the technique of code-switching between Arabic, English and Urdu. This helps bridge the gap not only between past and present but also between internal and external audiences. As Bøe and Flaskerud observe for Muharram processions in Norway, these 'events perform a dual function as ritualised mourning and as public expressions of a Norwegian Shia identity, which is presented as inherently non-violent. The new Shia voice in the public urban space thus use well-established ritual practices as platforms for communication with fellow citizens' (2017: 193).

The speeches also invoke an abiding pledge of spiritual allegiance rooted in ideas of justice, and the importance of standing up against persecution, oppression, tyranny and injustice whatever the cost. These speeches are all the more relevant for the contemporary anti-Shia backdrop against which they were made, and of which Shia Muslims in Edinburgh or elsewhere could not have been unaware — Shia pilgrims undertaking the hajj to Mecca from America just a month earlier in October 2013, for example, were widely reported as having been attacked by English-speaking extremists and told, 'Our [holy pilgrimage] will be complete once we have killed you, ripped out your hearts and eaten them, and [then] raped your women', before shouting, 'We're going to do Karbala all over again' (Husain 2014).

The Urdu sermon

The English speeches were followed by a sermon in Urdu. Differing in tenor from the earlier speeches, the Urdu sermon was about twice as long as the three English speeches combined. Apart from Husayn, it invoked a number of figures, notably Zaynab, Fatima and Ali al-Asghar, amidst frequent interjections of '*Labbayk ya Husayn*' and '*Be shakt*', that is, 'indeed, verily, truly'. Yazid also featured prominently and parallels were drawn

⁴⁰ Seventy-two, according to Shia tradition.

⁴¹ This was delivered dramatically in staccato fashion.

between him and the Pharaoh ('They continue to come in varying guises. Recognise them. Test your mettle and humility'). It was also much more emotional, vehement, and vivid. This was reflected back by the processionists' responses, which were not only louder and more vehement than for the English speeches, but also more frequent. This is partly explained by the fact that the story and the message have a longer history of inhabiting languages like Arabic, Persian and Urdu than they have English. As such, it is rhetorically more emotive and fiery in those languages. Its prose, cadence and style, too, are similarly affected. Since the necessity of communication in English is more recent, translating the message and adapting it to the rhetoric of English is understandably harder. Nonetheless, both kinds of speeches were characterised by a staccato delivery, dramatic pauses, and slow, long-drawn out inflections.

There were also repeated supplications and emotional exhortations which elicited *amens* (*illahi ameen*). Much reference was made of 'the world' (*duniya*) and 'people' (*duniya walo*, lit. 'people of the world'), to justice, to tyranny and oppression, to innocence, good and evil, as well as the necessity of bearing witness to injustices, past and present. There were also assertions of the elevated role and nature of Husayn ('The protector of God's Oneness is Husayn. The second name for justice is Husayn ... The second name for prayer is Husayn. The second name of crying is Husayn. If it were said of the hajj that it is Husayn, then Husayn is the hajj and that is the truth. All that is good in the world is of Husayn').⁴² That these sentiments were given public expression is surprising, particularly given traditional Sunni discomfort of this idea. Nonetheless, the value of Husayn's sacrifice is made very clear — his blood and death continue to give life; and so failure is sublimated into success. As with the English speeches, the Urdu sermon came to a close with the same proclamations, followed by prayers for the prosperity of the followers of Husayn, and the ruin of the followers of Yazid, before finally ending with the *salawat*.

It may be argued that being extempore speeches, they should not be read too closely. However, precisely because they were public and likely unrehearsed, they are more revealing. They were pitched at varying levels, to different audiences and represented overlapping identities and ways of being. This public-private dichotomy and layering of the procession is subversive because the duality of messages serves both insiders and outsiders. Yet, even as it steeled members of the minority community against potentially negative reactions from the majority, its relative safety also reinforced the rightness of the procession and its associated rituals. In turn, whatever the degrees of their ritual opacities (Grimes 1990), this allowed the community to express itself freely thereby increasing its confidence in its own public identity and the presentation of itself to an internal as well as external 'other'.

Conclusion

Much research remains to be done on the Shia in Scotland and of their spaces of worship and gathering. In attempting to fill this gap, this article has discussed an

⁴² See, for example, Pak-Shiraz (2011: 123–125) for innovative manifestations of this status (and quasi-official resistance) in contemporary Iran, as well as Amir-Moezzi (2011:103–132) for a wider historical treatment on the divine nature of the imam.

alternative example of a Muslim religious space in the form of an ethnographic study of a Muharram procession in a public street in Edinburgh, Scotland. It demonstrated how the procession provides a sense of continuity of tradition in the West, fulfilling not only a keenly-felt ritual requirement, but also the community's aspirations for public visibility and recognition. Furthermore, it traced the development and change in these aspirations in the form the procession took over the years to educate and engage with the wider community within which it lived. Although the procession is clearly an expression of Shia ritual practice, it was not explicitly presented in opposition to the majority Sunni interpretation of Islam. Nonetheless, it made visible, if not comprehensible, a ritual practice that is of fundamental importance to a significant minority of Muslims, but is almost practically invisible or unknown to the wider public. By analysing the public speeches made during the course of the procession, this study also demonstrated the duality of its messages and audiences. This duality speaks to insider and outsider, to the past as well as the present. In doing so, a formative historical event in the past is relived and revived to make sense of the anxieties and uncertainties of the present, and to produce a space where tradition and modernity coincide to create — and sustain — faith.

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