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# Digital Technology and Pilgrimage: Shi'i Rituals of Arba'in in Iraq

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## Abstract

Since the collapse of the Ba'athist regime after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Shi'i Muslim rituals, in particular the annual commemorations of Arba'in, have seen a revival in popularity. Based on two fieldwork studies conducted during Arba'in in 2016 and 2017, the present study attempts to examine the changing characteristics of the rituals. It does so by studying the increasing digitization of Arba'in as a commemorative pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq, to the shrine of the Prophet's grandson, Imam Husayn. This ethnographic study argues for a mediated conception of Arba'in pilgrimage in that digital technologies serve as an embodied site of interaction in shaping shared experiences based on networked sociability. Examining the intimate connections between "physical" and "virtual" spaces, as in the case of *Mawakib* or gatherings shaped in the form of temporary lodgings in the course of walking processions, the study argues that various uses of digital technologies for pilgrimage are less about means of devotional expression than a series of experiences of digital significance. The paper makes the final argument that the digital practices embedded in ritual processions are acted upon to enhance experience, which increasingly fuses technology with ritual action.

## Keywords

Arba'in – Husayn – Shi'i Islam – ritual – pilgrimage – space – performance – Iraq

## 1 Introduction

This paper offers a study on the increasing digitization of Shi'ī Muslim rituals of Arba'in, observed on the fortieth day after the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the battlefield of Karbala, Iraq; his shrine here is visited by Shi'ī Muslims around the world. This ethnographic study argues for a mediated conception of Arba'in pilgrimage in that digital technologies serve as an embodied site of interaction through which ritual experience undergoes a major change. In the ritual context, digital technologies are less about communication tools and more about mediated experiences of shared presence, in which new forms of practicing pilgrimage become realized. The paper ultimately makes a theoretical argument that digital technology embedded in ritual practice are acted upon to enhance pilgrimage experience, which increasingly fuses technology with ritual action.

While such mediated processes are part of an increasing shift toward pervasive computing, the argument proposed here is that the Arba'in rituals in 2016 and 2017 emerge as distinct commemorative experiences that fuse the ritual and the digital in networked ways. The reference to “fuse” does not imply a mere interaction between the “material” and “sacred,” as though the two are inherently distinct. Rather, the digital, in the form of networking and virtual immersion, has become a new aspect of the experience of pilgrimage in location-specific ways, enacted by actors who are mobile across localities. Here, the focus of locality is on the Najaf–Karbala route in Iraq, where Shi'ī pilgrims across the world observing the commemorative tradition by staging various ceremonies for the martyred Imam have steadily grown in numbers since the fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003. Karbala, as the place of Imam Husayn's burial, plays a paramount role for Arba'in, but so do various performances that embody the rituals as the most popular *ziyarat* (visitation) traditions among Shi'ī Muslims.

The term “fuse” also refers to Arba'in, in its current practice in the Najaf–Karbala route, as a reconstruction of religious action, augmented and mobile in the flow of information and data marked by enhanced sensibilities and affects across space and time. Changing ritual actions, in particular in their Arba'in form, involves using mediated technologies to bring about shared experiences directed at both the mundane and the transcendental. The mediated technologies cultivate an environment, or an “ambient commons,” as Malcolm McCullough describes it, in a rediscovery of “surroundings” enhanced by sensibilities through redistributing and incorporating digital communication in lived contexts shaped by an inescapable world of information (McCullough, 2015, p. 7). This paper is deeply informed by a philosophical position that views

religion and technology as inseparable (Stolow, 2005, 2013; Vries & Weber, 2001). Such an approach primarily understands the relationship between religion and technology in terms of changing experiences in lived contexts, and the assumed religion and technology divide as epistemological (Stolow, 2013, p. 9). In other words, meaning is constructed through technologies that render the sacred possible in ritualized practices.

The paper is divided into four sections. While all sections give accounts of the rituals, the first section primarily focuses on contextualizing Arba'in and the digitization of the ceremonies since the late 2000s. Arba'in is a complex set of ritual traditions that, depending on the local or national groups, includes elaborate rituals of informal and formal processional practices. Such traditions, though, are contingent to changing historical circumstances. Accordingly, the second section provides a theoretical–historical framework of Arba'in in the context of technological transformations since the nineteenth century, studying how interactive digital devices and sacred/mundane landscape become seamless and ultimately inseparable. The third and fourth sections examine specific cases observed in the field in 2016 and 2017 of Arba'in practices that have been informed by digital technological practices. The focus on cellphones in this section underlines distinct shared experiences of ritual spirituality, while the discussion on *Mawakib*, as gatherings in the course of walking procession, primarily as resting venues, focuses on ways such spaces with gender implications involve digital practices in the experience of Arba'in. These four sections, however, selectively study the relationship between technology and walking rituals in the days leading up to Arba'in.

A note on method: it is important to acknowledge that Arba'in studied here primarily focuses on gender-specific rituals with distinct spatial domains designated for men in the course of rituals. The ethnography conducted in November 2016 and 2017 was restricted mostly to male participants, which limited this study to how male ritual observants performed pilgrimage in close connection with their personal technologies. The study was also limited in a temporal sense, since the calendrical rites take place in a short span of time, although this is an inherent feature of all ritual actions. The temporal feature underscores patterns of change in ritual performances which an observer can identify through time. We had the privileged perspective of observing certain changes in technology use over a span of two years. Yet, such privilege also includes us as scholars involved in an ethnography of Arba'in with an authority to uncover meaning in the events that we observed. Such ethnographic authority has institutional implications grounded in class, gender, and nationality, as both authors of this study are of Iranian origin. The positionality mentioned here is meant to underline an awareness of our situated observations while attempting to look beyond them for critical analysis of the case in question.

The present fieldwork primarily involved participant observation surveys with the aim of gathering qualitative accounts of mostly male subjects. Though researcher engagement involves direct participation in the course of rituals, the present ethnography includes—based on informed consent of those interviewed—a series of informal questions and answers gathered during the ceremonies by one of the researchers who conducted the ethnography in Iraq. Such expressions were recorded by cellphone as photos and video. It is important here to note the role of digital technology in mediating the knowledge produced during and acquired through fieldwork interviews in our ethnography. The digital archival method, we suggest, does not hinder but rather highlights the argument the study makes, that is, that digital technology increasingly serves as a new aspect of Arba'in complex in terms of how they are ritually expressed and also archived, recorded, and recalled for diverse purposes.

## 2 Contextualizing Arba'in Pilgrimage

Arba'in marks the fortieth day after 'Ashura, the tenth day in the Islamic lunar month of Muharram when Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, was slain in the battle of Karbala, Iraq, in 680 C.E.. The fortieth day, which falls in the month of Safar, marks the temporal end of the ritual mourning period of Imam Husayn for millions of Shi'ī Muslims around the world, and elaborately observed in daily/nightly mourning ceremonies.<sup>1</sup> Performed through several time-sequenced rituals in devotion to the martyred Imam and his companions and family, Arba'in ceremonies reenact a cosmic day of bereavement during which the loss of the Prophet's beloved grandson, who is believed to have fought against the tyrannical forces of the Umayyad ruler Yazid (647–683), serves in part as a symbol of political resistance and revolutionary zeal for Shi'ī Muslims throughout history (Dabashi, 2010, 2011). As non-obligatory rituals, mourning performances are also about the ritual affirmation of a collective sense of sociocultural solidarity among Shi'ī communities, whose sacred history have revolved around the tragedy of Karbala and the martyrdom of Husayn as the rightful inheritor of the Islamic caliphate, in line with the 'Alid bloodline. At the core of sociocultural solidarity is the dramatization of Karbala, which entails complexities in meaning according to individual and communal experiences and marks the fluidity of performance, its ups and

<sup>1</sup> The paper focuses primarily on Twelvers, the largest Shi'ī branch, the majority of which is in Iran and Iraq, and where Arba'in performances take place during the month of Safar.

downs, according to shifting socio-historical and geographical contexts (Schubel, 1993; also see Ali, Heinhold, & Shanneik, 2017, pp. 145–157).

The revival of Arbaʿin as a public ritual since 2003 is exemplary of ritual's flexibility, in line with the growing reach for visibility by Shiʿi traditions after years of Baʿathist suppression (Luizard, 2012). Central to such revival has been the stability of Iraqi democracy, albeit deeply troubled by ethnic and sectarian politics. The growing popularity of the commemorative ceremonies can be credited to a rise of open routes to Iraq, where the two greatest shrines of Shiʿi Islam are located; for many Shiʿi Muslims, however, especially Iranians, such travel is not always safe. Despite sectarian violence, at its peak in 2006, millions of Shiʿi pilgrims have taken part in the pilgrimage marches, traveling from South Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Syria to Iraq in commemoration of the fortieth day. As large crowds visit the shrines of Husayn and his half-brother, ʿAbbas ibn Ali (647–680), in Karbala, many congregate first in Najaf, where ʿAli ibn Abi Talib (599–661), the father of Husayn and the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, is buried.

The symbolic connection between the two cities plays a critical role in the performance of the annual ceremony. Husayn and his father, the Prophet's cousin, ʿAli, represent the *ahl al-bayt* (Household of the Prophet), who not only have direct blood ties to Muhammad through his daughter, Fatima, but also represent the “socioethical model of sacrifice and faith” based on the battle of Karbala, or what Karen Ruffle calls “*husaini ethics*” (2011, pp. 29–30). Based on this idealized perception of *ahl al-bayt*, pilgrims march on foot, at times bare-foot, along the asphalt roads that connect southern Iraqi cities, where Shiʿi Muslims continue to represent the majority of the population. The celebration of Arbaʿin reaches its climax on the fortieth day, as pilgrims, in a mix of joy and sorrow, reach Karbala, where millions perform pilgrimage to the shrine of the two revered brothers.

The Arbaʿin marches are one of the world's largest pilgrimage rites—even larger than Hajj—and also one of the most visible in a collective context. Estimates of Arbaʿin pilgrims vary from 6–7 million to 15–17 million, 2 million of whom are Iranians, but the numbers are considerably higher than for Hajj, which was 2.4 million in 2018 (Cockburn, 2017). The marches combine visual displays of symbolic–physical processions of mourning directed towards the visitation of Husayn's shrine in Karbala. Although the place of origin may vary, the specific marching rituals take place on a road towards Karbala, where the story is reenacted through sermons, prayers, and commemorative ceremonies near or inside the shrine. Walking on foot signifies a blessing (Amin, 2016, 2018). It stretches sacred temporality into physical space as a path or a road; the temporal sequence of walking on foot serves as a performance that combines prayers, songs, and chants, which lead to the site of visitation through

progressive physical comportment. The ritual walk in many ways constitutes a (temporary) hold on mundane time and space, a freezing of earthly existence, with the fortieth day representing the final phase of a mourning ceremony before the lunar calendar renews the monthly cycle.

In Shi'ī Islamic tradition, Arba'in also holds significant religious cultural value (Jafarian, 2013). It is the most celebrated cultural event and ritual along with Muharram ceremonies: ten days of mourning during which Husayn and his followers are believed to have died a martyr's death at Karbala. The number forty also has sacred significance. In numerological terms within Abrahamic traditions, forty is symbolic of a period of penance and rebirth. In Islamic tradition, forty represents a completion period in maturity of intelligence (*aql*) (Quran, Surah al-Ahqaf, 46:15) and is also a number associated with awaiting or preparing to complete a task. The prayers of a faithful individual who has committed the sinful act of intoxication require forty days of waiting before becoming valid, though prayers can be performed during the period as God is believed to be forgiven and merciful. Certain prayers require forty days to be performed for their completion. In the prophetic tradition, Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai when he received God's commandments and Muhammad received the revelation when he was forty.

As a social event, Arba'in is inherently context dependent, and it is important to acknowledge the specific time-based settings of Arba'in under study. Depending on the city, as farther cities such as Basra would require an earlier departure time, the 2016 commemorations occurred four days prior to Sunday evening, November 20, and ended the evening of Monday, November 21, when pilgrims walking from Najaf finalized their visitation procession with prayers and lamentations for Imam Husayn and the Household of the Prophet at Karbala. Based on the Islamic lunar calendar, with each month changing on the new lunar cycle, the 2017 ceremonies were observed four days prior to Thursday, November 9, and Friday, November 10, when millions thronged the shrine-city of Karbala for Arba'in.

The temporal context significantly appropriates the days of gathering and walking prior to the day of Arba'in. In this sense, the rituals are stretched in a series of day/night events. The observations and interviews in this study, therefore, include not just public gatherings at the shrines but, more importantly, the elaborate walking processions of pilgrims, carrying flags and other religious material objects, who merge from various localities in a long march over the span of days. The path of the processions uniquely consists of various public services for the pilgrims, which range from public bathrooms to medical services, many of which are provided by civic religious associations but also by the Iranian and Iraqi governments, though the latter offers far less services.

Equally important to note is that the 2016 and 2017 Arba'īn rituals occurred during a period of relative enhanced security. The October 2017 fall of Raqqa, the last stronghold of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria, had already initiated the Iraqi military forces takeover, with the support of the Shi'i militias, of Ramadi in late 2015. The battle for Fallujah in June 2016 and the beginnings of the battle for Mosul in October of the same year consolidated Iraqi military power, especially in southern Iraq, where Karbala and Najaf are located. Iranian military collaboration with the Shi'i militias in their fight against ISIL had brought to view the increasing ties between Baghdad and Tehran. Since 2017, specifically, Iranians have felt safer in Iraq, with many Shi'i Iraqis admiring Iran for protecting their country from ISIL although nationalism continues to draw divisions in commerce, politics, and language.

In light of Iraq's increasing securitization, Iranians have increasingly made up the largest national group of pilgrims because of safer routes across the border with Iraq. However, among many Arba'īn pilgrims, one can find Afghani, Bahraini, Indian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Pakistani, Saudi, and diaspora groups from other parts of the world, including Europe and North America. In terms of gender and social class, pilgrims are relatively equally balanced in number between men and women and also come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, though with growing participation across nationalities in recent years (Luizard, 2012, pp. 161–162; Hamdan 2012). Iraqi women, though, comprise the largest segment of the female pilgrim population. In terms of social class, there are professionals, merchants, and students, mostly in their twenties, who attend the ceremonies individually, with families, or as traveling groups.

### 3 Mobile Pilgrimage: A Historical-Theoretical Look

The term “mobile pilgrimage” may appear a tautology at best, since one can argue that pilgrimage is always already “mobile.” Pilgrimage is, after all, a rite of passage which, as Victor and Edith Turner have famously shown, revolves around traversing boundaries, regions, and, more importantly, individual and collective identities in the form of transgression and ultimately reintegration through the ritual process (Turner, 1974; Turner & Turner, 1978). In *ziyarat* pilgrimages, for example, the rite of passage implicates the changing of status for female and male members of a community. Such identity-transformation primarily takes place on return from pilgrimage travel when a pilgrim undergoes enhancement of his or her distinct status identity embedded in symbolic significance of the experienced ritual, that is, material and spiritual power associated with the saint, as observed by Eickelman (1976) in his study of shrines in Boujad, Morocco. To go on pilgrimage, one undergoes a social transformation

through mobile action that allows change to take place in one's identity across time and space (see Nikolaisen, 2004).

Because of its required body-oriented mode of ritual performance, however, Arba'in mobility may seem to defy technological transformation in lived experience in the ritual context. In the particular case of Karbala visitations, little technological apparently is employed in the physical processional process. Likewise, performances of Arba'in have partly revolved around the rituality of processional walking, at times barefoot, but mostly in groups, to the Karbala shrines. The embodied practice of walking entails a display of penitence that evokes a sense of authenticity of intention, a testimony to the act of mourning the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, whose suffering can be felt centuries after the tragedy of Karbala. Arba'in mobility, in complex ways, is essentially about physical and emotional expression of grief, performed in the form of walking on a road (or roads) to Karbala. However, and in particular since the mid-twentieth century, Arba'in processions have been intimately linked with networks of modern transportation, such as airplanes, buses, and cars, which have directly enhanced the urban expansion of the Iraqi cities of Karbala and Najaf despite military conflicts since the 1990s.

The advent of transportation technologies has also enhanced connectivity and, since 2003, has changed the rituals in the way pilgrims experience travel and visitation. How connectivity can be described in terms of pilgrimage experiences of travel has to do with contraction of space. Yet connectivity, in this perceptual sense, operates in terms of not merely how pilgrims come to network through diverse media, software, hardware, and interfaces, but also a perceived capacity for interconnection across mundane and spiritual realms through technologies of transportation (Bunt, 2016, p. 231). This capacity is particularly true in the case of digital technologies, which, similar to telegraphy in the nineteenth century, underline connectivity of individuals across networks in forging an intimate interplay between religion and technology (Stolow, 2005, 2013). Digital mediated action, such as the use of cellphones during the pilgrimage processional marches, facilitate what Richard Menke describes, in his reading of Henry James' *In the Cage* (1898), as a "collapsing [of] distance into a proximity that was discursive, technological mediated, and strangely invisible" (Menke, 2000, p. 987). The compression of distance underlines a distinct form of connectivity that heightens a sense of shared spiritual experience in the performance of pilgrimage.

The 2016 and 2017 performances identify an increase in the digitization of Arba'in, and they do so in terms of not merely advent of electronic computing technologies but also shaping of social proximity in the form of the co-presence of a networked pilgrims across distant regions. By "co-presence," we mean an embedded experience of instantaneous and synchronous



communication, one inherently including practices of reproduction and dissemination through archiving and recording. Such forms of presence, first and foremost, identify material practices of possession, consumption, and exchange. A cellphone carried, used, sold, or even lost or stolen from a pilgrim underscores a material matrix of technological practices in the ritual process that overlap with other spheres of life beyond Arba'in, where cultural, political, and social processes intertwine in complex ways.

The notion of co-presence as an extension of digital technology also entails a phenomenological aspect with socio-cognitive implications. The use of cellphones, for example, has become increasingly situated in everyday practices of pilgrims and their varied modes of sensibilities, emotions, and desires in social contexts. A pilgrim uses the technology not only to connect, communicate, record, archive, and even engage in spiritual experience but also to foster awareness, a sense of desire, and even a dependency on the technology used for communication. This phenomenological dimension embodies the pilgrim in a particular way in lived space. It brings about a shared atmosphere that Malcolm McCullough describes as "ambient common," or an enhanced propensity toward a "superabundance" of mediated information grounded in interface cultures (McCullough, 2013, pp. 7–24).

In the case of Arba'in observed for this study, there are at least two features in which "mobile pilgrimage" becomes apparent in its digitized forms: first, walking rituals and, second, *Mawakib*, or gatherings in the form of temporary lodging for pilgrims. We begin with the mode of walking, as pilgrims' most essential performance displaying commitment to Husayn's memory in Arba'in. It is in this stage of ritual performance that we discuss a situated digitization of rituals in the production of pilgrimage space. Noteworthy here is the interplay between digital technology and pilgrimage experience in the act of the walking procession, and accordingly the way embodied spaces of digital interaction are formed in the situational contexts in which the male Iranian pilgrims find themselves.

#### 4 The Arba'in Digital Walk

In Shi'i history, pilgrimage of shrine visitation on foot, especially barefoot, has symbolized a commitment to suffering in allegiance to the Imams and the Prophet. Though suffering can be redemptive, the corporeal ordeal of experiencing grief includes an embodied expression of loss that renders faith and devotion to the holy family more transparent on personal and collective levels (Ayoub, 1978). In a symbolically significant way, suffering for commemorating the martyrdom of Imams may serve as an act of purification. But,

more importantly, pilgrimage to the shrines of Imams, exemplified by pain and endurance, also represents a way of staging piety in order to communicate a spiritual sentiment, one grounded in the cosmic loss of a holy figure, namely, Husayn.

When in 1601 Shah Abbas I (1571–1629) began his walking pilgrimage from Isfahan to Mashhad on *ziyarat* to the shrine of the eighth Imam of Twelver Shi'ism, 'Ali ibn Musa al-Ridha (766–818), astrological and historical accounts in written texts testify to the ritual performance as a way of legitimizing royal authority as well as communicating the personal devotion of the king to the holy Imam. In these devotional observations, despite motivational variations, staging the rituals as walking pilgrimage serves as a dramatic medium through which to communicate piety and coagulate personal connection with the holy Imams. While the 1601 ritual walks found a media stage in the historiographical texts of Iskandar Beg Munshi (1560–1632), the 2016 and 2017 versions exhibit ritual performance in “personalized” technologies that self-record for staging experience of pilgrimage mobility across time and space. The “modern exercise” of mobile usage during the walking rituals appears to involve an individuated set of practices that range from cellphone conversation to taking selfies, staging self-visibility for global accessibility. But what constitutes such individuated process?

Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman have described such personal connectivity, enhanced by new technologies, as “networked individualism” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, pp. 12–20). The relationships forged according to individuated practices underline a new form of sociability that fosters personal interaction in long-distance contexts. Such interactions have become more fluid as a result of not only the advent of new technologies but also the way people reshape their lived milieus and by extension norms of interaction. Networked relationships of ritual kinds, in particular in its Arba'in form, are no exception.

The walking distance (76 kilometers) from Najaf to Karbala is notable as a site for the ways networked relations by devotees are fostered through cellphones. The extended period of the walk performances is primarily due to the numerous stops pilgrims make on the way to Karbala, with the duration of the walks taking on average three days. Cellphones were integral to Arba'in in 2016 and 2017. Handsets not only are owned by nearly all (male and female of various age groups) pilgrims, but are also increasingly becoming “smarter” and cheaper with the growing Huawei and Samsung markets in both Iran and Iraq. The rising use of smart phones, along with tablets, which are also used by pilgrims, is significant as they feature mobile applications, in particular social media apps, which are used for data collection and sharing of personalized visuals through internet connections. The feature of sharing, in this sense, appears in the form of photos and video for personal networking between

traveling pilgrims and their friends of family at home. Cellphone usage reinforces mobile connectivity as ritual walks create multiple networks in the short duration of pilgrimage walks.

With the shift to more internet connectivity, cellphones have intervened as networks of shared experience. Cellphone videos are used by pilgrims to record their ritual walks from Najaf to Karbala, bringing about a sense of shared media space between the ritual performers and those who witness the pilgrimage through audio and visual communication in “real time,” in particular family and friends. Pilgrims also use cellphone to listen to religious sermons, songs, and chants in the formation of what Charles Hirschkind calls “sensorium,” a certain mode of embodied experiences mediated by (audio) technology (2006, p. 27). In what can be described as “digital pilgrimagescapes,” pilgrimage becomes an experience of ambient interface with live video streaming, simultaneous and interactive, which has particularly become popular on Facebook since early 2016.

The temporal phases of the rituals include different ways of using digital technologies. For example, the audio use of cellphones is mostly evident among *shabro* pilgrims, or those who perform the pilgrimage walk during nighttime. This acoustic experience in the dark enhances the sensation of spirituality through the audio media landscape constructed by recorded or live streaming of audio performances such as chants or prayers. However, photo or video media recording mostly takes place in the daytime, when pilgrims walk in groups carrying symbolic flags that are meant to evoke a visual experience for both the participants and their audiences. Selfies, in particular, have become a fad in recent years and are now a normal part of the processions, though they cause displeasure among older pilgrims, who see them as undermining the Islamic ethos of humility and self-effacing. Figure 1 shows an Iraqi teen taking a selfie for friends and family.

The idea behind selfies is to make “connections” with those back at home, wherever that may be, and in doing so to encourage their long-distance participation in the processions. But also, as Figure 1 shows with the man in the background and in Figure 2, many have other family members take their photos during the processions and send personal pictures to relatives along with informal texts. Short message services (SMS), through online social media apps such as Imo, Telegram messenger, or WhatsApp, significantly play a more prominent role than Facebook and other social networking apps, keeping pilgrims busy as they immerse themselves in mobile texting while performing walks in groups of friends or family.

Though mobile phones are mostly used for personal and at times group communication in the marching processions on the dusty road to Karbala, the mere presence of cellphones creates a felt awareness of digital connectivity with the pilgrims. Beyond use, the technology is perceived as an extension of



FIGURE 1 Photography – especially selfies – is a favorite activity for young pilgrims while elders pay less attention to these activities, though some also do participate.  
PHOTO BY MOHSEN AMIN, NOVEMBER 2016

family and friends into the present ritual time. Since the walking rituals are informal, pilgrims can casually call their loved ones, friends, colleagues, or neighbors to narrate, report, and engage in small talk about their travel experiences. But use of mobile phones are also an occasion for the exchange of SIM cards, especially for Iraqi SIM cards, which are cheaper and have better internet reception than Iranian ones. Despite random Wi-Fi drops, the use of SIM cards plays a key role in the ways pilgrims communicate during the course of their walking performances, as they purchase bus tickets, though lesser extent hotel reservations, and other travel-related activities on their cellphones.

Regardless of the kind of internet usage, there is an aspect of entertainment in the use of cellphones. As a male Iranian described the 2017 ceremonies, “you can’t just have *rowzeh khani* [ritual sermons] or *sine-zani* [ritual of chest beating]. It gets boring when they walk this long path.” He added, “using these



FIGURE 2 Iranian Pilgrims taking photos on the road.  
PHOTO BY MOHSEN AMIN, NOVEMBER 2016

technologies help the caravans, especially the younger crowd, to slow down and reflect more on Arba'in." As a positive development, the personal features of mobile connectivity, he suggested, are primarily about letting others who are absent participate with him in the ceremonies. A 63-year-old male pilgrim from Varamin, Iran, in his first pilgrimage walk to Karbala, also echoed a similar sentiment but focused on the personal aspect of keeping in touch with family. Amid the noise of the crowd, he described taking photos of himself as something deeply personal.

I have three kids who are waiting for my return. My wife is waiting for me. If I disconnect after three days, they will get worried. They'll wonder if I'm alive. Has he arrived nor not? Is he ill or not? In any case, families need to know about each other and remain in contact. We shouldn't be thinking of ourselves and just walk for ten days without regards for our family.

The underlying attitude toward connectivity for the sake of family is an important feature of personal networking evident in the walking rituals.

In recent years, the road between Najaf and Karbala has also undergone changes in media connectivity. Arba'in in both 2016 and 2017 saw a proliferation of several social media practices that range from live posting of photos and videos to enhanced internet access, provided by private agencies and also supported by the Iraqi and Iranian states. For travel from Najaf to Karbala during Arba'in, several Iranian state agencies provided "free internet" for pilgrims throughout various pilgrimage routes to Karbala (Gerdab, 2016). These agencies, led by the "Headquarter for the Restoration of Holy Shrines," work closely with their Iraqi state counterparts to help pilgrims on the road between Najaf and Karbala. In the two Arba'ins under study, several public services, including free Wi-Fi hotspots, were provided to pilgrims, creating opportunities for Shi'ī devotees from different nationalities to gather for rest and services before continuing with the walk.

Figure 3 shows internet portals along the Najaf–Karbala route in 2016, with a poster on the station that reads "*dar fazay-i majazi, sarbaz-i imamat bash*" ("in virtual space remain a soldier of Imam"). The statement appears above a pair of combat boots viewed from above and over an image graphically designed in the shape of a Wi-Fi sign.



FIGURE 3 "In virtual space remain a soldier of Imam" written on the body of Free wifi stations.

PHOTO BY MOHSEN AMIN, NOVEMBER 2016



Although the internet hub was not functioning at the time the photo in Figure 3 was taken, free internet stations serve as a temporal marker of digital connection among pilgrims. It is also a reminder that in digital spaces, a devotee should adhere to an ethics of conduct based on the Shi'i ideal of Imamāt, or the divine rulership of Imams, descendants of the Prophet.

With the adoption of mobile devices in Arba'in, intimacy of relations, in particular among family and friends, has become more coordinated to a greater degree of spatial proximity. In a sense, proximity involves a presence of self that is closely associated with the technological object through which communication across long-distances becomes possible. With three SIM cards and two cellphones, in the 2016 Arba'in a young Iranian man described his cellphone in terms of a deep affinity with the internet, as his connections with friends and family relied solely on this personal technology. He joins thousands of other men who also feel an affective connection with the internet, perceived as an ultimate means of communication with friends and loved ones. This is particularly relevant as internet use attains further "live" dimensions through televising and recording "real time" images and motion on route. Equally important as the "live" is the archival dimension; as another young Iranian man described, the recordings during the walks can be used for making personal memories, not to be shared by others. But the archiving, as he quickly explained, is also done because large audio and visual data cannot be sent because of limited mobile data or Wi-Fi speeds.

In what we call "digital walk," ritual marches, as by and large collective practices, are simultaneously bound up in close-knit family and friend connections through personal technology. The digitized is therefore an intimate space to which pilgrims are bound through the act of walking and affective experiences of connectivity through media reproduction in the form of audio, photo, SMS, and video. Mobile pilgrimage in its digitized form is precisely about the intimate connections between the inseparable lines of technological mobility and shifting space of pilgrimage, spaces that are inherently intimate and immediate despite physical distance and temporal delay.

## 5 *Mawkib as Virtual Ziyarat*

Arba'in walk, in its digital form, is a social practice, centered around the way digital technology enables ritual participants' involvement within multiple networks and, more prominently, personal ones. The personal networking feature, as demonstrated in the previous examples, does not limit the participants to engaging with other networks. With multiple modes of communication and

convergence of media practices, more complex forms of pilgrimage experience become possible in “real time.” The level of interdependence and connectivity between the so-called online and offline users substantiates the communicative reach. And such reach can develop around new social spaces where interpersonal activities become possible beyond face-to-face encounters in a domain that can be identified as virtual.

The virtual is marked by technology-enhanced experience for alternative reality. In the case of pilgrimage and the internet, as Christopher Helland and Mark MacWilliams have shown, ritual observations undergo change from the everyday-situated context to a distant site of pilgrimage (Helland, 2013; MacWilliams, 2004). “Online pilgrimage” serves as a symbolic alternative to the ritual experience as a physical journey, and more importantly as a shared experience of rituality through which physical relations with the sacred are altered in performatively complex ways.

The virtual becomes real primarily because of its shared experience, which gains validity through interaction with others in the common space of digital connectivity. Though online pilgrimage involves a distinct internet public, shared and felt on a networked level, there is also a personalized experience of pilgrimage space, as Edward Relph would observe in his discussion on urban space, in constructing geographic imaginaries “by *paths* and routes which reflect the directions and intensities of intentions and experiences, and which serve as the structural axes of existential space” (1976, pp. 20–21).

As for Arba'in, the “axes of existential space” revolve around the sacred site of Husayn's martyrdom, Karbala, and also, more importantly, around the paths and roads where pilgrimage is performed as an act of penitence. These paths can be “physical” or “virtual,” but nevertheless represent affective ways pilgrims imagine their relation to the sacred memory of the Imams. As Sabine Kalinock has demonstrated, such affective relations with the sacred can also be found in “Shia chat” rooms, web logs, and on websites, where repertoires of self-representation and communication are articulated to make pilgrimage a shared experience across long distances (Kalinock, 2006). As of the mid-2000s, websites such as *moharram.ir*, and *www.imamreza.org*, and software like *Sayehaye-malakout*, have provided the possibility of performing pilgrimage from a distance and, in their most recent forms in social media, in a mostly interactive form. The online pilgrimage experience, both symbolically and performatively, supplements the physical rituals by which action is limited to gender, class, or geographical location. Accessibility and anonymity serve as disembodied experiences of pilgrimage that entail a distinct form of communication with other pilgrims and the sacred. The internetization of pilgrimage, converging with other media technologies such as satellite TV, offer both cooperation and



competition between transnational Shi'is in making pilgrimage possible in the form of digital connectivity (Hasnain, 2015, p. 21).

For Arba'in of Iraq, the "social" aspect of the digital walk also entails new spaces of gathering on the path to Karbala, wherein the "real" and the "virtual" converge in an ephemeral but significant way. These gathering spaces, known as *Mawakib* (plural of *mawkib*), imply two distinct meanings as "ritual group" sites and also processional lodging structures that temporarily provide a range of public services to pilgrims such as tea, water, food, bathrooms, showers, beds, and medical support (Chaterlard, 2017, p.7). Similar to caravnasari (travelodge), but varied in terms of architectural features, these stations are make-shift venues specifically designed for Muharram and Arba'in processions on a yearly basis (*ibid.* p.7). More importantly, *Mawakib* are spaces of conviviality where Shi'i pilgrims across gender, ethnic, and national identities gather to rest on their way to Karbala.

*Mawakib* are rest stops, an opportunity to "recharge" in terms of both physical movement and personal technologies. Ranging from cellphone charging hubs, where pilgrims can charge their cellphones and engage in communal chats, conversations, and exchange of goods, to media stations where journalists can reconnect for reporting or broadcasting, *Mawakib* also serve as media hubs for transnational news dissemination. As digital "hotspots," *Mawakib* serve as spaces of significant internet and mobile activity, sites of interpersonal communication in terms of both face-to-face interaction and digital connections.

Both men and women pilgrims congregate at the *Mawakib*, though female pilgrims have their separate quarters, especially for sleep at night. The national characteristics of these resting stations are more distinct, though all are required to have licenses from the municipal authorities (Chatelard, 2017, p.7). Iraqi-made *Mawakib* are smaller, fewer in number, and mostly frequented by Iraqi pilgrims. Iranian-made *Mawakib* are made of larger tent structures and equipped with better recharging facilities. Iranian *Mawakib* have free and better Wi-Fi and other wireless technologies such as Bluetooth, which appeal to a wider range of Shi'i pilgrims from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Groups of Iranian pilgrims mostly arrive at Iranian-made *Mawakib* in the form of *hiyaat*, or group units based in urban neighborhoods who travel together in the ritual performance of mourning (see Aghaie, 2004, p. 51; pp. 69–71). These resting spots are mostly occupied by *hiyaat*, which are mostly Iranian men of various ages. The younger generation, from their teens to late thirties, can be seen busy with personal digital devices (Figures 4). They play video games, chat, text, post messages and photos on Imo, Telegram, Twitter, and most popular Instagram for friends and relatives, and communicate with fellow pilgrims en route to Karbala.



FIGURE 4 The younger generation, from their teens to late thirties, can be seen busy with personal digital devices.

PHOTO BY MOHSEN AMIN, NOVEMBER 2017

In this social milieu, personal technological devices are a ubiquitous part of the *Mawakib* social landscape. More than spaces of rest, *Mawakib* are ultimate communication hubs. SMS messaging, as the cheapest form of communication, facilitates an intricate set of connectivity at the *Mawakib*. One SMS message on a mobile which I was shown by a young pilgrim, for example, read “Good morning. It is the fourth day of walking... no place to sleep at *Mawakib*. We had to sleep outside.” The text, sent out to a fellow pilgrim, exemplifies the use of texting among pilgrims at different locations with *Mawakib* as the central meeting point. The *Mawakib* facilitate a way of locating oneself in relation to other traveling pilgrims. Although under local government supervision, they also signify liminal spaces, transition sites where the experience of pilgrimage is enhanced between the place of departure and arrival in the medium of relaxation and leisure time.

Equally important is the dynamic level of connectivity about the text that characterizes the *Mawakib* as a locational identifier. The *Mawakib* is not just a place of rest, but also a network hub, a focal site of connectivity where friends, families, and new acquaintances can locate themselves on the pilgrimage route and engage in mediatized interaction. The *Mawakib* also accommodates emerging practices in digital media culture that mark a convergence of different spoken and written genres and different media practices, ranging from texting to posting video on social media. Convergence also occurs in what Pierre Lévy (1997) has famously described as “collective intelligence.” The ritual community of Arba'in leverages the combined knowledge of fellow pilgrims in what Lévy describes as a knowledge community. Although sharing such knowledge remains contingent on group of networkers interacting based on

gender and generational identity, such knowledge combines messaging and sharing practices in a pervasive circulation of audio and visual video texts. The logic of “many-to-many” communication networks at *Mawakib* signifies a multitude of sharers and producers of media content, producing vibrant mediated communication across transnational networks.

Mobile communication is not the only digital feature of the various *Mawakib*. In 2016 and 2017, virtual reality headsets during Arba'in could be found at the largest Iranian *Mawakib*, which pilgrims use as a means to perform alternative pilgrimages to other Shi'i shrines, such as Imam Ridha's shrine in Mashhad. In 2017, for example, I came across a number of pilgrims visiting the *Mawakib* who stood in line just to use virtual reality glasses/headsets (see Figures 5 and 6). The headsets provide an immersive experience of a digitally generated media space, projecting layers of imagery and information in a person's field of vision.

Reality is augmented by the created computer-sensory, virtual-world environment, which supplements “physical reality” for an alternative experience.



FIGURE 5 Virtual reality glasses are accessible for the visitation experience of other holy shrines.

PHOTO BY MOHSEN AMIN, NOVEMBER 2017



FIGURE 6 Some digital content services are offered for pilgrims in the *Mawkib*.  
PHOTO BY MOHSEN AMIN

However, the “digital pilgrimage” of virtual reality headsets differs from online pilgrimage. The experience produced through the mediation of headsets is essentially about immersion in the visited sacred site, a near direct embodied engagement with the shrine, rather than distant contact with the shrine by entering an online environment, where pilgrims would gather online to conduct pilgrimage activity. The sharp distinction is that online pilgrimage through a website can be highly interactive through engagement with other pilgrims and is a hybrid of “digital” and “material objects,” with the computer-screen as a key medium, while pilgrimage via virtual reality headsets is essentially an individuated experience that alters the experience by transforming encountered space and time.

It is precisely because of the individuated experience that an intense affective dimension can be identified. In one case, a middle-aged Iranian man experienced “joy” when he put on the headsets and underwent a virtual experience of visitation of the Imam Redha shrine at Mashhad. In another case, an elder woman cried after taking off the headset. At the same Iranian *Mawkib*, an older Iraqi man broke down, sobbing uncontrollably after virtually performing

pilgrimage to Mashhad through the headset. When asked about his experience, he remained speechless. The inexpressible encounter with the sublime Imam becomes pronounced by emotions aroused through an immediacy of contact in a virtual environment.

The virtual simulates the shrine, but the experience generated through the virtual encounter, according to one of the men, is one of bodily presence, as though the aura of Imam Redha can be felt, touched, even relived. In this case, the virtual is as “authentic” as the physical experience of the encounter, even more enhanced precisely because there is profound embodiment. The bodily connection through sensation occurs with the sacred site, but in an alternative spatial environment where, according to Ken Hillis, experience is able to extend subjective reality in producing meaning, as well as creating a different perspective in the form of digital sensation (Hillis, 1999). Pilgrimage via a virtual reality headset is a type of interactive practice that produces a shifting perception of embodied relations with the sacred.

Not all pilgrims engage with technology for their pilgrimage experience. In Arbaʿin observations, some pilgrims (mostly male and female of late middle age or older) viewed the technology as disruptive to the tradition. For example, they saw using cellphones, especially at the shrine, as a troubling influence, especially on younger generations. The same rules they apply to the domestic domain, that is, complete prohibition of technological use at the house, also applies to pilgrimage. “All our problem is from internet and satellite TV,” a man complained. As a clergyman and university professor argued, such technology is against the spirit of Arbaʿin and the legacy of Karbala. Arriving at the *Mawkib*, he put away all his devices so he could “relax” and focus on the ceremonies.

Critical dissent against technology is evident, but not on a pervasive level. For the most part, the use of cellphones and iPads at the shrines testifies to a larger collective that has already made digital technology a matter of everyday life. On the ritual stage, arrival at Karbala marks the final phase in walking performances. As pilgrims gather at Karbala’s shrines, they perform prayers and chants in reverence to the martyred Imam. The pilgrimage walk attains a digitized dimension, as some pilgrims entering the shrine raise their cellphones toward the tomb of Husayn, allowing their friends and family on the phone to send their greetings to the grandson of the Prophet. It is as though an attempt is made to immerse themselves in the encounter with the martyred Imam through the cellphone, although what is instantly communicated are the photos and messages sent to families and friends (Figure 7).

The telephony practice carves out a virtual domain wherein the sacred is experienced through instantaneous communication; experience is transformed across the screen once contact is made. Here visitation becomes a shared



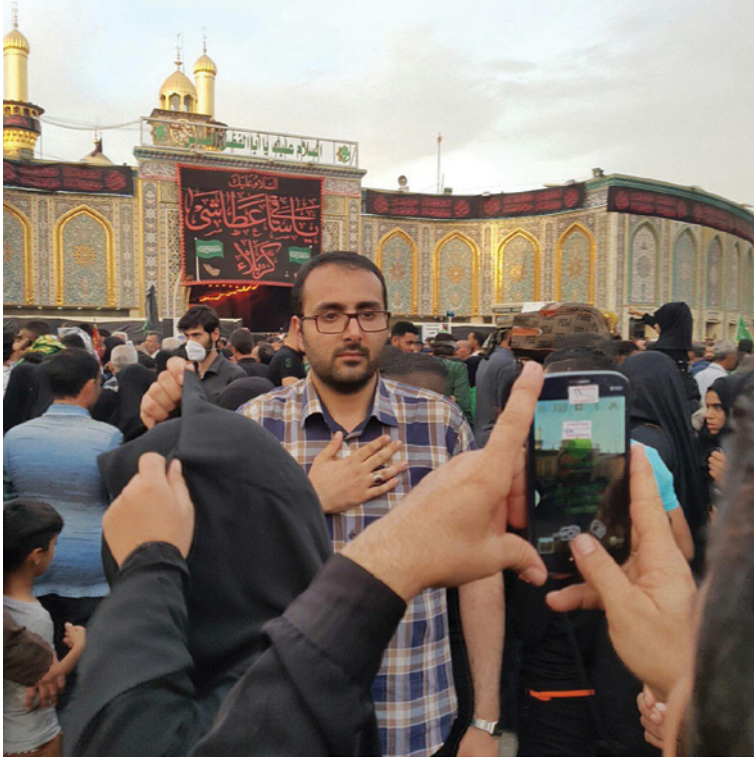


FIGURE 7 Photos and video calls are frequently made around the holy shrines at Karbala.  
PHOTO BY MOHSEN AMIN, NOVEMBER 2016

experience of co-presence between those who are physically at the shrine and others who are audiences from a distance. Likewise, pilgrims who transfer data, audio, and visuals, at the shrine or on the road to the shrine, become part data as shared images, information, and news. What mobile experiences of pilgrimage shape are affective practices that make the shrine into a shared site of virtual togetherness.

## 6 Conclusion

Based on an ethnographic study, the paper argued for a mediated conception of Arba'in pilgrimage as a virtually embedded series of communal practices in a transnational context. It argued that digital technologies serve as interactive embodied practices in which Arba'in rituals are increasingly becoming digitally mediated in a transnational flow of affective and informative processes. In the context of increasing transnational connectivity in post-Baathist Iraq,

pilgrimage practices such as Arbaʿin are shaping distinct religious experiences that fuse ritual and mobile practices, regardless of whether new technologies such as cellphones are effectively operational across groups of people.

There is something transformative in the fusion of the digital with religious practice. As Stewart M. Hoover has argued, the relationship between religion and technology, specifically media, is both “transforming and being transformed,” a dynamic process that changes lived situations in private and public realms with global significance (Hoover, 2002, p. 2). And it is through this transformation that ritual traditions attain a distinct authenticity to evoke meaning based on unique forms of connectivity on the perceptual level. Such meaning underlines that the significance of technologies can be informed by the way the sacred is ritually staged in embodied interactions in physical and virtual spaces, where religious experience gains a mediated reality.

Finally, digital pilgrimage culture also provides a range of translocal connections. We might argue that the digital inherently entails the transnational, but this is because of the centrality of enhanced and immediate communication across local spaces and national borders. Emerging ritual practices such as the “digital walk” or virtual reenactment at the *Mawakib* are distinct expressions of spiritual mourning informed by a nuanced understanding of reality, one based on pervasive computing spaces and mobile sites of interaction. What defines the digital Arbaʿin is less what technology can do than how such technologies are performed and embodied as pilgrimage (Rahimi, 2019).

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