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Between Karbala and the Khanqah: Muharram, Sufism, and the Making of Shared Sacred Culture in Colonial India

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersections of Muharram commemoration and Sufi devotional cultures in colonial India through a selective comparison of Awadh, Hyderabad, Bombay, and Calcutta. It asks how the memory of Karbala circulated beyond formal Shiʾa institutions without producing theological consensus. Drawing on the historical sources and scholarship cited in the manuscript, it analyses the different roles of imambaras, khanqahs, shrines, patrons, artisans, and neighbourhood participants in the making of processions, taʾziyas, alams, and practices of water distribution. It defines 'shared sacred culture' as recurrent participation in material and embodied devotional practices that retained distinct meanings and unequal forms of authority. Rather than assuming that Sufi institutions uniformly adopted Muharram observances, the article distinguishes devotional affinity from documented institutional involvement. It also examines how colonial description, enumeration, and the policing of public space recast existing religious differences as administratively legible categories. The argument is that shared ritual activity and sectarian differentiation were historically simultaneous, not mutually exclusive.

Keywords: *Muharram, Sufism, Karbala, Colonialism, Devotion.*

1. Introduction

Muharram in colonial India cannot be understood solely as a Shiʾa commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala in 680 CE. Karbala continued to be its theological and emotional hub, but its commemorative rituals expanded far beyond the confines of a religious and social sphere. *Taʾziyas* and *alams*, public processions, *majalis*, lamentation, vows, charitable giving and ritual remembrance of Husayn's thirst involved Shiʾas in devotional relationships with Sunnis, Sufi-oriented Muslims, Hindus, artisans, women, and neighbourhoods.[1] The question that has therefore been raised in the study of South Asian Muharram is not just whether or not other religious groups were involved, but how a specifically Shiʾa memory of Karbala became

[1] Vernon James Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shiʻi Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 1–18.

integrated within broader devotional traditions without compromising its theological distinctiveness.[2] Rather than describing such practices as syncretic, it is more useful to consider a historically constructed shared sacred culture where communities could occupy the same ritual places, objects, feelings, and rituals, but attach different significance to these.[3]

This article argues that Muharram in colonial India constituted a multilayered devotional field. At the same time, however, an *imambari* and *taʾziya* procession was not only linked to the Sufi languages of sacred love, suffering, intercession, and attachment to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, but also a colonial project of knowledge focused on classification.[4] The overlapping worlds of the religions of colonial India, then, reveals a basic conflict between entangled devotions and the production of difference through classification, as colonial religion in India was institutionalised during the census, ethnographic description, and policing of the processions.[5] Methodologically, the article consists of reading the research and literature in history along with colonial descriptions and accounts already mentioned in its footnotes. But there is a critical difference between what does what and what is interpreted. The footnotes to Meer Hasan Ali's nineteenth-century account of the Indian household and ritual life of Muslims in Awadh and north India are told not what Muslims did, but what they did within a patronage context. Likewise, city spaces Bombay Mohurrum reconstructed by Masselos and commemorations of Wajid Ali Shah in Calcutta studied by Richard David Williams can be made easily available for comparison. Combined, these resources allow a constrained investigation of the description, practice, and regulation of specific rituals. They do not warrant the broadly uniform ritual landscape of colonial India.

2. Karbala beyond Karbala: Martyrdom, Memory and Devotional Authority

When the troops of the Umayyad caliph Yazid murdered Imam Husayn's supporters during the battle of *Karbala* in 680 CE, the final march and consequence of the blood sacrifice of righteous Husayn, the event became the great pillar of Islam's narrative of righteous suffering. Husayn, thus, became the prototype of a *shahid*; he who refused to bow to an unjust ruler was endowed with martyrdom a moral vocabulary of suffering, injustice, fidelity, and a legitimate ruler; and Karbala lives on not only as a memory but as an ever-moving code of moral discourse, allowing subsequent generations to read into it suffering, injustice, fidelity, and a legitimate ruler.[6] *Ahl al-Bayt* was the emotional core of this memory world. It was an embodied memory too; Zaynab bint Ali in particular changed the nature of survival into testimony through her remembrance and narration, as the violence which had happened at Karbala found its way into the religious memory of later generations.[7] Due to their lack of water, Husayn and his men felt thirsty and water became a memory frame for them. Water distribution during Muharram, together with lamentation, *majalis*, *marsiyas*, *nohas*, *alams*, and *ta'ziyas*, translated the distant events of *Karbala* into embodied and affective forms of remembrance.[8] The recollection of *Karbala*, by means of grieving, recitation, actions, tones and reality was repeated and refined events. *Karbala* was represented many times and refined, by means of grieving, recitation, actions, tones and material practice.

But the devotional role of the household of the Prophet (s) was not exclusively a formal Shiʾa role. Love toward the *Ahl al-Bayt* was also a prominent role amongst Sunni piety and even many of the Sufi traditions. It is important to note that the Sufi genealogies invested Ali with a certain level of authority, and that Hasan and Husayn were also present in broader genealogies of sainthood and piety of the household of the Prophet(s) and

[2] Juan R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 92–123.

[3] On the methodological problems involved in treating South Asian religious traditions as self-contained and subsequently 'syncretic,' see Richard M. Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 106–23.

[4] Nile Green, *Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books and Empires in the Muslim Deccan* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–23.

[5] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–15.

[6] Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of ʿĀshūrāʾ in Twelver Shīʿism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 93–119.

[7] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21–40.

[8] David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 77–105.

their family.[9] These connections are not to be read as theological corollaries. The Shi'a and Sufi backgrounds differed in the reproductive lines, institutions, statements of claims, and ideas of leadership. Devotional circulation such as the movement of persons, stories, feelings, and rituals between sacred sites helped to articulate their relationships. Their relationships could be better expressed in devotional circulation sacred persons, stories and feelings, and practices that circulate between religious places with locally distinctive meaning.[10] It was therefore possible for Karbala to advance in a state of not giving up the centre of the Shi'a of *Karbala*. But it is not required of a Sunni or Sufi Muslim that he should not accept the fiasco of the religion of the Shi'ites, nor are they required to adopt ritualistic customs. Instead, it is the circulation of Karbala which exemplifies the way that difference in doctrine could cohabit with closeness of devotion. This devotion to the family of the Prophet, with its imperative to remember what fell from the battlefield, allowed it to enter into the holy environment of the *khanqah*.

3. From the Imambara to the Khanqah: Sufi Languages of Sacred Suffering

Discussions about the convergence of the two movements the religious movement in Karbala and the South Asian Sufi movement are better undertaken in terms of the affective languages in which sacred experience became intelligible. Of all these, '*ishq*' the overpowering love, that would displace attachment to self, it more presented a strong mystical lexicon. In this world of feeling, the lover's path of submission, the separation, suffering, and abandonment of material rights were often envisioned as the way to salvation; the refusal to buy that salvation by coming under the power of an unsighted oppressor might strike a chord of exemplification as a way of sustaining fidelity to the self, to one's higher self, to one's personal truths.[11] This provides the lures of wider mystical motions of love and self-effacement meaning to Karbala while not making it reducible to those meanings.

The second devotional connection was to the sense of suffering. In contrast, the importance of Karbala was more historically tangible and politically charged since Husayn's suffering was due to opposition from worldly power and to bloody martyrdom.[12] The entry of this into the imaginary arena of the mystical, then, added suffering to an ethical relation of fidelity and tyranny. While it is true that the Sufi themselves were not required to convert to Shi'a in order to mourn Husayn, nor was conversion necessarily to Sunni religion in order to participate in Muharram. The nature of these devotional crossings judges the attempts to locate them in retrospect within the confessional framework in a manner that is convenient for the categories.[13] A similar connection emerged through the material production of sacred presence. In contrast, the *dargah* created virtue via pilgrimage (*ziyarat*), works of dedication, gifts, food, cloth, flowers, recitation, and physical intimacy, making the missing Karbala present for space of the local congregation. These practices were neither institutionally nor theologically equivalent. However, both were engaged in materially and affectively present grammar in relation to the delimitation of sacred histories into the sphere of the near. The building of the *imambara* to the *khanqah* must therefore be regarded less as institutional borrowing and more as the recreation and transmittal of devotional techniques through the body.[14] Sacred authority was exercised not only via doctrine but via bodies, through substance, through objects, through emotions and through places. The embodied repertoire was where distant saints and martyrs could be present to the believers and where even Karbala could intrude into religious realms beyond the confines of the Shi'a community.

There is an important distinction to be made between actual participation of Sufi institutions and similarity in devotional language with respect to the relationship between Sufi and Muharram. A *khanqah* was not an *imambara* and following the family of the Prophet did not necessarily mean a definite support for a procession by

[9] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 26–31.

[10] Green, *Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century*, 1–23.

[11] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 194–214.

[12] Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1–20, 116–35.

[13] Justin Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14–18.

[14] Christian W. Troll, ed., *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1–23.

a Sufi line. The question of the past is who participated in mourning, whether they were named custodians, disciples or patrons, or shrine-centred communities, who circulated elegy-poems, or were responsible for providing water and hospitality during the festival's observance. I do not wish to argue that the social and institutional structures in which such questions can be explored must be identified here, before they can be identified in the account of Sufi institutions in the Deccan, by the author, Nile Green, but it is important to note that the account cannot really function as proof of engagement with any given Muharram rite without an episode. The case developed here is therefore a case of potential and local variation of devotional intersections, rather than just a fused or homogenized caste fusion of Sufi and Shiʾa institutions.

4. Materialising Karbala: Taʿziya, Alam, Water and the Religious Object

The popularity of the story of the martyrdom of Karbala was not only due to its narration, but also because the memory of *Karbala* took shape. The story of the martyrdom of *Karbala* made it tremendously socially powerful in South Asia, not just because of the way it was told, but because the memory became tangible. The construct of the *taʾziya*, taken as a depiction of Husayn's tomb, played a key role in this process. *Taʾziyas* were made of bamboo, paper, wood, tinsel, foil, glass and other locally obtainable materials, some simple and some extravagant but designed to be built and displayed for religious purposes and not only for decorative value.[15] They were built, adorned, exhibited, carried and lamented over before burial or immersion as was necessary in his area of the country and their ephemerality was therefore not incidental, and they could make a far-away place *Karbala* real in one's locality.[16] The *alam* enhanced this materiality and presence. The standard did not necessarily come automatically to bear the narratives of a person who had been faithful, thirsty, brave and sacrificed themselves, as is often suggested it was an object of sensory encounter associated with Abbas ibn Ali, Husayn's standard bearer who died while he was going to fetch water for the besieged camp.[17] Ornamented, draped, touched, saluted and carried in cloth, this could become a focus for devotees to receive blessing, protection, healing, or even intercession. Furthermore, these might appeal to both Shiʾites and non-Shiʾites, making it possible for piety to spread from one segment of a population to the other without the need for uniformity of doctrinal belief.[18]

The material dimensions of remembrance became particularly pronounced in practices centred on water. Withdrawal of water to Husayn's camp made thirst one of the most salient memory cues of *Karbala.* In Muharram, the *sabil* was making a tangible statement; that which had been denied was now being given, that which had been denied was an ethical act of giving. In Muharram, water was being remembered by giving water to the living; water denied to martyrs was being remembered by conferring water to the living.[19] The sequence was introduced the thirst, the memory, the water, the charity, embodied remembrance historical narration was combined with the sense of the body of the person. It could thereby turn out to be an encounter with remembered suffering, drinking itself. Shared sacred culture was not just formed in the form of propositions of belief, but through objects, bodies, substances, and repeated actions. Rather than asking about views on religion

[15] Rianne Siebenga, "Picturing Muharram: Images of a Colonial Spectacle, 1870–1915," ***South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*** 36, no. 4 (2013): 626–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2013.836069.

[16] Frank J. Korom, ***Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora*** (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 89–118.

[17] Karen G. Ruffle, "Bībī kā ʿAlam," ***MAVCOR Journal***, Yale University. Ruffle's analysis is particularly important for moving beyond a representational reading of the ***alam***. In South Asian Shiʿa devotional contexts, standards can operate as materialisations of the "presence in absence" of members of the ***Ahl al-Bayt***. The ***panjah*** associated with Abbas may also incorporate the ***mashk*** or water-skin, materially joining the standard to the memory of his attempt to bring water from the Euphrates.

[18] Karen G. Ruffle, ***Everyday Shiʿism in South Asia*** (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021). Ruffle's work is especially useful for understanding South Asian Shiʿism through everyday ritual, materiality, gender, and sensory practice rather than through doctrine alone. Her study of ***alams*** also shows that supplication and votive engagement with such objects may extend beyond exclusively Shiʿa constituencies.

[19] Richard David Williams, "Performing Royal Piety: Wajid 'Ali Shah's Muharram Commemorations in Colonial Calcutta," ***Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*** (2025). Williams demonstrates how Muharram's material, sonic, and processional forms travelled from Lucknow into Wajid Ali Shah's exilic court at Matiyaburj. His evidence is particularly suggestive for the present argument because objects, music, movement, and performance made Shi'a piety publicly perceptible in ways that cannot be reconstructed from doctrinal texts alone.

and religion-related customs, a material history asks questions about what people erected or wore or carried or touched or heard or distributed or followed and mourned before. From this point of view, *ta'ziya*, *alam* and water did not constitute secondary decorations that abound around religious belief. They were the means by which memory became presence and through which *Karbala* was made present in every day social space. Such is the religious object's revelation of aspects of devotional proximity that could only partially be captured by the classificatory terms of the colonial archive.

5. Processions and Sacred Geography: Making Karbala in Indian Space

Processions gave the material remembrance of Karbala a local geography through the movement of ta'ziyas and alams. Ritual movement thus linked up otherwise-differentiated spaces in a common ritual way of movement, from the *imambara* into the streets, bazaars, neighbourhoods, crossroads, shrines, water stations, cemeteries and local *karbalas*.[20] *Karbala* did not just get remembered in India; rather it was periodically spatialised in India through movement. This sacred geography created in the space of Muharram was, in turn, mnemonic and performative, in that walking, carrying, stopping, lamenting, distributing water, and burying *ta'ziyas*, all took place on the same familiar urban routes that became temporary sanctuaries of sacred history. This process was the more complicated and complex in Lucknow.[21] The development of Awadh as a major centre of Twelver Shi'ism created an extraordinary terrain of architecture and ceremony that involved not only *imambaras*, *karbalas*, mosques, processional routes but also literary and artistic forms of visualising Muharram, all of which culminated in Nawabi patronage, specifically under Asaf al-Daula and his successors in the city, which monumentalised Shi'a devotion, and the nineteenth-century court expanded the aesthetic, literary and performative spheres surrounding Muharram. However, if one considers this culture solely from a court ceremonial perspective, then it would be difficult to grasp the broader social lives that have taken place in this space.[22] So, sacred culture could be carried from the court to the *imambara*, from the *imambara* to the bazaar and neighbourhood, and from the neighbourhood to the procession.[23] The experience of sacred culture is, in turn, transferred between the royal court, the *imambara*, neighbourhood and bazaar, yet it is appropriated by the neighbourhood or the whole bazaar more or less as it flows into the procession.

These practices were not distributed uniformly across India. These differences show that, in specific urban and regional cultures, such as in the case of Hyderabad, Shi'a grief took different forms and was set to specific frames of ritual, contexts of memory and significance. Its sacred geography was therefore locally produced rather than uniformly reproduced across India. But this spatial view is also elucidative of the connection between the *imambara* and the *khanqah* that forms the title of the article. There was no institutional nor theological equivalence between the *dargah*, *khanqah*, *imambara* and Muharram procession. But this was part of a network of faiths, where an increasing number of sacred powers could be found through genealogy, memory, bodily proximity, ritual movement, objects, and place. [24]Procession was a crucial component, made possible by carrying sacred presence into the outside world beyond institutional walls. Thus it reshaped the landscape of Karbala into an occupied Indian geography of devotion. When comparing regions, the authors have chosen to address just a portion instead of attempting to capture the entirety of colonial India. Through the lens of Awadh and Lucknow, the focus is on the power of the shi'a courtly patron, the local organisation of the *imambaran* in these cities, and the regulation and regulation of the mourning processions; Bombay offers a contrastive urban setting wherein the form and regulation of Muharram processions altered over time, as discussed by Jim

[20] Jim Masselos, "Change and Custom in the Format of the Bombay Mohurrum during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (1982): 47–67.

[21] Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, the British and the City of Lucknow* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33–58.

[22] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 19–45.

[23] Marika Sardar, "The Maqbara: An Architectural Type of the Deccan," in *Sultans of the South: Arts of India's Deccan Courts, 1323–1687*, ed. Navina Najat Haidar and Marika Sardar (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 182–89

[24] Anna Bigelow, *Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4–13, 45–73.

Masselos; and the commemoration associated with Wajid Ali Shah in Calcutta illuminates the prominence of the *alam* and locally specific devotions, as well as how displaced courtly patronage could be reconstructed outside of Awadh. The examples provided are not mutually substitutable. The relative importance of patronage, urban space, material forms, and administrative influence in determining different modalities of participation is what is of interest. Any statements regarding any given setting should stay in proportionality with the sources he has available to make that statement.

6. Shared but Unequal: Hindus, Artisans, Women and Popular Muharram

It is not to picture colonial society as a devotional place in which religious and social cleavages were erased to call Muharram a common devotional culture. Participation in rituals was organised along caste, class, gender, occupation, patronage, locality and political lines. In fact, it is in this very tension that Muharram has received its meaning and analytical perspective, to some extent, at the time when the religious boundaries may be fluid while the social hierarchy remains important. The question is not just who takes part, but who takes part in what environment, in what style of participation, with what sense of participation. Hindu participation in Muharram frequently drew the attention of colonial administrators and observers, who regarded such cross-religious involvement as particularly noteworthy. Hindus, however, can be sponsoring or accompanying the *ta'ziyas*, participating in the processions, making vows, providing the service, watching a performance, or joining a healing and protection-based practice depending upon the region where they live in fact, in some areas, these and other activities are recognised as proof of communal harmony; such a narrative, then, can easily become a retroactive one.[25] Not always did participation mean theological agreement and it didn't always have a single meaning. What is seen as one act of participation from the administrative archive may be more than just one, involving several simultaneous religious and social meanings in a Hindu household, a customary attachment to some particular *ta'ziya* might be; it might be connected to the occurring economy of the labourer or be related to an economy of vows and petitions offered to a particular *alam* for example, the language of the political loyalty might accompany the language of neighbourhood belonging, of spectacle, of patronage.[26]

This plurality was especially visible in the labour required to prepare for Muharram. *Ta'ziya* would be no sacred object if it were to come as an incident. It required the skill of those willing hands: bamboo with needles to form it and wood to construct, paper to cut and paste and paint, foil and textiles to adorn it, metal ornaments to fashion and carry it and its actors. Thus, musicians, reciters, standard-bearers, water distributors, attendants and many other varieties of labour, many of which are unrecorded, kept the orchestra world of the procession in good working order.[27] The boundary between the religious participants and the artisans is therefore not easily drawn. The creation of a sacred object might create familiarity, attachment, familial obligation, and devotional proximity. Shared sacred culture wasn't just supposed to come about; it was worked out. For attention to labour, the history of Muharram is now moved from courts to those theological elites, or, even more significantly, from theology to those who, as labourers, made the sacred spectacle, materially, possible. But there is also a picture of inequality in labour. Both patron and craftsman were not necessarily in same standing due to both being participants in the creation of the same *ta'ziya*. Elite sponsorship would grant prestige and public power; artisanal involvement was required through economic and occupational subordination. Similarly, the neighbour groups themselves might use the scale, decoration, music, or path traversed in a procession to it to help express local status; local status did not disappear in the process, it could be expressed in it.[28]

The picture is even more complex because of gender. Histories developed mainly out of these colonial police record and the accounts of public processions inevitably are an overrepresentation of streets, public set of the pedestalsising of crowds, and merchant the visibility predominantly male in both the production and

[25] J. N. Hollister, *The Shi'a of India* (London: Luzac and Company, 1953), 178–83

[26] Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–14, 167–88;

[27] Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India: Descriptive of Their Manners, Customs, Habits and Religious Opinions, Made during a Twelve Years' Residence in Their Immediate Society*, ed. William Crooke, 2nd ed. (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1917), 18.

[28] Sandria B. Freitag, "Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a 'Hindu' Community," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 4 (1980): 597–625.

contemplation of a conception of processions. Such an archive could end up marginalising women for Muharram rituals, as there was a good deal of ritual work done outside of it. The household was not only a private counterpart to the real public procession; it was also a domestic religious space of significance to interiorisation of devotional memory.[29] It was another place where Karbala was recounted, lived and passed on from one generation to the next. Zaynab bint Ali is a figure which invests the gendered history with its conceptual depth. *Karbalas* martyred servant, Husayn, is the main sacrificial event but without witnessing and narration *Karbalas* existence remains history forgotten by all. As a witness of death and a witness to the authority which caused it, Zaynab has a uniquely central position in the commemorative tradition, and can be said to have emitted a testimony.[30] Mourners do not just bring the past back into the present to be known as another form of remembrance; they also preserve and transfer the history of the murdered into the living; they take part in the history of the dead. Those women who narrated, lamented, listened and taught *Karbala* in every household, were thus not a marginal part of the male dominated martyrdom stories. In them, they undertook the ongoing creation of its religious memory. In the name of popular Muharram it calls for a shared religion that does not romanticise the difference. The people engaged in different Hindu rituals and processions groups of Hindus, Shi'as, Sunnis, Sufi-oriented followers and patrons, artisans, women, neighbourhood groups, and labourers might not face the same objects and events in the same manner. It is possible that a *ta'ziya* not only stood for the memory of Husayn, but was also meant to respond to a patron's pledge, support an artisan's livelihood, symbolise neighbourhood prestige and gain the reverence of a non-reflexive family member. The interpretation would not have been shared with shared practice. The proximity of devotional faith did not lead to social equality either. The historical significance of Muharram was in the combination of intimacy and difference sacred activities were diffused across religious and social lines; who could participate in them, how, and whose religious experience became gathered was determined by caste, class, gender, occupation, and power.

7. Colonial Knowledge: Census, Ethnography and the Making of Sectarian Communities

The devotional plurality of Muharram opened social spaces that challenged the classificatory assumptions of colonial administration. British rule was increasingly reliant on the counting, classification, rule, and territorial locativeness of Indian society. Survey, Gazetteer, ethnography and decennial census were all ways by which colonial knowledge shifted and reclassified intricacies of social relations. Religion was one such domain of classification, involving such procedures as colonial investigative modalities, practices of enumeration, observation, classification, and documentation that constituted India as an object of knowing and ruling.[31] The census required the individual to check Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian and eventually began to focus on sub-categorisations of these categories. But the everyday religious domains outside of Muharram were not always so taxonomically congruent. Such a contrast with ritual practice becomes more apparent when administrative identity is juxtaposed versus ritual identity. A Sunni could say *kalaam* on this occasion without engaging in a belief in doctrines of the Imamate, a Sufi affiliation could make them more devoted to Ali and the Ahl al-Bayt, a Hindu artisan could not only make or carry a *ta'ziya*, but he/she could also be in a neighbourhood where several religious groups were present and participated in Muharram without forming a formal Shi'a identity. The Census categories might be able to enumerated called affiliation, but they were less able to show such differentiated devotional proximity. C. A. Bayly's insight that colonial information systems did not operate in an informational vacuum, but appropriated and reorganised existing forms of social knowledge within new administrative structures, is particularly relevant to Muharram.

An important historical qualification is necessary: Sunni-Shi'a differences did not originate under colonial rule. Succession, authority, law, ritual, and communal identity all had histories dating back to the early days of Islam, and the institutions of the Shi'a of Awadh gained a relatively significant political and religious presence even

[29] Diane D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 1–20, 75–101.

[30] D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 75–101.

[31] Bernard S. Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia," in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 224–54.

prior to the systematic late-colonial process of population counting.[32] Relations between Sunnis and Shiʾas were not always smooth and harmonious. The more powerful, however, was that the conditions of the recording, counting, representation and governance of religious difference were changed by the more robust claim of the different colonial government. Situational identities and locally negotiated practices might become documentable categories with an administrative life of their own if subjected to the census, gazetteer, court, municipality, and police record. Religious reform made this more difficult as well. One must not take it for granted that this categorization process in the colonies and the indigenous reform process are simultaneously responsible for the increasing importance of print, reformist scholarship, associational life and religious self-consciousness in Muslim societies.[33] They interacted: there was a parallel debate within Islam one of the Muslims sublimed the correctness of belief and conduct to Muslim others and the administration went along.

Undertaking these processes should, therefore, result in an archive that needs to be interpreted based on its underlying assumptions of organisation. When a Muharram procession became an issue of order, as it did in the making of police records, they encountered it. When it was a problem of order, it was privileged in police records. When it was a moment for administrative report, it was privileged. When it was a category for ethnographic survey, it was privileged, and when it was a custom to be measured an observables custom the act of translating religious life into such observations was privileged.[34] This gives rise to a structural distortion by the resulting archive. A controversy over the route for a processional, involving the wider community, daily devotion and artistic labour and official documentation, was significantly more likely to elicit official documentation than were other interactions, such as regular cooperation, domestic mourning, or shared vows. When religious communities became an administrative trouble, they were most visible and their points of conflict were precisely those that the colonial archive made them sees, reading that archive against itself, thus, demands navigating between the two sets of spectacles. At one level, Muharram serves to illustrate how enumeration might establish an individual's identity as a Hindu, Sunni, or Shiʾa, just as the parade would further create relationships that transcended these categories. Colonial knowledge did not merely misread an otherwise settled religious landscape; it enabled it to be made legible in a way that was particular to the colonial context. The historical tension lay precisely between religion as an administratively bounded category and religion as a lived field of devotional entanglement.[35]

Both the biography and the documentation of a procession can be useful in evaluating the argument of colonial intervention. A complaint over the passage, sound, timing or positioning of the neighbourhood route may lead to a magistrate specifying a fixed route or requiring police reports and determining who should be granted permission. This order, in turn, would then be used as precedent if there were a subsequent similar case. In this sequence, the religious distinction under consideration is not administrative, but rather arises out of a negotiable practice that was documented and was now potentially exclusive. Without the interpretation provided by the scholarship available to the manuscript's surviving text, the manuscript does not tell much; however, a precise account of any specific dispute would require a police file or a judicial directive.

8. From Shared Procession to 'Communal' Disturbance: Policing Muharram

Religious communities became 'statistically legible' in the census, but the policing of Muharram brought its religious categories into the realm of space. This was very significant as the procession extended beyond the confines of the relatively limited area of the *imambara* to the streets in which a number of communities made claims to customary use. Everything from processional routes, timings, music, and the movement of *ta'ziyas* to

[32] C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3–14, 365–76.

[33] For the longer history of Shiʿa political and religious authority in Awadh, see Juan R. I. Cole, "Imami Shiʿism from Iran to North India, 1722–1856: State, Society, and Clerical Ideology in Awadh" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1984), 119–71

[34] Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, *The New Cambridge History of India*, vol. 3, pt. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–15, 179–210.

[35] Francis Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 15–42.

passage near mosques, shrines, temples, and burial sites, as well as the convergence of competing processions, could therefore become matters of colonial administrative concern.[36] This street was where sacred geography met the regulatory state. This was not the case, however, as British involvement in the country did not initiate religious warfare. The institutional context of negotiations over controversy and conflicts was also shaped by colonial rule, though neighbourhoods and conflicts over precedence had indigenous histories.[37] Once the police, magistratures and municipal authorities intervened the locally remembered practices became more and more to be able to be translated into administratively demonstrable claims. Who had traditionally used a particular route? Which procession possessed customary precedence? Could music be played while passing a mosque? Where could a *taʿziya* be carried, buried, or immersed? But, most importantly, which community had the right of custom, and who was entitled to represent it?[38]

These regulatory questions reshaped the relationship between ritual practice, customary rights, and public space. An old practice that has depended on the power of the neighbourhood, patronage, accommodating, or now and then uses negotiating could suddenly be recorded on police diaries, magistrates' orders, maps, petitions, and judicial proceedings. The documentary recognition might then provide a precedent to be used for any future disputes. The place of a procession was no longer simply a place where a procession once passed, and regular claims to it could become spatialised claims about collective rights. Muharram provides a clear example of this process both intra-Muslim negotiations and intra-Hindu-Muslim negotiations could take place in this public display. The debate between Sunni and Shiʾa on the issue of mourning was coexistent with conflict among parties who clashed over the right to share the streets and share the spaces of local neighborhoods, which wandered over the Hindu festival and into Hindu temples, or competed over the same music.[39] But as the language of administration grew more and more to communicate only what it could, it depoliticised the communal disturbance. Conflicts about status, locality, patronage, occupation and neighbourhood rivalry might be missed or obscured, as the protagonists are portrayed as representatives of limited religious communities. As a result, colonial policing was more than just about controlling crowds after the violence had happened. It played a role in the territorialisation of the difference of religion. In designating routes, setting precedents, representing certain streets and spaces, and regulating sound, the state imbued them with a religious identity. It is Sandria Freitag's idea of the colonial 'public arena' that is particularly illuminating here though processions enabled communities to make collective claims through public performance, they also helped to create, as colonial regulations facilitated, more organised and recognised communal antagonisms.[40] Devotional crossing, arts analogies, spectator viewership and neighbourhood involvement may remain in the same Muharram procession. Instead, policing imposed further strata on this concurrent holy sphere that demanded that the overlapping practices be made governable in terms of categories, representatives, routes, and rights. The paradox was thus tremendous. The transparency of the boundaries between religions that was exposed by the procession could, if documented in colonial terms, serve as proof of their institutional hardening, as is truly the case with the documentaries of the meetings. The ribbon-cutting of religious frontiers visible in the procession can, when converted into the language of colonial public order, be documented as proof of its institutionalising; indeed, the documentaries of the meetings can speak for the public order of colonialism. Colonial administration of religion was therefore not merely concerned with policing sacred space; through repeated acts of regulation, it contributed to the institutionalisation and territorialisation of religious difference.

The difference between the two analyses is important. 'Lived religion' focuses on religion lived out, not religion taught; 'shared sacred spaces' refers to the locations that were shared by people whose identities are situated

[36]P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 105–12; John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 271–78.

[37] Gyanendra Pandey, ***The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*** (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 22–44, 96–108.

[38] Nandini Gooptu, ***The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 192–217.

[39] Mushirul Hasan, ***Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence*** (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 21–32.

[40]Douglas M. Haynes, "From Tribute to Philanthropy: The Politics of Gift Giving in a Western Indian City," ***Journal of Asian Studies*** 46, no. 2 (1987): 339–60.

differently; and 'religious entanglement' is recognition of historically interrelated traditions. 'Devotional circulation' charts the flow of stories, images, objects and ritual shapes. As such, 'shared sacred culture' refers to a specific historical pattern of repeated, socially organised involvement with a set of ritual objects, which had the potential to embody any of a range of meanings and whose use was differential. The evidence for this is to be found in the signs of tolerance in the first place and not in statements of tolerance, which are secondary to the evidence, in the second place; and detection has to take place by those who actually created the *ta'ziya* and *alam* and paid to build them and carry them and watched them, regulated them, or challenged them. It refers to a tangible connection between actors, things and institutions that does not mean a common faith will be reached or conflict will be eliminated.

9. Rethinking 'Syncretism': Shared Sacred Culture as a Historical Category

The reconstructed history here needs a vocabulary that allows it to identify the realm of religion and not erode difference, but also to not see difference as a barrier to the realm of religion. There are three interpretations that are especially limited. The first is in the sense that Muharram is regarded as a ritual that remains confined to the Shi'a community to which the Sunnis and Sufis, the Hindus, the artisans and all other individuals remain external observers. The social aspects of *ta'ziyas*, *alams*, vows, processions, water delivery, neighbourhood involvement, and homemade items are not well captured by such a model, and are prioritised over formal membership. The second reading steps too far in the opposite direction: it reads non-Shi'a involvement as sign of a basically harmonious religious fabric of India with colonialism as a factor that split it. This romanticises the past and obscures inequalities of caste, gender, occupation, patronage, and political power, as well as genuine histories of theological disagreement and sectarian conflict.[41] The third problem concerns syncretism itself. The term has frequently been used to refer to practices that seem to merge this with that of another religious tradition. In the South Asian context such an idea of syncretism is particularly problematic because the historian has to visualise the separate traditional entities that are then mixed together; only then can an act of mixing be conceptualised as a loss of boundaries.[42] State advocacy of pure Shi'ism was not the point at issue, rather those who engaged with different devotions and who suited to interpretation.

In their place, I suggest the term shared sacred culture as a more historically accurate term. Shared sacred culture refers to historically particular religious locations, actions, artefacts, and emotive expressions through which various communities, whose identities and beliefs may differ, would come together without needing to relinquish their particular beliefs or social identities. Theologians don't have to agree on the theological content of sharing in this formulation. Nor does it mean that everyone receives the same sacred authority. It discerns rather one space of encounter on account of which things and practices might have plural relations at once, and that is the *ta'ziya* that provides a good example for this. A Shi'a mourners might see it as a reminder of the tragedy of Karbala and solidify their identification with Husayn, an artisan might encounter the same object through his or her inherited craft, livelihood, neighbourhood, or devotion to Husayn, a Sunni might lament a loss without accepting any Shi'a teaching on the subject of Imamate, a Sufi devotee might relate to Husayn through the mystical language of sacrifice and devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, a Hindu petitioner might relate to an *alam* or processions on a basis of the vow, protection, healing, customary participation, or neighbourhood affiliation. Such interpretations must have been different for the object to produce a field of ritual encounter. This manner is therefore separating sharing from sameness. Shared shrines, for example, have shown that participation at a shared sacred site can co-occur with some competition, asymmetric claims, and shifting suggestions of religious ownership.[43] Sacred sharing is not, then, the lack of boundaries, nor proof that they don't matter.

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[41] Peter van der Veer, "Riots and Rituals: The Construction of Violence and Public Space in Hindu Nationalism," in ***Riots and Pogroms***, ed. Paul R. Brass (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 154–76.

[42] Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, "Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism," in ***Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis***, ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–26.

[43] Glenn Bowman, "Process and Pluralism: A Study of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Practices at the Shrine of St George," ***Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*** 18, no. 3 (2012): 527–44.

Muharram makes this paradox very obvious. Between the doctrine of colonial India and ritualised practice, there were sharp lines that were historically present but ritual practices all too often blatantly crossed them. On the other hand, devotional proximity did not work as an obstacle to communities asserting distinctions, especially with the development of any of the three reforms, enumeration, or policing categories, where the identity of the communities became important. Religious boundaries, therefore, may be doctrinal but not ritual penetrable. Shared practice did not need to be based on shared interpretation; common sacred space did not mean common theology; devotional intimacy did not mean social equality. The essence of this dynamic blend of sameness and otherness one that is hard to find even in the midst of a diverse and troubled Muharram, let alone a religious history is the subject of the shared sacred culture.[44]

4. Conclusion

Karbala and the khanqah were not identical religious institutions, but their devotional worlds could intersect. They were emblematic of various sacred genealogies that not only converged but also selected within South Asian Islam. *Karbala* nurtured memory of martyrdom of Husayn by adopting an ethical and affective discourse of sacrifice and injustice, testimony and fidelity and attachment to the Ahl al-Bayt. The *khanqah* and *dargah*, on the other hand, focused the religious aspect of authority on the genealogic, the eschatological, the passion, the remembrance, the intercession, and the continued existence of the sacred person. This process of looking for similarities does not obliterate the theological differences. Instead, colonial Indian Muharram is the embodiment of what is unique about the religious genealogies that could enter into, but do not necessarily equal, relationships of devotional proximity of suffering, of love, of memory, of trans-sacramental and sacred presence.

In the realm of religion, however, *Karbala*, as such, turns out to be more than just a sealed sectarian memory. While its theological significance remained firmly grounded in specifically Shiʿa tenets, the affective authority of Husayn and the Ahl al-Bayt extended beyond formal Shiʿa institutions. Its theological value was still oriented towards the specific concerns of Shi'a practice while the affectual authority of Husayn and the Ahl al-Bayt extended beyond the confines of the formal structures of Shi'a. Sunni grief to the event of Karbala, Sufi devotion to the family of the Holy Prophet, as well as the presence of other groups, reflect a sacred memory of *Karbala* that could neither be uniform nor doctrinally monochromatic and smooth. This kind of circulation makes histories that directly equate a person's ritual participation with his or her confessional allegiance less easy with which to assemble. It is the more notable question in history that this same sacred memory was brought to use in different ways across differing communities, each having its own theological and social narrative. Ideas were not enough to sustain this circulation at the social level, but rather, material and embodied practices. Affects became *Karbala* with *ta'ziyas* and *alams*, remembered thirst with water, lamentation with the power of poetry, spatialised memory with processions along streets and neighbourhoods. Its material forms, its narratives were conveyed by the housewives, its institutions, paid for by patrons, and its processional landscapes inhabited by heterogeneous urban communities. Shared sacred culture has been created in terms of labour, sound, movement, objects, substances, bodies and places. Theological texts are inadequate to reconstruct its history.

There were, however, some overlapping devotional relationships at the political level that faced the emerging colonial state's drive towards categorical legibility. Sunni–Shi'a and Hindu–Muslim difference is not the result of census enumerations, ethnographic description, municipal regulation or police surveillance, but the result of institutional shifts to the way in which those differences were registered and managed. When these processional routes and customary rights, religious affiliation and representation by or linkage to communities become administrative and judicial matters, fluid practices can gain a documentary and territorial fixity. It was then a paradox that practices which could create devotional proximity could also serve as moments of administrative separation, so that the events of colonial Muharram themselves exemplified this dichotomous reality. The history of Muharram in colonial India thus offers no indication of a world beyond religious boundaries or of a trapped within religious boundaries. Rather, it shows a religious scene of constantly crossed, negotiated, defended, and redefined boundaries through subtle forms of devotional practice. Not a vague blip of syncretism but a culturally-historically defined space of common sacred culture was found between *Karbala* and the *khanqah*.

[44]Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," ***History of Religions*** 40, no. 3 (2001): 260–87.

In that field, there remained room for individuals to grieve together without thinking the same thing is the same, to come to sit at the same shrine without coming to the same terms of engagement, to live in parallel prayer realms without losing their own religions. The unique historical force of Karbala resided precisely in its valiance as a devotional translation, both specifically Shiʾa in memory and in multiple translations as it went through the streets, the shrines, the houses, the bodies, the sounds, and the social circuits of colonial Indian trade and relations.

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