Conjuring Karbala Online and Offline

Experiences of the ‘Authentic’ in Shi’a majalis

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Abstract

Majlis sermons are a cornerstone of Shi’a ritual, and the online growth of this practice, mostly as videos, poses challenges for majlis preachers and audiences. This article explores Dutch Shi’as’ experiences of majalis ethnographically and considers how they vary online and offline. Practitioners seek experiences of authentication in majalis – meaningful, truthful, emotional and legitimising experiences. Majlis preachers aim to create experiences of authentication. This text considers how such experiences occur through registers of authentication, explored as re-memory, embodiment and discourse. These registers are employed by preachers of the majlis sermon and recognised by audiences to produce highly affective religious experiences. However, online contexts pose challenges as ways of eliciting registers of authentication shift. This article describes these shifts to explore the implications for Shi’a practices.

Keywords


1 Introduction

A woman sits across from me, twice-framed: her face is contoured by a black chador, and framed again within the screen of my phone. I am conducting a virtual interview with a Shi’a aalima – a religious scholar, preacher and public speaker. She tells me how she prepares lectures, specifically majlis sermons.
With practised ease, the *aalima* describes how she selects topics and consults a variety of sources. I take note when she posits ‘culture’ and ‘authentic’ as contradictory concepts. She describes avoiding ‘cultural’ stories in her sermons, expecting that her audience would dismiss them as repetitive, dramatised or far removed from their lived contexts. Instead, she tries to incorporate what she terms ‘authentic’ elements into her sermons, citing textual sources such as Qur’anic verses and reputable Hadiths to authenticate her words and build her reliability and her audience’s trust. The *aalima* favours a universal understanding of Shi’ism, appealing to people across cultures, promoting ideas that could permeate a multitude of lived realities. This position reflects both her seminary training in Iran and the diverse, largely immigrant Shi’a communities she works with across Europe. She explains that her audiences’ perceptions of her lectures were deeply important. It mattered that the audience should have a sense of something true, of conviction, of feeling close to something real. She wants them to leave a sermon feeling moved and inspired, and her preparation and performance of *majalis* accounts for this, as she considers how to present the ‘authentic’.

For me, this conversation opened up the question of how something came to be perceived as real, or true or authentic during the *majlis* sermon in Shi’ism. How does authentication unfold through the experience of *majalis* in various contexts? The *majlis* is a central practice of Shi’ism, and combines elements of a lecture, ritual mourning and embodied practices. My research follows how Dutch Shi’as practice *majalis*, from lectures held in local community centres to the way individuals engage with this practice online. Shi’as in the Netherlands mostly have migrant backgrounds rooted in the Middle East or South Asia, although the communities also include converts. This diversity results in a multiplicity of approaches to Shi’a practices that are grounded in a similar set of beliefs.

Most Shi’a *majalis* are held during the month of Muharram, in memory of the tragedy of Karbala. On 10 Muharram 1400 years ago, on a parched desert plain, Hussain ibn Ali² was martyred by the forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid 1. This was the Battle of Karbala, a historical cornerstone that has informed an aesthetic, practices and rituals in Shi’ism, including the *majlis*. In *majalis*, stories of Karbala are narrated, and each *majlis* ends with eulogies for Hussain and his people. Hussain is regarded in Shi’ism as an Imam, a spiritual leader

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¹ Plural of *majlis*, an Arabic/Persian/Urdu word meaning gathering.
² Hussain ibn Ali was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and the son of the fourth Islamic caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib.
and successor of the Ahl al-Bayt. Majalis evoke the story of Karbala, relay Shi’a history and theology, and touch upon topics of interest for contemporary life. Through my research, I attempt to illustrate how the Karbala story comes alive by evoking memory, bodily sensations and discursive performance. I explore how people experience majalis, and how processes of authentication (elaborated later) come about. This article explores authentication through the case of a traditional majlis, and interviews discussing online majalis.

Through the concept of authentication, I seek to understand what happens when practitioners participate in majalis digitally. Online participation in religious practices creates an array of new possibilities and opportunities. It also raises important questions about the meaning of participation, presence, space and sociability – such as whether or not online participation is as ‘real’ as physical. As Sabine Kalinock (2006) observes, Shi’a rituals on the internet are characterised by pluralism: ulema can engage audiences in new ways, practitioners can pick and choose information and who to listen to, which in turn creates attempts at regulation, and a need for authentication: in such an endless multitude of information and speakers and opinions, how would one know what is really real? For practitioners this is about experience. For ‘producers’ of sermons, it raises the question of whether or not online versions create the same connections with participants and elicit similar experiences, and how to rise to the challenges of ever-shifting communicative mediums.

The snippet from my conversation with the alima highlights textual and discursive elements of her lectures that aim to produce experiences of authenticity such as perceiving something to be real, legitimate, truthful or meaningful. I question whether this feeling was located simply in the spoken words of a sermon. For an audience listening to majalis, is a spoken reference enough to spark a sense of authenticity? To me, this suggests a tension in the dynamic between how religious speakers and audiences perceive authenticity in religious experiences. Do preachers and practitioners see what makes a majlis experience meaningful or ‘real’ in the same ways? Take Lara Deeb’s (2005) understanding of authenticated and traditional majalis: Deeb describes these as two styles employed by preachers: traditional majalis aim to arouse as much emotion as possible, with preachers performing with that aim in mind, whereas authenticated styles aim to represent history, so they validate and reference their words, and elicit emotions appropriately (ibid.). This is what the alima I spoke to was aiming to do: to move people, but to also establish her

3 The term Ahl al-Bayt refers to the family of Muhammad, descended through his daughter Fatima and Ali ibn Abi Talib. This lineage includes the Twelve Imams after whom Twelver Shi’ism is named.
lectures as authenticated. Deeb explains how preachers perceive the reception of their speeches. What of the audiences listening to them? How do they perceive a majlis as authenticated, traditional, truthful, emotional?

To examine this question, I use the concept of authentication/authenticating, as a process that arouses feelings of something as true, real, powerful, sincere and meaningful. In this article, I contend that there are multiple modes or registers of arousing and authenticating such feelings in a religious sermon. These registers shift in importance, depending on the perspective of the audience or speaker and are complicated by mediation processes such as digitisation. I discuss the perspectives of audiences listening to majalis and religious figures performing in them. To explore different experiential dimensions of majalis, I shall analyse a case study of a traditional majlis and interviews with Shi’a ulema and practitioners in order to present the perceptions and experiences surrounding online majalis.

This article draws from ongoing ethnographic work conducted with Shi’a Muslims in the Netherlands. In August 2020, there was enough of a lull in the ongoing Covid19 pandemic for certain forms of gatherings to resume. Alongside conducting online research, I attended majalis in Amsterdam organised by a Pakistani family affiliated with a prominent organisation in the Dutch-Pakistani Shi’a community. About 30 years ago, Pakistani migrants started to trickle into the Netherlands looking for economic opportunities. Shi’as were a minority amongst the already small number of Pakistanis in the Netherlands. During Muharram, these Shi’a people wanted to congregate, and formed an organisation to arrange majalis where they would gather to commemorate, embody, recreate and pass on Shi’a practices.

Since the pandemic restricted the usual large Muharram gatherings, the family arranged for a series of majalis to be held in their homes with a small group of attendees. These majalis took place at a time when digital options to congregate were flourishing. Majalis were regularly being held online through Zoom, live-streamed, uploaded to YouTube and Facebook, shared through WhatsApp, and broadcast on television channels, much this being a continuation of media dissemination that had taken place in previous years. In the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly after the 1980s, majalis have been mediated through radio, cassettes, CDs and television (Eisenlohr, 2015). With the rise of the internet in the past three decades, audio-visual majalis recordings originally made for other mediums began to appear on online platforms: TV clips, for instance, would circulate on Shi’a websites, forums and social media.

The frequency of uploads and amount of content being produced increased significantly as Shi’a organisations and public figures took to the internet to
reach socially-distanced audiences. Despite this proliferation of online content and the Covid-19-induced risk of congregating in person, most people still favoured physically gathering together. My interlocutors – including audiences, *ulema* and *zaakireen*⁴ who performed at *majalis* – all expressed a preference for attending in person rather than listening online. Some of my interlocutors did not listen to *majalis* in Muharram 2020 at all, finding the online experience, as one person put it succinctly: ‘less’.

What is it that seems to diminish the effect of a ‘traditional’/offline *majlis* experience when observed online? The distinction between offline and online *majalis* is blurred: both are participatory experiences, both are mediated, and they are not mutually exclusive. In this article, ‘traditional’⁵ and ‘online’ are considered analytical categories through which to explore nuances in the process of digitisation such as changes, overlaps and new possibilities. I use the term ‘traditional’ to refer to a *majlis* that is held in a designated (physical) space, where at least some members attend physically. Usually, these *majalis* are also mediated digitally by being recorded, broadcast or livestreamed, so they are not strictly ‘offline’. ‘Online’ *majlis* refers to *majalis* engaged with through internet platforms and an audio-visual interface.

How is a *majlis* experienced online? Is it indeed ‘less’? This article will look at registers of authentication (van de Port, 2004) – modes of experience that play a role in how it is that something feels moving, powerful, legitimate or emotional – and how they manifest in traditional and online forms of *majalis*.

2 Authentication

How is a *majlis* experienced? How is something perceived as true, or made ‘real’ in a *majlis*? When looking at how religious practices are experienced, it is valuable to consider how cultural elements come to be considered authentic or not, and how authenticity is experienced (Cohen and Cohen, 2012; Lindholm, 2002). Looking at this process of authenticity/authentication can highlight how religious experiences are communicated and created, and what is at stake when there are changes in this process. The concept of authenticity can serve

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⁴ *Zaakireen* are speakers with expertise in performing *majalis* in the ‘traditional’ style (Deeb, 2005). Unlike *ulema*, they do not have a formal religious education or training, but learn instead from experience and immersion in the Shi’a community.

⁵ The historical evolution of Shi’a ritual shows that the ‘traditional’ has always been constructed within a social context, including material and technological aspects (Deeb, 2005; Hussain, 2005). Traditional and modern ways of practice cannot be separated. We need to understand how rituals and are continuously constructed as ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’.
as a basis for exploring questions such as: How do Shi’a public figures respond to contextual changes that can influence the *majlis* experience?

During our interview, what the *aalima* called ‘culture’ – stories, folk knowledge, certain ways of using language – is simply lived religion. The lived religion approach shifts attention from formal religious institutions and fountainheads, emphasising instead religion as it is embodied, gendered, and practised by individuals in everyday life, and how individual agency contributes to authentication (Orsi, 2003; McGuire, 2008; Neitz, 2012; Ammerman, 2016; Hall, 2020). This approach sets the foundation for analysing religious experience beyond the roster of canonical and textual sources and in lived, contextually grounded experience, material and bodily practices and interpersonal dynamics. It offers narratives of religious experience and processes of authentication grounded in phenomenology, embodiment and materiality (Wolf, 2000; van de Port, 2005; Morgan, 2010; Hirschkind, 2011; Meyer, 2011).

In the same vein, Mattijs van de Port offers a perspective that acknowledges the concept of authenticity as constructed, whilst drawing attention to how it is constructed. He refers to authenticity as a degree of ‘ontological certainty’ (van de Port, 2004: 130), in that it reflects certain persistent ideas about reality and truth that people turn to. In this article I build on van de Port’s idea to explore authentication, considered as a process invoking the experience of something as true, real or meaningful.

3 Registers of Authentication

How is authentication experienced by Shi’a practitioners in a *majlis*? For this I use the term *registers of authentication* to describe modes that enact, evoke and produce authentication, where authentication is an experience of sincerity, truth or conviction. This concept draws on van de Port’s ‘registers of incontestability’ (ibid.). A register is a communicative mode that elicits experience. Registers of incontestability are communication styles that invoke experience in ways that resist contradiction, especially through discursive reasoning. They affirm themselves beyond discourse, thereby producing an experience of authenticity. For example, sensory experiences felt by the body whilst engaging with a phenomenon can be considered ‘registers of incontestability’ (ibid.). Registers of incontestability can still be challenged and deconstructed. This analytical category calls attention to processes of authentication that transcend the realm of the discursive, emphasising the material, embodied and tangible elements of experience. In my adaptation of this concept, I consider text and discourse within religious rituals such as sermons in tandem
with material and embodied articulations. Sensory experiences allow words to come alive, and spoken words can elicit memories, create connections and allocate meaning.

Drawing from my work, three elements of majalis can be considered registers of authentication: Rememory, Embodied mourning, and the Discursive.

‘Rememory’, considered here as a register of the incontestable, refers to an active process of bringing memories into lived experience, and remembering in engaged ways that connect past and present to generate a sense of familiarity, relatability, recognition and conviction. The second register is ‘Embodied mourning’, which sees bodily sensations, emotion and place-making as participatory, materially-grounded processes that authenticate experience. The third register is the ‘Discursive’, which differs mainly from the first two as it is not, by van De Port’s distinctions, incontestable. In fact, works on religion have shifted from textual and discursive approaches to focus on the non-textual and embodied precisely because textual and discursive readings can be contested and critiqued, as, for example, reductive and exclusionary of non-centralised, non-Abrahamic religious models (Meyer, 2009, 2011; Van de Port, 2005). However, in Shi’ism there are centralised structures that authenticate, naturalise, reject or dismiss aspects of religious practice that are prominent. And in majalis, I was confronted with textual underpinnings of authenticated knowledge: references to books, other scholars, oral traditions. How could I begin to make sense of a sermon without listening to what is being said/performed?

The discursive register in a majlis and its connection to authentication become especially interesting given that it is more fluid and open to critique compared with an ‘incontestable’ register. Audiences can react to discourse in a myriad of ways beyond agreement, conviction and certainty: with contestation, doubt, curiosity and questioning, all of which are important in an experience of authentication. The picture is further complicated when we consider what happens to these registers of experience when people listen to a majlis online.

In my research, the process of digitisation poses a challenge for how the majlis accesses Rememory, Embodied mourning, and the Discursive.

3.1 Rememory

Rememory amalgamates remembering and memory to describe an active process of remembering through which the past is brought into — and

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6 Rememory is a word drawn from Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel Beloved. Morrison created the word in her portrait of Black life in post-Civil War America.

7 Such as the marja’iyyat, a system of highly ranked religious scholars that Shi’as consider learned authorities.
reconstructed at – the present (Rody, 1995). Experiencing rememory means living with the past in the present, challenging the experience of time as linear. This does not just mean remembering as a recollection of past events; rather, one remembers a memory, and that memory influences the present, feeling like what is rather than what was.

During Muharram, Shi’as remember Karbala and Hussain, and these memories are enacted through rituals. For Shi’a Muslims, the story of Karbala serves as a foundation for a collective social memory (Connerton, 1989; Shanneik, 2015). Michael Fischer’s (2003) term ‘Karbala Paradigm’ is a way to conceptualise the significance of this event in the lived experiences of Shi’a Muslims. According to Fischer, the Karbala Paradigm is a way of understanding the world and key concepts embedded in social realities – such as divinity, life, death, justice, morality, sacrifice – through symbolism and meanings derived from the story of Karbala. I consider the Karbala Paradigm in conjunction with Connerton’s (1989) work on collective memory.

According to Connerton, social groups sustain shared memories through rituals and embodied practices so that memory is constantly constructed through participatory processes. In Shi’ism complex emotional and embodied commemorative rituals such as the majlis serve to construct, express and re-articulate the memory of Karbala (Sharif, 2005; Thurfjell, 2012). The Karbala Paradigm (Fischer, 2003) and Connerton’s (1989) concept of social memory-making both situate the majlis within the wider roster of rituals and practices that constitute social memory and collective meaning-making in Shi’ism. However, this is not enough to explain how intricate meaning-making takes place during the ritual process. For example, how is the Karbala story evoked during a majlis? How does rememory occur? Alongside this, we must consider that the rememory occurring during a majlis is not simply of Karbala: people remember their own experiences of pain, personal and political trauma, displacement and identity. Collective and personal memories intertwine, and majlis speakers often try to invoke this connection in their speeches to arouse affect.

3.2 A Pakistani Majlis in Amsterdam

To elaborate on how different registers of authentication are experienced during a majlis, I shall present an ethnographic account of a traditional majlis held by Dutch-Pakistani Shi’a women. I locate different registers of authentication in action during the course of the majlis: spatiality and materiality, the intricate performance of discourse, and embodied mourning.

Space-making: setting the stage. On 9 Muharram 2020, I walked into a home that had been converted into a majlis space. The room had been cleared of
furniture and a white cloth was laid on the floor. The walls were adorned with banners and art characteristic of Shi’a religious spaces: stark black tapestries embroidered with Arabic-script calligraphy in bright red, gold and silver. One corner housed a shrine; sparkling gold decorations, contrasted with small black ‘alami\(^8\) replicas. The living room had undergone place-making, so that private spaces become social/public through material objects and symbols, and people inhabit the space through religious practice (Halder, 2019). The space had been deliberately prepared for congregational practice with objects, visual and tactical cues instilling atmosphere. A congregation of about thirty uniformly black-clad women sat cross-legged on the floor of the sacralised living room, and I folded into a corner to join them. Observing a similar context of Shi’a women in the Netherlands, Tayba Sharif (2005: 141) has described the mise-en-scène of a majlis as a ‘visual and spiritual preparation’, which I understand as setting the stage for certain experiences to occur.

Women in the congregation participated in preparing the majlis space, from their uniform black clothing to their physical bearing. They sat in relative silence, carefully rearranging their limbs when the discomfort of sitting still set in. The proceedings officially began with customary soz-khaani\(^9\). A group of women huddled together and began to sing lamentation hymns. Singing about the tragedies at Karbala, their languages flowed between Urdu, Punjabi and Seraiki, remembering and vocalising the Pakistani heritage of this community. The chorus of female voices mournfully intoned poetry praising the Ahl al-Bayt and recounting the tragedies of Karbala. Thus bodies of congregation members played a role in the making of the majlis space through their presence, comportment and performance. A tone and mood were set for the lecture to follow, transforming an East Amsterdam living room into a space imbued with an aesthetic of Pakistani Shi’ism.

Majlis space-making contains material elements, performances and participation, and environments. Specific sensory experiences are crafted, such as listening and bodily attunement. Some of these elements extend to online majalis spaces, and some are experienced differently. To understand this, I turn to Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) idea of social space. Lefebvre described social space as that which is constructed by people using symbols (such as language and objects) and is then, in turn, a foundation for constructing social meaning by providing grounds for social interactions and intersubjectivity (see also Fuchs, 2019). In a majlis, decorations, rituals and languages set the stage for oratory and embodied experience. In turn, these performances and rituals explain

\(^8\) Flags carried during Muharram processions.

\(^9\) Ritual of singing of poetry.
theology, tell stories and elicit emotions that become associated with the space itself, such as the mourning black, that is a Shi’a uniform of sorts during Muharram. Material and social aspects of space intertwine, enabling specific experiences to emerge. I call attention to the space-making of the majlis for two reasons; first, this space is the location of a practitioner’s body, and therefore effects sensory experience; second, to consider how spatiality manifests in digital contexts (explored later).

At the majlis in Amsterdam, the soz-khaani was coming to an end and the sermon was about to begin. Through this, another social dynamic would unfold: that between the majlis speaker and audience. This relationship illustrates social exchange, communication, elicitation and emotional responses that rest on discourse through the oratory of the sermon.

3.3 The sermon: performance of discourse
An elderly woman rose from amongst the group of singers. She settled on a makeshift minbar (pulpit) made from a rickety dining chair, and the congregation turned to face her. The zaakira, who was to address the majlis had assumed her position. She was the matriarch of the family organising the majlis, and a veteran of Muharram proceedings.

Fittingly, her speech began with a statement of one of the foremost Islamic principles: tawhid, the oneness of Allah. The zaakira moved on to narrate faza’il (virtues), that is praising and narrating the importance of sacred figures in Shi’ism. She touched upon a classic qissa to recall a central tenet of Shi’ism: Ali as the rightful heir of Muhammad, and the first Shi’a Imam. The issue of the succession to Muhammad is a key matter for Shi’as. For a first-time listener, or a young child, the zaakira provided information. For a seasoned listener of majalis, this was rememory, as she reiterated a core belief of Twelver Shi’ism. The audience was familiar with this, nodding and murmuring Subhan Allah as the zaakira retold, explained, and reaffirmed her point.

The zaakira then moved on to matters of everyday Muslim life. She began to describe the difference between Shi’a and Sunni sequences of performing wuzu, the ritual ablution performed before prayer. Sunnis, she argued, let the water flow over their elbows in a counter-intuitive way: ‘It goes against fitrat’, she said, with a light chuckle. The Shi’a wuzu, she continued, was more logical

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10 In Urdu, a zaakir (fem. zaakira) is a person who performs zikr (meaning recitation, remembrance).
11 Story/anecdote.
12 Praise be to Allah! Used as a way to express appreciation/agreement with the speech.
13 Nature/instinct.
in the sequence of washing. Her argument indicates that the act of ablution preceding many religious practices may mark differences between Shi’a and Sunnis. Each time a person performs the Shi’a style of wuzu, their body goes through a repeated and ritualised act that is not merely preparatory in significance, but also marks a Shi’a identity. Perhaps, whilst performing the wuzu in everyday practice, a worshipper might register such interpretations subconsciously, or not at all. What is interesting here is the zaakira calling attention to the symbolic capacities of the bodily act of wuzu: through her words, she imbued the act of wuzu with additional meaning. She drew her listener’s memory to an embodied motion they must have performed countless times and then attached an aspect of new meaning to that memory and action: some members of her audience might recall her words later, when performing wuzu. These few minutes of the zaakira’s speech were a masterclass in the craft of a majlis lecturer. This wuzu example illustrates the use of multiple registers of authentication: eliciting the memory of an embodied everyday act and using a discursive argument to attach meaning to that act. In other words, the zaakira was saying: the Shi’a way is authenticated by what comes naturally to the body.

The final section of the speech was the masa’ib, the emotional core of the majlis, where the oration-focused performance of the majlis reciter becomes the backdrop for a deeply embodied mourning experience. The spoken word here plays an interesting role in the eliciting and sustenance of rememory and bodily experience. Consider here the materiality of the spoken word: words are materialised through speech, articulated using the body and received through the senses. Words become elicitors and authenticators of bodily sensations and emotions; there are no hard lines of distinction between embodiment and discursive performance.

During the masa’ib, the zaakira described the martyrdom of Ali Akbar, Hussain’s son, at Karbala and narrated dialogues exchanged between members of Hussain’s camp. The zaakira’s practised lehja indicated that she was reciting these words from memory, having heard them repeated in countless majalis. The repetition of familiar stories and tropes, in recognisable styles, created the trust that comes with feeling that one’s understanding is affirmed. It is a confirmation bias of sorts that the audience and speaker produce together. The importance of this familiarity has been expressed through Charles Hirschkind’s work on sermon recitation/reception, where he argues that ‘an experiential knowledge of the gestural and emotive elements of the story constitute a condition for its ethical reception’ (Hirschkind, 2002: 554).

14 Mournful narration/performance of eulogy.
15 Urdu for the style/tone of speech.
Thus, listeners' positive responses to familiar tropes reflect a familiarity that comes with the cultivation of religious knowledge and experience.

The zaakira narrated heart-breaking dialogues of hope and despair, courage and sacrifice by Hussain's family, speaking, as though the events were taking place at the present moment: rather than 'Hussain said,' she would say, 'Can you hear it? Hussain is crying out ...,' her words ebbing and flowing between past and present tense, creating a blurred sense of time. As the zaakira became the mouthpiece for dialogues between the Ahl al-Bayt, she embodied those figures, not only narrating but performing the words by speaking from their perspective. The audience, then, were not only seeing just her but were also standing on the side-lines of scenes at Karbala.

Rememory was in action. The zaakira's slips into the present tense were critical moments, conveying that this did not happen hundreds of years ago on a distant desert plain; this is happening now; this is always happening; and this is real. Bear witness. Her words were not important for their historical accuracy; the audience cared not about absolute precision but about experiencing a sense of truth.

People anticipate much of what will be said in majalis eulogies because they have heard it all before. They attend in anticipation of what they will feel, and knowing that the majlis speaker will help stir rememory and emotions. In this dynamic between the speaker and audience there is the expectation of what will be elicited. Thus, the audience were remembering Karbala through the zaakira's narration, but they were also at Karbala. Karbala was not confined to the past; Karbala was a memory relived in a space and time that had been shaped for its reception: a room decorated with symbolic artefacts, a like-minded and like-believing congregation, bodies primed and words that had been told and re-told to an ever-listening audience. The zaakira's words conveyed rememories of Karbala, mingling with the memories and experiences of the listeners. Together they conjured Karbala through an assemblage of memory, word and body. As people listened, they were transported to Karbala, and they began to mourn.

3.4 **Embodied Mourning**

Hussain's son Ali Akbar was mortally wounded, bleeding on the desert sand of Karbala, crying out for his father. As the zaakira spoke, the audience wept. Tears rolled down her face, her voice straining, her hand clutching her heart. Her tone was hoarse but sonorous, ringing across the room. The women began to cry louder, their voices swelling along with the zaakira's. Her masa'ib evoked painful sensations by conjuring images and encouraging imagination. The audience's own bodies became engaged as they heard visceral descriptions.
of scorching desert heat, children’s thirst and wounds inflicted on Ali Akbar, exacting a sympathetic response to suffering and violence. The zaakira described an agonising moment for Hussain in Karbala, cradling the body of his son as weeping black-clad women waited by their tents. In Amsterdam, the bodies of the listening women swayed, heads bowed, tensing as they wept into their laps. They began striking themselves on the chest, thighs or head in a practice known as matam or latmiyyah. The zaakira’s rhythmic and emotional performance met with wails and cries from the audience, and the sound of flesh thumping flesh.

After her narration of Ali Akbar’s death, the zaakira paused. This was the emotional peak of the majlis. For a few moments, people mourned, crouching. Sharp gasps and heavy breathing clung in their throats. Gradually, the pace slowed, voices faded and women began to stand up. Together, the congregation drew back from an emotional peak of lamentation.

This event illustrates how registers of authentication come to be performed and experienced during a majlis in which Shi’a practitioners physically congregate in a dedicated space. Rememory, words and embodiment all contribute to the experience and are contextually embedded.

4 Online Majalis Videos

While I have described a traditional majlis experienced through my own participation, I explore online majalis by combining my observations with Shi’a practitioners’ accounts of their experiences, including those of speakers who have recorded majalis videos and Shi’a worshipers who listen to them. My interlocutors, particularly those involved with Shi’a organisations, were unenthusiastic about online majalis. What made such a difference between listening to majalis when attending physically and listening online? Our screens provide sensory engagement and social experience, but of its own kind. The technologies of the internet enable specific modes of experience to be created, replicated, exaggerated or diminished, but there is a difference in the majlis that is noted by both audiences and performers.

The way a majlis is considered online or offline depends on how it is mediated and accessed: the same majlis may be heard in person, and a recording of it experienced online, perhaps years later. Brian Larkin (2009: 122) has called this process ‘entextualization’, in which an event is recorded and therefore split into versions, one version the actual event and another as media recording or livestream (ibid.). In the majlis context, the terms ‘online’ and ‘offline’ are better
understood as deeply interconnected modalities that are not exactly separate but which are certainly experienced differently. Video recordings of a majlis, for instance, become an extension of that time and space. A recording duplicates events and transcends linear temporality by making past events accessible and present ones accessible in the future. Audio-visual recordings have changed spatiality; carefully prepared and designated physical spaces transform into pliable virtual space, unbound by walls but held together by code and socially shared meanings that may be accessed by a variety of audiences. In the following section, I discuss experiences of and in virtual space-making, embodied experience online, and how discourse and rememory intermingle.

4.1 Virtual Place, Social Space and Mahol

To conceptualise the online space of the majlis sermon, I refer to a conversation with a young Dutch Shi’a man of Iraqi descent. He was an active member of Dutch Shi’a youth organisations and online groups, and would attend majalis regularly during Muharram. In 2020, due to the Covid19 lockdowns, the only accessible majalis were on the internet, so this avid practitioner saw his majlis engagement decline steeply. ‘For me the internet is like a place with a lot of content … to have a real Muharram experience in this messy place … it just didn’t feel right to me.’

It is not unusual to think of the internet as a space, as it certainly is an arena of social space, replete with social symbols, interactions and imaginations. In this ‘messy’ and complicated space, what is a real Muharram and majlis experience? To me, my interlocutor’s use of the word ‘real’ here seems to show a yearning for an experience of authenticity – or rather, a certain type of authenticity – in online engagement, implying that there is something different between offline and online majalis. The idea of mahol is relevant here. Mahol in Urdu literally means ambience or environment, but it also refers to a general atmosphere, usually socially-oriented. It can be good or bad. This word captures the idea of the experience of space, presence and environment. In Pakistani slang, if we do not quite feel the space and moment coming together, or feel something lacking, we would ascribe it to a lack of mahol. When I heard interlocutors describe online majalis, it seemed that the mahol of a majlis was transformed online. The same practitioner said: ‘I didn’t listen to an online majlis because I didn’t feel like looking at the screen, in my home, which is where I also work.’

In online majalis, there is no separate sacralised space for the event to take place. Another young woman told me that she played majalis on YouTube.

16 From Urdu, Arabic and Persian.
during her daily train commute. Online *majalis* are accessed and experienced differently. Often there is little prelude: one can simply open a webpage and begin watching and listening. The absence of congregational participation alleviates the need for uniform dressing or specific comportment, and opens up room for distractions.

This blurring of boundaries can increase access in many ways. A non-Shi’a audience can listen to *majalis* without having to go to a Shi’a centre, facilitating both understanding and debate, especially with other Islamic traditions. People can listen to a sermon being live-streamed from another continent. People who cannot physically attend for a variety of reasons, ranging from the pandemic to security risks\(^\text{17}\) to various accessibility needs, can still engage in *majalis*. However, the attunement and preparation when attending a physical lecture, such as performing *wuzu* or dressing in black, does not apply with online *majalis*, potentially affecting the experience.

Aspects of the social space of a *majlis* extend into the online experience. Returning to Lefebvre’s work, social space simultaneously enables social relations and the creation of meaning, and is subject to norms of social relations (Lefebvre, 1991). In the traditional *majlis* described earlier, space was not only bound by tapestried walls and a black-cloaked congregation, although these material elements contributed to the overall experience. Social space was also created and experienced through shared symbols and meaning-making such as language, ritual practice and social exchanges. These symbols were present in a specific context that enabled forms of attunement, embodiment and rememory to emerge.

In online *majalis*, the context and material conditions change, but many of the symbolic and communicative characteristics of the *majlis* space are retained. Both the audience and speakers share social meanings, such as the importance and emotion attributed to Karbala and the Ahl al-Bayt. Symbols such as language and memory elicit and authenticate the experience. This is what brings most people to the online *majlis* space in the first place – wanting to participate in a commemorative *majlis* to mourn Hussain and Karbala; a shared purpose was present beforehand. This is how, for instance, a Dutch Pakistani practitioner could listen to an Urdu *majlis* uploaded from Lahore, and still be able to access imaginaries of the most important space in *majalis*: Karbala. The imaginaries evoked remain the same, but do people respond to them the same way? The social space of online *majalis* retains symbolic capacities, but as the material conditions and context of participation changes, so does the embodied experience.

\(^{17}\) As in Pakistan for many Shi’a gatherings during Muharram.
4.2 Embodiment and Sensation Online

Typing in the word ‘majlis’ into the YouTube search-bar yields thousands of results. In each little video frame is a face. The colour palette is dark: the speakers dress in black, some wearing turbans and some headscarves. When you click on a majlis video, it begins: ‘Bismʾillah‌ al-rahman al-rahim’ (in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’).

The screen is dominated by a speaker, and the usual surrounding presence of a black-clad congregation is missing, the visuals flattened from a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional space. The speakers’ faces in close-up are arresting, displaying a range of expressions that correspond to their oration: smiles when delivering a powerfully moving anecdote, joy when relating praise, conviction when reciting a Qurʾanic verse, and solemnity preceding the eulogy. During eulogies, speakers’ faces drip with tears and sweat, hurriedly mopped up with handkerchiefs. The audience can be heard in a chorus of cries and tears, and occasionally the camera pans to them. However, the camera retains focus on the speaker as the visual locus of the majlis.

When listening to a majlis online, the experience remains sensory, of course. However, embodied and sensory experiences change in response to tangible changes in space, sensation and sociality. First, the experience becomes less participative. People are not embedded in an experience that they are co-creating; instead, the experience becomes largely receptive, perhaps even passive. Second, the experience becomes solitary, as one is no longer present in a congregation. The effect of mirroring a congregation dissipates; there are fewer cues for when to be silent, when to say something in response to the speaker, when to begin the matam. The anonymity that comes with congregational participation is gone: instead, a mourner becomes extremely attuned to their own body as the sounds of their cries and blows on their bodies no longer blend into a louder assemblage. Their cries become muted and soft, staying below the volume of the speaker. Listeners to online majalis no longer have the same mahol replete with other rituals, a congregation, bodily comportment and a soundscape to attune them.

This necessitates other techniques of listening and attunement, so majalis speakers who have mastered the art of engaging and attuning an audience face a challenge when adapting to online sermon recordings or livestreams.

One of my interlocutors is a Pakistani aalim who preaches to transnational Shi’a audiences in English. In 2020, all his Muharram lectures moved online.

In an anecdote that illustrates the challenges of a changed environment (and lockdown), he found himself speaking into a camera, pre-recording a majlis that would be broadcast to a time zone with a half-day time difference. He found the experience impersonal: his attention wandered, and it was hard
to maintain unbroken eye contact with the lens. This *aalim* is no stranger to online preaching. Tech-savvy and moving amongst international audiences, he had educated himself largely through virtual classes and an online network of Shi’a teachers. And yet he found that the public speaking tactics he would employ to engage his *majlis* audiences were not applicable to online circumstances: he could no longer suspend a query and pause to let the audience mull over it, before continuing with a well-rounded point. He could no longer sense how his message was received, and he felt that even the modulation of his voice changed.

I can’t really speak very loud at home…. it is about putting in emotions. And when you put in emotions, your voice is sometimes high and sometimes low. So online *majalis* are really monotonous-type conversation-type broadcast style which does not really show the true skills of public speaking one has.

Certain spaces allow certain forms of embodiment to occur, such as a hall and *minbar* that make it possible to perform with a raised, charged voice or loud weeping. The changes in space and embodiment influence the performance and production of *majalis* and, subsequently, the experience on the listening/receiving end.

4.3 *Discourse and Rememory*

On the surface, the discursive register of authentication seems to simply transfer online since many *majlis* lectures exist online as replicated versions of a physical event. In online and offline *majalis*, speakers take an audience through familiar stages of a *majlis*, from praise and discussion to rememory and mourning. The difference at first seems largely in reception but also appears in how *majalis* are performed. Sermon oration aims to attune the body by eliciting certain sensations and emotions. *Majlis* speakers must find new techniques to engage audiences who are seeking a deeply emotional and embodied experience.

The challenge becomes to digitally convey the sense of something authentic, whilst many of the usual registers employed for that purpose change. In the absence of congregational participation, interaction and the *mahol* of a particular space, *majlis* speakers turn to honing their performance and dialogue. In online environments, a great deal of atmosphere-building and interaction occurs through words: captions, titles of posts and comments. Much of what we see on a webpage, even if it is audio-visual, is embedded in texts: code, language, words. This highlighting of the textual does not escape the *majlis* ritual.
One of the first things I noticed about online majalis is they are announced and searched for by their title, which contains the date, perhaps the topic, and the name of the orator. The online majlis turns attention towards the orator, and the speaker’s fame or popularity becomes the draw for audiences rather than other reasons such as the geographical proximity of the venue and community engagement/alliances. This creates a twofold effect: first, audiences of online majalis have greater agency, as they are not bound by conventional social mores. Clicking off of a webpage and opening another majlis lecture is very different from walking out of a congregation in a local community centre. Second, majlis speakers who are specifically performing for online audiences – whether during the Covid19 pandemic or before – begin to take notice of this. The aalim I interviewed has a YouTube channel dedicated to Shi’a teachings but nevertheless spoke sceptically of online videos: ‘We are heading in a very superficial direction ... our method of learning or source of information is Tweets or two-minute clips. You don’t remember anything. This way you cannot (remember).’

So, how can audiences be sustained? Often, ulema turn to topics and anecdotes that will touch upon rememory: something familiar discussed in a way that is relevant to the current time and social context, and adapted to the architecture of the internet, which favours anything attention-grabbing. An example is a YouTube video by the Shi’a scholar Ammar Nakshawani titled: ‘Night 8: Mental Health: An Islamic Perspective. Dr. Syed Ammar Nakshawani.’ With ‘mental health’ in its title, this contains a social media buzzword and a public health issue. It immediately arouses curiosity. ‘Night 8’ refers to the eighth night of Muharram, positioning this lecture at a date that Shi’a practitioners will associate with mourning and remembering the Ahl al-Bayt. This majlis is in English, the lingua franca of the internet that is widely understood by audiences, including young Muslims growing up in English-speaking countries. The video begins with soz-khaani and moves to Nakshawani, dressed in black and seated on a minbar, somberly reciting Arabic verses. He switches to crisp English, and begins quoting a statistic on mental health in the UK. Nakshawani’s lecture is typically structured in the authenticated style: he references diligently, uses refined debate tactics, and speaks to a global audience. Nakshawani is one of the most popular young Shi’a scholars online, in large part because he understands online audiences and how online content creation works. He combines this with a seminary and university education in the history of Islam. In his eighth Muharram YouTube lecture, he recites faza‘il, makes an argument about mental health and ends with masa‘ib. We do not see

18  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JB5WiiqOBtU.
who his audience is, and they are barely audible. He narrates the martyrdom of Abbas, Hussain's brother, beginning to almost sing, combining English and Arabic, narrating the words of Abbas spoken on the banks of the Euphrates River, calling for Hussain. Illuminated in blue light, listening through speakers, watching on a screen ... we are, once again, at Karbala.

5 Conclusion

Online and offline forms of majalis are inextricably linked and lie along a continuous modality of mediation. The same majlis event may be experienced completely online or offline, depending on the method of mediation. Whichever mode a Shi'a practitioner chooses, however, a process of authentication happens to ascertain how meaningful, truthful, powerful and emotional a majlis experience is. The majlis experience changes online, posing a challenge for orators who are aiming to facilitate experiences of authentication.

Majlis orators can call upon registers of authentication to create experiences of something as true, meaningful or legitimate. Orators and audiences mutually create tangible aspects of experience, such as bodily and spatial experience, together with discursive performance to communicate beliefs, histories, stories and emotion. Rememory is laced throughout majalis in a delicate filigree that simultaneously recreates old patterns and introduces new textures into the experience and re-enactment of memory. Remembering the Karbala story and identifying with the Ahl al-Bayt helps Shi'a Muslims cultivate a sense of community, collectivity and identity.

In recent years, Shi'a speakers and organisations have begun to see online majalis as a means of reaching a broader audience. In response to this, some sermon performances change. Audiences' reception of majalis through different media is something majlis speakers constantly respond to in order to maintain interest and relevance. People feel that things are 'less' or missing in online environments. Ulema and zaakireen feel this difference too, and make attempts to fill in this gap – or at least puzzle over it. Whilst there are no clear solutions to replacing the missing 'something', there is an effort to continue the online mediation of majalis. This is part of religious dissemination, dialogue and engagement in which majlis orators participate. Religious speakers need to adapt to online environments if they wish them to position themselves as sources, sanctioners and even gatekeepers of what is 'true' or 'authentic'. The process of authentication is therefore quite critical for religious authorities. Registers of authentication can produce powerful experiences for religious practitioners during a ritual; discourse, memory and body can produce
conviction, a sense of reality and belief. This is of inherent interest to religious authorities, as religious power – or indeed power in general – is linked as intimately to bodily experience and sensations as it is to discourse. In the course of my continuing research, I hope to explore this further. This text opened with an interview with a female aalima, and the traditional majlis explored was a women’s majlis. Limitations of space preclude a discussion on gender, but this is a well-established sphere of Shi’a studies that I wish to explore in the future.

Majlis sermons increasingly cater to an internet-savvy audience that is curious and ever-growing, critical and gullible, stimulated and distracted. Exploring how sermon content might be changing is beyond the scope of this article, but is an interesting avenue for future research. This article establishes a preliminary look into online experiences of Shi’a majalis, adding to the literature on Shi’a rituals in Europe and the digitisation of rituals. The concept of registers of authentication builds on existing work on religion and materiality and provides a new framework for looking at religious experience. The fact that this research continues during the Covid19 pandemic, when socialising digitally (or not) is taking on new meanings, promises interesting new insights into online majalis in particular.

References


