Karbala in London: Battle of Expressions of Ashura Ritual Commemorations among Twelver Shia Muslims of South Asian Background

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Abstract

The roots of the struggle for authority among various groups of Twelver Shias of South Asian background living in London revolves around the idea of what is ‘true and authentic’ Shia Islam. The theological and political genealogy of this power struggle can be traced by examining the history of Shia Islam in South Asia. This article provides historical analyses and ethnographic accounts of Shia Islam and how it is practised in London. It investigates the influence of London-based Iranian and Iraqi Shia transnational networks on South Asian Hussainias and those who attend them. While some London-based Shias of South Asian origin conform to the Iran-backed reformist versions of globally standardised ritual commemoration of Ashura, others detest this and search for religious reinterpretations that assert South Asian ways of commemorating the Ashura ritual.

Keywords

Islam in West – anthropology of Islam – Shia Islamic reformism – South Asia – ethnography – ritual

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This sacred institution, this South London Hussainia (a Shia Islamic Centre), the best Hussainia in London, was built by our ancestors and our parents' generation. Now I don't want to enter inside the building. It hurts me to see how some people, in order to have their control over this institution and its resources, are twisting and abusing the very fundamentals, philosophy and teachings of Shia Islam. I regret to share, but one of the present administrators of this South London Hussainia publicly said that *qama zani* [self-flagellation by hitting one's head with a large knife on Ashura] only started just a 100 years ago, hence, it is a *bid'a* [innovation] and has no place in Twelver Shia Islam. Can you believe that? That administrator was twisting the Shia history in order to legitimise his monopoly and control over this South London Hussainia. He was doing a Netanyahu\(^1\) on us by wrongly reinterpreting the history of *matam* [lamentation and self-flagellation for the martyrs of Karbala].

We are simple, ordinary and practising Shias. We don't have any power of religious scholarship and backing of any establishment from Iran. We practise Shia Islam by showing the love for *Ahle Bait* [the immediate family of the Prophet Muhammad], which is in our hearts by doing *matam*.

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Mr Kaleem (a 36-year-old, second-generation British Pakistani) was venting his frustration about the current administration and the state of affairs at a South Asian Shia Islamic centre in South London (called in this article the South London Hussainia) during an interview with me.

This South London Hussainia is one of the oldest sites for a Shia Islamic centre and mosque in south London. It attracts devotees from diverse South Asian backgrounds, including Punjabis, Urdu speakers, Hazaras, Sindhis and Pashtuns, of Pakistani, Indian and Afghan origins. Over the last seven years

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\(^1\) A couple of weeks before this interview with Kaleem, Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu, addressing the World Zionist Congress, claimed that the Palestinian Grand Mufti of Jerusalem proposed the holocaust to the Nazis. Netanyahu said that Adolf Hitler was reluctant but the Grand Mufti of Palestine suggested the genocide of Jews to Hitler. Kaleem said that current administration of the South London Hussainia was interpreting Shia Islam in the same way as Netanyahu was interpreting the holocaust, by blaming the victims, i.e. Palestinians. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/netanyahu-under-fire-for-palestinian-grand-mufti-holocaust-claim.
or so, the South London Hussainia has become the arena for debates between two rival groups of Shia Muslims of South Asian background living in London, who compete with each other for the physical occupation of the premises and administrative and financial control of it. The building of the South London Hussainia has become amongst the most charged spaces for contestations over the very definition of what is it to be a Shia and who is a “true, authentic and a real” Shia. These contestations between the two groups have become a popular topic of conversation and gossip, as well as giving rise to legal battles in court between rival groups of Shia Muslims of South Asian background living in London.

This article presents ethnographic accounts of the complex and often contested nature of the ritual commemoration of Ashura among Shia Muslims of South Asian background living in London and aims to establish the centrality of Ashura (the day that marks the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the third Shia Imam, in 680 AD) and Shia Hussainias as the sites and spaces for the contestation and debates over the definition of who is a ‘true’ Shia or what is ‘real’ Shia Islam. The article also establishes that such contestations and debates are nothing new but rather a continuity of a South Asian Shia tradition of defining and reforming Shia practices by tracing their history, genealogy and current dynamics in South Asia. It presents details of schisms and friction between Shia Muslims at the South London Hussainia, and their origins and embeddedness in the historical context of and developments within Shia Islam in South Asia, and emphasises the religious, political, ethnic and regional dynamics of Shia Islam and how they are reproduced in the daily lives of adherents from a South Asian background. The aim is to elaborate the importance of the history of divergent opinions, the role of external influences from Iran and Iraq, internal contestations in South Asia, and the continuity of the same patterns among various groups of London-based Shia Muslims of South Asian origin.

Adding to the existing literature on South Asian Shias, I argue that debates that were historically limited to the circles of *ulema* (religious scholars; sing. *alim*) have become a common topic among most practising Shias in public spaces as a result of post-revolutionary Iran’s scholarly influence on Shia

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communities throughout the world. The article gives ethnographic accounts of the contested nature of expressions of 'being Shia in London', which manifests itself at the time of the ritual commemoration of Ashura every year during Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. It shows that different groups of Shia Muslims of South Asian background are uniquely asserting their ways of commemorating Ashura by collaborating and compromising with, as well as by challenging and denouncing, various transnational Shia networks based in London. The transnational Shia networks that have the backing of a marja, whether the charismatic and independent ones such as the Al-Khoei Foundation, or the London representative of Iraqi Ayatollah Sistani, or pro-Iranian establishments such as the Islamic Centre of England, or anti-Iranian ones such as the Shiraziyyon in London, thus become a medium of arbitration, authentication and certification for the permissibility or impermissibility of South Asian rituals and ways for adherents to perform the Ashura commemoration. I strongly maintain that the Shia Muslims of South Asian background in London are not the passive recipients of the decrees of these marjas. There are South Asian Shia individuals and groups in London who exercise their own agency in detesting the hegemonic discourses disseminated by religious authorities of Middle Eastern origin on how to be a Shia.

This article begins by benefitting methodologically from historical and comparative analyses. An analysis of historical transformations and developments within Shia Islam in South Asia delivers the context in which an ethnographic exploration of contemporary affairs provides a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The empirical research in this article is a result of multiple ethnographic fieldwork exercises conducted on various occasions, amounting to a total of six months of fieldwork, between October 2014 and May 2016 with Shia Muslims of South Asian background living in London, particularly in Tooting, Brent, Hounslow and Hammersmith. The findings set out here are collected from forty-two participant observations in the majalis (gatherings during

7 The source of emulation for a Shia Muslim to follow, usually a religious scholar or an ayatollah.
the month of Muharram to remember the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala), thirty-six interviews, twenty-five informal discussions with small groups of research participants, and five case studies. For this article, I have selected ethnographic data from the total amount of data I collected. One contribution of ethnographic research with London-based Shia Muslims of South Asian background is that it redresses the balance of the dearth of literature on this issue in Anthropology, Religious Studies, and Social Sciences. The overwhelming majority of available literature on Shia Islam in South Asia deals with Shia populations located in Pakistan or India, with a few exceptions. For ethical reasons, and keeping in mind the charged political and social situation in the real lives of research participants from rival groups at the South London Hussainia, and the sensitivities experienced by Muslims in the west during the ‘decade of suspicion’, pseudonyms are used for all individuals research participants and places. The article begins by discussing the history and evolution of contestation within Shia Islam in the South Asian context and its continuity in London until today, and then presents the ethnography.

**History and Continuity of South Asian Shiism**

It is pivotal to contextualise the present power struggle at the South London Hussainia and its roots in the historical experience of Shia Islam in South Asia. The presence of Shia Muslims of South Asian origin in London is a result

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of their migration from the 1960s onward, mainly from India and Pakistan. Exploring the historical trajectory of the formation of Shia identity in South Asia, and how local and global factors influenced its formation in the past, is instrumental in understanding the formation of South Asian Shia identity in Britain which is, at present, in the early stages of its formation. Looking at the history, developments and transformations within Shia Islam in South Asia is essential for understanding the patterns of contestations that the South London Hussainia has recently experienced.

The first establishment of Shia Islam in South Asia took place during the brief rule of Ismaili Shias (965-1005) in the region of Multan (currently, southern part of Punjab province in Pakistan), who were overthrown by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (971-1030). Six centuries later, Twelver Shia Islam emerged on the social and political landscapes of South Asia when the Mughal Emperor Humayun (1508-1556) took shelter at the Safavid court in Persia when he lost power in Dehli (1540-1555). With the support of Shia Safavids, Humayun was able to retake his empire in 1555. Humayun brought members of the Persian aristocracy and clergy with him and the Mughal court language, culture and religion of sixteenth-century India came under Persian influence. In South India, the Qutb Shahi dynasty (1512-1683) maintained closed relations with Persia and Muharram processions took place. The Qutb Shahi dynasty was overthrown by the Sunni Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (1618-1707), who declared the Qutb Shahi sultan a heretic and ally of Persia. Shia Islam did not vanish completely from South India with the end of the Qutb Shahi dynasty, however, and a sizable Shia minority still lives in the city of Hydrabad. In North India, Shia Islam rose to prominence with the beginning of the decline of the Mughal Empire. Sa’adat Ali Khan (1680-1739), a descendant of a Shia family from Persia and a high profile Mughal governor, established the Awadh State in North India. The rulers of Awadh started employing Shia ulema from Persia and Iraq in their court and these ulema brought the usuli tradition of

11 Cole, “Shi’i clerics in Iran and Iraq”; Pinault, Horse of Karbala.
12 Abou Zahab, “Between Pakistan and Qom”.
13 Pinault, Horse of Karbala.
15 Pinault, Horse of Karbala.
16 The school of thought within Twelver Shiism that emphasises rational principles for developing new understandings and believes in reinterpreting the rules of fiqh under the guidance of a mujtahid. Usulis believe that consensus among religious scholars can serve as an independent source of Shia law.
practising Shia Islam with them, along with Persian influence on Shia practices in North India. Thus, the influence of Iranian *ulema* among South Asian Shias in general, and among those living in London, is not a recent phenomenon and cannot be limited to post-revolution Iran, though that did expedite Shia mobilisation in South Asia.

Waves of Transformations and the Historical Experience of South Asian Shia Muslims

The modern history, trajectory and journey of Shia Islam in South Asia have experienced various transformative periods of renewal, reorientation and reformism, which I describe in this article as waves of formation and transformation. For the sake of analysis, I divide the modern history of Shia Islam in South Asia and Britain into four waves of formation and transformation with respect to their content, impact and outreach among people. While Shia Islam and Shia activism in Pakistan have already been discussed using the terminology of waves and transformations, particularly in the insightful work of Simon Fuchs on Shia Islam in Pakistan, I would engage with the similar pattern of analysing Shia history and extend the scope of analysis over Shia Islam in South Asia and the continuity of these waves in Britain. The arrival and influence of the *usuli ulema* of Shia Islam in the Awadh State can arguably be called a first wave of modern Shiism in South Asia that resulted in the consolidation and popularity of Shia Islam among Awadh Muslim elites. The arrival in India of *usuli ulema* from Persia and Iraq in the late eighteenth century corresponded with the prospering transnational religious and trading networks between India and Persia. Beneficiaries of these transnational networks were

17 Hussein, “Mourning of history”.
18 Here, I am not ignoring or undermining the influence of the 1979 Iranian revolution and its impact on Shias in South Asia and in the diaspora. On the contrary, the Iranian revolution has made a profound impact on Shia dynamics among the South Asian diaspora, as I discuss in detail later in this article.
21 The forefathers of Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini, the founding father of Iranian revolution, were among the generation of Persian Shia religious scholars who arrived to become part of the Awadh nobility and settled near Lucknow. His paternal grandfather was born near Lucknow and later migrated to Iran.
the traders importing and exporting between the two countries and the religious scholars travelling to and from shrine cities in Iraq, Persia and India. The famous Shia scholar of Indian origin, Sayyid Dildar Ali Nasirabadi, travelled to shrine cities in Iraq and adopted an *usuli* stance after his exchanges with *ulema*; he made a huge impact on his return to Awadh, although his command of Shia religious scholarship, theology and jurisprudence was never acknowledged by local *ulema* based in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala because of his Indian origin. While the first wave made an effort to cultivate Shia ritual performances under Persian influence in North India, the second wave came when the descendants of Awadh rulers started donating generous amounts of money for the maintenance and development of shrines cities in Iraq and provided patronage to Shia *ulema* in Iraq and Persia. During this second wave of philanthropy and artistic/aesthetic promotion of Shia ritual performance in North India, the shape of Shia Islam in the court at Lucknow, the capital of Awadh State, became model to follow for small Shia populations in other regions of South Asia.

The third wave was that of migrations of Shia Muslims from the Awadh region as a result of the Partition of the Subcontinent in 1947, when mostly educated and middle-class Shia Muslims, mainly from Lucknow, migrated to Pakistan, settling largely in Karachi. This group then undertook a further migration from Pakistan to Western countries, mainly to Britain, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, and this phenomenon continues until today. The migration of Shia communities has always been instrumental in creating and establishing transnational networks of Shia scholars, traders and families. This brings new opportunities for economic, political and religious alignments within the communities that experience migration. For South Asian Shias, both experiences of migration in the latter half of the twentieth century, shaped new realities of representation and identity at national and international levels. During this third wave Shias in North India lost the robust influence of the middle class on local polity and representation due to migration, and the Shias who did not or could not migrate then politically collaborated with right-wing Hindu

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22 Cole, “Shi‘i clerics in Iran and Iraq”.
24 Meir, “Money, religion and politics”.
parties,\(^{26}\) who did not traditionally have the support of Sunni Muslims.\(^{27}\) In Pakistan, Shias had to re-group in the new-born Islamic state with an apparent Sunni outlook and adjust to being the minority sect. The third wave resulted in the emergence of transnational networks of Shia Muslims of South Asian background in Britain, particularly in London. Popular Shia speakers from India and Pakistan started visiting Britain to deliver sermons and recite at the \textit{majalis}. These novice transnational networks of South Asian Shias in London experienced a major shift in their role and function after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 resulted in a fourth wave.

Interestingly, the fourth wave originated from Iran after the Revolution, it significantly influenced Shia Muslims of South Asian background in Britain, as well as in South Asia.\(^{28}\) The post-revolutionary fourth wave brought with it new processes and synergies of collective action for Shias of South Asian background living in London, which I call the emergence of ‘Shia globalism’ among diasporic communities and the public assertion of their identity as an ‘alternative \textit{umma}’ vis-à-vis Sunnis, mainly for the post 9/11 Western world. This fourth wave, however, has revived the same dilemmas for South Asian Shias in London as those brought by the first wave a couple of centuries ago in North India—namely, standardisation and reformation of ritual commemoration practices, excommunication of the so-called ‘deviant’ elements and the ‘formation of a central religious authority’.

Explaining the history of reformation by analysing it through waves in South Asian Shia Islam can help the understanding of critical events\(^{29}\) among diasporic Shia communities and their impact on both religious interpretations by scholars and the personal subjectivities of adherents. However, investigating Shia Islam in a global metropolis like London informs about new actors onto the Shia religious landscape and juxtaposes them to London-based South Asian Shia Muslims. What was not possible to explain during the historical


\(^{27}\) The split between Sunni and Shia voting patterns in North India became most visible during the general election in India in 2014. Shias openly supported the right-wing Hindu dominated BJP party, unlike Sunnis, who traditionally vote for more secular parties, such as the Congress Party and other secular regional parties. The current Indian Minister of Home Affairs, Rajnath Singh, during his 2014 election campaign from Lucknow, promised to deliver on the demands of the nawabs of Lucknow (traditionally Shia Muslims) and to protect their “reservations”.

\(^{28}\) Abou Zahab, “Between Pakistan and Qom”.

analyses of first three waves of reformation in South Asia is the interactions of Iranian and Iraqi Shia individuals and networks with South Asian Shias ones on a daily basis while they live in London; a recent phenomenon as a result of globalisation and resulting into ‘Shia globalism’. This opens up new debates on the emergence of ‘Shia globalism’ and has been missing in the analyses of delimited Shia religious geographies in the available literature.

Impacts and Acceptability of Reformation and Standardisation

Each of the above mentioned four waves in Shia Islam in South Asia and Britain has their own peculiarities with respect to its content, impact, outreach and acceptability among the adherents. The second wave of philanthropic donations, however, can be viewed as the formative stage of modern day Twelver Shia Islam in South Asia. The present form, conduct, delivery and performance of majlis, which is popular and prevalent in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan (partly) and in Britain among South Asians, were developed in Lucknow during this era of philanthropy and the promotion of Shia aesthetics. It is then that the format and structure for the delivery of majlis, the appearance and demonstration of the tazia (replica of a tomb) procession in streets and bazaars, the popularity of Urdu marsiyya (eulogy for the martyrs of Karbala) in poetry, the widespread approval of the majlis being delivered in Urdu, the introduction of tabarra (cursing and condemning opponents of the family of Prophet according to Shia tradition), women’s participation in majalis and other Shia gatherings, and the religio-political identity of Shia Islam were laid down. It can be safely said that debates about performing the Ashura ritual in a politically and religiously correct manner are a continuation of the standardisation process that started in the Lucknow court during this second wave, whereby usuli ulema pronounced on the permissibility or impermissibility of every performance.

This standardisation during the second wave was a result of usuli ulema’s efforts to distinguish Shia Islam from Sunni Islam and these ulema did this gradually in order to legitimise their role and to enhance their influence in the Lucknow court. The regional expressions of Shia Islam in South Asia,

30 Cole, “Shi‘i clerics in Iran and Iraq”.
31 Pinault, Horse of Karbala.
33 Cole, “Shi‘i clerics in Iran and Iraq”; Pinault, Horse of Karbala.
particularly in Delhi and Hyderabad in India, \(^{34}\) in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit Baltistan and Kashmir in Pakistan, and among the South Asian Shias in London whom I observed during my fieldwork, is fundamentally an imitation of the performative genre and standardisation that developed in the Lucknow court during the second wave. The regional expressions continue to retain their own linguistic distinction in recitation of the marsiyyas, but Urdu is an equally popular medium of majlis delivery throughout South Asia and in the diaspora. High-profile Shia scholars prefer delivering the majlis in Urdu, wherever they go in South Asia and abroad. Interestingly, the anti-Shia expression was also developed in Lucknow in the early twentieth century, initially in the form of the Madhat-i-Sahaba (the veneration of the Companions of the Prophet) procession, which was carried out in Lucknow by Sunnis in reaction against the introduction of tabarra (cursing and condemning the opponents) in the Shia majalis, a practice that was encouraged and incorporated into majlis delivery by usuli ulema from Persia in the Lucknow court \(^{35}\) during the second wave. Banned anti-Shia militant organisations, such as the Sepah-i-Sahaba in Pakistan today, are a political continuation of the expression of anti-Shia sentiment that appeared in the form of the Madhat-i-Sahaba procession in Lucknow during the nineteenth century. \(^{36}\) Just as Shia Islam became widespread and popular in Persia under the patronage and official support of the Shia Safavids, \(^{37}\) the same process occurred in South Asia under the tutelage of the Lucknow court and the rulers of Awadh State. \(^{38}\) However, it can be argued that the presence of Sunni kingdoms around the Shia Awadh State in South Asia and emergence of Sunni reformists after the decline of Mughals Empire \(^{39}\) restricted the popular spread of Shia Islam among the masses.

The migration to Britain during the third and fourth wave of Shia Islam’s (re)formation in South Asia is a pivotal point in shaping the features of British Shia Islam as it is practised today by Shia Muslims of South Asian background in London. A majority of Shias who migrated to Britain have their place of origin

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\(^{34}\) Wolf, “Embodiment and ambivalence”; Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*.

\(^{35}\) Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*; Bayly, “Pre-history of ‘communalism’?”.


\(^{37}\) Cole, “Shi’i clerics in Iran and Iraq”.


in South Asian areas such as Karachi, Lahore, rural districts of North Punjab in Pakistan and Lucknow, Delhi and Mumbai in India. Some Hazara Shias who migrated from Quetta in Pakistan and from Afghanistan participate regularly in gatherings at the South London Hussainia. While Urdu became a popular medium of majlis delivery in the Lucknow court because it was the language of the elites there, in Britain, Urdu is a necessity as a medium for majlis delivery because of the ethnic diversity of the audience.

Modern day public expression of being Shia in Britain and contestations around it are indicative of the influence on South Asian Shia Muslims of the fourth wave of Shia Islam, i.e. post-revolutionary Iran and its impact on Shia communities across the world. This fourth wave has repeated the story of reformism for South Asian Shia Muslims in Britain that played out during the first and second waves, when usuli ulema standardised Shia ritual practices at the Lucknow court. At the Lucknow court during the first wave, the reformist usuli ulema demarcated the boundaries of belief about who is a ‘true Shia’ and who is not, by excluding and isolating/purifying the majlis from Sunni and Hindu participants and declaring their beliefs as ambiguous and insufficient as an expression of ‘true’ love for Ahle Bait. Along with this exclusion, the process of purification of Ashura commemorations began, and Persian and local usuli ulema discouraged the cultural and popular ways of commemorations by, for example, forbidding people from playing drums and music during the Ashura procession, which urban middle-class Shias in Lucknow discourage even today, although it remains a popular way of commemorating Ashura among the rural peasantry. Similarly, in the current fourth wave, some of the ways that Shia Muslims of South Asian background living in London commemorate Ashura have been declared by the post-revolutionary Qom-trained reformist ulema of South Asian background to be ‘innovative, un-Islamic, cultural and impure’, harmful to the cause of global Shia Islam and giving it a bad name. The post-revolutionary generation of Shia ulema of South Asian background, educated and trained in Qom and/or Najaf, has been instrumental in the standardisation of the performative behaviour of the adherents. The standardised behavioural performance of being Shia is not limited to Ashura commemorations, but extends to notions of how a ‘true’ Shia Muslim should live a pious everyday life throughout the year, and this is disseminated in the Muharram majalis.

40 Pinault, Horse of Karbala.
41 Wolf, “Embodiment and ambivalence”.
42 My research participants told me that this is how they are viewed and described by the new breed of Qom-trained reformist Shia ulema of South Asian background.
43 Abou Zahab, “Between Pakistan and Qom”.
Reformism in the South London Hussainia

Efforts and initiatives towards the standardisation of public performance and expression related to the Ashura commemoration in accordance with the Iranian model have resulted into administrative and political advantages for one group of Shia of South Asian background in the control of the South London Hussainia. In this article, the group that favours standardisation of Ashura rituals on the Iranian model will be called ‘the reformist group’, for purposes of analysis of the internal rivalries in the South London Hussainia. This process of standardisation is contested and challenged by the other group, who prefer keeping to South Asian ways of Ashura commemoration and practice, and I call them ’the old guard’ for the same purpose. The reformist group have certain advantages at various levels over the old guard in supporting their claims about religious reinterpretation and control of the South London Hussainia. These advantages are the support of London-based Iranian foundations that favour their interpretations of what is the ‘right and Islamic’ public expression of Ashura. The reformist group has the backing of fatwas from marja’s based in Iran and Najaf and the preaching of the ulema trained in Qom and Najaf seminaries who constantly repeat fatwas that discourage South Asian ways of commemorating Ashura. Shia reformists exert pressure on adherents in London by maintaining that, given the current global hostility towards Shias, particularly in Iraq, there is a dire need to speak with one voice and be united under one leadership in order to take advantage of their positioning in London as a global centre to raise awareness about the issues in the international media.

The reformist group is led by Mr Jafer, the current administrator of the South London Hussainia. He emigrated from Karachi to Britain in the late 1980s. Because he was introduced as a well-established Shia activist and community leader from Karachi, he rose swiftly up the ranks to the administration committee of the South London Hussainia. He is a trained Shia alim and obtained his religious qualifications from the seminary in Qom, after the Iranian Revolution. He has established and strengthened the links between Iranian foundations based in London and the South London Hussainia and has organised joint events. By the late 1990s, he had secured the support of significant numbers of organisations and members of the administration committee at the South London Hussainia. After gathering a group of like-minded reformists at the South London Hussainia, he started discouraging the severe and violent forms of zanjir zani (self-flagellation with blades) and qama zani (striking one’s head with a large knife).

In one of the gatherings I attended during Muharram in 2015, Mr Jafer was speaking to the congregation. He said,
This place, South London Hussainia, belongs to everyone who has love for *Ahle Bait*. Everyone is welcome here. Please make sure that you leave your ethnic prejudice of being an Urdu speaker, Punjabi, Sindhi or Pashtun outside the four-wall of this South London Hussainia. Once you are inside this building, show unity and uniformity. I know some people are very rigid about their forefathers’ ways of doing *matam*, but I will request them to be flexible. I must emphasise that we are not in India or Pakistan anymore, and we have right guidance from scholars who are knowledgeable and who know how to do *matam*.

Mr Jafer never names and shames people from the old guard when he discourages the severe forms of *matam* in his public speeches. He always focuses on conveying his message diplomatically to the public. At the end of every *majlis*, he prays for unity and consensus among Shias under the leadership and banner of grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran. His idea of *tabbara* (cursing and condemning the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, especially the first three caliphs) is also a position that is unacceptable to his opponents from old guard. Mr Jafer believes that Shias are only obliged to say *tabarra* on the issues and topics that demonise *Ahle Bait* in any shape or form. He maintains that it is harmful for the promotion of Shia Islam to curse the *Sahaba* (Companions of the Prophet Muhammad) by naming them, as it creates further animosity between Shias and Sunnis.

There are two main conflicts among Shia Muslims of South Asian background in London: how to perform *matam* on the eve of Ashura, and the administrative control of the South London Hussainia. Debates that are common among the members of rival groups are intellectual discussions over the definition of who is a ‘true’ Shia or what is right way to be a Shia. However, these groups, both reformists and the old guard, are fighting not only an intellectual battle with each other over the right interpretation of being a Shia, but also a legal battle over the administrative control of the South London Hussainia. The old guard are accustomed to performing severe forms of self-flagellation, involving blades and knives that causes bleeding, which are still popular among Shias in South Asia. However, Grand Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran forbade this practice in a fatwa and declared it *haram* (impermissible).

After the reformist group grew in strength and numbers at the South London Hussainia, they petitioned in British court in London, arguing that severe forms of *matam* involving self-flagellation and shedding blood inside the premises of the South London Hussainia violated British health and safety laws and caused a nuisance, and requested the British authorities and police in London to end the practice. The court decided in favour of the reformists.
but the old guard appealed to a higher court against the decision. In response, the reformists pleaded in the higher court that the severe forms of *matam*, such as self-flagellation with blades and knives, exposed children to violent practices, bodily harm and extremist behaviour and so it should be banned. As a consequence, the court issued barring orders against fifty members of the old guard, who are no longer allowed to enter into the building of the South London Hussainia unless they give a written undertaking that they will not perform severe self-flagellation that causes bleeding.

**Repetition of Trans-Historic and Transnational Patterns of Reformation in London**

The history and waves of reformation within Shia Islam in South Asia are reproducing themselves in London. The legal battle and contestations among rival groups of Shias of South Asian background in London have a parallel with another historical event. In colonial times, during the Awadh Bequest [the philanthropic donations by Awadh elites for shrine cities in Najaf and Karbala (1850-1903)] by South Asian Shia Awadh State, it was then Iraqi and Persian Shia *ulema* who were petitioning against each other over allegations of financial corruption in the office of the British colonial administrator in Iraq.44 Now, the post-colonial London-based Shias of South Asian background are going through a legal battle against each other in the British courts in London in the early twenty-first century, in which Iranian and Iraqi *ulema* are arbitrators in a dispute between rival South Asian groups. Iranian foundations, according to Mr Ghulam, a supporter of old guard, allegedly give financial assistance to the South London Hussainia. The ancestral home of Mr Jafer, the alleged recipient of Iranian money and leader of the reformist group, is Lucknow [once part of the Awadh], from where his parents’ generation migrated to Karachi during Partition in 1947. It is also interesting to note that during the Awadh Bequest to shrine cities in 1857, a group of Arab Shias lodged complaints and sought assistance from the Sunni Ottoman administrators in Iraq over the misuse of funds by their Shia co-religionists and jurists,45 while others ridiculed them for seeking help and arbitration from the rival Sunnis to settle an internal Shia matter. In 2015, the old guard are ridiculing the reformist group at the South London Hussainia for they are paying for the legal services of a Sunni group

44 Meir, “Money, religion and politics”.
of solicitors who are presenting their petition in the British court against their own Shia brethren.

Counter-Reformation and Presence of the South Asian Past

The counter-narrative to Mr Jafer’s claims for his reformist interpretations of Shia Islam and his administrative control of the South London Hussainia comes from Mr Akbar, the leader of his rival group, the old guard. I met Mr Akbar during the first week of my fieldwork and did multiple indepth interviews with him afterwards. He is a 60-year-old self-employed businessman and is well versed in English, Urdu and Punjabi. He runs a busy family business in south London, where he arrived when he was fifteen years old with his parents. He told me that he was raised in a practising Shia Muslim Pakistani family. His father told him to study religion and then choose for himself what version of Islam to practise. Out of his personal interest in searching for what he calls ‘true’ Islam, he studied books of Hadith, which are regarded as authentic by Sunni Muslims. He came to his conclusion about the authenticity of the wilaya (political and spiritual right to lead the Muslim community) of Imam Ali (son-in-law of the Prophet and the first Imam for Twelver Shias) after making a comparison between Shia and Sunni polemics. He became convinced that Shia Islam is the ‘true’ Islam and started practising it with full devotion at relatively young age. He became an active and influential member of the South London Hussainia in the 1980s and started zanjir zani there. This is a very popular and common Ashura practice among Shia Muslims in South Asia, so, every Ashura for about twenty years, according to Mr Akbar, he and his friends used to perform zanjir zani at the South London Hussainia.

All this was about to change. Mr Jafer took charge of the South London Hussainia and he was not in favour of performing the ritual of zanjir zani on Ashura. Through Mr Jafer’s influential history among the Shia Muslim community and his links with local political and religious elites, in both London and Karachi, he was successful in lobbying against zanjir zani. In 2013, he along with other reformist members of the South London Hussainia reported to the police that Mr Akbar had created public disorder by performing the ritual in front of people who were quietly saying their prayers. This was an upsetting development for Mr Akbar, who was known for organising zanjir zani among London’s Shia community. Mr Jafer succeeded in obtaining a restraining order against Mr Akbar and his supporters to prevent them from entering into the premises of the South London Hussainia and Mr Akbar told me that he had also been ordered by court to pay a significant amount in costs. He told me
with disappointment that there were around fifty people on his side in the beginning of the court proceedings, but now only four were left. The rest of his friends had given written undertakings to the court that they would not perform *zanjir zani* in the premises of the South London Hussainia again and, as a result, they have secured permission to attend events at the South London Hussainia, unlike Mr Akbar.

In the meantime, some mutual friends intervened and tried to reconcile the parties. They agreed to take the issue to a prominent Shia cleric at the Al-Khoei Foundation. The reformist group wanted to take the issue to the Iranian Islamic Centre in London, but the old guard insisted that they didn’t recognise Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as a *marja*, so there was no point in taking the issue for arbitration by his followers at Iranian Islamic Centre. The old guard believed that, at the Al-Khoei Foundation, the clerics would share their opinion without Iranian pressure and influence, given the Foundation’s independent credentials. However, the *ulema* at the Foundation answered diplomatically and favoured the stance of Mr Jafer, whose supporters were in the majority at the gathering. South Asian Shias have huge regard for the Iraqi *marja*, Ayatollah Sistani and Pakistani and Iraqi Shias in Ireland also follow Sistani and show a common allegiance to his spiritual authority, despite cultural differences.

Mr Akbar told me that he contacted the representatives of Ayatollah Sistani in London at their Islamic centre and asked them to give a fatwa in support of *zanjir zani*, but he was surprised that representatives of Ayatollah Sistani opted to stay neutral and maintained that they neither favoured nor discouraged the ritual. They informed Mr Akbar that it was up to the individual whether to observe the custom or not. Mr. Akbar was very disappointed and blamed Grand Ayatollah Khomeini:

> Khamenei is the one to blame as he has given a fatwa against *zanjir zani*. The people against the custom of *zanjir zani* are enemies of Shia Islam and are the collaborators with the Sunnis. They want to crush the spirit of Shia Islam and its public manifestations. I will keep observing this custom even if the whole world turns against me.

He told me that he only considers Ayatollah Shirazi in London to be a true *marja* and representative of true Shia Islam as he openly favours self-flagellation and criticises the oppressive Iranian regime. While some argue about the depoliticisation of *marja*’s from the affairs of nation states in the Middle

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East and domestication of transnational Shia networks,\textsuperscript{47} in the case of Mr Akbar and Mr Jafer’s ‘battle of Karbala in London’, the picking and choosing of \textit{marja’s} to support their theological and political positions\textsuperscript{48} reveals another level at which \textit{marja’s} function in a cosmopolitan city like London.

Mr Akbar said that he felt betrayed and isolated as all his colleagues who had performed \textit{zanjir zani} with him for decades had abandoned him in order to have access to the South London Hussainia, and had succumbed to the pressure of the reformist group. He told me that at one point he decided that he would back down from his stance on \textit{zanjir zani} like his friends. He asked his family about it and his wife and daughters told him that they did not care even if they lost their house and they were willing to pay court fines and penalties, but Mr Akbar should not back down, and he said that, with the support of his family, he remained determined. He is pursuing the case in the courts and appealing further. He told me that for him, his life of being a Shia in London is just like another ‘Karbala in London’, where he feels he is surrounded by enemies like that of Imam Hussain (the third Imam of Twelver Shias), abandoned by most of his supporters and only supported by the women of his family. He said that his suffering at the hands of fellow Shias made him a more committed Shia and closer to \textit{Ahle Bait}.

Mr Akbar said that his likeminded friends have started organising commemorating Ashura at a private house. He and his like-minded friends perform \textit{zanjir zani} at this new location. At the same time, he is also leading a pilgrimage to Karbala and Najaf in Iraq during the month of Muharram. He said he was proud of saying \textit{tabbara} and \textit{tawalla} (veneration of Imam Ali) and maintained that \textit{zanjir zani} was a centuries old South Asian Shia ritual and people who were abandoning it in Britain were cowards and hypocrites. He said that some clerics from Pakistani and Indian backgrounds support his position, but they don’t visit Britain frequently and are not based in Britain. He alleged that South Asian Shia clerics who had links with the Iranian and Iraqi establishment in London were more interested in appeasing governments and Sunni Muslims and were compromising the spirit of Shia Islam by abandoning \textit{zanjir zani}.

The frustration and anger of Mr Akbar resonates among other members of his group of old guard. Most of them have given written undertakings to the current administration of the South London Hussainia that they will not perform the ritual in order to have access into the building. They are not happy about

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Fibiger, Thomas, “\textit{Marja’\textdegree}yah from below: Anthropological approaches to the study of religious authority”, \textit{Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies}, 8, no. 4 (2015), 473-89.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
it but they feel that they do not have a choice as they have been going to the South London Hussainia for Ashura commemorations all their lives. Everyone they know in their community goes there as it is a very prominent place for social and religious activities among South Asian Shias living in London.

The Dynamics of being Shia in London

This article has provided a brief history of waves of reformism and transformation that South Asian Shia Islam has experienced in the past two centuries. Unlike Sunni Islam, which has consistent political and social control over the Islamic public sphere in South Asia that resulted in the emergence of local authoritative interpretations, Shia Islam was only able to flourish under short-lived dynastic kingdoms, which made it prone to the influence of authoritative religious interpretations coming from Iran and Iraq. The ethnography suggests that the influence of fourth wave of transformation in Shia identity, i.e. post-revolutionary Iran, on South Asian Shias in London has had a similar impact on Shia ritual performances to that of the first wave that came with the arrival of usuli ulema in Awadh State. It is evident that these waves of transformation for South Asian Shia Islam are not linear or solely Iran-centred. Recently, South Asian tradition of zangir zani and performing matam by walking on fire, has been asserting itself by obtaining legitimacy by Shia marja’s, like Shiraziyon in London. In the absence of Muslim rulers to provide instruction for the public life of believers, reformist Muslims fills the gap and, in case of South Asian Shias in London, this function is performed by vibrant transnational religious networks of Shia Muslims.

Another aspect of the contestation over being a ‘true’ Shia in London is the problematic issue of selecting a marja. Shias of South Asian background in London, as well as in Britain, constitute a numerical majority of the overall Shia population. However, their numerical majority within British Shias is not proportionally reflected in religious authority, as the majority of London-based marjas are from Iraqi and Iranian backgrounds. Being a muqallid (follower) of a particular marja from Iran or Iraq might have significant implications for the

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49 Robinson, Francis. “Strategies of authority in Muslim South Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”.

personal life of an adherent. For the reformist, educated, upwardly-mobile middle-class, professional, second- or third-generation Shias of South Asian background, this may mean associating with the wider global Shia community, maintaining a political identity, or understanding and practising the most sophisticated version of Shia Islam. However, the implications are different for South Asian Shia in London who are mainly working-class, first- or second-generation immigrants, with a strong belief that the performance of South Asian rituals of Ashura commemoration like zangir zani and walking on fire are the best expression of being a ‘true’ Shia. In cases like that of Mr Akbar, following any famous and scholarly marja even becomes unnecessary as their personal devotion to Ahle Bait and conviction about the ritual Ashura commemorations are in themselves a path by which to seek spiritual and religious guidance. It is evident from events at the South London Hussainia that association with a marja and seeking protection and patronage from that association, may become another form of power structure equivalent to a biraderi block (kinship and caste-based alliance among South Asian for worldly gain) to maximise individual influence and social capital within the South Asian community.

These ethnographic accounts of members of both groups of South Asian Shias living in London—what I have called the reformists and the old-guard—present their personal understanding of what it means to be a Shia, based on their experiences and affiliations. Their personal understandings not only resonate with local concerns but also converge and diverge with global trends of Shia Islam in the twenty-first century. The meanings of the master narrative and its sub-narratives about the events of Karbala, as disseminated by Shia speakers, provide subjective understandings of these narratives among the audience dependent on their personal and socio-economic backgrounds.

At the same time, the “personal engagement in congregational Shi’ite religiosity can be approached as an expression of individual agency”. The history of South Asian Shia Islam is full of contestations centred on the expression of

51 Fibiger, “Marja’iyyah from below”.
individual agency and London-based South Asian Shia Muslims are a continuity of that tradition with their own local and global dynamics. Mr Akbar and his friends started performing self-flagellation privately in a house when they were denied permission to do it publicly in the South London Hussainia by Shia reformists.