Bodies & Artefacts

Relics and Other Devotional Supports in Shi'a Societies in the Indic and Iranian Worlds: An Introduction

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The term relic, literally “what remains,” from Christian religious culture, and so familiar there, has no literal translation in neither Arabic, Turkish, Persian, nor Urdu. The equivalent term used for relic in Islam is *āthār* (plural of *athar*: “effect, trace”), covering a much more general meaning than relic, or, in the Persianate world, including the Indian Subcontinent, *yadgār*, which refers more to the idea of memory and remembering than to the idea of remains, especially physical remains.

According to most scholars,¹ even though Prophetic “relics” are preserved and displayed in the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul,² these relics do not occupy a place of genuine importance among Muslims or in Islam. Indeed, on the one hand, Islam generally views everything as sacred: the whole earth and every man: “from a certain point of view, everything being governed by divine law, revealed or cosmic, nothing escapes the category of the sacred. According to the Sunna, the surface of the earth, given as a purification and place of prostration to the Prophet and his community, is entirely sacred, with the exception of certain places polluted by human or animal use and forbidden for prayer. In the same way, every man is sacred to his neighbour, as the Prophet solemnly reminds us during the Farewell Pilgrimage, summarising the main commandments of the Law as follows” (Gril, 2006). On the other hand, Islam places less emphasis on the importance of the body as an object of devotion than Christianity does, where it is venerated first of all because of the essential sacredness of the Body of Jesus Christ, the Body of God, and second because it is exclusively the bodily remains, the relics, which are visible and touchable that ensure the connection of the faithful to the dead saints. In Islam, bones are always buried, and, therefore, invisible and untouchable. However, it is worth mentioning that bodily relics of the Prophet, such as the hairs of his beard, are well venerated in different parts of the Muslim world. In Rohri, for example, a shrine in the Sindh region of Pakistan houses a hair from the beard of Muhammad, which a devotee is said to have brought from Istanbul in the sixteenth century.³ Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) devoted several pages of his *Muslim Studies* to the issue of relics in Islam.⁴ He begins by quoting a theologian from Medina, Shaykh Amin, who gave a speech at the 6th Congress of Orientalists in Leiden, denouncing the trafficking of the Prophet’s hair in the Turkish and Indian worlds, calling these products forgeries and adding that if real relics were found, the Sunna clearly orders that they be buried and forbids their being worshipped under any circumstances (Goldziher 1971: 331).

Indeed, it is very complex and delicate to compare the worship of relics in the Muslim and the Christian worlds. Nevertheless, if one develops the comparison, the relationship with the holy body in Muslim countries is, most of the time, a relationship with an absent body, which is quite different from what is observable in the case of Christianity and Christian relics or bones. Moreover, according to the beliefs of some Muslims, highly sacred personalities such as the Prophet and members of his family, the *Ahl al-Bayt* (e.g. in Shi’ism), are not considered dead but are actually believed to be

alive and, therefore, still able to hear and intervene. Although the body, bodily traces, and bones are not considered to be less present, this also ensures in a certain way the connection between the believer/pilgrim and the Imam.⁵

The idea of the absence of relics in the Islamic faith is probably based, in the case of common opinion, on the purist idea that Islam – in contrast to Christianity – affirms the direct and unmediated relationship of man with the only God, and the generalized interpretation of the first pillar of the Muslim faith, namely Divine Oneness, or *Tawhīd*. According to this view, Islam does not need any material intercession. This, despite the fact that the veneration of the relics of the Prophet (as mentioned above) and the veneration of the Black Stone of the Ka'ba (and other places in Mecca) is widely and uncontroversially accepted throughout the Muslim world.

In fact, it is worth noting that the question of relics in Islam has not received much attention from researchers to date. This is in spite of the existence of pioneering work such as that of Daniel de Smet.⁶ It was only in 2010 that a summary article on this subject was published. In it, Josef Meri states that the “study of the veneration of relics in medieval Islam is only now emerging as a sub-field of study after investigations by European Orientalists during the first half of the twentieth century” (Meri 2010: 97). He concluded his article by proposing a typology of Islamic relics organized according to the owners of the relics: 1. the Prophet and personages from the monotheistic faiths, 2. his family, and 3. saints (Meri 2010: 119–120).

When one sets foot in the lands of Islam, in the territories of Muslim culture, one observes the veneration of the divine-men or divine-women, the friends of God, the saints; perfect human beings who can always intercede between ordinary men and God. The geography of relics (bodily relics or contact relics) is superposed to the geography of the sacred spaces of the Islamic world. This has already been described by different researchers and scholars as “the worship/cult of saints” in Muslim societies. Theologians for their part have also tried to show that such veneration is not against the doctrine of Divine Oneness, but rather constitutes the solicitation and the veneration of the One God through and by means of a human being, an object, or a place.⁷ It is, of course, also a very anthropological trait, common to all human beings, to need something tangible or concrete, an object or a corps, in order to get closer to God, as we can see in almost all religions across geographical space and historical time. Does a purely abstract or merely theoretical religion or way of venerating the God(s) even exist? Perhaps this can only be found in the recent minority denomination of Wahhabism.

Here we have decided to use the Christian term “relic” to affirm its existence – all differences included – in Islam in general⁸ and in Shi'ism in particular, and to denote the artefacts, objects, and material supports related to holy figures that accompany devotional practices in Shi'a Islam, even if it is not customary to use this term when we write about the Muslim world. In fact, they are nothing other than “relics,” that is to say the bones and bodily traces of the saints (Imams), or objects that have been in contact with their bodies, either during their lifetime, or after their death, associated to their grave or the place(s) assigned to them. This is what remains of these sacred figures, of their everlasting presence, and what carries a *baraka* or “blessing” from these holy beings through various modes of transmission. As Dominique Julia writes, “The veneration of relics [...] is shared by various religions, even if each time it takes place in dissimilar theoretical and practical configurations” (2010, p. 1085).⁹

The articles in this thematic issue study relics, devotional objects and material supports employed in the Shi'i context of the veneration and cult of the Imams and the members of the sacred family of the Prophet. They study intertwined links between places, rituals, believers and their piety, at the crossroads of anthropology, art history and codicology. The present issue follows a few valuable and inspiring works that have

emerged from the fields of history, architecture and portable arts since 2010, from Ingvild Flakerud's *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (2010); the two collective volumes edited by Pedram Khosronejad about iconography and religious devotion in Shia Islam (2012), and saints and pilgrimages (2012); the valuable work of James W. Allan on the art and architecture of Shi'a Islam (2012); to the work of Fahmida Suleiman about the artistic and ritual expressions around the saintly family of the Prophet (2015). In short, our ambition here is to make a significant contribution to the under-explored field of material culture in Shi'i societies.

1 The Issue of Material Culture in Shi'i Societies

The core of this special issue¹⁰ is based on a workshop held in the EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris) on May 27, 2019. It also reflects some of the subjects studied in the course of our four-year monthly seminar held in the same School (EHESS), entitled "*Pratiques dévotionnelles et cultures matérielles dans les sociétés Shiïtes*", co-organized by the editors of this thematic issue and Zahir Bhalloo (Free University, Berlin), between 2015 and 2019. The aim of this seminar was to work on diverse research subjects dealing with Shi'i devotional practices and material culture, mainly, but not only in the Iranian and Indic Worlds, over a long chronology and with different approaches and scholars, using methods and knowledge of anthropology, the history of written sources, the history of material and artistic cultures, and the history of religion.

This seminar was intended to break with the geopolitical and media representations of Shi'ism and Shi'as, presented in turn as the antidotes of Sunni extremism, or, on the contrary, as the spearheads of Islamist violence. It aimed to open up the Shi'i horizon, both geographically and thematically, with a scientific and in-depth approach. During this experience, we wanted to see, through the material side of culture, i.e. the objects, Shi'i religiosity in all its geographical (from India to France, passing through Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon), thematic (funerary practices, pilgrimages, and ceremonial performances), and even doctrinal (Twelver Shi'ism, Isma'ilism, Druzism ...) diversities. For us, the material aspect of culture has been the link, or even the very support, of the more immaterial, symbolic, or religious aspect of culture. Our aim was not to enter into theorizations about the place of matter-object in culture, or its role in the construction of socio-cultural identities (about which there is a long debate between the French and English schools of thought), but simply to focus on the material aspect which, except in a few exceptional cases mentioned above, and despite its importance and the great place it occupies in the way of rendering Shi'i culture, has not been taken as a central focus in studies on Shi'ism until today. In the course of this experience, our intent was to identify the artistic and material cultures that are linked to Shi'ism. Some productions are identifiable by their inscriptions or the subjects they represented, while others need the interpretation of their context to be understood: the multiple identities and shifting meanings of objects were thus questioned. Above all, what interested us most were the processes of fabrication, the knowledge, and the skills, artistic or otherwise, involved in the production of everything, from the smallest, almost insignificant object to the largest monument. Our focus, then, was more particularly on how the materiality of the object – the passage from its ideal representation to a concrete existence as an object – conditions its conception, realization, manufacture, and uses, and, of course, to understand the significance that the faithful attach to it.

Many aspects of Shi'a devotional practices and material cultures were thematically studied with the enthusiastic assistance of numerous students and colleagues (from

EHES, but also from other French or foreign universities) who generously presented their research (often unpublished, always innovative) each month. Our path branched out in several directions, covering words, written materials and texts, figures of devotion, places and spaces, ceremonies and rituals, relics and others kinds of sacred artefacts; those bearing supernatural sacred power, such as cloths and fabrics, earth or stone, prayer books, ceremonial standards, various kinds of icons, magic squares, talismans, and so on. The words of the devotional spheres, i.e. written sources regarding religion, were brought into conversation with the theoretical/doctrinal aspects of the devotion and its relation to local cultures, rituals and practices (various forms of pilgrimages of the saints, worship of the dead, Muḥarram ceremonies, and so on, in various places from South East Asia to Iran and Iraq). Several figures of devotion were also studied: From the sacred personalities of the holy Prophet's family, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, to the mystical saints called *pīrs*, or wise men/women. We also focused on the geography of devotion, examining cities, shrines and places of pilgrimage, cemeteries, places of worship, and social organization in the network of the devotional public and private spaces (Sehwan Sharif, Qom, Najaf, Karbala ...). Within the context of cities and monuments, we primarily discussed what is ritualized and how the ceremonies and performances function therein: their religious, social, and political organization; what is their temporality, from everyday worship to other ritual or ceremonial rhythms (weekly, monthly or yearly), and the natures of the rituals themselves.

The June 2018 international workshop, entitled "Rituals in Transition among the Shi'a Worlds", focused on the contemporary period. This workshop was motivated by the hypothesis that certain ritual transitions and changes are underway in Shi'a societies. This hypothesis arose from recent observations and studies devoted to an array of diverse cultural areas. The workshop gathered scholars of different fields (anthropology, geography, history, sociology, art history, visual studies) and cultural areas, in order to combine the different approaches to the issue and to start elaborating a reflection on a potential ritual transition among the Shi'a worlds, from South Asia to the Middle East.

Several scholars from Iran, Germany, and France presented papers on "Objet, espace, temps: enquêtes multisituées des rituels de Muharram" (Sabrina Mervin CNRS-CéSor); "Āshourā immobile' et āshourā en mouvement. Quelques réflexions sur les modèles organisationnels des rituels de Muharram en Iran depuis la période Qajar" (Mohsen Hessem Mazāheri, Tehran Islamic Azad University); "Changes in the status of women in the mourning rituals of Muharram. University, feminising public sphere and religious rituals" (Jabbar Rahmani, Tehran, Institute for Social and Cultural Studies); "The *mar-sīyeh* in Sindhi among the Lawatiya Shi'a of Oman" (Zahir Bhalloo, Freie Universität Berlin); "De la pluri-religiosité à la pluriconfessionnalité: (re-)configurations des pratiques du croire en Anatolie rurale de la fin de l'Empire ottoman à la République de Turquie (XIX–XX^e s.)" (Aude Aylin de Tapia, IDEMEC); "Pour une nouvelle approche de la sainteté: le rôle des rituels dans la fabrication des saints" (Delphine Ortis, INALCO); "La ville de Qom et le sanctuaire de Fātemeh Ma'sumeh. Les rites et leur transition dans l'espace-temps" (Sepideh Parsapajouh, CNRS-CéSor).

Our second workshop, which took place in May 2019 and whose proceedings constitute this thematic issue, centred on the themes of bodily relics and on the objects linked to devotional practices, offering an overview on specific questions from the Medieval to the Contemporary Period. The material culture of Shi'a societies still remains an understudied area or, more properly now, an under-published field. This workshop focused on the material and artistic culture of Shi'a piety through relic and devotional media, such as objects used in the ceremonial commemorations of Ḥusayn and Muḥarram worship, as well as votive objects of everyday life, in the public and private, as well as sacred and

profane spheres. These are both objects and material elements made for devotional purposes and objects that become sacred and hold supernatural powers over time through a form of connection (dedication, prayer, touch) with a divine source.

Three main directions were proposed, anchored in the main subjects studied during our four years of seminars: Manuscripts as devotional objects; the body and its imprint on devotional rituals; and the circulation of material culture between Shi'ism and Sufism. This workshop thus provided the opportunity to open up various fields and, at the same time, to propose a synthesis of our approach, shared by eminent, generous, and highly involved colleagues, with papers that ranged from specific field studies to historical overviews.¹¹

2 Devotional Practices, Relics, Bodies, and Objects: Some Reflections on This Issue and an Introduction to the Contributions

The present issue is made up, for the most part, of developed versions of papers presented during the aforementioned workshops. According to the contents of the seven articles gathered here, this issue begins with articles on the relics, places, objects, and texts of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran, continues with Indic Shi'ism, with a contribution dealing with the Isma'ili branch, and is followed by practices that are situated between Shi'ism and Sufism. Finally, this volume ends with an article on devotional Islam in Maghreb. The question of relics is explored through their very different types found in Shi'i societies. Here bodily relics, contact relics, and relic/memory objects are presented that function as substitutes for the presence of the sacred figure, the relics "*en creux*,"¹² such as the foot prints left by the Imam or the hoof prints of his mount, and relics as part of the process of constitution of sacred figures.

In Twelver Shi'ism, the cult of the Imam's bodily relics is embedded in the general idea of the timeless and constant presence of the Imam (the Pole), and its attributes of occultation and visibility. Relics in Shi'a contexts and beliefs can be thought of as the everlasting and visible/invisible presence of the Imams. The contribution of Sepideh Parsapajouh approaches the question of sacred geography and pilgrimages in Twelver Shi'ism, focusing on the most important sacred figures (the members of the family of the Prophet), the places attributed to them situated in the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Israel) and Egypt, and the reason for and scope of their sacredness. She shows the immateriality of the sacred figure, and his/her omnipresence beyond many places attributed to them through a permanent or ephemeral physical presence. Annabelle Collinet, with her contribution about steel performance objects used in public rituals of the Muḥarram ceremonies in Iran since the Safavid and Qajar periods, also addresses the superposed materiality and immateriality through artefacts (arms, armours and *'alams*), which are supports of devotion and accessories for ritual performances. They materialize the abstraction and constitute a place of encounter (in a monument or in an outdoor public ritual) and gathering in the sacred context. The very concrete existence of the Imams in any time and place is visible through rituals and the used objects or the bodies (even buried or absent).

Dealing with South Asia, the relation between the body, the trace/imprint of the body, and the object, is especially explored through two case studies in India (Hyderabad) and Pakistan (Sehwan Sharif in Sind), but also through the study of the relics *en creux* which are the imprints of Imam Ali (*Qadamgāh*), discussed by Michel Boivin in the Sindhi context of Hyderabad in Pakistan. In his study of the political and social issues that these places present since the nineteenth century, he shows how their liminal

status has attracted different categories of pilgrims. Karen Ruffle and Delphine Ortis show how artefacts in general, and especially *‘alams*, interact in the worshipping of Shi‘i figures and saints. Things are polysemic: for instance, the *‘alams* in Hyderabad, India, discussed by Karen Ruffle, are proper relics and defined as “focal objects”. They are fascinating cases of image-objects, with a strong personification of the anthropomorphic *‘alams*. They are indeed close to sculptures and their presence in an Indic religio-cultural environment is related to the process of viewing. Delphine Ortis shows how artefacts in a Sufi context are also involved in the construction of the ascetic himself, and consequently the potential saint. These two studies reveal a fascinating interaction between bodies and things: Ruffle shows how brass objects are composed/identified as bodies of the *Ahl al-Bayt* and Ortis shows how living servants of the saints are (re)created almost as objects (through their own body and soul and through their tool artefacts) for the holy figure to whom they are entirely devoted. Furthermore, the performance of public rituals and witnessing the presence of the Imams are made through a deep interaction between bodies and artefacts. The sensorial aspect of sacred love/commemoration (see, touch, sing, declaim, carry, play, eat ...) is directly linked to (and works through) image-signs, image-objects, and above all of them seems to be the *‘alam*. They are a presence proper, a substitute: an activation, an analogy, a memory.

Some of the articles in this issue deal with the power of the text, the written word, and devotional practices, meaning the organization taking place between canonical texts, ritual practices and the “popular piety” and, in so doing, question the relation between global Shi‘ism and vernacular Shi‘ism, often considered as belonging to a different level and described as existing between “official” and “popular.” As some of the papers published here demonstrate, this conceptualization of a textual, canonical religion on the one hand, and of a piety performed by the people that would be a kind of parallel Shi‘ism on the other hand, can be largely nuanced: the rituals taking place in the public space, just like in the sacred monuments, find their meaning and roots in official bases, practices, and texts. The contribution of Olly Akkerman explores the Bohras, Shi‘i Ṭayyibī Isma‘ilis who consider themselves heirs of the Fāṭimid Imamate through the written word materialized in manuscripts and documents. To quote Olly Akkerman, Bohras legitimize their “Neo-Fāṭimid” identity through their living Arabic Isma‘ili manuscript culture. She shows the material metamorphosis from documents to manuscripts, leading to a new unique social life as sacred objects, subject to veneration and ritual performance.

The last paper of this issue, by Hiba Abid, introduces the text-object famous in the Maghreb (*Kitāb Dalā’il al-Khayrāt*) and in the Ottoman world. She approaches the very interesting question of the mental visitation through the painted manuscripts produced in the Maghreb. This contribution about the tomb of the Prophet in Sunnism touches on the important matter of substitution. This topic, also discussed through other contributions on Shi‘i societies, appears as a central notion in the understanding of devotional practices and material culture in the Islamic world.¹³

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Notes

- 1 See for example R. Jamous, 1998; 2013; Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, 2005.
- 2 Hilmi Aydin, 2014. The sacred relics are named *Kutsal Emanetler* in Turkish, in the past they were named *Emanat-ı mukaddese*. *Emanat* is something precious entrusted to someone (we thank Charlotte Maury, curator, Musée du Louvre, for the Turkish terms used for the sacred relics preserved in Topkapı).
- 3 About the body of the Prophet, its sacredness and its veneration, see for example the article of Denis Gril, 2006; about the fabrication of saints and substitute, cf. Jean-Pierre Albert, Raymond Jamous et Antoinette Molinié, 2013.
- 4 It was first published in an article in 1911 on the cult of saints, then republished in his *Muhammedanische Studien*, Halle, 1889–90, 2 vols. Here we use the English translation.
- 5 See also, Emma Aubin-Boltanski, 2013, where she questions the mystery of the existence or absence of the body of the prophet Moses in a place that has become holy for Muslims.

- 6 See for example "Translation et vénération du ra's al-Ḥusayn au Caire fatimide", dans: Urbain Vermeulen & Daniel De Smet (éds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras* 11 (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 83), Louvain 1998, pp. 29–44; "Le calife fatimide al-Hâkim (996–1021) a-t-il voulu s'emparer des reliques du Prophète Muhammad?", dans: Philippe Borgeaud & Youri Volokhine (éds.), *Les objets de la mémoire. Pour une approche comparatiste des reliques et de leur culte* (Studia Religiosa Helvetica 2004/05), Bern 2005, pp. 247–65; "L'ostension des reliques du Prophète Muhammad: une pratique controversée", dans Daniel-Odon Hurel et Anne Massoni (dir.), *Des reliques et des hommes. Ostensions limousines et fait religieux (XVI^e–XX^e siècle)*, Limoges (Pulim), 2018, pp. 217–29.
- 7 See for example Sepideh Parsapajouh 2016, about the theological debate around the veneration of the great reliquary (*zarih*) of Imam Ḥusayn between Iran and Iraq.
- 8 Finbarr Barry Flood, in his last book (2019), has used it for the devotional practices in Islam: *Thechnologies de devotion dans les arts de l'islam. Pelerins, reliques et copies*, Paris, Louvre. See also the chapter devoted to relics in Richard Mac Gregor recent book, *Islam and the Devotional Object: Seeing religion in Egypt and Syria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020.
- 9 On the definition and the place of relic in religious thinks and practices, see Dominique Julia, 2010.
- 10 We warmly thank Stéphane Pradines, who gave us the opportunity to publish this volume as the first thematic issue of this new collection.
- 11 Daniel de Smet and Mounia Chekhab Abudaya who contributed to this workshop, had already published their papers, and gave us their vivid interventions and participations (see the references in the bibliography *infra*). The workshop also gave the opportunity to watch Hasan Ali Khan, Shabbir Siraj and Nofil Naqvi's documentary film about The Qalandariyya Sufi Order of Sehwan (Pakistan) and its relationship to popular Shi'a devotion, commented by Hasan Ali Khan (Habib University, Karachi).
- 12 This term refers to the trace of the sacred figure left like an imprint, as a negative view of his presence and power. It is borrowed from the terminology employed for the relic of Saint-Aubert (seventh-eighth century) housed in Saint-Gervais Basilica (Avranches, France). Bishop Aubert would have founded the Mont Saint Michel. He was touched by the the Archangel's finger of fire, which occurred a hole in the skull, which constituted a relic (of the presence) of the archangel.
- 13 Flodd, 2019.