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Encountering the Internal Other: Non-Shi‘i Family Members among the Imami Shi‘a

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Abstract

This article looks at the figure of the extreme anti-Shi‘i, the *nāṣīb*, as treated by early Imami Shi‘i discourse during the seventh–ninth centuries CE. Several stories are studied in which the *nāṣīb* is encountered as a problematic internal other within Shi‘i family structures. It is argued that such narratives gesture at the ways in which complex social realities were responded to by social and religious authorities such as the Shi‘i imams. While concerns about issues such as mixed marriages and overbearing parents were not restricted to Shi‘i families, the figure of the *nāṣīb* shows us how certain ways of encountering others within kinship structures were related to the distinctive ways in which Imami Shi‘i social institutions harmonized or were dissonant with the wider society within which they were embedded.

Keywords

nāṣīb – sectarianism – marriage – procreation – Twelvers – communal boundaries – ritual purity – pre-Occultation

In this article, I focus on the problem raised by the encounter, within Imami Shi‘i family structures, of the figure of the *nāṣīb* (pl. *nawāṣīb*). A *nāṣīb* is a term from early Islamic usage which initially referred to someone who vehemently

opposed ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the brother-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, a claimant to the caliphate before the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty, and later canonised as the first imam of Imami Shi‘ism and the progenitor of all the Twelver Shi‘i imams. In some sources we see that the *nāṣib* came to be understood as an opponent of either the *ahl al-bayt* more broadly, or the Shi‘a. This anti-‘Alid *nāṣib* figures as a stereotyped *bête-noire* in many Shi‘i reports. I focus on the early period of Shi‘i history by looking at the *nāṣib* in Imami Shi‘i hadith corpus formulated largely in the eighth to ninth centuries CE. This article relates to the topic of this special journal issue on “kinship encounters” by looking at what happens when this dangerous other, the *nāṣib*, is encountered within the intimate spaces and relations of the family. As we will see, the *nāṣib*, although a Muslim, represents a far more disrupting presence than even non-Muslims. I will not, however, attempt a comprehensive diachronic history of the development of the idea of the *nāṣib* in Shi‘ism, but rather limit myself to a consideration of some of the meanings of the *nāṣib* at its earliest point of appearance in Imami sources.

I will argue that the fact of being an Imami Shi‘i Muslim, a person whose values and identity were sometimes treated with hostility by the hegemonic structures of the society of the Islamic empire, meant that the processes of encountering an “internal other,” in particular in one’s own family, were complex and distinctive. It is true that issues of the negotiation of religious difference within intimate relationships such as marriage were always prone to throw up complexities whose niceties were meticulously reasoned out by the cerebral jurists who chose to engage with them, as in the case of Antonia Bosanquet’s analysis of the question of “husband-only conversion” in this special issue. For the Imami Shi‘a, a further layer of complexity emerged from their self-positioning as morally superior to and physically purer than those who subsisted in a less precarious position of participation in the hegemonic religio-political culture. In the course of my analysis of several cases related to the *nāṣib*, I will argue that such narratives illuminate how complex social realities were responded to by social and religious authorities within Imami Shi‘ism, such as the Shi‘i imams. While concerns about the issues raised in these cases (mixed marriages, overbearing parents) were not restricted to Shi‘i families, the figure of the *nāṣib* shows us how the distinctive Imami Shi‘i ideologies and socio-religious hierarchies created distinctive ways of encountering others within kinship structures. In this sense, the idea of the *nāṣib* represents not only a negative construction of identity, but also a productive tool for understanding the ambiguous social consequences of religious difference, and should be understood as part of a constellation of Islamic terms

for internal others, fifth columns, and marginal cases such as the *munāfiq* and the *fāsiq*.¹

1 What Is a *Nāṣib*?

The figure of the *nāṣib* is complex. The multiple roles of the *nāṣib* in early Islam has recently been extensively explored by Nebil Husayn.² Husayn's book focuses on non-Shi'i discourses about and by various people who might be described as anti-'Alid in some way, but it neglects a key aspect of the phenomenon of the *nāṣib*: its long history as a productive category in Shi'i discourse. Likewise, Husayn does not discuss the origins or developments of the term itself. The literal meaning of a *nāṣib* is one hostile to or who makes war upon another (from the root *n-ṣ-b*, to set up, erect). Lane's lexicon cites the classical Arabic dictionary *Tāj al-'Arūs* as suggesting that the *nāṣib* refers not just to a general hater of 'Alī, but specifically a member of a Kharijī sect. Whatever the nature of the earliest Islamic usages of the term, Nebil Husayn shows that very soon the term referred to rather diffuse phenomena:

Historically, the most staunchly anti-'Alid individuals were part of larger collectives of Muslims who did not necessarily agree with all of their views. These groups might have been found in a pro-Umayyad mosque in eighth-century Kūfa, in proto-Sunnī ḥadīth circles, or in an army that fought against 'Alī and his descendants.³

Like many similar terms of disapprobation for heretics, infidels, and the religiously heterodox,⁴ the application of the term *nāṣib* leaves much to the eye of the beholder and tells us relatively little about the exact content of the *nāṣib*'s own ideas and practices, and more about the distance between the *nāṣib* and the one making the accusation of *naṣb*. Thus, to Sunnis, who ultimately

1 For the former, see A. Brockett, "*al-Munāfiḳūn*," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. For the latter see, Josef van Ess, "*al-Manzila Bayn al-Manzilatayn*," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition.

2 Nebil Husayn, *Opposing the Imam: The Legacy of the Nawāṣib in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

3 Husayn, *Opposing the Imam*, 32.

4 See for example terms like *kāfir*, *fāsid*, *murtadd*, *ghālī*, *mufawwid*, *muqaṣṣir*.

adopted broadly pro-ʿAlid positions,⁵ but who rejected Shiʿi claims about ʿAlī’s religious primacy as a successor to Muḥammad, the *nāṣib* might mean a Khārijī sectarian who condemned ʿAlī, but for some, it might also refer to a Sunni such as Ibn Taymiyya who restricted ʿAlid claims more than most Sunnis.⁶

In the early Imami Shiʿi context studied here, the *nāṣib* appears not as a clearly defined theological persuasion or social grouping, but rather as more general term for stubborn anti-ʿAlids or anti-Shiʿa. Even in Shiʿi texts, the idea of the *nāṣib* does various different kinds of work at different periods and in different frames such as legal, theological, ethical, political, historical, and polemical.

2 Sources

I will be relying on Twelver hadith reports from collections compiled in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE in order to access the attitudes and institutions of Imami Shiʿism. Throughout this article I use the term “Imami” to refer to the community of Shiʿa who recognised as their imams a coherent father-to-son succession in the lineage of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765) up until al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī (d. 874), as well as other ultimately non-canonised claimants. I draw a distinction, therefore, between the Imami Shiʿa who lived at a time when the imamate was not a fixed canon, but a living, contested institution, and the Twelver Shiʿa who emerged out of Imamism in the tenth century and came to recognise a closed, canonised set of twelve Imams ending with the hidden Twelfth Imam.⁷ The relationship between the earlier Imams and the later Twelvers is a complex one, but in general one should be aware that the vast majority of Twelver hadith would have been first circulated as Imami hadith, but they

5 ʿAlī was incorporated as one of the “four rightly guided caliphs,” a doctrine that represented not a historical political formation, but rather a retrospective compromise regarding the religio-political splits and military confrontations in the decades following the death of the prophet Muḥammad. Crone notes that the “four caliph thesis” was spread in Iraq in the course of the ninth century, see Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 134–5.

6 See Husayn, *Opposing the Imam*, chapter 5, especially 113–116.

7 I am aware, of course, that Imami is often used synonymously with Twelver, but for convenience I use the two terms to refer to two very distinct historical periods characterised by very different institutional and doctrinal formations. For a history of the terms see Etan Kohlberg, “From *Imāmiyya* to *Ithnā-ʿashariyya*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976): 521–34; Etan Kohlberg, “Early Attestations of the Term *ithnā ʿashariyya*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000): 343–55.

would have undergone a process of compilation and redaction which changed the way they were read and used as Twelver Shi'ism began to develop.

Much could be said about the difficulty of establishing the historicity of Twelver hadith. As an underpopulated field within western academia, scholars of Shi'ism have done less work to establish principles for dating reports and articulating the specificities of the hadith corpus than has been done for historical reports or Sunni hadith reports, for example. A few reports can be established fairly securely as representing historical communications between the imams and their followers,⁸ but most cannot. However, an automatic rejection of the content of the Imami hadith reports does not represent a rigorous scholarly approach any more than a reflexive acceptance of them. Imami hadith are an immensely rich reservoir of ideas and attitudes, also preserving evidence regarding institutions and interrelations that, if ignored, radically impoverish our depiction of early Islamic history. In what follows, I will operate on the assumption not that these narratives report facts, but rather that they reflect thinking in the eighth and ninth centuries CE about concrete social realities that members of the Imami community encountered.⁹ There is a difference between ideology and practice. However, although the reflection on social experiences that exists in the Imami hadith corpus often emerges from narratives whose central aim is the hagiographical construction of imamic authority, these sources are nonetheless relevant to the broader history of kinship encounters in early Islam, for they allude to ongoing, unresolved efforts to deal with the socio-religious complexity which was one of the unescapable facts of a large, diverse Islamic empire.

3 Imamate at the Centre

Before we look at the case of the *nāṣib*, we must understand the way family relations fit into a broader ideology of kinship and community in early Imami Shi'ism. The Imami Shi'i community was founded on an engagement with ideas of kinship, specifically descent from and succession to the Prophet

8 See Edmund Hayes, "Between Implementation and Legislation: The Shi'i Imam Muḥammad al-Jawād's *Khums* Demand Letter of 220 AH/835 CE," *Islamic Law and Society* 28, no. 4 (2021): 382–414.

9 A landmark article in this regard is Etan Kohlberg, "Imam and Community in the pre-*Ghayba* Period," *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 25–53. However, Kohlberg's sociological commentary remains marginal to his analysis, which is dominated by a philological, thematic, history-of-ideas approach. The same could be said of many other scholars of Imami Shi'ism who touch upon social history.

Muḥammad. Ultimately this crystallised into a doctrine of father-to-son succession of religious guidance and leadership within a specific branch within the lineage of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib through his marriage to the Prophet’s daughter Fāṭima. The Imami doctrine of father-to-son succession which became distinctive of their conception of imamate and community around the mid-eighth century CE, however, was embedded in an older, broader sense of veneration to the family of the prophet, the *ahl al-bayt*, which emerged alongside the increasing veneration of the prophet Muḥammad across the entire Muslim community and continued to persist alongside, and sometimes in tension with, the centralizing doctrine of imamate of Imamism.¹⁰

The concentration of divine guidance in an increasingly restricted lineage of the imams meant that a doctrinal defence of the Imami imams’ fitness to guide the community was mounted. This ultimately led to the adoption of the doctrine of imamic infallibility and impeccability (*isma*). On the other hand, the imperfect realities of genetics and family politics meant that the imams’ kin did not always measure up to the ideal conduct imagined for this holy lineage of *ahl al-bayt*. This became particularly apparent during crises of imamic succession, when apologists had to resort to strategies such as citing prophetic precedents for bad kindred, such as the brothers of Joseph and the son of Noah and so on.¹¹

4 How Did Members of the Imami Community Refer to Themselves?

Given the centrality of kinship to communal identity, we might expect that kinship terms might be dominant metaphors in describing relations between community members. However, while such terms do exist in the Imami lexicon, they are not dominant. When describing the relationship of followers of an imam, it is true that some kinship terminology enters. Followers of the imams are usually referred to in early sources as *mawālī*, a multivalent term that was used in early Islam as referring to the incorporation of a client into tribal framework that can be conceived broadly as a kinship structure, with

10 See Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 3–144, for the development of the conception of Imamate among early Shi’is and other early Islamic groups.

11 For example, these two examples were deployed by Twelvers to explain how the brother of the eleventh imam could deny the imamate of his brother’s son, the messianic hidden imam. Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni’ma fī Ithbāt al-Ghayba*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar Ghaffārī, 2 vols. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Masjid-i Muqaddas-i Jamkarān, 1384 [2006]), 2: 237.

specific implications, for example for inheritance between master and client.¹² However, in the Imami sense, it is clear that an imam's "mawālī" were not clients in this sense (although imams did also have clients of this sort). By the time of the sources examined in this article, which purport to depict the eighth and ninth centuries, the *mawālī* were people who had voluntarily pledged their *walāya*, their allegiance, to an imam. Thus, this was a theological and soteriological relationship, rather than a tribal or legal relationship of dependence and subordination. It is possible that this kind of Imami *walāya* emerged from a quasi-tribal relationship of recognition of the imam as one's leader, or from a kind of metaphorical recognition of a follower's dependence upon his imam, but the nature of the sources make it difficult to establish seventh-century facts without running the risk of back-projection.¹³ At any rate, by the time of the rise of the Imami community in the mid-eighth century, the idea of *walāya* and *mawālī* appears to refer to the distinctive spiritual allegiance pledged by a follower of the imams which had no legal or familial aspect, but instead echoes in the spiritual domain the political pledge of allegiance that might once have been made to the ruler.¹⁴

There are many reports in the Imami hadith corpus in which members of the community refer to each other as "brethren" (*ikhwān*).¹⁵ But the most common term for peer-to-peer acknowledgment is "companion" (*ṣāhib, aṣḥāb*). We do not, then, generally see a consistent set of kinship terms applied commonly to the experience of participating in the community itself, as we sometimes see in other religious communities. By contrast, Shi'i communities in which allegory and metaphor played a more active role in structuring their piety and their hermeneutics, such as the Ismā'īlīs and Nuṣayrīs, developed more elaborate and systematised use of kinship terms as metaphors to denote different

12 The issues related to the topic of the *mawālī* are extensive. See, in particular, Elisabeth Urban, *Conquered Populations in Early Islam: Non-Arabs, Slaves, and the Sons of Slave Mothers* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Monique Bernards and John Nawas, eds., *Patronage and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); and the contributions by Nawas and Simonsohn/Zinger in this special issue.

13 For a discussion of *walāya* and tribal affiliation in the earliest phases of Shi'i history, see Maria Massi Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

14 The specific mechanisms that tied followers to the imams remains an open question. Little research has been carried out into the institutional framework of early Imamism.

15 See, for example, the phenomenon of ethical works that compile hadith from the imams extolling the virtues of the Shi'a and recommending good comportment and virtuous behaviour between them. A recent volume collects three short works of this kind by Shaykh Ṣadūq Ibn Bābawayh, *Ṣifāt al-Shī'a, Faḍā'il al-Shī'a, Muṣādiqat al-Ikhwān*, ed. Aḥmad al-Māhūzī (Tehran: *Mu'assasat al-Ṣādiq li al-Ṭabā'a wa al-Nashr*, 2019).

kinds of internal-community relations, for example using parenthood and marriage as metaphors to describe the relationship between initiators and initiates.¹⁶

5 The Implications of Kinship in the Shi'a Community beyond the Imams

If the Imami community was defined by its allegiance to a leadership that is structured on kinship principles (hereditary succession), what, then, are the implications for the role of kinship in structuring relations within the community beyond the imamate? Firstly, it must be stated that many prominent members of the Shi'i community claimed membership of the same broad kinship group as the imams: the *ahl al-bayt*, or family of the prophet, which was defined in a more or less restrictive sense by different people in different contexts.¹⁷

In other Shi'i hadith, we also see hints that perhaps relate more directly to how *ahl al-bayt* lineage might affect one's attitudes while moving through society. Viložny discusses traditions in which one's lineage is seen to play a key role in one's faith and one's soteriological fate, and therefore, by extension, in the communal identity of the Shi'a. In one report, for example, Imam Ja'far al-Šādiq recommends that a believer should turn to his neighbour for help, and sure enough, his neighbours respond, "Even if we were not among Ja'far's followers, we would be obliged to execute his request because of his impeccable lineage." As Viložny notes, "the impeccable lineage is depicted in this tradition as a sort of social code that guarantees mutual trust and support."¹⁸ But Viložny suggests that the understanding of the operation of lineage is also fraught with potential contradiction. Thus, he cites a report in which Ja'far al-Šādiq is asked by someone "whether he should encourage his adult children to join the faith. The imam rejects this suggestion and explains his negative answer by telling this believer that if a person is born 'Alawī or Ja'farī, God grabs him

16 The Nuṣayrīs used kinship metaphors like parenthood and marriage to describe the relationship between initiators and initiates. See, for example, Bella Tendler, "Marriage, Birth, and *bāṭini ta'wil*: A Study of Nuṣayrī Initiation Based on the *Kitāb al-Ḥāwī fi 'Ilm al-Fatāwī* of Abu Sa'īd Maymun al-Ṭabarānī," *Arabica* 58 (2011): 53–75.

17 See, for example the minority claim that the Umayyads were part of the *ahl al-bayt* studied by Moshe Sharon, "The Umayyads as *Ahl al-Bayt*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14 (1991): 115–152.

18 Viložny, *Constructing a Worldview*, 78.

by his forelock and pulls him into the Shi'i faith."¹⁹ Such reports suggest that those of 'Alid lineage were to be seen as natural Shi'a.²⁰ Clearly then, kinship, in particular 'Alid lineage, was not just a doctrinal principle that structured Imami Shi'i belief, but it also played a practical role in the way the community relations and institutions were structured. But there was a constant tension between the ideal that kinship and ideological commitment should overlap, and the complex realities, as we shall see in more detail below.

6 Theologies of Community

Much of the scholarship that has been done on communal attitudes in early Shi'ism has focused not on concrete institutions and interactions, but rather on what I would call theologies of community, for example Mushegh Asatryan's chapter on "Constructing a Community" in his 2017 book *Controversies in Formative Shi'i Islam*.²¹ Etan Kohlberg in his seminal article, "Imam and Community in the Pre-Ghayba Period," lays out elements of a theology of community prevalent in early Shi'i hadith, that includes a Manichean split between the Shi'a and the non-Shi'a that extends to the idea that these two groups were strictly divided into different kinds of clay or light in pre-eternity. Imamic, prophetic, and 'Alid lineage are hierarchically prioritised, but all the Shi'a are incorporated into an essentialised community of the saved which is often expressed through claims about lineal descent.²²

Recent work by Roy Vilozny has usefully suggested that even in such clearly ideological materials, we can detect evidence of the need to navigate concrete social realities. Thus, he notes that there needed to be a framework for harmonising Shi'i myths of primordial black-and-white communal splits with lived experience of the complex interminglings of actual society.²³ Within

19 Vilozny, *Constructing a Worldview*, 136.

20 However, it should be noted that in such reports it is often unclear whether "Shi'i" refers to someone who recognises the claims of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, or recognises the current imam, therefore qualifying as "Imami" in a stricter sense.

21 Mushegh Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shi'i Islam: the Ghulat Muslims and their Beliefs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

22 Etan Kohlberg, "Imam and Community in the Pre-Ghayba Period," "Imam and Community in the pre-Ghayba Period." *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 25–53. See the discussion of kinship based on substances in Simonshon/Zinger's contribution in this special issue; and Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 5.

23 Roy Vilozny, *Constructing a Worldview: Al-Barqī's Role in the Making of Early Shi'i Faith*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017) 78.

the Imami hadith corpus, there exists a distinct subset of reports which distinguish the Shi'a as having been created from a different essence or material (such as clay, water, or light) from non-Shi'a. The figure of the *nāṣib* is occasionally named as an antagonist in these reports,²⁴ though more commonly the Shi'a are opposed to infidels (*kāfir*). In some, the antagonist is not explicitly termed as such, but we can recognise him as a *nāṣib* through his enmity to the imams, as in one report in which a certain man says to Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq:

I was born in the Jabal [in north-western Iran], and I grew up in the land of Fārs. I associate with *al-nās* [non-Shi'i people] in the course of trading and other activities, [during which] I have associated with a man who has shown to me his good habits and morality and a high degree of pious faith. After that I have investigated him and discovered his enmity towards you [the imams]. But I have also associated with a man and seen his bad morals and the paucity of his faith and his maliciousness and I have investigated him and uncovered his allegiance (*walāya*) to you [the imams]. And how can that be?²⁵

In this case, the answer that the imam provides is that men are made of a mixture of the clay of heaven and the clay of hell, but that ultimately one will return to one's basic essence.

Thus, although the idea of separate Shi'i and non-Shi'i essences suggests a black-and-white Manichean split, many of these myths of separation are forced to acknowledge the complexity of society and attempt to incorporate this complexity by talking about the mixing of these essences as a part of the primordial act of creation. Viložny couches these ideas within his wider discussion of predestination in early Shi'ism, but he acknowledges that these issues must relate to practical experiences of social relations in society: "Despite the dualistic attempt to colour reality as black and white, the Shi'i tradition gives considerable room for grey, which seems to be a genuine reflection of reality."²⁶ Much of the material on the *nāṣib* in the Imami hadith corpus relates to an attempt to see clarity while navigating these shades of grey.

24 Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi* (Tehran: Dār al-kutub al-islāmiyya, 1388–1391 H [1968–1971]), 2: 243.

25 Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 2: 244.

26 Viložny, *Constructing a Worldview*, 86.

7 The Ritual Impurity of the *Nāṣib*

In early Imami thinking, not only did membership in a particular kinship group have implications for one's religious status, but religious status had implications for one's kinship status.²⁷ The non-Shi'a are sometimes accused of being illegitimate children. This can be seen in certain legal hadiths which discuss the payment of the *khums* alms-tax to the imams. Kohlberg, in his article on illegitimate children (*walad zinā*) in Shi'i thinking, notes a rather tortuous logic behind the accusation of non-Shi'a as being illegitimate:

Al-Bāqir, addressing his disciple Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī, is said to have expressed this bluntly; "All people are the offspring of fornicatrices (*awlād baghāyā*), with the exception of our Shi'a." The reason given for this has to do with the *khums*: it belongs to the Imams, who have forbidden all but certain of their followers from taking possession of it. Many non-Imamis, disregarding this prohibition, appropriated the *khums*, and one of the ways in which they used it was to pay for a dower. A dower paid for with money earned illegally is invalid, as is the resulting marriage; and the offspring of such a marriage are illegitimate.²⁸

With a more direct logic, in one hadith attributed to al-Ṣādiq, the imam says of his Shi'a that, "*Khums* purifies their births for them."²⁹ This suggests that the very act of paying the *khums* alms tax has a purificatory function, without which kinship structures are endangered. The implicit contradiction between the content of these reports ascribed to Bāqir and Ṣādiq is not uncommon and indicates different thinking within the community about how to understand relationships between individuals who do and who do not belong to the legitimate structures of the community which collectively imply the living of a pure life in a quite literal sense.

It is hard to imagine how such strictures might have been put into practice, and our sources provide only scattered and elusive evidence that might enable us to answer this conundrum. Kohlberg's article shows that the impurity of the *nāṣib* is in many ways comparable to the impurity of illegitimate offspring, and demonstrates that, for later Twelver thinkers, at least, the content of these

27 See John Nawas's article in this issue, on the social significance of Islamic intra-confessional distinctions after the ninth century.

28 Etan Kohlberg, "The Position of the '*walad zinā*' in Imāmī Shī'ism," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48, no. 2 (1985): 237–66 at 241.

29 Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 1:546.

early reports presented numerous problems which were sometimes reinterpreted or rejected. The intense separation of communities implied by early hadith was clearly not always as relevant to the social situation of Imamis in later times as at least some Imamis had felt it to be during the lifetimes of the imams. Indeed, the black-and-white separation between good and bad communities is even impractical when seen through the ideal lens of cosmological hadith, as we have seen.

Although it is difficult to make judgements about the practical implementation of such concepts, we can note that a key problem presented by the figure of the *nāṣib* intermingling in Imami social circles, was that of ritual purity. It is not just a question of religio-political differences over the righteous leaders of the community, but the affiliation to such leaders and therefore to separate Muslim subcommunities was understood to have had practical effects on one's purity status.

Other texts also suggest that the *nāṣib* could be considered ritually impurifying in a concrete sense. Thus, one account explains that the runoff water from bathhouses cannot be reused for ablutions by Muslims for the reason that this water might have been used by the offspring of adultery³⁰ or a *nāṣib*, implying that their moral impurity would be communicated through the water.³¹ This is an issue connected to public, rather than private, bathhouses as they were accessible to a varied clientele in the cosmopolitan cities of the early Islamic empire. For water to be suitable for carrying out ablutions, it must not have been polluted by an impurifying substance such as blood, and also, apparently by water used to wash impure, irreligious, and immoral people.

It is not only in Shi'i texts that we see an anxiety about the implications of purity laws for social mixing. Melchert has analysed the evidence from hadith also from the Sunni tradition that expresses an anxiety about visiting bathhouses in the earliest period of Islam. He notes the anxiety stems mainly from three causes: impurity that comes from mixing; immorality arising from nakedness; and the association between hellfire and the fires that heat the water for the bathhouse.³² Again, then, the Shi'i anxiety subsists within a wider discourse, but is characterised by distinctive concerns that crystallise around the figure of the *nāṣib* as an archetypal problems for social interaction in Muslim society.

30 See Kohlberg, "The Position of the 'walad zinā,'" 243.

31 Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 3:14.

32 Christopher Melchert, "Public Baths in Islamic Law," in *25 siècles de bain collectif en Orient. Proche-Orient, Égypte et péninsule Arabique*, ed. M.-Fr. Boussac, S. Denoix, Th. Fournet, B. Redon (Cairo: Ifpo-IFAo, 2014), 1001–1010.

8 The Problems of the Religiously Mixed Family³³

As we have seen from the discussions above, both in the legal realm and in the mythic cosmologies of community, there were significant conceptual difficulties represented in the Imami textual tradition regarding Imamis and their interactions with non-Shi'is in society. These became more intractable when they involved the close family. Within the Imami hadith corpus, there are many requests directed towards the Imams for clarification of the issues of interacting with a religiously mixed society. These interactions do not just take place within a framework of insider versus outsider, however. Indeed, they do not just reproduce the classical vision of concentric circles of belonging with Muslim in the centre, people of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb, dhimmī*), and infidel (*kāfir*) on the outside that we find, with various nuances, in Sunni jurisprudence. In comparison to Sunni law, Shi'i legal hadith dramatize the effort to maintain distinctively Shi'i values and identity within a society that is often hostile to these values and identity. Within this discourse, the anti-'Alid (*nāṣib*) is sometimes used as an archetypal figure to represent the least palatable figure possible. We can see this, for example, with reference to the issue of marriage, a common area where anxieties about encountering various others are discussed. Imami Shi'i marriage law is comparable to Sunnī law in its anxiety over the question of mixed marriages, with similar solutions. So, for example, both Sunni and Shi'i legal reports rule that a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man, but that a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman, with the rationale that a woman is likely to be ruled by the religious preferences of her husband. Shi'i hadith add to this the complication that even worse than a non-Muslim partner is a *nāṣib*, even though that person would claim to be a Muslim.

This represents something of a complication to the widespread anxiety expressed in legal literature produced by Muslims well beyond the Imami context about the complicated effects of having non-Muslims as marriage partners.³⁴ The Shi'i hadith frequently suggests that non-Muslims should be considered as preferable to anti-'Alids.³⁵ In line with this logic, for example, one report indicates that it is better to marry a Jew or a Christian than an anti-'Alid woman (*nāṣiba*).³⁶ Here religious boundaries are constructed according to

33 For further discussions relevant to these issues, see Antonia Bosanquet's contribution to this special issue.

34 See, for example Bosanquet's contribution to this special issue.

35 For example whether one can give alms to a non-Shi'i, see Hayes, "Alms and the Man," 293.

36 E.g. Kulaynī, *Kāfi*: 5: 351.

Shi'i values, which depart from a simple linear hierarchy of Muslim > *dhimmī* > *kāfir*. The judgement is relaxed in the case of marrying people who are merely "doubting" (*shukkāk*) (perhaps referring to people who had broad Shi'i leanings without recognising the true imam). In that case it was judged to be suitable for a man to marry a doubting woman, but a woman could not marry a doubting man, for the same reasons given to explain why a Muslim woman could not marry a non-Muslim: she was expected to be disciplined by her husband and he might force her to leave her religion.³⁷ The same fear of doctrinal pollution from non-Muslims applied also to the *nāṣib*, if the power relations were working against the Shi'i, as they often would have been.

Marriage to a *nāṣib*, then, brought with it similar dangers of ritual pollution and doctrinal perversion as marriage to a non-Muslim. However, in general, in contrast to the issues of marriage to a non-Muslim in a Muslim empire in which Islam was hegemonic, marriage to a Muslim *nāṣib* may well have brought with it less favourable power dynamics.

9 Differentiation of Merit within the Imami Community

In addition to anxieties about interaction with non-Shi'a, Imami reports discuss even relations among the Shi'a in such a way as to imply a hierarchy of initiation and merit within the community. Gleave has written on the long durée conversation about the issues relating to marrying Fāṭimid women whose lineage grants them high status,³⁸ and who should not, ideally, be placed in a position of inferiority with regards to their husbands by giving more than one Fāṭimid woman in marriage to the same man, or other acts that would demonstrate insufficient respect for the holy lineage.³⁹ Interestingly, however, the principle of ethnic or social equality (*takāfu'*) between married partners, which discouraged marriage between social classes in some of the Sunnī *madhhabs*,⁴⁰ was not ultimately used in Twelver Shi'i jurisprudence to separate out social

37 Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Khilāf*, ed. 'Alī al-Khurāsānī and Jawād al-Shahrestānī and Mahdī Ṭaha Najaf, 4 vols. (Qumm: Mu'assasat al-nashr al-islāmī, 1414 AH), 3:271.

38 For a more comprehensive analysis of the broad system of 'Alid status in the early medieval period, see Teresa Bernheimer, *The 'Alids: The First Family of Islam, 750–1200* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

39 Robert Gleave, "Marrying Fatimid Women: Legal Theory and Substantive Law in Shī'i Jurisprudence," *Islamic Law and Society*, 6, no. 1 (1999): 38–9. The reason articulated in the report Gleave discusses is that it might cause the women distress.

40 Farhat J. Ziadeh, "Equality (*Kafā'ah*) in the Muslim Law of Marriage," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 6, no. 4 (1957): 503–517.

groups of higher status, such as the Hāshimī⁴¹ or ‘Alid clans from other Arabs; or Arabs from non-Arabs. Thus Shaykh al-Ṭā’ifa al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), notes in his *Khilāf*, a work in which the positions of different schools of law are compared, that the principle of equality in marriage only applies to faith and level of income.⁴²

The intense consideration of religious merit in Imami Shi‘ism coupled with the sectarian interest in defining boundaries between the saved and the erring, meant that the question of spiritual inequality between marriage partners was not easily dismissed. On the face of it, the dominant impression conveyed by most Imami reports is that a man will have great problems to find a suitable mate, given that he may marry a suitable partner among Shi‘a and non-Shi‘a, Muslims and non-Muslims alike (as long as they are not anti-‘Alid). Nonetheless, several Imami hadith reports express an anxiety over the issue of choosing a suitably pious Shi‘i woman, especially in a series of reports attributed to the well-known jurists and companions of the fifth and sixth imams, Zurāra b. A‘yan and Fuḍayl b. Yasār. These cases are not presented as a simple choice of Shi‘i or non-Shi‘i. In a fascinating evocation of the demographic issues of belonging to a spiritual elite, as the Imamiyya conceived themselves to be, the issue of marrying a Shi‘i woman really appears to be a problem of finding sufficient numbers of potential mates who acknowledged the true doctrine. Imami hadith often portray the true Shi‘a, perhaps rather rhetorically, as a tiny minority of true believers, but it is interesting, and a little unexpected, to note that the small size of the initiated Shi‘a may indeed have been thought to have had practical consequences in creating difficulty in finding a mate. In one report, Zurāra suggests that his own solution to this problem might be simply to avoid marrying at all, but rather to resort to concubines instead, though it is not specified how this might solve the problem.⁴³ The imams’ response tends to be more practical, and often revolves around the idea of a “simple-minded woman” (*balah, balhā*) who may not belong to the spiritual elite like the close companions of the imams, but who also must not be an anti-‘Alid:

Zurāra said: I said to Abū Ja‘far [al-Bāqir]: “I fear that it is not licit for me to marry someone who is not of my affair (*amr*) [i.e. allegiance to the imam].”

41 The Hāshimī clan is a subgroup of the Prophet Muḥammad’s tribe of Quraysh which encompasses the ‘Alid lines. Hāshimīs trace their lineage back to Hāshim, the great-grandfather of the Prophet Muḥammad, and include the ‘Abbasid lineage of the second dynasty of caliphs.

42 Ṭūsī *Khilāf*, 3:271.

43 Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 5: 349.

So [Bāqir] responded: “What prevents you from a simple (*balah*) woman?”

I said: “And what is a simple one?”

He said: “They are oppressed ones (*mustaḍʿafāt*)⁴⁴ from among those who do not espouse anti-ʿAlid sentiments (*naṣb*) and also do not know what you are about.”⁴⁵

The imam, thereby offers Zurāra a kind of third way which does not require him to marry only a full initiate.

As is common, men get it easier. The same case is more difficult for a fully initiated woman, who might be swayed by her husband:

Al-Fuḍayl b. Yasār said: I asked Abū ʿAbd Allāh (AS) about marriage [of a woman] to an anti-ʿAlid (*nāṣib*) and he said: “No! by God, it is not licit.”

Fuḍayl said: Then I asked him another time and I said: “What did Muḥammad say⁴⁶ regarding marrying them,” and he said: “A knowing woman?” and I said “[Yes], knowing.”

He said: “A knowing woman is not placed [in marriage] except with a knowing man.”⁴⁷

Here, then, is a discussion of a woman who is fully initiated into Shiʿi doctrines and secrets. It is not clear what this initiation might have meant, either in theory or in practice. While there has been substantial important research into the ideas of esoteric Shiʿism,⁴⁸ little concrete has been established about the social institutions of initiation in Imami Shiʿism in the mid-eighth century at the time of Bāqir and Ṣādiq when these reports purport to date from. However, it is clear at least that the process of initiation into imamic wisdom was thought to have social consequences for marital suitability, establishing a spiritual hierarchy that narrowed the pool of potential partners for the initiate woman. The figure of the “knower” or initiate, then, stands at an opposite pole from that of the *nāṣiba* and both appear to have legal consequences for the

44 Referring to Qurʾān verses commonly applied to the oppressed, and in particular Q 28: 4–6.

45 Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 5: 349.

46 The literal reading is “what do you say, Muḥammad?” but we should perhaps read *yaqūl* instead of *taqūl*, that is: “What does he say?” Either way it seems strange.

47 Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 5: 350.

48 See especially the seminal contribution in the works of M.A. Amir-Moezzi and his school, for example his *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism*, trans. David Streight (New York: SUNY Press, 1994).

establishment of kinship relations with others who occupy a more intermediate position on the spectrum of conformity with Shi'i ideals.

10 Anti-'Alid In-Laws

While discussion of the rules governing intermarriage abounds in legal hadith and *fiqh*, evidence for intra-familial encounters beyond these rules are harder to find. Cases are usually presented in the abstract or stripped of all but the barest concrete details. An illustration that tensions within Imami families did sometimes pivot on questions of religious values and communal identity can be seen in one report attributed to a few generations later than the reports above, in which the ninth canonised imam, Muḥammad al-Jawād (d. 835) is asked for advice:

عن علي بن مهزيار، عن بكر بن صالح قال: كتب صهرلي إلى أبي جعفر الثاني صلوات الله عليه: إن أبي ناصب خبيث الرأي، وقد لقيت منه شدة وجهداً، فأريك - جعلت فداك - في الدعاء لي، وما ترى جعلت فداك؟ أفترى أن أكاشفه أم أداريه؟ فكتب عليه السلام: قد فهمت كتابك وما ذكرت من أمراك، ولست أدع الدعاء لك إن شاء الله، والمدارة خير لك من المكاشفة، ومع العسر يسر، فاصبر فإن العاقبة للمتقين. ثبتك الله على ولاية من توليت، نحن وأنتم في ودعة الله الذي لا تضيع ودائعه. قال بكر: فعطف الله بقلب أبيه [عليه] حتى صار لا يخالفه في شيء.

From 'Alī b. Mahziyār,⁴⁹ from Bakr b. Ṣāliḥ, who said:

An in-law of mine wrote to Abū Ja'far [Imam Jawād] (SAA) as follows:

"My father is an anti-'Alid [*nāṣib*] with repugnant views. I have encountered from him severity and affliction.⁵⁰ What is your judgement (may I be your ransom) regarding saying a prayer (*du'ā'*) for me, and what do you judge (may I be your ransom)? Do you judge that I should show him open [emnity]⁵¹ or dissimulate and flatter him?"⁵²

49 'Alī b. Mahziyār was a prominent agent of several imams, and features in many epistolary texts in the Shi'i hadith corpus. See Edmund Hayes, "Between Implementation and Legislation: The Shi'i Imam Muḥammad al-Jawād's *Khums* Demand Letter of 220 AH/835 CE," *Islamic Law and Society* 28 (2021): 382-414.

50 Perhaps in opposing the son, or persisting in his repugnant views.

51 *Ukāshifuhu*, "act openly towards him."

52 *Udārihi*, "act deceitfully towards," "blandish" or "flatter."

[The imam] wrote (AS):

“I have understood your letter and what you mentioned regarding your father. And I will not cease to pray on your behalf (*lastu ada‘ al-du‘ā laka*), God-willing. Concealment is better for you than exposure: Alongside hardship comes ease.⁵³ So endure patiently. Reward comes to the pious. May God make you firm in your allegiance (*walāya*) to the one to whom you have pledged allegiance [i.e. the imam himself]. We and you are in the trust of God whose charges are not led astray.”

And Bakr said:

Then God softened his father’s heart (*‘atafa bi-qalb abihi*), such that he no longer opposed him in anything.⁵⁴

It seems plausible that this account may reflect historical experiences of inter-familial strife, an encounter with an internal other. The fabrication of such an account does not seem to serve any particular polemical purpose. However, regardless of the historicity of the source event, we can fruitfully view this report as a narrativized contemplation of what must have been a relatively common social dilemma experienced by religiously mixed Shi‘i/non-Shi‘i families. The depicted context of a petition to the imam is indeed a trope, a convenient way of packaging imamic wisdom, but here appears plausible nonetheless, for it is clear that a large part of the imam’s practical role for his followers lay in answering questions: often issuing *responsa* on theological and legal questions, but also giving blessings, and occasionally responding to requests for practical help and advice, as in this case. It is noteworthy that petitions that request information or interpretation on points of doctrine: law, theology and Quranic exegesis are the great majority, and usually positioned as simple question-and-answer exchanges without the social detail that appears here, however scant. This account is precisely valuable, then, in that it depicts the imam operating not as an epistemic prop for Imami doctrine alone, but also as a community leader responding to the messy complexities of family life.

Having recognised that this report does appear to dispense individually tailored practical advice, we should also acknowledge the normative weight of

53 This evokes the language of Qur‘ān 94:5.

54 Al-Mufīd, *Amāli*, edited by ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Qumm: al-Maṭba‘a al-Islāmiyya, 1403 H) 191. There is also an online translation of this hadith by Mulla Asgharali M.M. Jaffer on the Thaqaalayn website: <https://thaqaalayn.net/chapter/13/23/20> retrieved 1.12.2023. Thanks to Kumail Rajani, Afzal Sumar, and Oded Zinger for suggesting interpretations of this passage which have allowed me to improve the translation.

this report exists in two dimensions: an exemplary response to the issue of non-Shi'i family members which is generalisable; and a hagiographic suggestion of the imam's miraculous intervention through answered prayers.

Dealing with the social implications of this report first, the transmitter of the report notes that it happened to his in-law: *š/hr* means the husband of one's daughter or the husband of one's sister. This makes the emotional stakes in the story higher: if the narrator is married to the transmitter's daughter or sister, and if the narrator had an anti-Shi'i father, then the influence of that father could potentially bring the daughter or sister into religious peril by his influence. As we have seen above, a Shi'i woman should theoretically not be married into a non-Shi'i family, but here the dynamics are complex. While no legal ruling has been broken, nonetheless, the anti-'Alid father poses a threat to the Shi'i couple.

The central dilemma posed by the narrator as a petition to the imam is whether to openly oppose one's irreligious father, or to hide one's true feelings. Given the centrality, in the Shi'i tradition, of the pious concealment of one's true religious beliefs (*taqiyya*),⁵⁵ it is unsurprising that the imam cautions his follower to avoid open conflict with his father. There is probably an implicit consideration of the appropriate behaviour of a son towards his father here. Whatever the doctrinal considerations were, the duties of filial respect were highly prized and revolt against one's father may have implied social censure. The report does not make it clear whether there may have been further social implications for open enmity towards his father: if he was living in a predominantly Shi'i context, it may have exposed his father to problems or danger; while if he was living in a predominantly non-Shi'i context, the son may have put himself in danger. We do not have an explicit indication that the father knows of the son's own religious affiliation, though the "severity and affliction" perhaps refer to the father creating problems for his son due to his disapproval of his views.

Ultimately in this narrative, though the imam's advice is assumed to be valuable, it is soon made redundant because the father's heart is softened, perhaps towards Shi'ism itself, though the narrative suggests more particularly that his severity towards his son vanishes, without a clear sense that he recants his own repugnant religious convictions. Is he still an anti-'Alid *nāšib* at the end of the story? We are not told. Beyond the "softening of his heart" there is no mention that the father embraces Shi'ism himself, and so perhaps we are supposed to understand that he persists in his own convictions but ceases to engage in

55 See Etan Kohlberg, "Some Imāmi-Shi'i Views on *Taqiyya*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no. 3 (1975): 395–402.

conflict with the son, or remains merely a moderate non-Shi'i. However, given the abovementioned threats to ritual impurity and doctrinal pollution posed by the *nāṣib*, it is also intrinsically problematic to think that he would continue to be a *nāṣib* while interacting with the narrator and perhaps his wife also. A father-in-law is, according to Islamic law, considered to be *mahrām*; that is one of the men who can interact with the women of a household freely, without *ḥijāb*, and who is banned from marrying them at any point. Thus, the transmitter of this report had a direct interest in considering whether his daughter or sister was exposed to such pollution. If the father did remain a *nāṣib*, these problematic issues are left in silence.

While the imam advises non-confrontation, he also stresses the importance of holding fast to his pledge of allegiance to the Shi'i imamate (*walāya*), indicating the potential danger in the situation: if a wife is in a position to be disciplined and coerced in her religion to drop her Shi'i principles, then perhaps a son might also be in danger, albeit lesser. Diplomacy in family relations does not imply compromise in doctrinal and ritual matters. The petitioner must both conceal his enmity while standing fast in his religious principles.

Ultimately, this anecdote provides rather scanty evidence, but it does give us a valuable sense of the clear problems of religiously mixed families within a community in which kinship is supposed to split along ideological lines. In purely ideological terms, the existence of a pious Shi'i son with an anti-ʿAlid father should not really be possible: surely he should be formed from the same pure clay of the Shi'i community as his father? This is an ambiguity that is prevalent in much of the Shi'i hadith corpus that sometimes denies but also clearly needs to engage with such contradictions. Clearly the existence of internal others in an Imami Shi'i family presented not merely a theoretical problem, but a practical issue which required the counselling and sometimes intervention of community leaders, even, in this latter case, the imam himself.

11 Conclusions

In this article I have tried to present some evidence regarding the navigation of the issues of encountering a distrusted other within a domain that is normatively supposed to be safe and pure home ground: the family. While certainly sharing characteristics with the broader society, Imami Shi'i conceptions of social and religious boundaries were in some ways distinctive, aligning with the ideological values of this community. The problem presented by the *nāṣib*, as a nominal Muslim who was nevertheless worse than a non-Muslim, arise from a distinctively Shi'i way of thinking of and organising the social world.

The advice of their leaders, the imams, and the hadith transmitters and jurists who interpreted their legacy, revolves around safeguarding ideological and physical purity from sources of derangement. The issue of marriage is particularly sensitive: indeed, the question of marriage across borders is intrinsically sensitive, probably in all human societies. The cases discussed here indicate that the early Shi'a were often unable to establish clear in-group/out-group boundaries which could simplify judgement on these issues.

Part of the problem is typified by the issues we see with the *nāṣib*: The Imami Shi'a were a community amidst the wider Muslims but with strained relations to it, and subject to discursive and sometimes physical attacks from other Muslims. Discourse on the *nāṣib* deals with the question of how one should organise one's social and religious life with regard to such antagonists. In addition, the Imami Shi'a appear to have created within their community as-yet-poorly understood internal differentiations by conceiving of an initiatory hierarchy that separated the initiate, the knower (*ʿarīf*), from other less-committed community members who acknowledged the same imam, who themselves would have been differentiated again from those people who may have been broadly sympathetic to pro-ʿAlid principles without a clear pledge of allegiance (*walāya*) to a specific imam. The reports studied here, as well as hints elsewhere in the hadith corpus,⁵⁶ suggest that while the prestige of Bāqir and Ṣādiq was high in their society, the absolute numbers of Imami initiates at that time was very low, creating a demographic problem for the conduct of social institutions like marriage, especially, as we have seen, for the particularly small group of woman initiates. This is probably to be contrasted with the social structures of the Twelver community following crystallisation of sectarian boundaries from the tenth century onwards, when hierarchical structures of initiation probably gave way to a more broad-based acceptance of diffuser community in which the scholars and hadith transmitters represented imamic authority in the community, but without imposing strict structures of initiation on a tiny spiritual elite.⁵⁷

In contrast with the case of marriage, the second case I have looked at, that of having an anti-ʿAlid father, while troubling, does not directly involve sex or procreation of children, which pose particular problems for purity and the

56 On the idea that the imam would not want to excommunicate followers because they were so few, see Etan Kohlberg, "Barā'a in Shī'ī Doctrine," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic And Islam* 7 (1986): 139–75 at 167–8.

57 On the replacement of imamic authority with scholarly authority see Hayes, *Agents of the Hidden Imam: Forging Twelver Shi'ism (850–950 CE)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 216–221.

safeguarding of the Shi'i community. No instructions to cut ties⁵⁸ expose the evil man are issued: instead, the common strategy of hiding one's true opinions, *taqiyya*, is suggested, alongside the counsel to hold fast to the pledge of allegiance (*walāya*) to the true imam. Thus, these two kinds of cases can be seen to offer two broad strategies for dealing with anti-'Alids in the family: to cut ties with them, exemplified by the cases of marriage with *nāṣibs*, or put up with them and trust in God, exemplified by the case of the father who is a *nāṣib*, and with a range of intermediate strategies for intermediate cases. While none of this gives us a clear sense of the concrete social institutions involved, it does give us a toolkit for understanding the range of strategies that members of the early Imami community might have resorted to for dealing with the inevitable ambiguities of trying to live as a self-separating spiritual elite in a diverse cosmopolitan Islamic empire.

58 Indeed, there is a rich vein of reports which counsel one not to cut ties with one's blood relatives. See, for example, the chapter against severing ties with blood relatives (*qaṭī'at al-raḥim*) in Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 2:346–348.