

Shi‘i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters

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In recent years, the field of Shi‘i studies has undergone a significant transformation, expanding beyond traditional religious, theological, and historical inquiries to encompass a more nuanced exploration of the material and sensory dimensions of Shi‘i religiosity. While earlier scholarship on Shi‘ism focused heavily on its foundational texts, rituals, and political movements, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of material culture in shaping religious experience. *Shi‘i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters* marks a pivotal moment in this scholarly evolution, offering a fresh, interdisciplinary approach to understanding Shi‘i devotion through objects, spaces, substances, and sensory experiences. The volume moves beyond the familiar focus on *Karbala* and *Ashura*, turning attention to how materiality mediates the sacred, sustains communal identity, and facilitates encounters with the divine across diverse contexts. By engaging with fields such as Religious Studies, Material Religion, Anthropology of Religion, and Media Studies, this book provides a ground-breaking perspective on the

multisensory and material aspects of Shi'i life, reflecting a much-needed shift in the study of religion and material culture.

The collected volume consists of a Foreword, Introduction, and three main parts (Part 1: *The Visuality and Aurality of Shi'i Materiality*, Part 2: *Gendered Perspectives on Shi'i Materiality*, and Part 3: *Sacred Objects and the Materiality of Shi'i Life-Worlds*), each containing four chapters, making a total of twelve chapters. This division reflects the volume's broad and interdisciplinary approach, allowing for an exploration of Shi'i materiality from multiple perspectives—ranging from sensory experiences and visual culture to gender dynamics and the role of sacred objects in shaping religious life. By organizing the chapters in this way, the book offers a comprehensive and multifaceted examination of how materiality influences Shi'i religious expression and practice.

Each contribution stands as an independent scholarly article, allowing readers to engage with individual case studies while contributing to the broader thematic inquiry of the book. In the *Foreword*, Katja Rakow situates *Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters* within the broader field of material religion studies. She emphasizes that religion is inherently material, as it relies on various media—such as objects, images, spaces, and sensory experiences—to render the sacred tangible (p. ix). Rakow highlights how disciplines like material culture studies, visual culture studies, and the anthropology of the senses have reshaped the study of religion, shifting attention toward lived religion and the materiality of religious practice (p. x).

She underscores that this volume stands apart from previous works by taking a comprehensive approach to Shi'i materialities, moving beyond a focus on devotional objects to explore the full spectrum of material engagements, including visual, sonic, and corporeal dimensions. The book examines how religious actors interact with material things and how these interactions shape religious experiences, emotions, and communal identities (p. x). While acknowledging that no single volume can fully encapsulate the vastness of Shi'i materialities, Rakow asserts that this collection provides a crucial entry point for understanding the embodied and materialized aspects of Shi'i religious life (p. x).

In the *Introduction*, editors Fouad Gehad Marei and Yafa Shanneik outline the central aims of the volume, emphasizing the importance of materiality

in the lived religious experiences of Shi'i communities. By bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines, the book explores how material objects and sensory experiences shape Shi'i religious life across *Twelver*, *Alawi-Nusayri*, *Alevi*, and *Bektashi* communities in varied geographical contexts, including Norway, Turkey, Albania, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kashmir, Kuwait, and Lebanon (p. 1). The volume operates on the premise that religion is inherently corporeal and physical, taking form through images, bodies, sounds, smells, and other sensory engagements that render the sacred tangible (p. 1).

A key doctrinal tenet of Shi'ism is the devotion to *Imam Ali* and his descendants (*Ahl al-Bayt*), whose suffering—epitomized by the martyrdom of *Imam Husayn* at *Karbala*—shapes Shi'i cosmology and historical consciousness (p. 2). The editors acknowledge that the book does not cover *Zaydi* or *Isma'ili* contexts, as its contributions largely stem from European academic conferences that have historically focused on *Twelver Shi'ism* and related groups (p. 2). The volume expands existing scholarship on Shi'i ritual and material practices in three key ways: first, by examining Shi'i communities beyond the Middle East and Muslim-majority regions; second, by shifting focus beyond *Muharram* rituals to underexplored practices such as *ziyāra*, *Mawlid an-Nabī*, and *tabarruk* rituals; and third, by acknowledging the broader influence of the "*Karbala paradigm*" while examining a wider repertoire of Shi'i religious expressions (pp. 4–6). Rather than merely analyzing what religious objects symbolize, the book investigates their active role in shaping sociopolitical ecosystems and religious experiences (p. 8).

The editors position the volume at the intersection of material religion, new materialism, and post-anthropocentrism, viewing Shi'i materiality not just as a representation of faith but as a means of making the sacred tangible and experiential (p. 8). Shi'i heritage is constructed through sacred sites, relics, art, sound, oral traditions, and rituals, wherein emotions, sensory experiences, and material culture collectively memorialize Shi'i history and devotion (p. 9). The contributions in this volume thus offer a comparative perspective on Shi'i materiality across different geographies and sectarian traditions, illustrating how material and sensory engagements cultivate affective and embodied connections with *Ahl al-Bayt* and other sacred figures (p. 10).

In the chapter 1, Sara Kuehn explores the material expressions of Albanian Bektashi religious life, focusing on paintings and their symbolic meanings. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork (2011–2019) in Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo, she examines how Bektashi communities use visual and material culture—paintings, objects, and costumes—to articulate their faith. She frames her analysis within material religion, demonstrating how these visual elements serve as religious practices bridging the symbolic and material (p. 46). A central theme is the role of paintings in the *Kryegjyshata* (World Headquarters of the Bektashis) in shaping religious identity. These artworks express core Bektashi beliefs, particularly devotion to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and are seen as conduits of divine grace (p. 53). One painting illustrates the Albanian Bektashi community's ties to Shi'i traditions, reinforced by *Baba Mondi's* pilgrimages to Iraq—differentiating them from Turkish Bektashis, who identify as Sunni (p. 51). Another painting presents the rivalry and unity of dervish “world models,” depicting *Karaxha Ahmed Sultan*, *Haxhi Bektash Veli*, and *Sari Ismail Sultan* (p. 59). Other depicted figures, such as *Kaygusuz Sultan* and *Asim Dede*, underscore the historical development of Bektashism in the Balkans (p. 59, 63). Beyond paintings, Kuehn discusses the symbolic significance of ritual objects in the *Kryegjyshata's* reception room, including an open Qur'an, a white salt crystal, and a bowl of colorful sweets. These objects reflect the Bektashi interpretive framework of *zahir* (the outward, public dimension) and *batin* (the hidden, esoteric meaning), emphasizing balance in religious practice (p. 67). Finally, Kuehn highlights how persecution, especially in the 19th century, led Bektashis to encode their teachings in visual and material forms. This tradition continues today, as their current leader *Baba Mondi* navigates both the broader Muslim public sphere (*zahir*) and the esoteric dimensions (*batin*) of Bektashi belief (p. 69).

Chapter 2, by Stefan Williamson Fa, delves into the integration of audio technologies into devotional practices within Azeri-Turkish Twelver Shi'ism. Drawing on ethnographic research in Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Williamson Fa explores how the circulation of audio recordings of specialized reciters, known as *meddah*, has transformed the way Shi'i Muslims engage with religious rituals (p. 77). The chapter highlights

how these recordings, initially distributed through cassettes and now available through digital media, allow for the extension of *majlis* (ritual gatherings) into everyday life, facilitating devotional engagement anytime and anywhere (p. 81). Williamson Fa examines the diversity in style and content of the *meddah* recitations across different regions, showing that despite differences in local practices, the devotional content remains consistent in its focus on *Ahl al-Bayt* (p. 77). However, the chapter also addresses the tension between those who view the integration of media technologies into religious practices as a positive development and those who see it as blurring the lines between devotion and entertainment (p. 90). The history of audio recordings in Shi'i devotional spaces is also explored, noting the gradual loosening of restrictions on such media in Turkey, especially after the 1990s, which allowed individual reciters to gain widespread fame (p. 82-85). These recordings help create a sense of transnational community, linking believers across physical borders and allowing them to maintain a connection to religious practices in a global context (p. 93). Williamson Fa's analysis demonstrates that these technological changes are not simply modernizing Shi'i devotion but are part of a continuity of devotional practices that adapt to new media forms, allowing religious expression to reach beyond traditional communal spaces (p. 80). The chapter ultimately argues that the circulation of devotional media plays a crucial role in shaping the global Shi'i soundscape and expanding the ways Shi'i Muslims experience and express their faith (p. 93).

Chapter 3, by Ines Weinrich, examines the sonic and performative aspects of *Hizbullah's Mawlid an-Nabi* (the Prophet *Muhammad's* birthday) celebrations, particularly focusing on the 2012 main event broadcast on al-Manar TV (p. 98). This chapter relies also on her ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2013, which includes observations of both Sunni and Shi'i commemorations across Lebanon and Syria (p. 98). Weinrich's analysis highlights the integration of Shi'i and Lebanese aesthetic forms in the celebration, with a particular focus on the sonic practices used to express devotion and political solidarity (p. 99). *Hizbullah*, since its inception, has emphasized the use of symbols, flags, and distinct aesthetic markers, particularly in its political iconography, which includes the iconic yellow flag with the *Hizbullah* logo (p. 102).

This emphasis on aesthetic design extends to the party's commemorative rites, which include not only Shi'i religious observances like *Ashura* and *Eid al-Ghadir* but also party-specific events like the commemoration of martyrs and the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon (p. 104). These events are marked by specific sonic genres, including *Ashura*-derived mourning songs, political hymns, and newly composed pious songs (p. 105). The *Mawlid* celebration itself involves both Sunni-Shi'i convergences and intra-Shi'i distinctions. For instance, certain songs are shared between Sunni and Shi'i *Mawlid* commemorations, such as *Tala'a l-Badru 'Alayna* and recitations on the Prophet's birth, but distinct Shi'i themes are also introduced, such as invoking *Ahl al-Bayt* for intercession (pp. 116-118). This reflects a broader trend in *Hizbullah*'s celebrations where a balance is sought between emphasizing Shi'i identity and fostering political rapprochement with Sunni communities (p. 118). Weinrich further explores the politicization of *Ashura* rituals and their evolution in *Hizbullah*'s repertoire, noting that the party's sonic practices are increasingly professionalized. This professionalization and diversification in musical styles serve not only to reinforce Shi'i identity but also to express *Lebanonization*, reflecting the party's broader political goals within Lebanon (p. 122). Through these evolving sonic practices, *Hizbullah* uses sound to create a unique space that combines religious devotion, political resistance, and national identity, ultimately contributing to the party's influence in both the religious and political spheres (p. 122).

Chapter 4, by Maryam Aras, delves into the transformation of contemporary Iranian eulogy and elegy rituals (*maddāhi*), focusing on their evolution after the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Historically, *maddāhi* has been a key part of Shi'i commemorations, particularly during *Muharram*, honoring *Ahl al-Bayt*. Aras explores how these rituals became a tool for the Islamic Republic to mobilize citizens and foster a shared sense of national duty. The chapter highlights the materiality of these rituals, including bodily actions, pop culture influences, and material spaces, all contributing to the cultural identity of youth loyal to the Islamic Republic (pp. 127-128). A central figure in this transformation is the eulogist *Sadeq Ahangaran*, who became a prominent voice for the Islamic Republic

during the war. Ahangaran's wartime eulogies, which merged entertainment with ideological mobilization, connected the culture of war to civilian life through soundscapes emphasizing the "sacred defense" (p. 128). The media, particularly the war documentaries *Revāyat-e Fath*, played a critical role in amplifying these eulogies, incorporating music and sermons to evoke strong emotional responses from viewers (pp. 136-138). *Morteza Avini's* direction of *Revāyat-e Fath* blended visual imagery with eulogies to enhance the emotional impact, with the music often overshadowing the sermon itself, helping to bridge the battlefield and civilian life (pp. 137-138).

Aras also examines the institutionalization of these rituals, with professional organizations training ritual singers (*maddāḥān*) to innovate in their performances. These singers now incorporate a mix of traditional Iranian music, patriotic ballads, and pop influences (p. 146). One significant shift is the integration of pop music, exemplified by *Hamid Alimi*, who adapted secular love songs into religious elegies. This reflects the hybridization of Iranian musical traditions and the incorporation of contemporary cultural elements into religious rituals (pp. 148-149). In her analysis of chest-beating, Aras explains that it is traditionally seen as a form of repentance for the Shi'is of Kufa, who failed to assist *Imam Husayn* in the Battle of *Karbala*. She also describes it as a ritualized form of self-punishment in Shi'i culture (p. 147). However, while this interpretation is widely accepted, it is important to note that this view is not universally agreed upon, and there are various other perspectives on the meaning and context of chest-beating. The practice is much more nuanced and can hold diverse symbolic meanings depending on different interpretations within the Shi'i community. In conclusion, Aras' analysis shows how the materiality of Shi'i cultural memory has evolved since the Islamic Republic's establishment. The hybridization of religious rituals with popular culture, such as pop music and new performance styles, reflects broader social and political changes while still preserving deep symbolic meaning. These rituals now resonate more with younger generations, connecting them to a shared cultural memory. Despite these innovations, the rituals still carry deep symbolic meaning, connecting participants to a shared history and a collective cultural memory (pp. 150-151).

In Chapter 5, Sana Chavoshian examines the emotional and spiritual connection *washwomen* (women who washed the bloodstained uniforms of fallen soldiers) developed with the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2014 to 2017, Chavoshian highlights the profound kinship these women, often mothers themselves, formed with fallen soldiers through their act of cleaning bloodstained uniforms. This “consanguinity,” not based on genetic ties, was rooted in the haptic contact with the blood of martyrs, transforming the act of washing into a deeply intimate and spiritual experience (pp. 157–158). Chavoshian’s analysis provides a fresh perspective on the materiality of martyrdom, emphasizing how the washwomen’s emotional and physical labor was crucial, yet overlooked by the state, in the war effort. The chapter explores how handling bloodstained uniforms created a transcendental connection to the martyrs for the washwomen. Far from just cleaning, the act became a ritual that allowed them to forge a spiritual bond with the soldiers and their sacrifice. This form of martyrdom, however, was not recognized by the Iranian state, which focused mainly on male soldiers who died in battle (pp. 163–164). While mothers of martyrs were acknowledged, the contributions of the washwomen were marginalized. These women, in turn, sought recognition as active participants in the war, fighting for their own “share of martyrdom.” Their efforts were a way to reclaim agency within the patriarchal state structures, challenging the state’s narrow, gendered definitions of martyrdom (pp. 164–170).

Chavoshian further discusses the rituals women held at places like the Howeyzeh cemetery, where they honored the martyrs and asserted their emotional and spiritual connection to them. These rituals, though largely ignored by the state, provided washwomen with spaces to remember and reframe martyrdom to include their labor and personal sacrifices (pp. 170–177). The chapter concludes by reflecting on the symbolic power of blood in Shi’i material culture. The bloodstains on the soldiers’ uniforms became a bridge between the women, the martyrs, and the divine. Through their labor, washwomen created sacred maternal bonds with the martyrs’ spirits, offering a new, affective perspective on martyrdom that transcended traditional military and patriarchal narratives (pp. 177–181).

In Chapter 6, Ingvild Flakerud explores the formation of Twelver Shi'i male virtues through the practice of *zur-khane* exercises, an ancient form of Iranian athletic training. The *zur-khane*, or "House of Strength," is more than a physical workout space—it fosters moral qualities like courage, generosity, humility, and societal responsibility (p. 195). Flakerud's ethnographic fieldwork in Shiraz in 2001, supplemented by video recordings, interviews, and informal conversations, provides the foundation for her analysis. She employs a material cultural approach, examining how the objects, architecture, and rituals involved in *zur-khane* training contribute to the development of virtues (p. 185-188).

Flakerud argues that *zur-khane* exercises create an agential relationship between the body and the tools used, such as weights and whirling implements. These tools help athletes cultivate attention, precision, and a sense of responsibility. The body functions both as a tool to be trained and as the tool that shapes the ethical self, demonstrating how embodied ethics are integral to the learning of virtue (p. 199). This relationship is central to Flakerud's understanding of how physical practices contribute to moral development. The architecture of the *zur-khane* space also plays a crucial role in instilling ethical values. For instance, the low entrance forces athletes to bow their heads, fostering humility. The circular shape of the arena encourages equality by eliminating hierarchical divisions, though senior athletes still guide novices. This layout promotes mutual respect and a sense of shared experience among participants (pp. 200-203). Spirituality is also a significant component of *zur-khane* practice, as prayers, poetry, and stories are recited during exercises. Many of these texts honor figures like *Imam Ali*, offering moral guidance and deepening the athletes' connection with God and the *Ahl al-Bayt*. These recitations help athletes reflect on their ethical responsibilities and solidify their commitment to living a virtuous life (pp. 203-207). Flakerud concludes by emphasizing *zur-khane* as a unique male-only space where the body, material culture, and ethical formation intersect. Through these practices, athletes not only develop physical strength but also cultivate virtues that prepare them to contribute to a just society (pp. 214-216). With this study, Flakerud provides valuable insights into how material culture and embodied practices can contribute to the formation of virtue in a religious context.

Chapter 7, by Nada Al-Hudaid, explores the intersection of materiality, agency, and social capital in religious statue art in Kuwait, focusing on *khidma*, a religious service dedicated to *Ahl al-Bayt*. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2015 and subsequent follow-up trips, Al-Hudaid examines how religious statues are central to the materialization of religious devotion in contemporary Shi'i culture. A key figure in this trend is *Umm Mish'al*, a pious Shi'i woman and artist who pioneered the creation of religious statues, which have since been widely adopted across Kuwait and the broader Gulf region. Al-Hudaid highlights how *Umm Mish'al*'s work has earned her significant social and cultural capital, positioning her as a key figure in Shi'i religious artistic production (pp. 218-220). The chapter emphasizes how the production of religious statues by women like *Umm Mish'al* challenges the male-dominated religious landscape of Kuwait. These women gain cultural significance not only for their artistry but also for their role in facilitating devotion to *Ahl al-Bayt* through their creative contributions. *Umm Mish'al*'s art has had a broad impact on Shi'i rituals and religious practices, particularly in regions like Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq (pp. 226-227).

Al-Hudaid further explores the multifaceted nature of *khidma*, which creates sacred spaces, models social relations, and generates both symbolic and social capital. She examines how women's artistic work in *khidma* fosters agency, using the concept of the "docile agent" to discuss how women like *Umm Mish'al* gain subtle autonomy within patriarchal structures. While their work requires clerical validation, it also allows them to carve out a space for female participation in the religious sphere (pp. 222-223). The chapter also highlights the materiality of the statues, arguing that these objects transcend mere representation and become imbued with spiritual significance. *Umm Mish'al*'s statues, made from materials like fabric and recycled clothing, are seen as material hierophanies—sacred embodiments of *Ahl al-Bayt* that evoke empathy and devotion within the Shi'i community (p. 249). This contribution to Shi'i material culture emphasizes the pivotal role of women in the development of religious art. Overall, Al-Hudaid's chapter offers a nuanced understanding of how religious art, particularly in the form of statues, operates within the context of *khidma*. It explores the intersection of

gender, agency, and materiality, showing how female artists shape both personal and communal religious experiences and build social and cultural capital through their creative contributions.

In Chapter 8, Marianne Hafnor Bøe examines the practice of *mahr*—the payment from husband to wife in Islamic marriages—within the Iranian diaspora in Norway. Using a materiality lens, Bøe explores how *mahr* functions both symbolically and transactionally in a diasporic setting, shaped by religious, social, legal, and economic factors. The study, based on a three-year research project, reveals that despite many Iranians in Norway distancing themselves from Shi‘ism, *mahr* remains an important component of Shi‘i marriage, even when practiced outside of Iran (pp. 254-255). Bøe shows that *mahr* takes on various meanings depending on its form. While some choose token *mahr* amounts—such as a single rose or sweets—as romantic gestures, others opt for larger sums that signify financial security and cultural identity. Interestingly, the interviewees also referenced the symbolic value of *mahr*, such as the use of 5 gold coins symbolizing the five members of *Ahl al-Bayt*, which reflects a continued connection to Shi‘i religious practices even as they seek to modify the practice (pp. 259-260).

A major theme in this chapter is how *mahr* embodies Shi‘i identity while also reflecting political and socio-economic aspirations. Some diaspora members, particularly refugees, prefer symbolic *mahr* amounts, distancing themselves from the financial and patriarchal aspects of Shi‘i marriage in Iran. This shift aligns with broader trends of financial independence and a desire to redefine marriage outside of traditional expectations (pp. 261-262). The materiality of *mahr* also serves as a bargaining tool for women, providing financial security in case of divorce. However, its evolving practice—especially when replaced with modest gifts—challenges the traditional interpretation of *mahr* as a “price” for a wife. Women in second marriages or with financial independence increasingly favor token *mahr*, using it as a way to assert autonomy while distancing themselves from patriarchal norms (pp. 263-265). Ultimately, *mahr* serves as both a material and symbolic expression of belonging, identity, and negotiation in Shi‘i diaspora marriages. It reflects the complex interplay of religion, culture, politics, and personal aspirations, as

Iranian diaspora members navigate their connections to Shi'i Islam and their evolving social context in Norway. Through its material expressions, participants both affirm and challenge elements of Shi'i Iranian marriage, illustrating the multifaceted nature of this practice (p. 268).

Chapter 9, by S. M. Hadi Gerami and Ali Imran Syed, takes a historical and textual approach—distinct from the ethnographic focus of previous chapters—to examine the origins and evolution of the veneration of *turbat al-Husayn* (the soil from *Imam Husayn's* grave). The authors trace how this ritual practice became central to Shi'i religious identity, offering spiritual blessings (*tabarruk*) and reinforcing the community's distinct theology. The veneration of *Husayn's* grave soil emerged gradually rather than immediately after the Battle of *Karbala* (680 CE). Although contemporary studies often assume its early significance, the authors argue that it became a widespread practice only in the second and third Islamic centuries, largely due to the endorsement of the fifth and sixth *Imams*, *Muhammad al-Baqir* and *Jafar al-Sadiq* (pp. 278-279).

By the time of *Imam al-Kazim* in the late second century AH, the practice of taking soil from the graves of righteous figures was widespread. However, *Imam* explicitly prohibited the consumption of soil from all graves except *Husayn's*, marking the soil's special status within the community (p. 282). The chapter emphasizes how the veneration of *Husayn's* grave soil played a crucial role in shaping Shi'i identity. It became a marker of distinction from the broader Muslim community, reinforcing the theological significance of *Husayn's* martyrdom and the divinely appointed nature of Shi'i leadership (p. 276). By the third century AH, *turbat al-Husayn* had become fully integrated into Shi'i religious life, despite ongoing debates over its effects and limitations (p. 286). Finally, the chapter reframes the development of this practice as a gradual process, influenced by Shi'i *Imams* and the evolving identity of the early Shi'i community. It highlights how material objects, such as sacred soil, played a key role in the formation of Shi'i religious tradition and collective memory.

In chapter 10, Amelia Gallagher examines the role of material objects in the *ziyāra* (shrine visitation) practices of the Alawi-Nusayri community, focusing on shrines in Sutaşı, a historic village now part of

Samandağ in Hatay Province, Turkey (p. 289). She explores how both natural and man-made materials shape religious experiences and sustain shrine-centered devotion (p. 290). Gallagher provides a brief history of the Alawi-Nusayris, which consist of an elite religious class and the general laity. Her focus lays on public religious practices, particularly shrine visitations and festivals that often include animal sacrifice (pp. 292-295). European travelers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries documented the significance of *ziyāra*, describing the distinctive white-domed shrines scattered across Alawi regions (p. 296). Whether or not these shrines contain actual graves is often irrelevant; they are treated as sacred due to their association with revered figures (p. 298).

Several *ziyāras* in Sutaşı are dedicated to prominent Islamic and Alawi figures, including multiple sites for *Hıdır*, as well as shrines for *Melek Cafer al-Tayyor*, *Mikdet el-Yemin*, and others. A shrine known as “The Seven Prophets” may reference the Qur’anic *Seven Sleepers*. Other sites commemorate historical shaykhs such as *Hasan İbin Mekzün Sincari*. A notable *ziyāra* is dedicated to *Sultan Habib Neccar*, a figure associated with Jesus Christ (pp. 301-302). Gallagher categorizes shrine-related objects into mobile materials and foundational objects. Mobile materials include petitionary objects, healing aids, and ritual items such as cloth strips tied to shrine structures, incense, candles, coins, oil, and sacred texts (pp. 307-313). Foundational objects, which define the shrine’s sacredness, include cenotaphs, stone formations, and sacred trees (p. 304). Each type of object is examined individually. She concludes that *ziyāras* are created “from the ground up” in both a literal and symbolic sense. Material elements contribute to their religious significance, even as some communities begin to oppose aspects of material-based religiosity (p. 313). Through a material culture perspective, Gallagher demonstrates how physical objects shape sacred spaces in Alawi-Nusayri religious life. This chapter provides a valuable analysis of how shrine-based devotion continues to evolve within this historically significant yet often overlooked tradition.

Chapter 11, by Hakim Sameer Hamdani, explores the evolving observance of *Jashn-i Nisf Sha‘ban* (Festival of Mid-*Sha‘ban*) among Kashmiri Shi‘is, highlighting its shift from a night of atonement (*barāt*) to

a celebration of *Imam al-Mahdi's* birth (*vilādat*). While the festival, also known as *Shab-i Barat*, has traditionally been observed by both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims with themes of divine forgiveness and sustenance, Hamdani argues that its meaning has transformed within Kashmiri Shi'ism, particularly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution (pp. 318-320). The historical trajectory of the festival in Kashmir reveals its syncretic roots. Although there is no evidence of its Shi'i observance in the sixteenth century, Mughal-era sources link it to the illumination of homes and public spaces, possibly influenced by Hindu traditions (pp. 322-324). The Mughal court's adoption of *Shab-i Barat* further popularized it among Kashmir's Sunni majority. However, prior to the twentieth century, its observance, including supererogatory prayers, remained largely confined to the educated elite due to widespread illiteracy and limited access to Persian and Arabic religious texts (p. 328).

Hamdani identifies two phases of Kashmiri Shi'i engagement with Mid-*Sha'ban*. Until the late twentieth century, the festival centered on atonement, grave visitation, and communal feasting (p. 328). However, after 1979, Shi'i observance increasingly emphasized *Mahdism*, introducing new devotional practices such as *arīza* writing—"petitions" to *Imam al-Mahdi* immersed in running water (pp. 342-343). While Sunni participation in *Shab-i Barat* has declined since the 1990s due to the armed insurgency in Kashmir, which disrupted traditional grave visitation practices, and the growing influence of neo-Salafi and Wahhabi movements that reject it as an innovation (*bid'ah*), the festival has continued to evolve among Kashmiri Shi'is, further sectarianizing religious life (pp. 346-351). One assertion in the chapter—that Shi'is generally frown upon fasting on the fifteenth of *Sha'ban* unless undertaken as a votive vow (*nazr*) and fasting is seen as a rejection of the blessings associated with the festival (p. 339)—oversimplifies Shi'i practice. While Kashmiri Shi'ism may emphasize festivity over fasting, fasting on the *White Days* (13th-15th of each lunar month) remains a recommended practice in Shi'i tradition. Many Shi'is fast on this day as part of their devotional rituals, particularly in connection with prayers for *Imam al-Mahdi* (p. 339). Despite this minor oversight, Hamdani's chapter provides a compelling analysis of the shifting meanings of Mid-*Sha'ban* in

Kashmiri Shi'ism, illustrating how political and ideological influences shape religious observances over time.

In Chapter 12, Christiane Gruber presents a nuanced and interdisciplinary study of the shrine complex of *Abdal Musa*, an important Alevi-Bektaşî pilgrimage site in Turkey. Through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates textual analysis, ethnography, and eco-critical theory, Gruber explores how architecture, devotional imagery, votive practices, and nature shape Alevi religious experience (p. 356). The chapter begins by situating the shrine of *Abdal Musa* within the historical and cultural framework of the Alevi-Bektaşî tradition, noting its development as a major Sufi lodge (*tekke*) during the Ottoman period. While its architectural grandeur has diminished over time, key sacred sites remain: the tomb of *Abdal Musa*, the tomb of his cook *Budala Sultan*, a cemetery, sacred wells, unique rock formations, and a sycamore tree that serves as a focal point for votive offerings (p. 355). These features highlight the integration of materiality and spirituality in Alevi devotion, distinct from mosque-centered worship (p. 387).

Gruber's analysis of the shrine's visual culture reveals an interplay between Shi'i-Sufi iconography and Turkish secular nationalism. Inscriptions featuring the Twelve Imams coexist with images of Atatürk, reflecting Alevis' complex identity within a state that often marginalizes them (pp. 358, 365). However, the chapter's assertion that Twelver Shi'ism is most prominently espoused in Iran and India (p. 361) overlooks its significant presence in Iraq, the Levant, and other regions with rich indigenous Shi'i traditions. The chapter's discussion of eco-materiality is particularly compelling. Pilgrims engage with natural elements—rocks, trees, and water—as part of their devotional practices. The miracles attributed to *Abdal Musa* reinforce the saint's connection to the land, and votive acts such as tying cloth to trees or collecting sacred stones demonstrate a unique ecological spirituality (pp. 373, 381). The discussion of trees as devotional sites (p. 377) and rocks as hierophanies—divine manifestations—further enriches this perspective (p. 378). Gruber also highlights contemporary challenges, particularly the destruction of sacred trees, linking environmental degradation to religious marginalization (p. 388). Overall, her study broadens our understanding of Alevi

devotion by emphasizing its material and ecological dimensions, making a valuable contribution to the study of Islamic pilgrimage and religious material culture.

One of the key strengths of this collected volume is its empirical grounding in fieldwork, which provides rich, firsthand perspectives on Shi'i materiality across different contexts. The inclusion of minority Shi'i communities and the comparative analysis of various regional and religious traditions add to its depth and diversity. Additionally, the book is visually engaging, as the inclusion of images helps readers better grasp the materiality discussed. The use of local spellings and Romanizations based on vernacular traditions rather than standard linguistic norms is another commendable aspect, as it respects indigenous expressions and highlights linguistic plurality. That said, while the volume offers a wealth of ethnographic and historical insights, its level of detail and analytical depth make it more suitable for an academic audience than a general readership. The specificity of the case studies, the theoretical frameworks employed, and the engagement with specialized discourse may be challenging for those unfamiliar with the subject. However, for scholars in religious studies, anthropology, and Middle Eastern studies, the book provides invaluable contributions to the study of Shi'i materiality beyond its conventional narratives.

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