WOMEN’S SHI’I MA’ATIM IN BAHRAIN

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ABSTRACT

In this study I examine the evolving function of the ma’tam (pl. ma’atim), or Shi’i religious center, in Bahraini Shi’i women’s lives. The role of the ma’tam has changed in Bahraini society, especially in the case of women’s ma’atim. While men’s ma’atim have always been sites of political relevance, according to the women I interviewed it is only in the last few decades that women have used their ma’atim for purposes other than religious and social. In the past, Bahraini Shi’i women used this space to grieve the martyrdom of figures from Shi’i sacred history. Now they have begun to employ it for secular education of all kinds—legal, social, health—and even for political purposes. I focus on the ways in which education, and the Shi’i Islamic resurgences that took place in Iran and Iraq, influenced Bahraini Shi’i women in their interpretation of religion and their uses of religious space.

INTRODUCTION

Often, while spending evenings with my children in our apartment in the Shi’i village of A’ali in Bahrain—a tiny country comprised of 33 islands off the coast of Saudi Arabia—we heard what sounded like plaintive chanting or singing being broadcast loudly over a speaker from the local ma’tam (pl. ma’atim), or Shi’i religious center.1 On nights when an event was being held, the streets near the ma’tam and the ma’tam itself shone with green-colored lights, people milled about outside greeting each other, and the overwhelming, poignant sound of
religious recitations could be heard at quite a distance.

The role of the ma’atam has changed in Bahraini society, especially in the case of women’s ma’atim. While men’s ma’atim have always been sites of political relevance, according to the women I interviewed it is only in the past few decades that women have used their ma’atim for purposes other than religious and social (however, it is likely that Bahraini women have always had some influence in political and economic affairs, albeit indirectly). A ma’atam is not the same thing as a mosque, but rather primarily a place for Shi’a to eulogize the martyrdom of Husayn, who was the second son of the first Shi’i imam, ‘Ali, and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Later it was used to eulogize and celebrate the births of the Twelve Imams, other members of ahl al-bayt (the household of the Prophet), and even contemporary religious leaders. A mosque, in contrast, is the site of communal Muslim ritual prayer. A ma’atam is also a community center for the Shi’i community, who have suffered from economic disadvantages and political repression, and a venue for communal support and services, compensating for the government’s deficiency in this area. However, ma’atim are open to all Muslims, except for women during their menses. The communal attendance of ma’atim by the Bahraini Shi’a is unparalleled in the Sunni community; the Sunnis do not have a site that functions like a ma’atam. The Shi’a comprise the majority—up to 70 percent of the total Bahraini population in Sunni-ruled Bahrain—and tend to be much less wealthy than their Sunni counterparts. Religious demographics in Bahrain are controversial, and precise figures are not available.

Some scholars have analyzed Muslim women’s communal religious practices (Boyle 2004; Aghaie 2005; Deeb 2005; Mahmood 2005). Lara Deeb (2005), in particular, has written on the transformation of Shi’i women’s religious practices in the Lebanese context. However, there remains a paucity of literature on Bahraini Shi’i women’s practices. This study attempts to address that gap by examining the Shi’a in Bahrain and the evolving function of the ma’atam in their lives—especially women’s lives—through the lens of the impact that education has had on Bahraini Shi’i Islam. It also looks at the ways in which the Shi’i Islamic resurgences that took place in Iran and Iraq have influenced Bahraini Shi’i women in their interpretation of religion and their uses of religious space.
METHODOLOGY

While researching this topic as a graduate student in Bahrain for six months in 2002–03, as part of a larger project that looked at the impact of education on Sunni and Shi‘i Bahraini women’s religious practices, I interviewed 25 Sunnis and eleven Shi’a of various backgrounds, most of whom were women. I also informally spoke with countless others on the topic of my research. This article is based chiefly on these interviews and conversations, and more specifically on the perceptions of Bahraini Shi‘i women of the changes that have taken place in their communities, religious structures, and the way in which they interpret Shi‘i Islam. I have changed the names of those individuals whose voices I have chosen to highlight, for their security. All statements made by the interviewed women represented in this study were originally made in English, and their comments were recorded either in handwritten notes or on audi-tape, or both.

EDUCATION IN BAHRAIN

Oil, discovered in Bahrain in 1932, allowed sufficient resources for the subsequent development of modern education. In the decades prior to that event, if boys or girls received any schooling, it was through the kut-tab system. Kuttab schools focused primarily on the rote memorization of the Qur’an; children only attended until the age of ten or so. By 1914 roughly 800 boys and 400 girls in Bahrain attended this type of school (al-Misnad 1985, 30). The American Missionary School for girls had opened in 1892. It was directed by the Arabian Mission (an American independent Protestant group), and in 1934 it was adopted by the Reform Church of America. Curriculum at this institution included Bible study and English, as part of the group’s evangelistic agenda (al-Misnad 1985, 31). In 1919, the first non-missionary school for boys opened in Bahrain (Jain 1986, 13), and in 1928, a non-missionary school for girls was also established, although modern education for girls would not be widely accepted for decades due to social, cultural, and religious reasons (al-Misnad 1985, 33–8). In 1932 only 600 children were enrolled in public school, but by 1940 this number had tripled (Zahlan 1989, 51), and by 1970–71 over 50,000 children attended (Nakhleh 1976, 24).
However, in 1971 the national mean rate of illiteracy was 50.3 percent, and even higher in rural areas, and girls were three to four times less likely to enroll in school than were boys (Nakhleh 1976, 19, 21). By the 1990s, the situation had greatly improved: the literacy rate for men rose to 87 percent and for women to 75 percent; and by 2001, it was at 88.6 percent and 83.6 percent for males and females respectively. Among other factors, this new access to modern education had a transformative effect on the ways in which Bahrainis, and for the purposes of this study, Bahraini Shi’i women, would understand their religion and use their religious structures.

THE SHI’A OF BAHRAIN AND BAHRAINI SHI’I ISLAM

While almost all the Shi’a in Bahrain belong to the Twelver Shi’i sect of Islam, they are nonetheless a diverse group. The Baharna are those Shi’i Arabs who claim to be indigenous to Bahrain (although other groups have made similar claims), and they are the most economically disadvantaged community among the Bahrainis. They comprise around half of the total Shi’i population in Bahrain. The ‘Ajam are Bahraini Shi’a of Persian descent, and are in general wealthier than the Baharna. They represent up to 22 percent of the total (Fuller and Franke 1999, 120). This study focuses on all Bahraini Shi’a, whether Baharna or ‘Ajam; and more specifically on female Shi’a involved in some way in activities at a ma’tam.

The Shi’a have developed their own ways of practicing Islam, while still sharing many similarities with their Sunni counterparts. The Shi’a observe days having to do with the martyrdom of Shi’i religious figures, and while some Sunnis in the larger Muslim community have also participated in these commemorative rituals (Aghaie 2005, 8), most Sunnis in Bahrain do not. In Bahrain, the most dramatic religious event carried out annually in the public realm by the Shi’i community is the Ashura (‘Ashura’) procession through the streets on the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram. In this procession participating Shi’i men flagellate themselves until bloody to commemorate the brutal slaying of Imam Husayn at the battle of Karbala. This has changed since several Shi’i religious leaders have spoken against flagellation, and in fact those who still practice it are in the minority. Aghaie notes that in the larger Shi’i community women have “always been heavily involved in Moharram
rituals” (2005, 55), although my Bahraini informants spoke of flagellation as a male ritual.5

There are myriad ways in which Shi‘i Islam is actually interpreted and practiced. Typically in Shi‘i ethos, however, communal history is evoked in grief and mourning for past oppression and slain religious leaders, considered martyrs, who led their communities under oppressive conditions and died tragic deaths. Functions that commemorate this history can be understood as providing cohesion and meaning for the Shi‘i community. They allow the Shi’a to relive their communal past and to reaffirm and perform collective ethics, such as the importance of standing up to tyranny and demonstrating compassion for the suffering of all, especially for the family of the Prophet.

The most prominent of these holy figures are ‘Ali, Hasan, and Husayn, considered the first three Shi‘i imams. ‘Ali, cousin and brother-in-law of the Prophet and father of Hasan and Husayn, was attacked while praying and subsequently died in 661 C.E. Hasan was later poisoned in ca. 669, according to Shi‘i accounts, by an agent of Mu‘awiya. Husayn, with his children and a small group of followers, was slain in 680 by Yazid’s army at the battle of Karbala (Hodgson 1961, 216–19; Tabataba‘i 1975, 195). Yazid was the son of Mu‘awiya and became caliph after his father’s death.

The collective sorrow felt by Shi’a regarding not only these deaths but also the tragic ways in which they occurred is combined with hope for a future filled with justice, and the tone and mood of religious functions stem in part from this shared sorrow and hope. The Shi’a place hope in the figure of al-Mahdi, a divinely guided messianic figure who, in Shi‘i theology, will return to rid the world of evil, tyranny, and oppression, establish justice, and avenge those who assassinated Imam Husayn. Bahraini Shi‘i Islam also carries with it the current struggles that the community has waged against their political and economic situation, while at the same time being imbued with the memories of a Shi‘i sacred past and the struggles of Imam Husayn and the others against oppression and tyranny.

SHI‘I ACTIVISM IN BAHRAIN AND ELSEWHERE

Shi‘i Islam has a long tradition of valuing dissent, going back to the days after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and the contest for author-
ity that ensued: in general, those who came to be known as the Sunnis wanted political authority to pass to a succession of caliphs, selected by the community, while those who came to be known as the Shi‘a believed it should go to ‘Ali, and then to a chain of his descendents, who would carry the Prophet’s bloodline. In the late twentieth century some Twelver Shi‘is were responsible for political uprisings, activism, and terrorism (as were some Sunnis). The most important example of contemporary Shi‘i activism in places other than Bahrain is that of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Other examples include the bombing of the US Embassy in Kuwait in 1983 and the Kuwaiti airline hijacking in 1984 (Keddie and Cole 1986, 13–14). Juan Cole argues that other than in Shi‘a-ruled Iran, recent Shi‘i activism should be understood as the attempt to obtain political representation, in light of the status of Shi‘a elsewhere as minorities or functional minorities (2002, 173).

In Bahrain, recent Shi‘i activism has economic and political roots. The Gulf and the surrounding oil-producing regions constitute the homeland of the Shi‘a. Shi‘i communities are found in Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (they are also found in Lebanon, India, Pakistan, and elsewhere). In all of these Gulf countries (except Iran and the Shi‘i community in post-Saddam Iraq), the Shi‘a have a marginalized status and have not benefited from oil and other resources to the same degree that Sunnis have. As nation-states formed after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, Shi‘is found it difficult to integrate into states whose binding ethos was Arab nationalism (Cole 2002, 174). Modernization and urban development benefited the Sunni city-dwellers much more than they did the Shi‘i village communities. Specifically, Bahraini Shi‘is, under Sunni al-Khalifa rule since 1783, have remained at the bottom of the economic ladder despite constituting the majority. One scholar has estimated unemployment among Bahraini males to be 16–30 percent, with most of the unemployed being of Shi‘i descent (Zahlan 1989, 47). In part, this is due to the fact that the Shi‘a constitute the majority of the population in Bahrain. The activism among the Shi‘i community in Bahrain during the late twentieth century was a result of Shi‘i dissatisfaction with their lower socioeconomic status, lack of any democratic involvement, and governmental discrimination and oppression.

The 1990s in particular were a time of intense political repression.
During this time the Bahraini Shi‘i community actively and at times violently struggled to achieve political representation. Shi‘i violence included the bombing of hotels, restaurants, and the purlieus of a bank. The government responded by cracking down severely on Shi‘i activists: thousands were arrested, including women and children, and at least 22 Shi‘a were killed. Some women reported being held in isolation for long periods in 1995 and being beaten (AI 1996, 1–2). In 1994, many in the Shi‘i community, together with Sunni secular liberals who led the movement, signed a petition calling for the restoration of Parliament. The majority of the 23,000 who signed the petition were Shi‘a (Fuller and Franke 1999, 127). However, in the last few years the government has done much to appease the Shi‘a, such as granting amnesty for political prisoners and exiles.7

HISTORICAL FUNCTIONS OF THE SHI‘I MA‘TAM

The ma‘tam is not an institution unique to Bahrain. Communal meeting halls for the Shi‘a have different names in different places, but one common name for them—also used as an alternative name in Bahrain and as the principal term in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia—is husayniyya.8 This term refers to Imam Husayn, the martyr of Karbala. In Iran (as in Bahrain), apart from the formal and ritualistic activities carried out at the mosque, this institution is a site reserved for continuing Imam Husayn’s struggle for justice and against oppression (Sachedina 1983, 196).

Before the late nineteenth century, ma‘atim in Bahrain were situated within private homes. Each extended family had its own ma‘tam, and strangers were not encouraged to enter.9 Later, the Shi‘i community began to build ma‘atim as structures apart from homes, and they began to visibly manifest the presence and prosperity of the Shi‘i population (Fuccaro 1999). Ma‘atim in which men met became public structures. Khuri notes that some funeral houses were organized on the basis of class interest and ethnic origin, and others were family-organized and -managed (1980, 160–66). Women continued to gather in homes until separate public ma‘atim for women were also created (Doumato 2000, 116–17). Women’s activities at the ma‘tam centered primarily on the recitation of special narratives from the sayings of Shi‘i imams, religious
stories and poems lamenting Shi‘i martyrdom (especially that of Husayn), Qur‘anic passages, and grieving and socializing with others. The ma‘atim are sites of the performance of a very structured set of historically established rituals and recitations.

A PLACE FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Today, other than its traditional function as a religious communal meeting place, the ma‘tam is used for religious education. One issue the Shi‘i community contends with since the founding of governmental schools is that the religious curriculum offered as part of the general curriculum did not and does not teach the Shi‘i version of Islam. While both Shi‘i and Sunni Bahraini communities gave their children religious instruction prior to the arrival of modern public education, the need to emphasize the religious education of Shi‘i youth was heightened when only the Sunni form of Islam was offered in the public school system. Islamic education in Bahraini public schools is mandatory for Muslim children (non-Muslim expatriate children usually attend private schools), and I am told that it is presented in a general way with sensitivity to the Shi‘i population. If the parents wish to provide learning in Shi‘i Islam, they turn to the ma‘tam for more specific religious guidance. A public school opened in the Bahraini town of Juffair in 2002, offering curriculum at the primary and secondary levels in the Ja‘fari Shi‘i school of Islamic thought, thus providing the community with an alternative.

Fatima, a young, earnest, and outgoing Baharna Shi‘i studying English literature at the University of Bahrain, expressed her dissatisfaction with the situation: “I went to a government school, but I never, ever depended upon what they gave us for religion. They gave us the Sunni stuff. We learned—just memorized for the exam—then went home and learned our religion from the ma‘tam. It’s unfair.” Remediing the state of imbalance created by the public school religious education, the ma‘tam serves to maintain religious identity. Dana, Fatima’s friend and also a university student and a Baharna Shi‘i, articulated this sentiment: “We feel that this is all we have. The government is not on our side. We feel we have to keep up; we have to know our religion.”

I met Dana and Fatima, both of lower-middle-class families, at the American Studies Center at the University of Bahrain, where I had
been invited to give a talk. Both aged twenty-one, they sat assertively in the front row of the lecture hall, wearing unassuming abayas and head-scarves, and asked several questions during the talk, smiling at me with friendliness. They came up to me afterwards to introduce themselves and to offer me their cellphone numbers in case I needed any help with my research. They were young and optimistic, and it struck me in later conversations with them that while not naive, they did not seem to have much of the cynicism regarding “the state of the world” or “hope for the future” that I often encountered when I interviewed middle-aged Bahrainis.

A REFUGE

While Fatima and Dana emphasized the educational function of the ma’tam, it is also a site of refuge for the Shi‘i community. It is a liminal space between the public and private realms, in which Sunnis and other outsiders rarely venture uninvited, and where Shi‘is can develop and strengthen their communal identity and position in society. Hajar, a Baharna Shi‘i and a strongly outspoken political activist in her forties, noted that during periods of Shi‘a persecution by the government the ma’tam serves as a safe gathering place for political discourse. She said, “During the uprising [of the 1990s] no one could speak about politics, except for in the ma’tam. This was the only place we could speak the truth.” Hajar is from a middle-class family, married with two children, and her husband is also quite active in politics. While her parents were not religious, she became more political and more religious after her marriage. For Hajar, Islam is not only about piety, but rather a “political religion that governs all actions and lays down foundations for all of your life.” I met her and her husband, Jalal, in their spacious, elegant home one evening— their two small children were running around in pajamas—and what impressed me the most about her was her intensity. She spoke quickly and with a force that was almost intimidating.

Returning to the ma’tam, why is there a need for a refuge? Firstly, doctrinal and sectarian differences underline the existing political and economic rift. In Bahrain, there is a range of Sunni attitudes toward Shi‘i Islam and Shi‘is. Some Sunnis insisted to me that they live quite peacefully with their Shi‘i counterparts, who are their co-workers, friends, and sometimes relatives through marriage, and made statements
regarding the truth value of Shi‘i Islam such as “only God knows.” On the other hand, the Shi‘a, while tolerated, are also often misunderstood by the dominant Sunnis, and some Sunnis go so far as to consider the Shi‘a to be kafirs (apostates). Although in Bahrain (as in Iran and Iraq) the Shi‘a comprise the majority, elsewhere they are minorities. The dominance of Sunni Islam in the Arab world, combined with political Sunni dominance in Bahrain, creates a Sunni-normative environment. In this setting Bahraini Shi‘a, despite their majority status, feel as though they are “the other,” and are thus on the defensive—in a way that Sunnis are not—for their difference. I witnessed a long debate regarding the differences in daily prayer. A Sunni was trying to understand how it was that her friend could possibly find it correct to pray less frequently than she herself did; it struck her as lazy worship. Needless to say, her friend became quite defensive, sighing deeply and launching wearily into the explanation for that particular tradition.

CONDESCENSION AND CRITICISM: SHI‘I EXPERIENCES UNDER SUNNI DOMINANCE

Many Shi‘a told me stories illustrating the condescension they had suffered on the part of those whom they perceived to be overly righteous Sunnis. Most annoying were those they termed “Wahhabis,” a term, often used pejoratively, for those Sunnis adhering to a purist, resurgent form of Islam inspired by the Saudi Arabian reformer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), often also referred to as Salafis. Hajar’s husband Jalal related with deep exasperation,

I was in Mecca praying. A Wahhabi came and told me, “Repeat your prayers. A lady has passed in front of you.” I said, “What is wrong with that?” He replied, “Three things can’t pass in front of you: a donkey, a black dog, and a woman.”

This story not only depicts the way in which Shi‘is feel they are treated—condescended to by the Sunnis, as though they were constantly in need of correction—but also illustrates the perceived ideological differences between the Salafi (reformist) Sunnis on the one hand, and the Shi‘a on the other. Many Shi‘a I spoke with resented Saudi wealth and the ability of the Saudis to propagate their version of Salafi Islam to poorer
countries. It is rumored that Saudi Arabia also sends Salafi proselytizing material to Bahrain.

Jalal was also irritated by the hypocrisy he felt Saudi Arabian “Wahhabis” demonstrate by making an overt show of religiosity when in fact their piety is feigned. He referred to a scenario he considered common: “You can see the Saudis—a man and a wife—the wife is walking twenty feet behind him. Then they both sit, the wife lifts her niqab [face veil] and drinks a beer.”

Zahra, a tall, upper-middle-class ‘Ajami (of Persian descent), was in her late forties when I met her. She has children, and is the founder of a prominent women’s society. Serious, dedicated, articulate, calm, poised, and efficient, she has all the qualities that enable her to be a leader in her community. She wanted to meet with me at a mall once a week to practice her already advanced English. When we would meet, I would usually ask her to explain some aspect of Bahraini society to me, and she would patiently do so. Her patience did not extend to the Salafis. Like Jalal, she complained about Salafi “righteousness,” charging that the Salafis greatly damaged the image of Islam with their rigid and shallow ideology, as she put it, stating,

The Salafis focus on the external aspects of Islam. Worship shouldn’t be used as a weapon against other people, but should be between you and God. The religious police in Saudi Arabia beat you to make you close your store and go and pray. Will this cause people to pray?

Zahra also complained that the Bahraini government’s priorities were skewed toward promoting Westernization at the expense of other issues that she deemed more important:

The Bahraini government encourages people to make Bahrain the “Singapore” of the Gulf, having freedoms, being “civilized,” instead of paying attention to what is important, such as science, etc. They run to McDonald’s but don’t pay attention to women’s rights, children’s rights, and humanitarian issues. Everyone is shopping; everyone has Western fever. Is it a government policy to keep people too busy to think about democracy and human rights?

Clearly, Zahra felt that this shopping-oriented “Western fever” which she suggested the government supported was diverting people from crucial
social and political awareness. Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–69) termed this phenomenon *Gharbzadegi*, or “Weststruckness.” He wrote, “This *Gharbzadegi* has two heads. One is the West, the other is ourselves who are Weststruck” (Al-e Ahmad 1982, 11). Many in the Shi‘i community do not feel as though they have derived much benefit from the course toward rapid economic development—associated with the West—that the government has taken.

The ma‘tam, then, is a refuge from the intolerance and prejudice of some in the wider society, governmental oppression, and feelings of alienation from what some feel are the materialistic ambitions of the ruling al-Khalifa family. The reasons for needing a sanctuary are varied and no single reason can be attributed to all Bahraini Shi’a.

NEW WAYS TO USE THE SPACE: LESS GRIEF AND VICTIMHOOD

Besides its function as a center for religious education and as a communal refuge of sorts, the ma‘tam is at the heart of discourse regarding changes in religious practice and belief that have taken place in the last few decades. According to those interviewed, one of these changes is the reinterpretation of Shi‘i religious figures and rituals; for example, the increasing rejection of victimhood in Shi‘i practice, especially by the younger, educated, and more politically active generations. These reinterpretations serve to newly define the Shi‘i community, often shedding images of passivity, victimhood, and the blind adherence to traditional ritual practice. Instead, figures are interpreted as strong and responsive. My informants spoke of an educated understanding of Shi‘i religious figures and practices, and an insistence on their relevance to today’s concerns, political and otherwise.

These changes are taking place among the Shi‘a outside of Bahrain as well. For example, Deeb (2005, 256) describes the reinterpretation of Zaynab’s significance among Lebanese women. Some Shi‘i communities are choosing to donate blood on Ashura instead of flagellating. In Istanbul both men and women lined up to donate blood for the Red Crescent Society (Majid 2006). In Iraq, some Shi’a, aware of blood shortages due to the war, have also chosen to donate blood instead of flagellating (al-Sharei 2004). Hizballah in Lebanon forbade this practice in the 1990s and many Lebanese Shi‘a also donate blood instead (Deeb 2005, 244–5).
Although women in the Shi‘i community seldom participate in flagellating, they do give blood. While still commonplace, rituals like wailing and flagellating are increasingly rejected by the more educated in favor of gestures perceived to be more productive, such as donating blood to those in need.

Ma‘tam functions that re-enact sacred events in the Shi‘i historical past are traditionally accompanied by expressions of profound grief and crying by both men and women. I was told that women would weep not only for the travesties the Shi‘a endured in their communal past, but also to lament their current situation, thus linking the past with the present. Women stated again and again that in the past, they had spent most of their time at the ma‘tam weeping, and that now—except for the older women—they do not. Zahra described the older generation of women and their religious expressions of sorrow at the ma‘tam:

> Older women read sad poems and tap their chests. This is not so bad—I won’t do it—but it’s not a big deal. They want to feel as though they are sympathizing, and connected to Imam Husayn. What makes them feel connected is that most of the people in jail now are Shi‘a. Women feel relief; when they cry, they release their emotions. They link Imam Husayn with all Shi‘a.

Thus the loss and suffering of Imam Husayn are connected with their suffering today, reinforcing a sense of Shi‘i identity. What is different now is suggested in Zahra’s comments that she would not participate in that type of lament.

When Zahra said that she would no longer cry and tap her chest at the ma‘tam, she did so because she found the gesture to be incorrect, dangerous, and feeding into the Shi‘i culture of victimhood, which she considered passive, destructive, and unproductive, and ultimately a negative force on the community. Imam Husayn, she argued, had in the past been understood to be a powerless victim, needing help. She voiced her objections: “It’s not true, he was a big hero. No one did what he did. He had dignity. He would have refused this representation. He wanted us to draw inspiration from his life.”

Likewise, Jihan, a Baharna Shi‘i and a wealthy, polished professional in her early thirties who works in the diplomatic quarter in Manama, explained that it is no longer considered acceptable among “modern”
Shi’a to react to the story of Imam Husayn by crying alone:

I get very emotional when I go to the ma’tam and hear the whole story of Imam Husayn. He died and was killed for reasons beyond that, beyond us just going to the ma’tam and crying. He died because he wanted us to think, and to improve ourselves, our Shi’ism and way of thinking.

She spoke quite passionately about the role of newly interpreted Shi’i Islam in her life and the ways in which she felt it empowered her. As she dressed elegantly in a variety of muted colors and a silk headscarf, her appearance was different from that of the black-robed university students, Fatima and Dana. A new mother, she smiled with tension and told me how much she missed her baby boy and how hard it was to leave him to go back to work.

Contemporary Bahraini women have also newly conceptualized the significance of another figure from Shi’i sacred history, Zaynab, the daughter of ‘Ali and the sister of Hasan and Husayn. Zaynab accompanied Imam Husayn to his massacre at Karbala. After his martyrdom she was forced through the desert to Damascus, and later while captive in Yazid’s palace she held the first lamentation assembly for her brother. Zahra argued that while in the past Zaynab was understood to be a symbol of grieving womanhood, today this would be considered an incomplete way of understanding her significance. Instead, she should also be remembered for her strength and resilience. A better way to view her, Zahra held, was to remember that Imam Husayn relied upon Zaynab to continue his revolution. She was a model of patience, able to bear all tragedies. Now women think of Zaynab as a positive role model, inspiring all women to be patient and strong, and not just to grieve.

Jihan also spoke of Zaynab’s function as a modern role model:

Zaynab has become a symbol for all Shi’i women because of her strength, her strong faith, her crisis management skills. You know, before they didn’t have those terms, but now we do, that’s what I think of. Shi’i women use her as a symbol. Even highly educated women try to use her skills and ability as a guide and an example for their lives, and implement it in a way that can serve their office work and their interpersonal relations.

Zaynab, in her view, now serves as a career role model for women, and
as someone to turn to for help with “crisis management” as well as with other professional and personal matters. Clearly, Jihan has found a way to connect the significance of the figure of Zaynab to her own professional life. She also emphasized that before literacy, women did not have a profound nor an informed understanding of Zaynab.

Of course, you know, for illiterate women who only think of Zaynab as a superwoman, they don’t know why. I’m telling you this because I know why. I’ve read about it, I’ve thought about it, I’ve discussed this with several people. The first reason, the second reason, the third reason; the new generations know why.

Jihan’s emphasis on knowing why implies that to understand the relevance of these religious historical individuals—to know why they are important to one’s life—one has to undertake careful research and not just rely on popular or commonly held notions. In other words, a literate and self-educating approach to religion is the key to any genuine understanding.

As in other regions, ritual practices invoking themes of Shi’i victimization are being rejected in Bahrain. Zahra discussed the flagellations that Shi’i men carry out during Ashura processions, a practice she believes is unproductive: “These flagellations are wrong. Why should we hurt ourselves and shed our own blood? Instead we can donate blood for the Palestinians. In fact we have started to donate blood instead. What is the point of flagellating?”

**A VENUE FOR EDUCATION AND POLITICS**

What is filling the time formerly spent grieving at the ma’atam, then? Surprisingly, today it is being used for secular education of all varieties. These observations about new ways in which Shi’i Muslim women in Bahrain are using their ritual spaces reflect a greater trend among Muslim women, both Shi’i and Sunni, in the Middle East and elsewhere (Boyle 2004; Clark 2004; Mahmood 2005). Dana told me that now at her ma’atam most people cry for only ten minutes, and listen to a lecture for 40 minutes, while in the past women spent all of their time there crying. Lectures on legal matters, health education, and politics, as well as marital advice can be found at men’s and women’s ma’atim. Dana described the new subject matter offered:
I go to the ma’tam all the time. It is the source of education in all fields. In the past, the ma’tam was for religious practice only, now it has become relevant for all fields. Now doctors and lawyers give lectures there. During Ramadan we had a lawyer give a lecture about political changes in Bahrain. Later a doctor came to speak about diabetes. We meet there in groups and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the programs we have. Nowadays, my group is thinking about bringing in computers to the ma’tam.

Jihan also commented on this subject:

In the past seven or eight years, ma’atim in Bahrain—women’s ma’atim—have remarkably advanced.... Now, ma’atim have developed to be very active in society. Not only to get people to come and weep and cry, but also to tackle issues and problems; family problems, religious problems, social problems such as drugs, sexual relations, relations between the sexes, things like that are being tackled in the ma’tam. When my mother went, this wasn’t possible. Now celebrations are celebrated in a more civilized way, in a more informative way. In other words, if a mother takes her kids to a ma’tam, she’s not only there to chit-chat, to eat and drink tea and sweets. She’s there to listen to how and what is the best way of raising her child, what is the best way of dealing with her husband, and of having a happy family life, things like that.

Without a doubt, education—which of course has always been highly valued in Islamic societies—is taking on a new importance and religious significance in the Shi’i ma’tam. The sense is that education of all types is so crucial to bettering the entire struggling Bahraini Shi’i community that now it is even the focus of religious functions.

Not only is secular education taught in the ma’atim, but the way in which it is conducted invokes the modern educational environment, with chairs in rows and all types of educational technology. Hajar noted: “All the female candidates campaigned in the ma’atim. We had PowerPoints, overhead projectors.... The technology was astonishing, as was the interaction and the amount of discussion.” Keeping in mind that until recently women used to go to the ma’atim solely to recite religious lamentations and to meet with other women, all of these changes are startling.

A further break with tradition is taking place in women’s ma’atim:
now they too have become overtly politicized. The ma’atim provide Shi’i women (and men) with the same protected space for political discourse that Sunni men have always had in mosques. The extent to which women’s ma’atim could have been places of female political discourse in the past is not clear; most likely women talked about a range of issues. What is different now, noted by female Bahraini Shi’is themselves, is the organized nature of the political functions. During the period preceding the groundbreaking 2002 elections in Bahrain—the first time Bahraini women were able to vote and to run for office—the role of the ma’tam in Bahraini life was publicly highlighted. The candidates used the ma’tam as a venue for campaigning in their attempts to reach out to the Shi’i community, with contenders giving speeches in women’s ma’atim as well. Even Shaykha Sabika, the king’s wife, came to a woman’s ma’tam to urge the Shi’i community—who were threatening to boycott the elections—to vote. Jihan illustrated the changing role of the ma’atim, offering an example of the campaigning that took place therein:

To be honest with you, just recently, the ma’atim have changed their face, because of the municipal council elections that we had in Bahrain. They started to take a more political role, even the women’s ma’atim. OK, we’re not talking about men’s ma’atim—they’ve always been political from the beginning. Even women started to talk about politics in the ma’tam. Actually, women started to campaign for their candidates in the ma’tam, and tried to get women’s votes.

Here Jihan notes that functions at ma’atim have begun to reflect the new political, social, and educational atmosphere. The recent campaigning that took place within women’s ma’atim illustrates the greater degree of political involvement of Bahraini Shi’i women, and exemplifies the new ways in which women use their religious institutions, as well as their understanding of the role of religion in their lives.

BEHIND THE CHANGE

What is the cause of these changes? Bahraini women’s access to modern education is one factor. Additionally, one cannot overemphasize the influence of nearby Iran and Iraq on the Bahraini Shi’i community. The Iranian influence has been particularly prominent. The tremendous religious upheavals and the flourishing of innovative religious thought that
took place before, during, and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution had a great impact on Bahraini Shi’a. Their marginalized status, proximity to Iran, ethnic ties (in the case of the ‘Ajam) and history with Iran predisposed them to this influence. Hundreds of Bahraini Shi’a demonstrated in support of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and in 1981 a coup attempt by an Iranian-financed movement to overthrow the Sunni ruling family in Bahrain was thwarted (Zahlan 1989, 62). Many activists inspired by the events of the Iranian Revolution organized in Bahrain in protest of the Sunni government. Some Iranian clerics also tried to influence the political scenario in Bahrain through radical preaching. It was a goal of Khomeini to “perpetuate the revolution both at home and abroad,” as a line in Iran’s constitution put it (Esposito 2000, 664). He and other players in his government called on the Shi’a in other areas of the world to struggle for their own freedom. Even Iranian radio broadcasts called on the Shi’a of the Gulf to combat the Sunni regimes under which they lived. Ideology was exported from Iran by means of conferences, radio, publishing, and the funding of religious organizations. During this time many Shi’a not only became politicized but also turned to a Shi‘i form of resurgent Islam. In Hajar’s words,

The Iranian Revolution had a great impact on the Bahraini Shi’a. After the revolution cassettes with religious messages were distributed in Bahrain, spreading the revolutionary ideology.... It was possible to get ideas from new modern shaykhs from Iran. These shaykhs, reformists from Qom, were able to see things from different points of view: they had studied Martin Luther King, secularism, science, and philosophy.

She also added that at that time Shi‘i women became interested in religion because when Khomeini spoke about the revolution, he called on women to be involved.

Zahra also spoke of being religiously inspired by the Iranian Revolution, and noted that during the revolution she read religious books about Islamic values and principles, wanting to reevaluate her life and way of thinking, and to find the “real Islam.” This search led to her commitment to an Islamic way of life. This Shi‘i unrest was not limited to Bahrain: parallel Shi‘i uprisings in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia also took place in the hope of furthering Shi‘i interests.
One Iranian religious reformist who had a particularly relevant impact leading up to the revolution was ‘Ali Shari‘ati (1933–77), who helped found the current Shi‘i movement of Islamic resurgence that spread to Bahrain and is still active. His contribution was in bridging the gap between religion and alienated, educated, middle-class Iranian youth in a way that led to new approaches to thinking about Islam in Iran and also in the greater Shi‘i community.

In Iran during the 1960s and 1970s, many middle-class Iranian youth felt alienated from both their government and their religious institutions. Iranians from various groups felt angry about their lack of political participation and also the Shah’s programs of Westernization. Roy Mottahedeh attributes the rise of political unrest to the Shah’s support for modern education, as students began to demand the democratic representation they had read about (1985, 51). As for religious alienation, the youth in particular had attained a level of secular, scientifically oriented education that made them less willing to unquestioningly follow their religious traditions. The ulema (religious leaders) were still using traditional religious teaching methods such as rote memorization, which made both the ulema and their methods seem outdated.

Educated in France from 1960 to 1964, ‘Ali Shari‘ati was one among a few prominent religious reformers who was able to offer a vision of Islam that, he argued, was relevant to the new political and social circumstances Iranians faced and was based on systematic thinking and rationality. He often spoke at a husayniyya, the Iranian version of the ma‘tam, as the venue for his revolutionary religious teachings, especially at Husayniyya Irshad in Tehran, and thousands of copies of his talks were sold. He believed that *ijtihad* (religious reinterpretation) was necessary to apply Islam to life today, and criticized the popular preachers of the religious class for ignoring modernity. In his view, wisdom and knowledge—not ignorance—lead to a rational worldview and thus the capacity to seek justice, which is a primary Shi‘i goal (Sachedina 1983, 194–208). Opposing unscientific thought in religion, he disliked those who promoted a religious concept without sufficient scientific analysis—a practice he believed would lead to ignorance (Shari‘ati 1982, 298–9). He spoke of women’s public activities as having a religious precedent in the life of Fatima, a member of the *ahl-e bayt* (holy family), the Prophet’s daughter, and the mother of Imams Hasan and Husayn (Badran 1988).
Shari’ati believed that women should have access to education, that they should be free to better themselves and to model themselves after Fatima whom he described as possessing incredible strength and resilience (Shari’ati 1981).

Shari’ati also rejected the passivity inherent in the Shi’i concept of waiting for the return of the Hidden Imam, instead arguing that Shi’ism should be active and positive. His popularity can be credited not only to his ability to reinterpret Islam in a way that was intelligible and meaningful to alienated Iranians, but also because he spoke of religious reform in ways that were still inherently Shi’i, invoking Shi’i motifs such as the recurring call for social justice. Shari’ati called for a reemphasis on Shi’i Islam’s early revolutionary message, and criticized clergy for their alliances with the state (Esposito 2000). Religion, he believed, should not simply consist of a system of personal ethics, but rather should be a revolutionary ideology that emancipates people from oppression and tyranny. His recorded lectures and writings, which circulated throughout Iran, were influential in providing Iranians with new ways to view religion. Shari’ati’s revolutionary messages did not go unnoticed by the Shah’s regime: Husayniyya Irshad—where Shari’ati delivered most of his lectures—was shut down in 1973 and he was jailed; he died in exile in 1977.

One can see evidence of Shari’ati’s influence on Bahraini Shi’ism even today in the ways in which the women interviewed for this study spoke of new interpretations of Shi’i practices and rituals. Like Shari’ati, they spoke of moving away from “traditional” practices toward ones they deemed more “progressive” and informed by an educated approach. Like Shari’ati’s insistence on applying knowledge to religion, Jihan spoke of knowing why in her approach to understanding the significance of the figure of Zaynab. Zahra said that she preferred interpretations of religious figures that focus on activity and positive action, and not on passivity or victimhood.

The new emphasis on political activity in women’s ma’atim, reflective of women’s educational development and their participation in the greater Bahraini Shi’i resistance movement, can also be understood in part as a legacy of Shari’ati’s particular interpretation of Shi’i Islam as a revolutionary message. In this interpretation, believers should struggle against ignorance and oppression—and thus be politically active—just
as the early imams and their families struggled and were active. Many educated Iranian women, applying Shariʿati’s principles, did become politically active during the Iranian Revolution (Badran 1988, 17), perhaps offering inspiration to their Bahraini counterparts. One famous slogan of Shariʿati’s reads, “Every day is Ashura; every place is Karbala!” (Algar 1980, 9).

Movements similar to the one in Iran took place in the greater Shiʿi world. The situation in Iraq in the late 1950s and 1960s was somewhat comparable to that of Iran, in that increasing modernization and secular education had also left the clergy in a weakened position, having lost appeal and relevance. Movements of Islamic resurgence began to appear in the Arabic-speaking Shiʿi world, such as that led by Iraqi cleric, mujtahid (jurisprudent), writer, and reformist Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1931–80); movements that strove to make religion more popular with the masses. Al-Sadr’s success was due to his ability to reach the educated, secular masses, instead of the traditional approach of teaching only seminarians (Wiley 1992, 31–2, 74). The political situation of Iraqi Shiʿa was not unlike the political situation in Bahrain, in that the Iraqi Shiʿa comprised the majority of the population and yet were under Sunni rule; in Iraq’s case, that of the Arab nationalist Baʿth party run by Saddam Hussein. As in Bahrain, the Iraqi Shiʿa were poorer than the Sunnis, and rural, while the Sunni ruling class lived in the cities. Al-Sadr and his followers actively opposed the Baʿth party. This opposition led to the arrest, torture, and execution of many clergy, and to the execution of al-Sadr in 1980 (Wiley 1992, 53, 75). His death in prison led to a heightening of his popularity, as he was now considered a martyr.

Educated in Najaf, the site of many theological schools, al-Sadr, like ‘Ali Shariʿati, thought a reinterpretation of Islam was needed to reconcile faith with scientific knowledge and rationality, and he argued that one should struggle actively toward the improvement of society, instead of waiting patiently for divine intervention (Wiley 1992, 131). This emphasis on positive action versus grief-ridden patience can be seen in the Bahraini rejection of victimhood, e.g., Zahra now chooses to celebrate and emulate the positive aspects of religious history and sacred figures, instead of crying and tapping her chest, and approves of the new trend of donating blood to the Palestinian cause instead of self-flagellating. Al-Sadr was also relatively progressive regarding women’s roles, believing
that women should receive an education and move away from allowing tradition to be their only guide (Wiley 1992, 131).

Shari‘ati and al-Sadr were part of a larger Islamic reform movement that rejected what were deemed to be stagnant ways of thinking and practice. These reformers called for the laity’s right to interpret Islamic texts. Early representatives of that movement include Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) (Esposito 2000, 647–8). Afghani is associated with Islamic modernism and with his commitment to reason. ‘Abduh emphasized the importance of education and, greatly influenced by the Enlightenment, he tried to reconcile Enlightenment thinking with Islam (Moaddel and Talattof 2000, 13–14). The precise extent to which individuals such as al-Sadr or Shari‘ati impacted Bahraini society is difficult to gauge.

THE BAHRAINI SHI‘I RESURRENCE

While Shi‘is in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain no doubt influenced each other through the sharing of ideologies, each movement manifested in distinct ways and reflected the specific social, cultural, and political circumstances in each place. In Iran, those participating in the efforts that led to the revolution wanted to topple the Western-oriented Shah. In Iraq, the struggle involved active resistance to a secular Arab nationalist government and to the Ba‘hist interpretation of Islam. The Shi‘i Islamic resurgence in Bahrain, however, arose in response to political and economic discrimination against the Shi‘a. Other than the isolated thwarted coup attempt, the thrust of the Shi‘i political struggle in Bahrain has been toward achieving democratic participation and ending discrimination.

The Shi‘i Islamic resurgence in Bahrain is informed by Bahraini culture and society. The value placed on social and religious tolerance, held by both Shi‘is and Sunnis, appears in the ways in which Bahraini Shi‘a talk about Bahraini society and the Islamic resurgence. Invited to a women’s party held in a tent during Ramadan, I was begged by one woman not to write a book, as had others, on the problems between the Sunnis and Shi‘is. She said, “Look, the tension you read about doesn’t really exist. I’m Sunni, and [pointing to another woman] my friend and relative over here is Shi‘i. There are Sunnis and Shi‘is right here at this
party and we don’t have any problem with each other.” Many Shi’is emphasized to me that the problems they had were not solely Shi’i problems, but that many Sunnis were also fighting for democracy and justice. Both Sunnis and Shi’is are aware of the political fragility of Bahrain (surrounded as it is by larger, more powerful neighbors), and that for it to survive as a nation, a priority must be placed on Bahraini nationalism and not on ethnic and religious sectarianism.

FUTURE PLANS

Many Shi’i women I interviewed spoke optimistically of their plans for the future. Fatima and Hajar both discussed the importance of thinking beyond the ma’tam and of reaching out to others. Fatima was proud of the various activities that she had helped to organize, and now wanted to find ways to publicize ma’tam events and activities. She believed these events could have a greater influence in Bahraini society. She complained, “We have a problem, a serious problem. We don’t own the media. No one knows what we do in the ma’tam. Media has great power and we don’t have it. It is expensive, and everyone who deals with ma’atim is a volunteer. The government has the media.” Here she noted, with some resentment, that the difficulty in accessing the media lies in its status as a tool of the government, again highlighting the struggle for power between the Shi’i majority and the Sunni government. (Of course, despite their lack of access to official media, these days the Shi’a do have access to blogs and Facebook.)

Hajar wanted to expand upon the progress already made, arguing that the next step for the Shi’a is to think outside the ma’tam. Instead of seeking publicity for local Shi’i events, she supported the notion that the Shi’a should create and nurture leaders in the community, especially women. She stated,

As Shi’a, we need more leaders to go out into the public. They could go to seminars, hotels, to reach foreigners worldwide, etc. We can then defend our point of view. We need to mix [with other groups] to show how an Islamic woman can be strong. We lack leaders. In sha’allah, things will change.

This is heady and ambitious thinking for those whose mothers sat in the ma’tam grieving, socializing, and drinking tea.
Bahraini Shi’i women are using their newly found religious literacy to reinterpret their religious practices and historical figures in ways that reflect their desire for a rational and educated approach to religion. As illustrated by the use of the ma’atam as a venue for community education and self-betterment, this literacy is also being used to empower women and their community. Education raised the level of political consciousness of both male and female Bahrainis, and created a desire for political representation and an awareness of the possibility for change, as reflected in the politicization of women’s ma’atim. The expansion of literacy in Bahrain, the Shi’i Islamic resurgences in Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq, and the Bahraini struggle for democratic political participation all informed and shaped the ways in which the Shi’i community in Bahrain made use of their religious structures. Some of the women I spoke with were idealistic about the impact these changes might have in the future, in terms of strengthening the role of women, the Shi’i community, and Muslims in general. As Zahra put it, “The new generation is changing. They want religious life to be more informative and educational. In traditional ma’atim, you read, cry, and go home. In new ones you can give speeches about Bahrain and the world.”

NOTES


2. According to Jan Lahmeyer’s (1999/2004) Populstat.Info website, the population of Bahrain was 88,000 in 1932; 100,000 in 1940; and 220,000 in 1970.


4. Worldwide, approximately 150 million people, or 10–15 percent of all Muslims, are Twelver Shi’a (Ernst 2003, 170).

5. Eleanor Doumato (2000, between pp. 186–7) includes a 1908 photograph of Bahraini women following a Shi’i Muharram procession.

6. Louay Bahry notes that the exact number of Shi’i unemployed is not known. In 1998 the government cited a figure of 1.87 percent unemployment, but Bahry disputes this claim: “[I]t is probably safe to estimate the number of unemployed in Bahrain at anywhere from 16 to 30 percent of Bahraini males. Almost all of these are poor Shi’ites, and the figure is higher among Shi’ite women” (Bahry 2000, 137).
7. Shaykh Hamad bin 'Isa al-Khalifa, who assumed rule after his father's death in 1999, carried out this amnesty in 2001 (see Infoplease, s.v. “Bahrain: History,” http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/world/A0856819.html [accessed January 5, 2010]). Louay Bahry also mentions that in 1999, the amir (now king) announced that he intended to hold municipal elections in the future, and grant greater press freedom (Bahry 2000, 140).

8. David Pinault (1992, 83–98) writes about Shi‘i men’s guilds in Hyderabad, and notes that the term used there is matami guruhan. As for the use of the term husayniyya in Bahrain, I am told that it is a term used more commonly in the past and by the older generations. I was not able to find out when the term ma‘tam arose and became commonly used.

9. For more on the foundation of the Shi‘i ma‘tam, see Khuri 1980.

10. While Sunni women in Bahrain historically have not regularly attended mosques, some do attend Qur‘anic institutions, which likely provide those Sunni women with a venue for political discourse parallel to what Shi‘i women have in the ma‘tam.

11. However, in subjects such as philosophy and logic, rote memorization did not play a major role.

12. See also Esposito 2001, s.v. “Ali Shari‘ati.”

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