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Lebanese Shia Women Temporality and Piety

LARA DEEB

For many Shia Muslims in Lebanon since the late 1970s—particular practices of piety have become part of a discourse that is held up as an alternative to notions of a secular modernity. In this process, an identity has been forged that is understood to be both pious and modern, and where notions of piety and modernity are interdependent on one another.² Within this context, ideals of public piety—or public expressions of religious commitment that are interpreted in contextual ways—have had particular ramifications for women. This is in part because of gendered markers of religiosity like the headscarf, but more importantly, because public piety has emerged in relation to a set of gender ideologies that highlight the ways that locality is firmly embedded in its transnational dimensions. In what follows, I will touch upon the interconnections among local and transnational gendered linkings of piety to modernity, female role models from Shia religious history, and ideas about temporality.

The link between notions of piety and modernity is rooted in a Lebanese Shia mobilization around religion that began in the 1970s. The dominant gender ideologies in circulation amongst pious Shia have emerged through these historical processes and in the Lebanese context of sectarian coexistence. Over this period of transformation, the meaning of “modernity” in the pious Shia cultural sphere came to include three elements: being “civilized” as opposed to backward, material progress, and spiritual progress—which meant cultivating particular religious understandings and practices that were characterized as more “authentic” than supposedly older or “more traditional” forms. For women in this community, the result has been that to be considered a modern woman in most contexts, one must also be visibly pious in very specific ways. To begin to look at the ways women demonstrate these qualities simultaneously, let us turn to contemporary reformulations of the behaviour of Sayyida Zaynab at the Battle of Karbala.

Zaynab as role model

Ashura, the annual commemoration of Imam Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala, is a key element in the transformations of religiosity that have taken place in Lebanon. One of the myriad ongoing changes in Ashura commemorations has been a two-part shift in the ways that ideal womanhood is portrayed. First, there has been a decrease in emphasis on Sayyida Fatima accompanied by an increased emphasis on Husayn’s sister, Zaynab. In pious women’s testimonies about the influence of these figures on their lives, Fatima has taken a background role, despite continued emphasis on her stoicism and strength by religious scholars. Instead, lay women focus on Zaynab as the dominant female figure of Ashura, emphasizing her presence at the battle and her role as the community’s leader following Husayn’s martyrdom.

Second, there has been a reformulation, in Ashura recitations, of Zaynab’s behaviour during and after the battle. Portrayals of Zaynab as buried in grief or shedding copious tears over the dead and dying gave way to representations that emphasized her courage, strength, and resilience, and highlighted her leadership role. This reinterpretation of Zaynab’s role is both embodied in the

Among Shia Muslims in Lebanon, piety has become a central marker of modernity. The author argues that, perhaps unexpectedly, it is women who are allotted the greater responsibility of representing modernity in all its dimensions, including the material. As part of their mandate to represent and facilitate their community’s progress, pious Shia women are encouraged to move into public roles and spaces. These processes demonstrate the coming together of the material and spiritual domains as well as the transformation and partial blurring of gender divides.¹

increased participation of women in Ashura commemorative practices and the model for women’s greater public participation in the community more generally.

When the notion of “role model” comes up in relation to Islamic religious and/or political groups, it is frequently followed by assumptions about the forms of temporality that must be structuring the lives and expectations of people who draw upon religio-historical figures for inspiration. In particular, the idea frequently arises

that looking to a figure like Zaynab implies or demonstrates a “looking backward,” a desire to “return” to an earlier time period, or an understanding of time as circular and therefore, non-modern. In response to such assumptions, I argue that in this community there exist multiple notions of temporality simultaneously, including both a modernist notion of time as linear progress to a potentially attainable yet unknown future and a notion of time as—not quite cyclical—but paradigmatic.

Temporal readings

The Battle of Karbala’s relationship to time can be read in at least two ways in its contemporary representations in Lebanon. On the one hand, time here may be understood as nonlinear. This reading emphasizes a notion of time similar though not identical to that described by Reinhart Koselleck as a temporal framework in which “the future could bring nothing fundamentally new” because the end of the world was expected.³ In the Christian contexts in which Koselleck’s theorizing is rooted, this relates to the enduring nature of human beings as sinful until Judgment Day. However, in the Shia worldview emphasized in the Lebanese context, this non-new future is instead related to the continuity and constancy of a battle between good and evil that is consistently foreshadowed and re-instantiated in different eras. This was often articulated to me as the idea that “there is a Yazid and a Husayn in every time, in every nation, in every era.”

This represents a paradigmatic reading of Karbala, as opposed to a narrative reading. Paradigmatic, not as the origins of Shia resistance against evil, but as the paradigmatic instance of this resistance, understood as an ever-repeating type of event, an always-foreseen battle of good against evil that will not be resolved until Judgment Day. This is not about a return to Karbala, but rather, about using Karbala in *parallel*, to emphasize the morality of one’s stance, and an identification with the side of good in the good-evil binary. Contemporary Shia battles, like those against the twenty-two-year Israeli occupation of Lebanon or the Israeli attack on Lebanon in July 2006, become yet another instance of the universal moral battle for which Karbala represents the paradigm.

The second possible reading of the Battle of Karbala’s relationship to time instead highlights the notion of an unknown and unpredictable future—what Koselleck and others describe as “modern time.” Here Karbala is the point of origin for a linear historical narrative, the location of the beginning of the history of the possibility of Shia Resistance, as well as the locus of inspiration. The next step in this telling of the narrative involves partial rupture, where centuries of historical time are skipped over in a catapulting move to the early 1980s and the beginnings of the history of the Lebanese Islamic Resistance in its contemporary and local manifestations. This rupture is not one of time itself, but one of narration, where the “missing” centuries are understood to exist outside the particular telling of the history of the Lebanese Islamic Resistance, as commonly narrated.

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In the second reading, the events of Karbala and the behaviour of the role models of Husayn and Zaynab function as a literal model—to be drawn upon by many of my Shia interlocutors as role models for moral behaviour interpreted through the lens of the contemporary world. Characteristics associated with them were to be emulated *in the present, in order to shape the future*, characteristics such as bravery and sacrifice for one's community. In the first temporal framework, the martyred Imam and the contemporary martyred fighter are seen as lives in parallel, as participating in the same battle. In the second, the martyred Imam is viewed as inspiring values that lead to similar participation in the contemporary moment.

Gendering temporal frameworks

In this community, both these notions of time and both these understandings of the role of Husayn and Zaynab as models for, or in, the present coexist. Yet their relative emphasis is gendered in particular ways. When men are called upon to fulfil the public piety ideal, it is most often in relation to the resistance to occupation, and when their participation is recognized, it is most often framed as a paradigmatic instance of continual resistance. In other words, Lebanese Shia fighters are frequently equated with Husayn in discourse and in memorialization practices.

In contrast, when women are called upon to participate, or are recognized for their participation, it is more frequently cast in the framework of linear progress of the community into an unknown but inevitably more “developed” future—drawing instead on “linear” temporal frameworks identified with modernity. Women activists are not equated with Zaynab. Zaynab is looked to for inspiration, and values associated with her are adapted to the current context.

One may note the contrast of this gendering of temporal frameworks to that described by Partha Chatterjee in relation to colonial India. Chatterjee's analysis is one in which the material and the spiritual were also both key elements in ideas about modernizing the community, but in that case, Bengali women were delegated the maintenance of the spiritual, while the material development was conceptualized as the domain of nationalist men. Women's spiritual responsibility was linked to a gendered division of space into public and domestic spheres. Even with nineteenth century shifts in gender norms that facilitated elite women's emergence into public spaces, the gendered nature of the spiritual-material divide remained.⁴

In contrast, the Shia Lebanese case, located in a neo-imperialist context of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, demonstrates the coming together of the material and spiritual domains without a similarly prominent gender divide; and where such a divide can be discerned, through notions of temporality, it is *women* who are allotted the greater responsibility of representing modernity in *all* its dimensions, including the material. Furthermore, as part of their mandate to represent and facilitate their community's progress, pious Shia women are encouraged to move into public roles and spaces. This contrast raises questions about the limits of comparison of colonial and postcolonial contexts to contemporary theorizing about gendered responses to neocolonialisms and neoimperialisms in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Gendering piety and modernity

Women's public activism in emulation of Zaynab takes many forms. The most visible can be seen in the thousands of women who volunteer with Islamic social service organizations. In addition, more Shia Lebanese women are formally employed than before, and the types of employment have diversified widely. A third area where Zaynab's example is applied today draws on her ideal attribute of outspokenness, as Lebanese Shia women contribute to the continual process of religious reform through daily conversations and debates about the proper interpretations of religious meanings and practices.

Women's public participation is a key element in the way that Zaynab provides a normative model for public piety and for the ideal moral woman, a woman who is conceptualized as both pious and modern. The activist lesson of Karbala, in its application in daily life, provides a framework for these expressions of piety, and indeed, *insists* on public



PHOTO BY LARA DEEB, 2001

activity as a part of piety. In this context, to be pious according to such standards is a large part of being modern. Women who did not express piety “properly” were considered “backward” and in need of education to bring them into their proper role in the progressivist narrative of community development.

While it can be argued that this is true to a certain extent for both women and men, public piety marks women most visibly. This gendering is related to a number of factors: the new visibility of women in public spaces, especially in relation to how women's activities and words are embodied and marked as *women's*; the way that this new visibility provokes discussion of change in domestic relationships; and finally, the gendered temporal frameworks structuring the emulation of Karbala-based role models, so that women have become the representatives and agents of linear progress in ways that men have not.

This gendered temporal difference is related to the way that women's public piety is marked as crucial to the community's external visibility. Shia women's public piety is central to their signifying their community's modernity within a transnational discursive field. The status and image of Muslim women is one of the most consistent and contentious issues that arose during my field research, in passionate and often, unsolicited responses to Western discourses about Muslim women. Gender norms are critical because of both local and international concern, as well as local concern about international concern. As one woman put it, “a woman is the example for everything. A culture is judged by the level of its women.”

Public participation has come to provide an externally visible marker of morality and modernity by which women can be judged within the community, and by which the community can be judged internationally. The social importance of this is magnified because women's participation and its promotion are taking place in a discursive field where gendered notions of modernity are negotiated. Piety and modernity are thus linked on two levels: in the first, because the forms of piety that *require* women's public participation are locally understood as both modern and as a crucial aspect of community progress. And in the second, because those same forms emerge in response to, or dialogue with, transnational discourses about gender and modernity.

Notes

1. This is a much-condensed version of a paper presented at the University of Texas, Austin on 16 February 2006. Since then, the community described here has come under intense Israeli attack.
2. This is elaborated in Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton University Press, 2006).
3. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History* (Stanford University Press, 2002).
4. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

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Hizbullah women guiding girls in the public Ashura procession in Beirut, 2001