

Introduction

Religious Rituals' Reflection of Current Social Conditions in the Middle East

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Abstract: Peoples' practising of religious ritual is never isolated from the social and political setting in which it takes place. It is therefore inevitable that ritual practice somehow contends with the current social context. Examining Muslim ritual practices across the Middle East, the authors of the articles in this special issue discuss religious ritual as a tool for accomplishing something in the real world. They provide examples of which social concerns are addressed in ritual practice, who is involved and how the ritual practice is affected. The studies show that current ritual practices are embedded in multi-actor social spaces, and they also reflect on the ritual as a multi-actor space where the power to define ritual form, meaning and importance shifts between different categories of actors.

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As Guest Editor of this special issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East*, I am happy to introduce five articles discussing the dynamic relationship between ritual and social conditions across the region. People's performance of religious ritual is never isolated from the social and political setting in which it takes place. It is therefore inevitable that ritual and its practitioners somehow must cope with the current social context. In acknowledging the important role that ritual often plays in the spiritual and social life of individuals, groups, and communities, the five authors explore how Muslim rituals reflect current social conditions in the Middle East. Embedded in their approaches is an attention to ritual performers' ability to critique and actively and strategically reflect on both the social conditions in which they live and the existing ritual practice. The authors thus examine religious ritual as a form of technology



or method for accomplishing something in the real world (Driver 1998: 47). Which concerns are addressed in ritual performance? How are the identified issues negotiated in ritual performance? Who is involved? What is the social vision that ritual participants seek to establish, and how do ritual participants reflect on the meaning and usefulness of traditional or existing ritual practices? These questions relate to matters of authority and interpretation. Do people consolidate around hegemonies and the validity of long-followed ritual, or do they usher in new interpretations and spur demands for change? How are rituals made meaningful on individual, societal and political levels? What happens to the ritual form? Is it subject to solidification, reaffirmation reformulation, deletion or invention?

Perhaps the most influential current event bringing about changes on a global scale is COVID-19, the pandemic that began in January 2020. The pandemic has ruthlessly impacted people's social life in general and ritual life in particular. Demands for social distancing have prevented families and friends from meeting and religious communities from convening. Restricted mobility has caused educational institutions, workplaces as well as religious institutions to scale down and even close their activities. At the same time, such constraints have generated new jobs, forms of socialising, and alternative ritual practices. Research into COVID-19-related developments is yet at an early stage, and the first article in this issue contributes to our understanding of the politics of Islamic death rituals in Egypt during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although academic research has been constrained by the pandemic, Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal and Matthew Ryan Sparks have been able to interview people in Egypt on this matter for their article 'The Politics of Islamic Death Rituals in the COVID-19 Era: The Case of Egypt'. To contain the spread of the virus, the authors observe that the Egyptian Health Ministry imposed restrictions and regulations on religious festivals, group prayers, and funeral rituals. The government's regulation of funeral rites was supported by religious scholars at established institutions like Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifra', who issued *fatwas* legitimising modifications in washing the body, burial and the collective performance of prayers. One of the modifications required people to move funerary prayers from inside the mosque to outside. Little opposition was voiced against this, although in rural areas, where government control was slack, people often failed to comply. In addition, Al-Azhar issued a *fatwa* replacing the common funeral prayer (*salat al-janazah*) with the exceptional *salat al-gha'ib*. This regulation proved more difficult for people to accept as Salat al-Janazah is an obligatory prayer collectively performed in the presence of the body to seek forgiveness for the deceased. In failing to do so, relatives are believed to be held accountable. *Salat al-gha'ib*, the absence prayer, is instead performed at home when one cannot find the deceased body. By suggesting replacing *salat al-janazah* with *salat al-gha'ib*, Al-Azhar introduced a new ritual. Many interlocutors expressed regrets but abided by the regulation because it was perceived to be the rational thing to do. Feelings of regret were

typically connected to mourners' emotional states, feeling sorry not to be able to secure in a 'correct' manner the deceased's safe transition into the after-life and salvation. Amongst those refraining to comply were people in rural areas often operating by their traditional rules and norms, since informal networks and relationships determined the codes of behaviour regarding religious observances, prayers and funerals. Also, unofficial religious leaders and Salafist and Wahhabi supporters questioned the legitimacy of the Al-Azhar rulings and the government's and Al-Azhar's attempts to control prayer and religiosity.

The next two articles discuss changes promoted in the Iranian ritual culture by the new religious-scholar-led government following the Revolution in 1978–1979 and the establishment of an Islamic republic. The authorities have used religious rituals to foster the state's new interpretation of Islam and the identity of the republic, an impact which continues to be felt also today. In 'Mourning at New Year's Day (Nowruz): Cultural Practice against Ideology', Reinhold L. Loeffler and Erika Friedl discuss how people in a rural village in south-western Iran responded to official directives in 2006 to prioritise Islamic mourning rituals for Imam Huseyn on the day of *Arba'yn* over the joyous celebration of the Persian New Year, *Nowruz*. Islamic and Persian calendars and rituals have traditionally operated side by side in Iran, forming integral parts of people's identity as Iranian Muslims. The government's attempt to curb New Year celebrations was seen by many local people to challenge this identity, and they resented the pressure. People responded to the government's efforts to insert its hegemonic ideology by boycotting and subverting public mourning rituals and by constraining public and private New Year celebrations. Particularly in subverting government-promoted mourning rituals, rituals of commemoration and celebration were combined in ways that blurred their different 'ideological' orientations and even emotional sentiments. For example, discouraged from greeting each other in customary Nowruz visits to people's residents, people visited the graves of deceased relatives. Here, they exchanged Nowruz sweets while mourning dead relatives, the latter being a customary *Arba'yn* rite. As a result, Loeffler and Friedl contend, people created a stalemate for both the mourning for Huseyn and the New Year celebration. In so doing, they resisted the government's attempt to impose its hegemonic ideology without giving up their Iranian Muslim identity.

Karbala commemorative rituals are discussed also by Atefeh Seyed Mousavi in 'Reinventing a Traditional Ritual: Commemorating Karbala's Youngest Martyr in Iran'. In 2003, a new ritual, The Husayni Infancy Conference, was introduced that honours Ali Asghar (d. 680), the infant son of Imam Husayn. It is the only public Muharram assembly in Iran dedicated to women and their infants, and Mousavi's article is based on observations and interviews with urban, middle-class female participants in 2021. Mousavi demonstrates how the reinvention of traditional rituals commemorating Ali Asghar involved several changes. Rituals for women are traditionally held in private houses and

assembly halls. Instead, the Conference was held at important public venues, and thus obtained public visibility. Following increased visibility, authority shifted from women to men. Lay women's leadership of traditional rituals was replaced by professional male leadership. Reinvention also involved institutionalisation, as the Conference was planned by committees of national and international importance. Consequently, traditionally improvised ritual dramatisation was homogenised. Reinvention also involved ideologisation and politisation, implying reframing the theology of soteriology and redemption traditionally associated with the ritual. Institutionalisation and homogenisation were here useful tools. Connections were made to the politics of gender formation, with male preachers speaking about women's hijabs and chastity, marriage and procreation, and mediating an ideological eschatological focus on the end of time and the reappearance of the Twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi. However, from the perspective of female participants, the Conference served multiple social, psychological and spiritual functions. It contributed to the reconstruction of a new feminine identity, a 'modern Islamic woman'. One important aspect was mothers' central role in raising children. Some sought to instil an Islamic education in their children, find good role models like Husayn and raise their children inspired by the Doctrine of Mahdship, with the vision of preparing soldiers for the future Mahdi's uprising. However, traditional redemptive aspects like seeking salvation, intercession, and divine blessing regarding current issues were widespread. Women also participated so as to reinforce their faith and secure spiritual growth. In general, the invitation to join in the new global ritual made women feel important and empowered in a society in which they are often socially marginalised, and they also used ritual participation as a tool to maintain and build social networks.

The relationship between the state and people's ritual practices is addressed by Thomas Brandt Fibiger in 'Invisible and Visible Shi'a: Ashura, State and Society in Kuwait'. The Twelver Shi'a minority community in Kuwait has been described as being controlled by the state, and as being supportive of and supported by the Sunni al-Subah regime. Little is, however, written about the relationships between the state and the Shi'a communities from the perspective of Ashura ritual performance. Fibiger demonstrates how the Shi'as' public enactment of the ritual in this regard is multifaceted. Ritual performance demonstrates compliance with as well as contestations of state authorities' identity policy regarding religion and nationality. A key issue is ritual visibility and invisibility. Fibiger's ethnographic observations of Ashura rituals in 2013 reveals that Kuwaiti Shi'a citizens usually respected state authorities' expectations that Ashura processions and other Shi'a rituals should not be performed in the streets but remain invisible. Some groups challenged the boundaries and organised rituals in the streets, but when state representatives intervened to stop performances, sanctions were respected and rituals moved indoors in large ritual assembly halls and tents. Encounters like these reflect the diversity of opinions held within the Shi'a community, both amongst the laity and

the religious scholars, *mara'ji*. Shi'a discussions over ritual performance were thus multifaceted. Some groups chose to comply with the state and practise 'ritual invisibility', whereas other groups challenged such limitation put on their religious freedom and performed rituals in public, practising 'ritual visibility'. Analysing different viewpoints and areas of contestation, Fibiger argues that most Shi'a tried to steer clear of turning Ashura and Shi'a identity into a political issue. Their efforts, nevertheless, point to the presence of conflictual relations, and therefore political issues, within Shi'a groups as well as between Shi'a and non-Shi'a groups in Kuwait. It is therefore difficult to assess what is political and how it is demarcated in ritual practices.

The contestation of ritual practice in relation to social and political settings is discussed also by Kholoud al-Ajarma. Turning to Sunni-dominated Morocco, al-Ajarma examines the annual local pilgrimage known as the 'Pilgrimage of the Poor' (Hajj al-Miskin), a type of pilgrimage which amongst Muslims is known as *ziyara*, or 'visit'. Although performed at the shrines of two local Sufi saints, Sidi Shashkal situated on the Atlantic coast and Sidi Bu Khiyar in the northern Rif Mountains, the pilgrimage was by pilgrims perceived to function as a substitute for the Hajj to Mecca. The correspondence between the local, traditionally sanctioned *ziyara* pilgrimages and the universal, normative authorised Hajj pilgrimage was produced and maintained by the pilgrims in imitating at the saints' shrines rites performed during the Hajj. The local ritual offered possibilities for the poor to connect spiritually with Mecca and perform the Hajj closer to home. An important social context for the ritual's popularity was the economic situation faced by many Moroccans. At Sidi Bu Khiyar in the Rif Mountains, pilgrimage was also entangled with ethnic-identity-rights issues in which the Berber or Amazigh population felt politically and economically marginalised in society. Pilgrimage was an occasion for reconciling social and political conflicts related to these issues. However, as the convention was monitored by the Moroccan police, pilgrimage became connected with national security management issues. Al-Ajarma argues that the Pilgrimage of the Poor played a key role in the lives of the pilgrims at both the individual and community levels. Intertwined with the local social and political setting, pilgrimage was an opportunity for the disempowered to actively engage spiritually in the Meccan Hajj as well as negotiate their position as Muslims and as socially and economically marginalised Moroccans. The perception of there being a link between the local pilgrimage and social and economic status is strengthened by al-Ajarma's multi-located ethnographic research. Negative sentiments towards the local pilgrimage circulated amongst the urban, educated middle-class who condemned it for being polytheistic, ignorant and foolish, thus reflecting the social order and class distinctions in Morocco. In sum, the debate about the Pilgrimage of the Poor reveals how different groups of Muslims negotiate their positions with respect to different interpretations of the global discursive tradition of Islam, applying these interpretations within their local context.

Based on the insights brought to light by the authors in this special issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East*, we can observe that the practice of religious rituals reflects current social conditions related to health and security, socio-economic conditions, ideologisation and national identity politics. Moreover, the articles show that current ritual practices are embedded in a multi-actor social space. On the one hand, this space is hierarchical, authoritatively regulated by governmental policy, interventions and regulations. At the same time, it is an interactive space supported or contested by official and non-official religious authorities' evaluations and opinions, and the personal interests and needs of ritual practitioners. Governments use religious rituals as tools to control issues related to health and security and to cultural, religious and national identity politics. Frameworks created by government policies thus impact ritual practices. In dealing with the pandemic, the Egyptian government in liaison with official religious institutions has created and authorised new rituals and abandoned traditional ones. In Iran, ideologisation of religion is managed through the official support of reinvented rituals and the curtailing of traditional religious and cultural rituals. In Kuwait, the government's national identity politics regulates the visibility of rituals. In Morocco, official socio-economic policies limit people's possibilities for ritual practices while police monitoring undermines ritual practices. The religious authorities' support or contestation of government sanctions create a polyvocal space, making it possible for ritual practitioners to act on their own evaluation of what is 'correct' ritual practice and on their personal needs. Religious practitioners use rituals as tools to communicate with transcendent forces, like in funeral rituals in Egypt, the Pilgrimage of the Poor in Morocco and commemorative rituals in Iran and Kuwait. The communication often relates to securing the well-being of humans in the afterlife and to resolving problems in this life. Religious and cultural rituals also have individual and collective social implications, offering opportunities for personal freedom, empowerment and community-building. To achieve these goals, ritual performers choose various strategies. Some accept the introduction of new or reinvented rituals, while others object and continue to practise old rituals. Some try to evade restrictions by conflating prohibited and approved rituals, like Nowruz and Arba'yn, thus blending ritual borders. Others put to the test regulations that approve of rituals when they are invisible to the public by making them visible. Some create new options for ritual practices by imitating other rituals, as in the Pilgrimage of the Poor, thus expanding ritual borders (Hajj in Morocco). Our discussion of religious rituals' reflection of current social conditions in the Middle East thus reflects on the ritual as a multi-actor social space where the power to define rituals, in form, meaning and importance, may shift or compete between the different categories of actors.

In complying with the focus on ritual practice in this special issue of *Anthropology of the Middle East*, I am pleased to also present reviews of two books published in 2021. Rose Wellman introduces *Muslim Women's*

Pilgrimage to Mecca and Beyond: Reconfiguring Gender, Religion, and Mobility, edited by Marjo Buitelaar, Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Viola Thimm, whereas Max Klimburg presents *Religion and Daily Life in the Mountains of Iran: Theology, Saints, People*, authored by Erika Friedl.

This Special Issues closes with a reminder of the value of long-term anthropological research and how we may continue to extrapolate meaning from data once collected in light of protracted and evolving interactions with people. The reminder is set in motion by Reinhold L. Loeffler. In a section called ‘The “Deep Believer” Thirty Years on, 1926-2008’ he revisits conversations he held with a male inhabitant in Sisakht, a village in the province of Kohgiluyeh/Boir Ahmad in Iran, between 1976 and 2006. Covering such a long time span Loeffler captures the man’s changing perception and reflections on his life, life philosophy and religious beliefs in response to personal, societal, and political circumstances.

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