



## Editorial

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Published online: 12 September 2019  
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## Introduction

This special issue emerges from a conference focusing on Shia minorities in the contemporary world hosted by the Centre for Islamic Studies at the University of Chester, UK, in May 2016. It is one of three publications produced out of the conference dealing with Shia minorities in various Muslim minority contexts (see also Shanneik et al. 2017; Scharbrodt and Shanneik forthcoming). The aim of that conference was to explore Shia Muslims as a ‘minority within a minority’ outside the so-called Muslim world; that is, to explore the ways in which global migratory flows, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have produced highly diverse Shia diasporic communities across the planet. Given the relative neglect of diasporic Shia communities in scholarly and political discourse, especially in the West, we believed that publishing a collection of original research articles on the topic would be an important project to undertake. Given the growing body of work produced on Shia Muslims in the UK, this special issue contains a number of articles presenting highly original research on this understudied dimension of the British Muslim presence.

However, none of us could have foreseen the seismic political events of the months following the conference, namely, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, and the way in which Muslims were implicated in both. Readers will recall that both the Brexit and Trump campaigns made ample use of populist, racialised and at times explicitly Islamophobic rhetoric. They relied heavily on representations of the contemporary West as under siege by the Muslim other who needed to be under constant suspicion and surveillance, and, if possible, extricated from the West

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altogether. Donald Trump's 'Muslim ban' and Nigel Farage's abuse of images of the Syrian refugee crisis to win Brexit votes are cases in point. These events have helped to further entrench Islamophobic sentiments, discourses and policies that have been on the rise in Western public life in recent years. A devastating hallmark of this public Islamophobia is the reification and fetishization of 'the Muslim other' that works to conceal or outright reject the dizzying diversity of religious and secular practices that can be attributed to people of Muslim backgrounds. It goes without saying that in this context Shia communities have had little hope of any sort of positive representation in public debates, let alone one that comes close to the empirical realities of their lives. Therefore, this special issue has taken on added importance and timeliness and hopes to make a meaningful contribution in that regard.

At the same time, long-standing tensions between Shia and Sunni Muslims in the Middle East have been worsening. The Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, as well as the more recent war in Yemen – these events not only serve as a stark reminder of the sectarian dimension of current geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East, they also herald the arrival new Muslim migrants to Europe and North America, among them many Shiis as well. Yet, partly because of these currents, Shia communities in the West are starting to become more active in having their voices heard and asserting their identities. For example, the establishment of Shia student societies on university campuses in the UK is proving important for a generation of young Shia, largely born and raised in Western countries, to negotiate their often hybrid identities and engage with wider socio-political issues as Western citizens (see Ali in this special issue). In this way, they are also helping to redefine the very contours of notions of citizenship in the contemporary West. Thus, their voices and actions are of immense significance and need to be studied in their own right; this is another contribution that this collection of articles aims to make.

## State of the art: Research on Shia Muslims in the UK

After a period of neglect there is a growing body of research on contemporary Shia communities in Muslim minority contexts in Europe and North America using social scientific and ethnographic research methods. Initial research was produced on Twelver Shia communities in North America, providing either a general survey on the communal presence in the US or Canada (Sachedina 1994; Schuble 1996; Takim 2008, 2009, 2010, 2018) or focussing in particular on Arab Twelver Shia communities located in Dearborn, Michigan (Walbridge 1996; Capucci 2015a, b, 2016). There has been a much longer tradition of research on Nizari Ismailis in various diasporic contexts with early research on North America (Nanji 1983 and Ross-Sheriff and Nanji 1991) and more recent research on gender and generational dynamics among Nizari Ismailis in Canada (Mukadam and Mawani 2007; Damji and Lee 1995; Bhimani 2017) and Australia (Mitha and Adatia 2016; Mitha et al. 2017). In the last two years, more research has been published on Twelver Shia Muslims in Europe (Shanneik et al. 2017)<sup>1</sup> with earlier work produced on Germany (Böttcher 2007), Ireland (Scharbrodt

<sup>1</sup> The special edition includes contributions on Twelver Shii Muslims in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Greece and Belgium.

2011; Shanneik 2013, 2015; Flynn 2013), Sweden (Larsson and Thurffjell 2013) and Denmark (Holm-Pedersen 2014).

However, the British context has not received that much attention in academic scholarship with a few exceptions. While no work so far has been produced on Ismaili Shia Muslims in the UK, research on Twelver Shiism has followed three strands: (a) the Iranian diaspora the UK, in London in particular, and its religious dimensions, (b) transnational Twelver Shia networks and their British manifestations, and (c) more recent ethnographic research on Twelver Shia rituals and practices by South Asian and Arab Shiis in the UK.

The Iranian diaspora in the UK (Sreberny 2000; McAuliffe 2007) has been one entry point for research touching upon or addressing Shia-related issues. Very useful demographic work on the Iranian diaspora has been produced by Gholami and Sreberny (2016). Their report includes qualitative and statistical data on Iranians in the UK, identifying potential policy needs and discussing the nature of communal activism, based on an interviewed sample of 265 research participants. While Twelver Shia Islam or Twelver Shia organisational structures are not the particular focus of the report, it provides some interesting information on the level of religiosity and religious practice among the sample of Iranians interviewed for the report. Around half of the respondents described themselves as having no religious belief, and only small minority in single digits identified itself as very practising or devout Muslims (Gholami and Sreberny 2016: 11–12; see also Gholami and Sreberny in this volume).

Spellman (2004a, b) offers the first extensive study of religious practices within the Iranian diaspora in the UK. Her study provides an account of the settlement and immigration patterns of Iranians to the UK, in particular after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and an overview of the organisational field of Iranians living in London. Her work investigates a variety of Iranian groups such as Twelver Shiis, Sufis and Christian converts from Twelver Shiism and focuses on the transformation of religious identities and practices through the process of migration. As such, Spellman investigates the role of religion in diasporic identity-building among Iranians living in London and lived religious practices outside more visible and organised forms of Islamic life that are usually the focus of research on British Muslims. For instance, one chapter discusses how middle-class Iranian women in London, who would be considered ‘secular’ or ‘cultural’ Muslims, perform a Shia religious ritual, *sofreh*. Having pre-Islamic roots, *sofreh* is a ceremonial dinner tableau created for auspicious occasions such as weddings. Investigating Iranian Sufis and converts to Christianity, Spellman investigates how these groups embrace forms of religiosity that are conceived to be in contrast to official Twelver Shiism as practiced in Iran.

The role of Islam in the formation of diasporic identities among British Iranians is also explored by Gholami (2014, 2015). Based on extensive ethnographic research among Iranians living in London, Gholami investigates attitudes towards Islam, in particular how diasporic Iranians seek to dissociate themselves from their Muslim backgrounds and to adopt a secular outlook. Gholami coins the notion of ‘non-Islamiosity’ to characterise the complex engagement with and rejection of Iran’s Islamic heritage by members of the British Iranian diaspora.

Research on the transnational dimension of Twelver Shia community networks and organisations constitutes the second strand of work on Twelver Shiis in the UK. Research has emphasised the transnational nature of Twelver Shiism through its clerical networks and political organisations that often assumed a transnational reach as a result

of state oppression and exile (Louër 2008, Mervin 2010, Ridgeon 2012, van den Bos 2012a, b; see also Takim 2000 and Scharbrodt and Shanneik *forthcoming*). This transnational dimension is also addressed in Spellman's and Gholami's work with the former undertaking a co-authored comparative study of transnational Iranian religious institutions in both the UK and Germany (Hesse-Lehmann and Spellman 2004). Focussing on Hamburg and London, the article provides an overview of the Iranian institutional field in both cities such as schools either run by the Iranian embassy or by private individuals to teach Persian language or other elements of Iranian culture. The role of the Islamic Centre in Hamburg, an institution affiliated to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, in shaping diasporic identities is compared to its sister organisation in London, the Islamic Centre of England. The involvement of both centres in interfaith and intra-faith, Shia-Sunni, dialogue and other public engagement activities is discussed with a particular focus on the centre in Hamburg. In terms of Iranian religious actors in London, Hesse-Lehmann and Spellman (2004) discuss in more detail the activities of the Maktab Tarighat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi School of Islamic Sufism, a transnational neo-Sufi order with the strongest following within the Iranian diaspora in Western Europe and North America.

Moving away from Iranian networks and organisations, Corboz (2015) investigates the transnational networks of two prominent clerical families that have been based in Najaf and produced the two most prominent clerics of Iraqi Shiism in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Muhsin Al-Hakim (1889-1970) and Grand Ayatullah Sayyid Abu Al-Qasim Al-Khu'i (1899-1992). Corboz's book adopts a generational approach, covering the various religious, political and philanthropic activities of these clerical families over three generations: from Al-Hakim and Al-Khu'i to their sons and grandsons. The sons of al-Khu'i formed and managed the Al-Khoie Foundation in London, making it the headquarters of their father's clerical network at a time when his activities were severely curtailed by the Iraqi regime. The London-based Al-Khoie Foundation also played an important role in globalising the philanthropic activities of Khu'i's network across the globe and, by adopting a human rights discourse, in highlighting the oppression and persecution of Shiis in Iraq during the Baath regime (Corboz 2012).

Flynn's study (2013) approaches Iraqi Shia communities in London and Dublin from a Catholic perspective and seeks to identify theological convergences between Twelver Shiism and Catholicism. Most of his book provides an overview of the recent history of Twelver Shiism in both Iran and Iraq based on available research. The more original core of the book provides an analysis of important themes that emerged in sermons given at Shia community centres in Dublin and London and their particular political dimensions. With fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2010, sermons responded to developments in Iraq and the wider Middle East and read these developments through the prism of Shia history and doctrines. The role of London as centre of Iraqi Shia diasporic politics is explored by Rahe (1996, 2002). Based on research conducted in the early 1990s, Rahe provides an overview of the different religio-political actors based in London and their political programmes and ideological orientations.

Shia educational institutions in Britain are discussed by van den Bos (2015; see also Gilliat-Ray 2006: 63-64), considering in particular the Al-Mahdi Institute in Birmingham and the Islamic College in London. Both institutions are embedded in the local context of a diverse British society but maintain various transnational links to either state actors in the form of the Islamic Republic of Iran or transnational clerical

networks. Van den Bos' article provides a brief overview of the development of Shia seminaries (*hawza*) in the UK pointing at the leading role Khoja Twelver Shiis have played therein. The Al-Mahdi Institute in Birmingham was established to provide a seminary institution geared towards the needs of Shia Muslims in the West. In contrast, the article argues that the Islamic College in London is closer aligned to the Islamic Republic and its official ideology of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurisconsult). While the Islamic College has a diverse student profile, recruiting both Shia and Sunni students, it is part of the global networks of Shia seminaries and colleges that are run by the Al-Mustafa International University, an initiative headquartered in Qom and launched by the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei (Sakurai 2015).

The third strand of research consists of more recent contributions based on ethnographic research on Twelver Shia ritual practices in the UK, their transformation and reinterpretation and contestations around them. A particular focus of this new body of research engages with the most important period of the Shia religious calendar, 'Ashura', the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, when Shiis commemorate the death of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet and third Shia Imam, and his family and supporters in Karbala, southern Iraq, in 680CE. Spellman-Poots (2012) investigates how 'Ashura' and its rituals are reinterpreted by young British Shiis in their public performance in British society. Her articles focusses on the annual 'Ashura' procession in central London and a concomitant blood donation campaign to illustrate how young British Shiis seek alternative modes of Shia ritual practice to make 'Ashura' meaningful to themselves and to wider British society. Spellman-Poots provides insights how the procession in central London is organised and how – as her discussion of the blood donation campaign illustrates as well – these rituals are used to present an alternative narrative of Shia Islam that focusses on the moral message of 'Ashura' rather than its ritualised commemoration in controversial practices such as self-flagellation.

Similarly, Degli Esposti (2018) discusses the 'Ashura' rituals as sites where generational, national and sectarian cleavages within the Iraqi Shia diaspora in London become obvious. The performance of Shia rituals is used to articulate different understandings of Shia identity across generations or to demarcate Iraqi Shiism from Iranian Shiism. Finally, the public performance of these rituals in the diaspora – such as the annual mourning processions through central London during 'Ashura' – present Twelver Shiis as victims of the same radical and militant form of Sunni Islam that are responsible for the rise of global terrorism.

In line with the general demographic profile of Muslims, Twelver Shiis from South Asia constitute the majority of Shiis in the UK. Yet, both in the field of organised Shiism and in academic research they are underrepresented. Dogra's article (2017) enters into a pioneering investigation of how Shia rituals are performed by South Asian Shiis in England, in particular in the period of 'Ashura', to articulate current contestations around what 'authentic' Twelver Shia Islam is. The article begins with a useful historical contextualisation by discussing the development of Twelver Shiism in South Asia and then presents the results of extensive ethnographic research within South Asian Shia community centres (*husayniyya, imambargah*) in London. These community centres and the rituals performed therein become physical and symbolic sites of contestations around what it means 'being Shia in London' (Dogra 2017: 161). The article illustrates the influence and reception of Iraqi religious authorities and the religio-political establishment in the Islamic Republic of Iran, investigating the influence of Iranian-trained reformist clerics and their redefinition of ritual practices.

Rejecting practices such as self-flagellation with blades (*zanjir zani*), cutting one's forehead with a knife (*qama zani*) or cursing the companions of the Prophet (*tabarra*), these reformist '*ulama*' intend to avoid antagonising Sunni Muslims and emphasise a more generic Islamic identity over a specific Shia sectarian identity coloured by ritual practices that are unique to South Asian Twelver Shiism.

Shanneik (2017) investigates ritual practices around marriage as performed by Iraqi Shia women in London and the meanings assigned to them to preserve and articulate different conceptions of Shia identity. Her article focusses on two important rituals: *mashaya*, the official proposal visit of the groom and his family to the bride's family and the various elements involved therein and the *sofrat al-'aqd*, a dinner tableau, prepared as one of the wedding rituals (see also Spellman 2004a: 59–102). In particular, the *sofrat al-'aqd* uses material objects to preserve a collective Iraqi Shia memory and identity while at the same time expressing contestations around them; certain Iraqi Shia families include Iranian cultural elements to articulate a hybrid Iraqi-Iranian Shia identity, as many Iraqi Shiis had spent many years in Iranian exile before moving to London. Other Iraqi families reject Iranian cultural influences – also to articulate their opposition to the Islamic Republic – in order to assert an Iraqi or more generic Arab Shia identity. Shanneik also sheds light on the generational dynamics as young Iraqi Shiis in London redefine and challenge traditional practices around marriage from their parents' generation, illustrating how such rituals are used as 'an identity marker' (Shanneik 2017:2).

Conversion to Twelver Shia Islam from either non-Muslim or Sunni Muslim backgrounds is an entirely understudied phenomenon (Inloes and Takim 2014; Aghdassi and Marandi 2018). Shanneik (2018) places women converts to Shiism within power relations prevalent among Shia community centres in London that represent different clerical factions and political orientations. As converts, these women are outsiders to these different allegiances. Converts are also perceived as outsiders by born Shiis and marginalised within these intra-communal power relations and only assume importance in the public representation of the community because of their cultural background, language skills and gender. Shanneik also discusses the motivations of these women for their conversion to Twelver Shiism and identifies two narratives. Some converts were attracted to the official ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *wilayat al-faqih*, which ensures the central place of religion in state and society in contrast to the secularising forces of Western societies. This group of converts also sympathises with the pan-Islamic elements of Ayatollah Khomeini's discourse which aims at transcending cultural, ethnic and national differences among Muslim by emphasising their allegiance to one single global Muslim community (*umma*). Other converts identified with the historical and current persecution of Shiis due to their minority position in Islam, using the Karbala narrative around the martyrdom of Imam Husayn to present Shiism as a movement resisting oppression of any kind.

## Overview of the Special Issue

The articles contained in this special issue build on existing research and further examine and expand themes and debates explored therein. Reza Gholami and Annabelle Sreberny's article explore the state-society interactions through discussing everyday life aspirations for upward mobility, assimilation and sense of marginalisation

among the Iranian diaspora in the UK vis-à-vis British government's integration policies. The authors problematise notions of integration by dwelling on the ethnographic accounts of mobility driven middle-class secular Iranians who equate complete integration within British society with being 'good, successful and proper' citizens; as a consequence, such attitudes weaken the solidarity with other British minorities in general, and with practicing Shia Iranians in particular. Furthering the idea of 'non-Islamiosity', both argue that middle-class Iranians in the UK, like their first-generation Iranian-American counterparts, construct their secular cultural life as a conscious political act that attempts to preserve 'pure' Iranian identity in opposition to the growing Shia Islamisation within the Iranian diaspora globally.

Emanuelle Degli Esposti's work presents the details of the evolution and dynamics of 'sectarian' spatial segregation among north London-based Iraqi Shiis. Deliberating on how the political economy of Shia religiosity is influential in shaping up the spatially fragmented realities in everyday lives of Iraqi Shiis, Esposti's article expands Lefebvre's idea of social space and how it produces and reproduces the social consumption of sectarian identity within a wider global capitalist context. Esposti maintains that Iraqi Shia 'ghettoes' in North London are to be viewed and analysed in relation to its trans-local interactional patterns with other Muslim majority neighbourhoods and within broader global political Sunni-Shia dynamics.

Oliver Scharbrodt presents a refreshing perspective of approaching Shia Muslims in London academically by looking beyond the 'minority within minority' framework and through investigating the complex trans-local and transnational Shia processes. Scharbrodt's article provides a detailed mapping of various Shia scholarly individuals, groups, institutions and organisations in north London and their distinct impacts on local and global Shia religio-political developments. The article develops analytical tools by benefiting from recent debates in religious studies on spatial methodologies and scales while emphasising that multilocality of Shiis in London is to be viewed in terms of the diversity of ethnic, linguistic and religious networks and formations. Various Shia establishments in Brent, also known as the 'Shia mile of London', are analysed by discussing the ethnographic and cross-sectional nuances of each network and how each becomes an autonomous actors with their own specificities within the broader 'social field' of transnational Twelver Shiism.

Sufyan Abid Dogra's article presents the ethnographic accounts over the idea of 'being or becoming' a South Asian Shia Muslim beyond the month of Muharram by living a piety-led life throughout the year in London, Birmingham and Bradford. Dogra engages with recent anthropological debates on piety among Muslim communities and problematises the scope and analysis of studying piety among Muslims by presenting the alternative perceptions of piety among South Asian Shia Muslims in the UK. The article argues that non-observable notions of piety induce similar a sense of commitment among South Asian Shiis, who privilege emotional participation in ritual commemorations during Muharram and being a Shia Muslim for the rest of the year over the reformist Shia discourses which advocate becoming a Shia Muslims by praying and reciting Qur'an throughout the year.

Fayaz S. Alibhai's article presents the evolution of 'Ashura' ritual commemorations among multi-ethnic and diverse Shia community in Edinburgh, Scotland. The article provides an ethnography of 'Ashura' processions in Edinburgh by describing its mobility, rhythm and pace, multi-ethnic composition of participants, varying gender

roles, and the developments and changes within the ‘Ashura’ processions over the years. The article discusses the fine details of messages on ‘Ashura’ by Shia speakers, public reactions to it, and the material and symbolic meanings of various artefacts and signage displayed by the Shia processionists.

Zahra Ali’s article presents multi-cited ethnographic research conducted in both the UK and Iraq and explores the issues of cultural and religious identities among London-based young British Iraqi Shiis and their perceptions and senses of belonging to Iraq. The article theoretically builds on Stuart Hall’s notions of ‘articulation’ and ‘new ethnicities’ and analyses how different realities and experiences of space and class shape the process of self-identification among young British Iraqi Shiis in London in relation to socio-political, religious and ethnic belongings. The author provides analytical reflections of herself and that of research participants through exploring how the interlocutors articulate the fluidity of the sense of religiosity, belonging, and identity vis-à-vis Sunni Muslims in Britain as well as Shiis in Iraq.

Building on the growing body of Twelver Shiis in Europe and North America, this special edition collects the latest research on Twelver Shii Muslims in the UK. It hence provides an important contribution to research to map the internal diversity of Muslim presence in the UK, to counter objectifying discourses around British Islam and to illustrate the transnational impact of global events on British Muslim communities and their discourses and practices. Furthermore, it contributes to current research on Twelver Shiis located in Muslim minority contexts outside of the so-called Muslim world.

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