

SOUND AND VOICE IN CONTEMPORARY TWELVER SHI'Ī ISLAM

ONLINE WORKSHOP

27th – 28th May 2021

TO REGISTER AND ATTEND PLEASE EMAIL: S.J.WILLIAMSONFA@BHAM.AC.UK



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



Photo by Syed Kumail Hasan; Lahore, Pakistan



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Sound and Voice in Contemporary Twelver Shi'i Islam

International Workshop | [AlterUmma](#) at University of Birmingham

Thursday 27th May 2021- Friday 28th May 2021

There has been a growing interest in the intersection of sound and Islam within Islamic studies, anthropology and ethnomusicology. This interest has translated into a wealth of scholarship examining a wide range of modes of sonic expression- from the role of sound in Muslim piety and devotion (Hirschkind 2006; Eisenlohr 2018) to diverse musical practices in Muslim societies (van Nieuwkerk, LeVine, & Stokes 2016; Harris & Stokes 2017) and the politics of listening and Islamic sounds in the public sphere (Jouili & Moors 2014; Larkin 2014; Weiner 2014; Khan 2011; Arab 2017; Eisenberg 2013). Despite this growing body of work covering a large geographical area and different Muslim communities, little attention so far has been paid to sound in Shi'i Islam. Within Shi'i communities, the central and shared sounds of the recitation of the Quran and the adhan exist amongst additional forms of vocalised sonic expressions. A vast range of supplications, laments and chants of praise and celebratory poetry are central to Shi'i devotion to *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Family of the Prophet. Within Twelver Shi'ism there is a surprising consistency in content and form of these genres worldwide. Yet, a huge diversity in style correlates with the wide geographic distributions of these communities.

Bringing together ethnographically-grounded contributions from South and West Asia, this workshop aims to consolidate current research on sound and voice in contemporary Twelver Shi'i Islam. In thinking about the politics and aesthetics of sound in these diverse settings we ask the following questions: how does Shi'ism sound? What parallels and divergences exist between the way sound is mobilised and engaged within Shi'ism and in other Islamic groups? How does sound mediate across social, political and conceptual boundaries- between communal groups in the public sphere, the secular and sacred, 'this-world' and the 'other-worldly'? What are the distinct aesthetic qualities of Shi'i devotion and how do they relate to poetics, theology, politics and society? Approaching the study of Shi'ism from a sonic perspective presents new ways of thinking about key issues such as transnationalism, cultural production and socio-political activism whilst further contributing to wider efforts to understand religion materially and sensorially.

Thursday 27th May 2021 14:00-16:30 (GMT+1) https://bham-ac-uk.zoom.us/j/85148764135?pwd=NCTmM0FoSWgrcXdRL0QvRjNGTkJUz09	
14:00-14:15	Welcome
14:45-15:15	Nabeel Jafri <i>'My respected listeners': Aurality and audiences in Urdu Shi'i khiṭābat</i>
15:15-15:45	Epsita Halder <i>Voice in Shia Sonic devotionism: Acoustemological issues in the female preaching sessions (Kolkata, India)</i>
15:45-16:15	Timothy Cooper <i>Recitation on the Threshold of Song: Irreverence, Celebration, and Disclosure in Pakistani Shi'a Qasida.</i>
16:15-16:30	Discussion
	Continue the conversation on <i>Wonder</i>: https://www.wonder.me/r?id=9008006f-fa18-4415-9607-f632c570dcaf

Time Zone Guide:

09:00-11:30 Toronto

14:00-16:30 Birmingham

15:00-17:30- Berlin

16:00-18:30 Beirut

18:00-20:30 Karachi

18:30-21:00 Kolkata

‘My respected listeners’: Aurality and audiences in Urdu Shi‘i *khiṭābat*

Nabeel Jafri, University of Toronto

On any given day, somewhere in Karachi, an Urdu-speaking Shi‘a *khaṭīb* (orator) takes to the pulpit to deliver his *khiṭābat* (oratory). Embedded within the broader socio-religious ritual complex of the *majlis*, Shi‘i gatherings to commemorate their dead, *khiṭābat* is a central performance in Shi‘i life. In this paper, I make two interrelated arguments. First, I turn to aurality, or cultures of hearing, in order to draw out the mutual constitution of the *khaṭīb* and his audience. Oratory, I suggest, is not a unidirectional process initiated by the *khaṭīb* but contingent, in roughly equal parts, upon continuous and relevant participation from the audience. Second, I posit that the voices and sounds of any *khiṭābat* event resonate far beyond their original utterance— attention to how voice and sound travel elucidates the multiplicity of audiences involved in the performance. Who are these not-present audiences and how do they participate in *khiṭābat* events? What are some linguistic, geographic, and historical markers of identity, imagined or otherwise, that comprise these audiences? My data is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Karachi. This paper emerges from, and contributes to, scholarship on material cultures in Islamic and Muslim societies.

Nabeel Jafri is a PhD student at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. He works primarily on South Asian Islam, with a particular focus on Urdu Shi‘i orators in contemporary Karachi. His scholarly research interests include theory and method in religious studies, language use (particularly speech-acts and ritual performances), and secularism studies.

Voice in Shia Sonic devotionism: Acoustemological issues in the female preaching sessions (Kolkata, India)

Epsita Halder, Jadavpur University

A study of the sonic dimension of Shia piety with a special focus on the sermon preaching sessions can be extremely productive to understand the criticality of sound and sounding as an acoustemological phenomenon. At the same time, the publicity and interiority of the Shia embodied sound during the *muharram* stand as interpretive to the inter-communal and inter-sectarian contest in the post-colonial urbanity in India. The complete interiority of women's sounding practices with a bar on the use of cell phone cameras or any other recording tool during the mourning rituals makes more challenging the critical understanding of private sounding practices as a site of acoustemological citizenship.

By drawing upon references from the sermon preaching sessions by three *zakiras* (female preachers) in Kolkata (eastern India), I would like to understand the capacity of voice to create a sensational field for the collective sonic identification of the Shia women receivers and understand their individual and collective sounding practices within the bigger framework of acoustemological citizenship of the Shia who are a double-minority community in India.

Here the study of the sonic materiality of embodied voice of the *zakiras* opens up a discussion of sound as received by the felt-body (Eisenlohr, 2014; 2018). The persuasive and manipulative materiality of the female voice shows us how the individual voice of the preacher, through its subjective intentionality creates collective devotional ecstasy. At the same time, I would propose a reading of the voice beyond its metaphoric status and then align it with the social situations of the Shias within a multiply oriented cityspace. While the aesthetic-poetic structure of the elegies provides affective cues of mourning, my study would look into what can be called a phonosonic nexus (Harkness, 2014). Here the connection between the stimulated felt-body and the 'sonic framework of communication' can be connected with social positionality and collective identity. The voice of the *zakira*, then, as a medium with its pitch, tonality and timber, produces bodily sensations and pious dispositions and shows that the gendered sounding practices in the interiority of the imambaras can only be meaningful in the context of a larger social identity formation of the Shias.

Epsita Halder is Associate Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University. She was the Charles Wallace Visiting Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She received fellowships like the Charles Wallace Short Term Fellowship, Sarai-CSDS Social media Fellowship and the Art Research and Documentation Fellowship of India Foundation for the Art, India. Her research interests include Muslim visual and sonic piety, vernacular Shi'ism, everyday religion and urbanity, new media and Shi'ism. A monograph based on her research on the polemic of identity formation, religiosity and literary modernity of the Bengal Muslims in the wake of Bengali nationalism is forthcoming from Routledge.

Recitation on the Threshold of Song: Irreverence, Celebration, and Disclosure in Pakistani Shi'a Qasida.

Timothy Cooper, University of Cambridge

The Pakistani Shi'a style of group recitation known as *qasida* is an experimental form of religious address forged through its mediatization, amplification, and circulation, and its mediation by traders, producers, and collectors. Its purpose is to disclose two theological pillars; love for the *ahl-e-bayt* and rejection of those who harmed them. Owing to the difficulties in characterizing the distinct contours of the form, this paper argues that *qasida* recitations share a common feature; they are all recitations on the threshold of a change manifested through an emergent intensity that threatens to submerge its reciters.

Timothy Cooper is an anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker studying religion, media, and the moving image in contemporary Pakistan. Currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and a research associate at the Max Planck Cambridge Centre for Ethics, Economy, and Social Change, his work has appeared or will soon appear in journals such as *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Material Religion*, and *the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. He has also disseminated his work in a number of public impact projects, including the organisation of a major international retrospective on Pakistani film at the British Film Institute.

Friday 27th May 2021 14:00-17:00 (GMT+1) https://bham-ac-uk.zoom.us/j/89830678605?pwd=TnplUWcyOTd1bTlrRFJidWsxec1UT09	
14:00-14:30	Stefan Williamson Fa <i>Sonic Intimacy: Cultivating Relations with the Ahl al-Bayt through Sound</i>
14:30-15:00	Hamidreza Salehyar <i>The Ethics of Unpredictability: Divine Agency, Economic Reason, and Mourning Rituals in Iran</i>
15:00-15:30	Joseph Alagha <i>The Concept of Maslaha and Music in Shi'i Performing Arts</i>
15:30-16:00	Fouad Gehad Marei <i>"I, Too, Must Go [To Syria]" : Shi'i ritual mourning and the traveling sounds (and lyrics) of holy war</i>
16:00-16:30	Askari Naqvi <i>Soz Khwani Demonstration and Q&A</i>
16:30-17:00	Discussion
	Continue the conversation on <i>Wonder</i> : https://www.wonder.me/r?id=9008006f-fa18-4415-9607-f632c570dcaf

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Sonic Intimacy: Cultivating Relations with the Ahlul Bayt through Sound.

Stefan Williamson Fa, University of Birmingham

Devotion to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Family of the Prophet Muhammad, is central to Shi'i Islam as well as other strands of Muslim devotion. Amongst Azeri-Turkish speaking Twelver Shi'i Muslims gatherings of celebration and mourning are held throughout the year to commemorate the days marking the deaths and birthdays of these holy figures. Recitation of various genres of lament or praise mark the climax of such occasions. This paper focuses on these forms of recitation to demonstrate how sound offers ways for Muslims to come to know, love and live life alongside the Family of the Prophet. Through the use of audio examples from Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan, I argue that the sonic qualities of recitation aim towards the cultivation of viscerally felt relations of intimacy with these holy figures. Engaging with the ways Muslims cultivate relations with these "more-than-human" beings through sound, challenges both ocularcentric and materialist secular assumptions which have led to the neglect of the 'unseen' in anthropology and religious studies.

Stefan Williamson Fa is an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist whose academic interests focus broadly on the anthropology of Islam, sound, senses and religion. He has conducted extensive research in Turkey, the Caucasus and Iran as well as at home in Gibraltar and Andalusia. He received a PhD in Social Anthropology from University College London in 2019 and is currently working on a manuscript and ethnographic film based on this work tentatively titled "Resounding Love for the Household of the Prophet".

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The Ethics of Unpredictability: Divine Agency, Economic Reason, and Mourning Rituals in Iran

Hamidreza Salehyar, University of Toronto

The high rate of remuneration demanded by famous performers of Shia *maddahi* rituals has recently become a topic of considerable debate in Iran's religious community. As these musical-religious rituals are inspired by the tragic martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein in 680 AD, many practitioners disparage monetary calculations in such mourning rituals on religious and moral grounds. These critics advocate for conventional practices in which performers receive monetary gifts from ritual sponsors, and both parties conceal the gift value from the public to divert attention from the ritual's financial aspects. What are the implications of such debates for ritual practitioners' conceptions of the sacred and social-religious relations that embody such conceptions? Drawing on interviews with *maddahi* practitioners in Tehran, I elucidate how the debates on *maddahi* performers' modes of compensation reflect existing interplay and tension between two understandings of economic relations: the one based on moral considerations of reciprocity that exceeds capitalist imaginaries by bringing the afterlife into economic logic, and the other derived from an ethos of neoliberal calculative reason that subsumes every domain of life within the logic of market. Investigating the implications of these heterogeneous conceptions of economic reason for ritual practitioners' aesthetic and religious sensibilities, I demonstrate how new rationalized economic practices challenge the authority of traditional social-religious values and hierarchies. These practices acknowledge and promote ordinary believers' aesthetic and religious choices, yet they reproduce new hierarchies of social and political power that marginalize communal religious practices not contributing to market logic.

Hamidreza Salehyar is a doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto. His doctoral research focuses on mourning rituals in Tehran, Iran, investigating the ways multiple definitions of agency are negotiated and performed in these sonic practices. Hamidreza's doctoral research has been supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Society for Asian Music, and the University of Toronto. Hamidreza has presented his research at major ethnomusicology conferences in the United States, the UK, and Canada, and has received several prizes. He is a recipient of the Society for Ethnomusicology's Religion, Music, and Sound Section Student Paper Prize (2018), the Canadian Society for Traditional Music Student Paper Prize (2019), and the British Forum for Ethnomusicology Student Prize (2017). In addition to his Ethnomusicology MA from the University of Alberta (2015), Hamidreza's academic research also benefits from his expertise in Iranian classical music as a *tar* player; he holds a BMus in Iranian Instrument Performance from the University of Art in Tehran.

The Concept of *Maslaha* and Music in Shi'i Performing Arts

Joseph Alagha, Haigazian University

For contemporary Islamic movements, notions of *maslaha* (public interest or common good) and 'the good Muslim' are translated into ideas about authentic Islamic cultural production and pious art and entertainment (fun) within the normative, foundational domains of local customs, religious sensibilities, and sound reason. Music – as a purposeful, didactic form of Shi'i Resistance Art (*al-fann al-muqawim al-multazim al-hadif*) – is an embodiment and reflection of the pressing issues in society. As such, music is a cultural resistance and a form of Islamic propagation contributing to founding social justice. This piece studies how the Lebanese resistance movement Hizbullah employs 'voice', or 'the sound of music' as public interest (*maslaha*) directed towards reform, resistance, mobilisation, and political struggle, in line with Shi'i traditions, as the Party argues. For that reason, Hizbullah considers purposeful art, or ideologically motivated art, as Resistance Art, where music plays a seminal role in propagating the message of resistance. This line of reasoning is sanctioned by Hizbullah's authority of emulation (*marja' al-taqlid*) Imam Khamina'i who allows playing revolutionary music (*anashid*) from mosque minarets to celebrate military victories (2009, p. 172), in conformity with his dictum that 'resistance art is the most effective means of Islamic propagation' (2006, p. 221). In its socio-political activism, Hizbullah encourages *jihad* through music as a mobilisation technique of didactic resistance art. This conforms to the declaration of leading Shi'i thinkers that cultural production has to be central to the construction of revolution, and it points out to the very different ways that Hizbullah conceives of both culture and the role of religion in public life.

Joseph Alagha is Professor of Political Science & Intercultural Studies at Haigazian University, Beirut, Lebanon. He is a prolific author in humanities and social sciences. Alagha is the author of four peer-reviewed university press books, two monographs, three books in Arabic, and more than one hundred refereed publications, mostly journal articles, in Arabic, English, French, and Dutch, but mainly in English. As attested by his publications, Alagha is subject matter expert (SME) in four disciplines: (1) Political Mobilization and Performing Arts in the Middle East; (2) Contemporary Islamic Movements; (3) Islamism & post-Islamism; and (4) Gender-based Violence

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“I, Too, Must Go [To Syria]” : Shi’i ritual mourning and the traveling sounds of holy war

Fouad Gehad Marei is a Research Associate at the University of Birmingham. His research focuses on Islamic religiosity, piety, Shii politics, Islamic eschatology, and jihadi violence. He has research experience in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq and is particularly interested in post/conflict dynamics. As a member of the ERC-funded AlterUmma project, Fouad’s ongoing research examines Shii ritual practices and cultures in the Middle East and the diaspora. He has previously worked at the Max Weber Centre of the University of Erfurt, Germany, and the Orient Institute in Beirut, Lebanon. Fouad holds a PhD from Durham University. E-mail: f.g.marei@bahm.ac.uk.

Soz Khwani Demonstration and Q&A

Askari Naqvi is a Lucknow based lawyer turned performing artist & entrepreneur. He is a trained vocalist under the tutelage of Pandit Amit Mukerjee. Apart from his repertoire of light classical compositions, Askari is perhaps the only artist of his kind to introduce art forms of Muharram, specifically Soz-Khwani from its strictly religious settings to a secular & wider audience. He is also an accomplished Dastango and has performed at various national and international festivals and spaces.

When not training or performing, he can be found at the lakhnavi home-cooked food restaurant he runs in Lucknow, called Naimat Khana.