

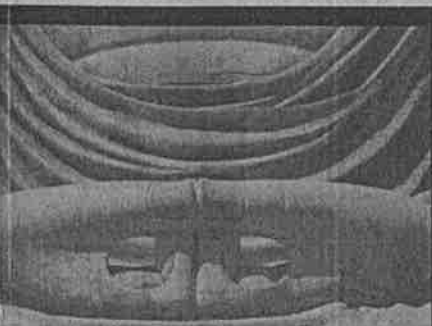


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Performed Ritual Space: Manifestation of Ritual Space through Flagellation in Mumbai Muharram

Reza Masoudi Nejad

Abstract

The ritual of flagellation is commonly studied in regards to questions surrounding religion and body. However, this paper looks at the ritual in order to explore the relationship between ritual and space. It focuses on exploring the 'ritual space' that manifests through the performance of flagellation by Shi'i-Muslims during the commemoration of Muharram. The spatial theories of ritual mainly focus on the ritualization of built space and the way that rituals are staged and accommodated in religious places. However this paper differentiates 'ritual space' from 'the place of ritual' through a set of observations of flagellation during Muharram in Mumbai (India), articulating 'ritual space' as a 'performed space'.

I was sitting on the steps of Moghul Masjid chatting with Habib Nasser about the Muharram rituals in Mumbai. I was about to do a participatory observation for the first time in Mumbai, so Habib was mentioning some points to keep in mind. He explained that some Shi'i Muslims would walk barefoot during Muharram. He then particularly emphasised that to get into the *matam* you have to be barefoot, 'otherwise people are going to kick you out of the *matam*'. In Urdu, *matam* means mourn; it specifically refers to flagellation in the context of the Muharram rituals. However, Habib obviously did not use *matam* with its general meaning of flagellation, rather he was referring to a kind of sacred space that has to be respected, entwining the idea of ritual and space.

The idea of this paper is to discuss and articulate the theoretical intertwining of ritual and space. The ritual of flagellation is commonly studied in regards to the question of religion and body. However, I will explore the relationship between ritual and space by observing the flagellation practice throughout three occasions during Muharram in Mumbai. The ritual is a part of the Shi'i remembrance of the tragic martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, a grandson of Prophet Muhammad, in the 7th century.

The question of ritual and space is addressed by a wide range of ideas from *the territorial passage* (Van Gennep 1960) to Jonathan Z. Smith's 'controlled space' (1987). Van Gennep has explained how mankind has formulised passage through and access to exclusive territories and spaces via rituals. Smith discusses the association of rituals with sacred places, e.g. temples. Over the shoulder of classic works, such as Durkheim's and Eliade's, Smith clarifies the role of ritual in associating sacred places with an ultimate quality that cannot be found in profane places. He also explains the significance of rituals in demarcating the

'controlled environment' of sacred places, and the role of such environments in generating the temporal realities of the ritual itself (Smith 1982, 63; Smith 1987, 74–96). Moreover, he discusses the role of religious places in the orchestration of rituals. Smith significantly articulates how ritual and sacred places essentially function hand-in-hand. In parallel with these ideas, there are other works that treat the role of ritual in defining and controlling the natural environment. For example, Rappaport has explained that rituals not only define the relationship between individuals in society, as discussed e.g. by V. Turner, but also formulise the relations of human society and ecology. Rappaport has particularly articulated how rituals define and control landscape and regulate distribution of natural resources (Rappaport 1968; Rappaport 1979).¹ The aforementioned studies maintain a stereotypically predominant focus on the inter-relationship between ritual and place, aiming at understanding the role of ritual to regulate and formulise access to places, ritualization of places, and demarcating territories. In other words, these studies are about the notion of 'place' and territory, not 'space'. This paper, however, approaches ritual as a spatial phenomenon, differentiating 'ritual space' from 'the place of ritual'. The idea is to shift the attention from 'the place of ritual' where ritual is lodged to the manifestation of 'ritual space' through practising ritual.

The idea of this paper is in parallel with David Parkin's idea of ritual spatiality (1991; 1992), through which he deals with the problem of ritual-myth ambiguity. Anthropologists, from Lévi-Strauss to Lewis, have tried to distinguish myth and ritual by focusing on the notion of *action*. Lévi-Strauss explained that each myth has often been seen as the ideological projections of a rite; however some anthropologists have reversed the direction of this

relationship and regard ritual as a kind of dramatized illustration of the myth. He then stated, regardless of the nature of the myth-ritual relationship, 'the myth exists on the conceptual level and the ritual on the level of action' (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 232). Similarly, Lewis sees rituals as actions, distinguishing them from beliefs, symbols, and myths that are mental concepts (Lewis 1980, 10–11).

Lévi-Strauss explained that the linguistic is inseparably part of social action and that even speech is a part of social action; this idea is also echoed by Lewis (1980), Tambiah (1979), and Bloch (1986). Parkin agrees with the statement that ritual is neither fully a statement nor an action. Yet because of the indistinctness of *action*, it does not solve the problem of myth-ritual ambiguity. Therefore instead of 'action', Parkin steers toward 'ritual spatiality'. He explains that rituals are held in order to privilege physical action in contrast with myth, which privileges the words. Then he argues that rituals are fundamentally physical actions and the verbal parts of rites are optional; therefore while ritual can emerge without words, it cannot be identified without its spatiality (see Parkin 1992, 17–18). The advantage of Parkin's idea is in replacing the notion of *action* with *spatiality*, thereby illuminating that spatiality is intrinsic to ritual. By taking Parkin's idea, ritual can be defined as *the spatial manifestation of myth*. If we reverse the myth-ritual relations, as Lévi-Strauss (1963) suggested, then myth can be defined as a transcription of a spatial performance. Despite Parkin's theoretical initiative, the spatiality of ritual remains a theoretical subject that has not been significantly discussed. This is partly because of the dominant attention paid to studying rituals 'in' sacred places and not as a space.

After an introduction to (1) the tragedy of Ashura and its commemoration and (2) the idea of flagellation as a Shi'i ritual, I will articulate the idea of 'ritual as a space' through a trilogy observation of flagellation in Mumbai. While I hold to the idea of ritual as a spatial manifestation of myth, I also explain how the 'sacred space of *matam*', aka a 'ritual space', is manifested through the performance of flagellation.

The tragedy of Ashura and its commemoration in Mumbai

Ashura is the name of the 10th day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Every year, Shi'i Muslims observe Ashura as the day of the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali and his few companions in the tragic battle of Karbala in the late 7th century. The tragedy was the consequence of disputes over the legitimacy of the

Umayyad authority. The frequently noted Shi'i phrase: '*Every day is Ashura, and everywhere is Karbala*', signifies the battle of Karbala as an eternal battle between justice and injustice, wrongness and rightness. From the Shi'i point of view, the battle of Karbala is more than a historic battle over a political dispute and it has since transcended into 'meta-history' (Chelkowski 1988, 263); it is 'the Shi'i myth'.

Myth is classically known as an invented story; however as Calhoun (2002) explains: a myth is a story that 'contribute[s] to the elaboration of a cosmological system and to a cohesive social identity'. The tragedy of Ashura is 'the Shi'i myth', since the battle of Karbala is regarded by Shi'i Muslims 'as a cosmic event around which the entire history of the world, prior as well as subsequent to it, revolves' (Ayoub 1978, 141). The tragedy and its observance had a significant role in the process of establishing the division of Muslims into Shi'i and Sunni sects.² Michael Fischer states that the tragedy 'provides a way of clearly demarcating Shi'ite understanding from the Sunni understanding of Islam and Islamic history' (1980, 21). The memory of the tragedy has profoundly influenced Shi'i creed and rituals to such a degree that Fischer (1980) has called it 'the Karbala paradigm' by which Shi'i culture is constituted.

Shi'i Muslims developed numerous rituals throughout history to observe the tragedy of Ashura. The rituals mostly originated in their Arab environment in Iraq, highly enriched in Iran mainly during the Safavid era (1501–1772), and then diffused on the Indian subcontinent (Calmard 1996).³ Later, Indians even spread the rituals during colonial times to as far as the Caribbean islands of Trinidad (see Korom 1994; Korom 2003). As Nigel Thrift argues, 'no social process unfold[s] in the same way across different places, raising the significance of context in explanation to a central position' (Warr 2004, 298). Like other socio-religious practices, the Shi'i rituals were also diffused and localised in India where it constitutes its own social meaning. Muharram commemoration is essentially a Shi'i ritual in the Middle East; however the ritual metamorphosed into a non-Shi'i festival in India. In fact, not only Sunni Muslims but also Hindus had often participated in Muharram observances in India (Korom 2003, 142). Hasnain (1988) explains that the Sunnis, especially more liberal sects, celebrate the tragedy of Karbala in India. He has also noted that some of the Hindu rulers of Gwalior and Jalpur were patrons of the ritual for purposes of encouraging harmony between their Muslim and Hindu subjects.

A large number of reports published in *The Times of India* (TOI) remark that not only Sunnis but also Hindus



Figure 1: Human Tigers at the Muharram Festival; street performers in a wood engraving from *The Graphic*, 1872.

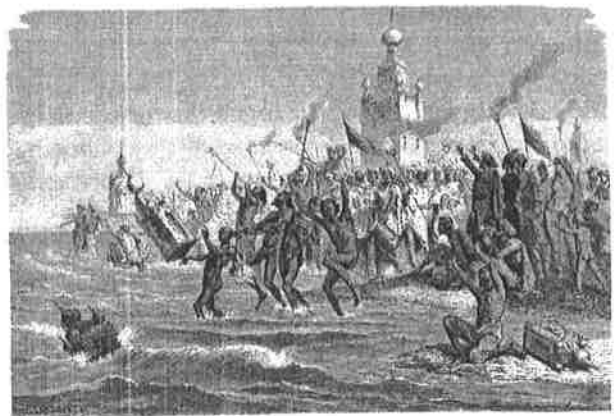


Figure 2: Muharram procession arriving on the shore of the Back Bay at Bombay, a wood engraving by Emile Bayard, 1878. (Ref: www.columbia.edu)

of lower orders participated in the Muharram processions in Bombay⁴ during the 19th century (e.g. see TOI, Dec 14, 1880: 2).⁵ Interestingly, not only Sunni Muslims participated in Muharram Rituals, but even the Sunni community of Konkonis claimed authority over the Muharram processions of Bombay in the 19th century (see Masselos 1982). Generally, observing Ashura day was an inter-community religious event; and as Birdwood narrated, the procession on Ashura day was the greatest festival of Bombay during the 19th century (1915, 180). The diffused rituals contained dancing and other performances, and there was little aspect of mourning in the 19th century Muharram rituals in Bombay.

The Muharram ritual has changed drastically since the late 19th century. The ritual as an inter-communal festival came to an end with the rise of the Hindu Nationalist Movement in the late 19th century, punctuated by a riot between Hindus and Muslims in 1893 (see Edwardes 1923, 104–105). Thereafter, as the consequence of a series of riots in the 1900s, the colonial authorities imposed tight regulations over Muharram. The Muharram regulation of 1912 served to totally curtail the Muharram processions (for more see Masoudi Nejad 2012; Masselos 1982). From here on out, the commemoration was limited to *majlises* (mourning service sessions) in Shi'i-Muslim places, mainly those associated with the Iranian community of Bombay (e.g. see TOI, Dec 20, 1912: 5, and Dec 21, 1912: 9). As I extensively discuss elsewhere (Masoudi Nejad 2012), the regulation of 1912 was in fact a part of the process that gradually turned the commemoration into a solely Shi'i ritual in Bombay. Since 1912, the published reports in TOI indicate that the procession was not carried out in Bombay during most of the first half of the 20th century. However, the Iranian community gradually

revived a short procession in the Dongri area (in the south of the city) during the 1930-40s. The Iranian procession then became a core around which Muharram processions in public spaces recuperated during the second half of the 20th century. While Muharram rituals are dominated by Sunni-Muslims in other Indian cities, today the commemoration is mainly a Shi'i ritual in Mumbai.

The Shi'i flagellation

The rituals of commemoration of Ashura are mainly categorised according to what *action* is carried out. For example, Nakash (1993, 163) categorises the rituals into five major groups: (1) the memorial service session (*majlis*), (2) pilgrimage to Karbala, (3) the public procession, (4) the representation of the tragedy in the form of plays, and (5) flagellation.⁶ These rituals are generally aimed at narrating or performing the Shi'i grief over the tragedy of Ashura. For example, *majlis* is a ritual in which an orator narrates for the audience the passion of Hussein in Karbala. Some other rituals, e.g. procession and flagellation, are aimed at performing the Shi'i sorrow. Nevertheless, all of the rituals are orchestrated as a grand event to commemorate the tragedy.

Nakash (1993) mentions that it is rather difficult to determine when flagellation became part of the Muharram remembrance. However, he argues that the Shi'i flagellation was originally based on a Christian ritual. The Christian flagellation originated during the Italian Renaissance by brotherhood communities that organised religious rituals outside of the institutional church in cities like Florence and Venice (Weissman 1982, 51; Pullan 1971, 50–51). Nakash explains that flagellation was pre-

sumably introduced as a Shi'i practice by the *Quezlbash* community, which was the orthodox brotherhood community of Safavid army officers (1993, 174–177). The earliest description of the Shi'i flagellation is written by Evliya Chelebi, the Ottoman traveller, who describes the shedding of blood during Muharram in the city of Tabriz (Iran) in 1640 (Chelebi 1968, 138; Nakash 1993, 175).

Since it is usually argued that the Shi'i flagellation is based on the Christian ritual, some scholars apply the connotation of the Christian flagellation to understanding the Shi'i flagellation as well. For example, Afary reviews the ideas of Foucault (1980) who argued that the Christian flagellation rituals were self-punishment designed to achieve a state of purity. These painful rituals were, Foucault stated, confession and penance rituals (Afary 2003, 18–19). Accordingly, Afary argues that 'Foucault's reading of Christian rites of penance can also explain the endurance of, and affinity for, similar rituals of penance in Shi'i Islam' (Afary 2003, 19). Although there are indeed affinities between the two rituals, Afary's reading of the Shi'i ritual ignores the connotation of the Shi'i ritual in its own context. The Shi'i flagellation cannot be seen as a rite of penance for two reasons: First, in the Middle East and India there is a historical background to the bodily expression of grief; in this context, the Shi'i flagellation is expression of the Shi'i Muslims' grief and rage that are evoked. Secondly, there is a specific theological backbone to the Shi'i flagellation which differs from the Christian penance ritual.

Chest-beating and face slapping with one's hands have always been practised during the funeral of beloveds both in Arab tribes of southern Iraq⁷ and in Iranian nomadic tribes. In fact, such a practice not only expresses grief, but is also a means of respecting the deceased; harsher beating of the face and body means deeper grief over the death of an influential member of the community or tribe. It is imaginable that chest-beating could not effectively express and show the grief of the Safavid army officers over the tragic battle of Karbala. It would be relevant to bring up *rudaali* here, a tradition in Rajasthan (India) in which women of a lower caste are hired as professional mourners to express grief upon the death of upper-caste males. These women, called *rudaali*, publicly express the grief of family members who are not permitted to publicly display emotion due to their social status.⁸

Secondly, there are those Shi'i clergy members who may disagree with practising flagellation and in fact, the ritual has always been a controversial practice.⁹ However, the majority of Shi'i clergies support flagellation based on the idea of *shafa'at* (intercession). Pinault (1999) extensively explains the idea of intercession in Shi'i theology

in which the physical manifestation of lamentation for the Karbala tragedy is regarded. In Shi'i theology, the passion of Hussein is like the passion of Jesus for the redemption of mankind; however Hussein's intercession is granted to those who are manifesting and expressing the grief over the Ashura tragedy. Molla Hussein Waeizi Kashifi in *Rawdat al-Shuhada*, his classic Persian textbook on the Karbala tragedy, explains that

Weeping as one performs gestures of mourning pleases God and is the means by which one attains the Gardens of Eternity. As it has been stated in various writings: "Paradise is awarded to anyone who weeps for Husain or who laments in company with those who weep for Husain ...

Paradise is awarded: for the following reasons, that every year, when the month of Muharram comes, a multitude of the lovers of the family of the Prophet (*jam'i az muhibban-e A hl-e Bayt*) renew and make fresh the tragedy of the Martyrs, and they bewail the offspring of the Lord of Prophecy. They enflame their hearts with the fire of sorrowful regret; their eyes stream with tears from the overwhelming extent of their loss (Pinault 1999, 291).¹⁰

Pinault explains that despite criticism from some clergies and educated Shi'i Muslims, flagellation continues to be popular in cities like Hyderabad (India). He argues that Shi'i Muslims tend to practise flagellation to show that they deserve to be ranked as 'the lovers of the family of the Prophet, those Muslims who merit Paradise through their lamentation' (Pinault 1999, 302).

Therefore, although flagellation arguably originated in Europe, the Shi'i flagellation has its own foundations. In this context, the ritual is practised to bodily express grief and sorrow over the passion of Hussein in Karbala; and the ritual is theologically based on the notion of intercession, not penance.

Shi'i flagellation in Mumbai

There is no evidence as to when the Shi'i community began to practise flagellation in India; however it may have been brought by Qezelbash officers who were hired for military services in India during the 18th century (Cole 1988, 45), or later by Iranian immigrants to India during the 19th century. Although there is no historical evidence about the origin of flagellation in Mumbai, the oral history of the Shi'i rituals of Mumbai provides some narratives. As oral history and documented history focus on different matters, I am not intending to fill gaps in documented history with oral history. The importance of

oral history lies not in its verification of facts, but in how people commonly understand, experience, and narrate the past.¹¹

Mr. Sayyed Safar-Ali Husseini (interviewed, December 2009, April and December 2010) argued that it was the Iranians who introduced flagellation to Bombay. S. Safar-Ali's father immigrated to Bombay in 1912 from the city of Yazd in central Iran. S. Safar-Ali is one of the most informed members of the Iranian community, and is the senior member of the Husseini family who owns Lucky Hotels and Restaurants in Mumbai. He explained that Indians did not practise flagellation and it was only Iranians who practised flagellation during the early 20th century in Bombay. He mentioned that although Iranians have gradually stopped practising flagellation, Indian Shi'i Muslims continue to devotedly practise the ritual:

Iranians are not doing *zanjir* [flagellation with chain] now, but they used to do that. [In fact] *qamme* and *zanjir* [flagellation using sword and chain] both came from Iran. I, myself, used to practise *zanjir*; now they [Iranians] don't practise it anymore ... You will see the observances on the 9th and 10th of Muharram [in Mumbai] that all have Iranian origins; not contemporary [Iran], the Qajar Iran [18th-19th centuries]...

... Iranians used to practise the *zanjir* more passionately than Indians ... [during colonial times] it was prohibited [in the public space] and we practised it inside [of the *imambara*¹²] ... Amin Imambara was blood-filled ... but it is currently practised throughout the procession as well.

[Question: Why do Iranians no longer practice flagellation?]

They are more educated, the level of their wisdom has increased, and Iranian clergies are asking people not to practise this kind of ritual. Iranian *ulammas* [clergymen] do not agree with this kind of practice, but Indian *ulammas* are ok...

[Question: Would you explain the atmosphere in the *imambara* that you mentioned was blood-filled?]

The Iranian ceremonies incorporated [playing] drums and horns; when drums and horns were played, our hands and legs were shaking. When the first drum was played our body was shaking, it was very emotional and we became crazy.

We are 'the crazy of Imam Hussein' [we are the lovers of Imam Hussein]; it is in our blood. When the drums and horns were played, we got goosebumps all over our body; if we even killed ourselves,

we were not mindful. It was partly the effect of the music as well.

The second point is that we were more Husseini than now [we were more devoted to Imam Hussein than now]. We may be getting old [losing our passion], our children are going to Christian schools and are affected by them. That passion did not remain in Iranians. We had Iranian schools; the context was Iranian. At Amin Imambara there was Amin school, we went from Bandra to there and studied Farsi and Arabic. We were [closer] with other Iranians, now we are all scattered. It is all over now.

[Question: Did clergies support flagellation before?]

They were silent [on the topic], they were not saying yes or no. If they had been asked, from *mojtahed* [highest rank of Shi'i clergy] to the lowest rank, their answer was that we are [too] ashamed of Imam Hussein's mother to say anything. They did not say to do or not to do it. Now in Iran, they say do not do this, but at that time the *mojtahedin* [*mojtahed*-s], all, were silent. (S. Safar-Ali Husseini, interviewed in Farsi, at Lucky Hotel, Bandra, Mumbai, December 2009)

Safar-Ali's point that Iranian clergymen are against flagellation mainly refers to two *fatwas* (religious decrees) issued by former and current Iranian supreme leaders against flagellation. The official state policy in Iran is against flagellation based on these religious decrees, a policy that is promoted to other Shi'i communities around the world as well. In fact, the ritual was not popular in Iran even before the Iranian revolution (1979) as the consequence of a long-standing policy against the ritual that was taken up by the Pahlavi State (1920s-1970s), which was a secular state. Therefore, flagellation has not been publically practised for a long time in Iran.

I asked S. Safar-Ali:

[You mentioned that Iranians are not practising *zanjir* as before. To what extent did the *fatwa* against *zanjir*, which was issued after the Iranian revolution [1979], affect that?]

It doesn't affect it at all. They [Iranians in Mumbai] are not emotional and devoted as before, their population decreased ... they are going to non-Iranian schools. *Azadari* (mourning) was a part of Iranian edification; they are not under Iranian edification anymore. Therefore the culture of *azadari* declined. (S. Safar-Ali Husseini, Mumbai, December 2009)

In another interview in April 2010, he talked about processions and stated:

[People] want that it [the procession] took as long as possible, I don't know why ... psychologically, when we are in procession, we love to be seen, we love to be seen. So if it is over soon, no one will see us... have you seen the people? They have no future ... the more miserable they are, the longer their procession would take, the harder they would beat themselves, or dance more [referring to the Hindu Ganpati procession]... people who are wealthy and rich are not in processions... (S. Safar-Ali Hussini, interviewed in Bandra, Mumbai, April 2010)

Notably, it is not just the Husseini family that has been one of the most devoted Iranian families to the Muharram rituals in Mumbai, but also S. Safar-Ali, himself, is a very sincere Shi'i. He was in tears during our conversation when he described his own emotional experience during the Muharram rituals.

On one hand, S. Safar-Ali talks nostalgically about the devotion of the Iranian community to the Muharram commemoration, a devotion that is gone. He conceives the cessation of flagellation as a sign that the Iranians are losing their cultural identity and faith. On the other hand, he negatively perceives the emotions of the rituals by relating them to miserable poor people, and regarding the cessation of flagellation as cultural progress and the end of backwardness. This can be seen as a contradiction through his narration; however it indeed illuminates the multi-perception of flagellation, a kind of counter-punctual reading of the ritual given by the very same person. These paradoxical readings also imply the fact that various people participate in the ritual with different agendas; moreover people also read the ritual performance differently depending on the socio-historical circumstances in which the ritual takes place. Therefore the ritual, like other kinds of performances, is perceived throughout a kind of 'contingent process.'¹³ The result is that a ritual can be described by a person based on multiple and contradictory narrations. In other words, flagellation implies an amalgamation of paradoxical references that creates a landscape in which flagellation is perceived, conceived, and practised in Mumbai.

Although some scholars, including Pinault (1999), associate flagellation with a certain social class, that of the widely uneducated and working classes or teenagers, it is rather difficult to limit the ritual to a certain group. For example, I was passing through Imambara Road where Moghul Masjid is located. The mosque is one the most

important Shi'i places in Mumbai; therefore shops around the mosque are dedicated to selling things related to Muharram rituals, mostly *zanjir*, during Muharram. I talked to a man who was about to buy a set of expensive blades for flagellation. I asked him about the price of the blades and why he was buying such expensive blades. Through our subsequent conversation I learned that he was a diamond trader. He passed me his business card that listed an address of a prime business area in Mumbai. This encounter, along with other observations that I had, shows the spectrum of people who practise flagellation and that flagellants include wealthy individuals.

As already mentioned, I interviewed Habib Nasser who is the founder of a flagellation *anjuman* (union/group for flagellation). Born in Bombay, Habib is 37 years old and graduated from a school in Chicago; his father migrated from Bahrain to Bombay during colonial times. He is not from a working class background and devotedly practises flagellation during Muharram. Habib explained the following about flagellation:

Aza [mourning] of *aba-Abdullah Hussein* is basically a *pursah*. *Pursah* means condolence, condolence to *Fatem-ato Zahra (SA)*, mother of *Imam Hussein (AS)*. The problem that *ahl-e bayt* [the family of the Prophet *Mohammad*] faced in the desert of *Karbala*; we try to basically follow the pain they received during that particular span [of time], the span of [the journey from] *Karbala* to [the city of] *Kufah* and *Kufah* to *Sham [Damascus]*. The type of torture they received, we try to imitate that torture. The thinking is that if we had been there, we would have served *Imam Hussein (AS)*. Here there is a question mark because *astakh-forllah* [may God forgive me], we cannot compare ourselves to the *shohada* of *Karbala* [martyrs of *Karbala*]. We cannot say that if we were there, we would be a *shahid* [martyr] ..., because [the names of] *Shohada-i Karbala* [martyrs of *Karbala*] were the list generated from *Allah [God]* himself. But we, we, it is our *tasavor* [imagination], it is our thinking that if we were in *Karbala*, we would definitely have devoted our lives to *Imam Hussein (AS)*. (Habib Nasser, interviewed in English, at *Moghul Masjid*, Mumbai, December 2009)

Although Habib's account presents a generic idea about flagellation, as mentioned before, it is rather difficult to limit the idea of flagellation to a single narration. The Shi'i flagellation, like any other ritual, can be seen as anything from a simple act of showing off to a sincere devotional practice. While some Shi'i Muslims may look

at flagellation as a backward ritual that promotes a negative image about Shi'i Muslims to the modern world, many others are proud of practising the ritual. For example, Fairoz Shakri (interviewed, December 2009, April 2010) appreciates flagellation as the core of the Muharram rituals in Mumbai. He proudly talked about his grand-daughter, Marziyeh, who has the temptation to cut her forehead during Muharram. Fairoz, who is an amateur photographer, proudly posts photos of flagellation on his webpages to show the world the devotion of Shi'i Muslims to the tragedy of Ashura and he is not afraid that someone may see the photos as a sign of backwardness.

Matam as a ritual and space

Matam in both Urdu and Farsi literally means 'lamentation.' In the context of Shi'i rituals in Mumbai, *matam* describes the bodily expression of grief in diverse forms, from chest-beating with one's hands to flagellation. The harsher form of *matam*, flagellation, is practised in different ways in Mumbai. The most common form of flagellation is *zanjir-matam*, in which flagellants lash their backs using blades attached to a set of *zanjir* (chains). *Qamme-matam* is the other common form of the ritual in which flagellants cut their foreheads with a knife (*qamme*), or beat their backs with a sword.

The flagellation is practised before, during, and at the end of processions; it is also independently practised at Shi'i places. In what follows, flagellation will be described and discussed on three different occasions during the 10th of Muharram (Ashura) in the south of Mumbai. For each occasion, I will explain certain aspects of 'ritual space'. Throughout these three observations, I will articulate the manifestation of ritual space by means of practising flagellation.

Prima: At Spencer Lane

It was the evening known as Shab-i Ashur (the night of Ashura)¹⁴ in December 2009.¹⁵ I was walking north down Mohammad-ali Road towards Honda Corner. From all over southern Mumbai, people were gradually gathering at Spencer Lane, off Honda Corner. The lane is away from the Dongri area where most Shi'i places are located. Shi'i Muslims would hold the evening prayer in the lane before carrying out the procession of Shab-i Ashur towards Amin Imambara in Dongri.

People in small groups were carrying symbolic flags (*'alam*) and coffins (*taboot*) towards Spencer Lane, where a Shi'i *anjuman* (union) is located. The *anjuman* is identified by a small *manbar*, named after Mahfil-e Abulfazl



Figure 3: The manbar at Spencer Lane, Mumbai, December 2010.

Abbass (AS),¹⁶ located at the end of the lane, behind a residential building block (figure 3). Mr. Sekkeh-zadeh (interviewed, December 2010, Mumbai) stated that the *manbar* used to be a parking lot owned by a member of the Dawodi Bohra community.¹⁷ The founders of the *anjuman* bought and turned the parking lot into a *manbar* during the 1960s. Sekkeh-zadeh, who is a member of the committee of the *anjuman*, has mentioned that the *mahfil* was a gathering place for a few people during Muharram, but it gradually attracted people from around southern Mumbai during the 1980s and now it is where the procession of Shab-i Ashur begins. This procession is the second largest procession during Muharram in Mumbai.

The first group who arrived at Spencer Lane located their *'alam* and *taboot* inside or next to the *manbar*. But soon, thousands of *'alam* and *taboot* arrived and it became difficult to fit the *taboots* and *'alams* even along Spencer Lane. The crowd filled the lane and reached to and blocked Mohammad-ali Road.¹⁸ The gathering is driven by the very small *manbar*, however it was the crowd that defined the ritual arena (see figure 4 & 5). Liebeskind states during his first visit to Mumbai in 2004 that: 'Mumbai is clearly a city that eludes architects who see the city as a material object. It's a city where human beings are far more important than brick and mortar, concrete, glass and steel' (Rao 2007, 229: after TOI, October 14, 2004). Liebeskind's narration is based on observing everyday life of the city. The significance of crowds, however, is particularly illuminated during festivals and rituals, e.g. Ganpati¹⁹ or Muharram, when crowds are experienced on an entirely different scale in Mumbai. The picture of Spencer Lane on the night of Ashura (figure 5) may still show buildings, but they had no place in my human experience and perception of the event. In fact, even looking at the captured images of Spencer Lane before and during the ritual (figure 4, 5) reveals how the crowd superimposes on the physical/built



Figure 4: Spencer Lane, prepared for Shab-i Ashur, December 2010.



Figure 5: Spencer Lane, Shab-i Ashur, Mumbai, December 2010.

environment. In this situation, we witness how the crowd washes out the built environment from our perception of an area. The buildings are still there, but they are no longer part of our experience of the event. This circumstance is entirely different from a situation that for example, Smith (1987) discusses in *To Take Place*, where the architecture of religious places is incorporated into our perception and experience of a ritual.

Edward Hall articulates the idea of 'personal space' in the framework of body, space, and cultural behaviour. He defines such a space based on the notion of a *bubble surrounding* the body of individuals, an elastic bubble with a size that varies according to the social situation (Hall 1966; Hall et al. 1968; also see Low 2003, 11–12). However, in the crowd on the night of Ashura, like any other intensive crowd, there was no 'personal space'; the *bubbles* were popped, and the whole crowd became a body, a mass with its own bubble. The 'crowd bubble' defines the ritual arena, from where everyday activities, e.g. normal car traffic, are expelled.

When the evening prayer at Spencer Lane was over, the whole arena was packed; it was as crowded as a Mumbai local train in rush hour. For a few minutes, I felt like the people were waiting for something to happen. Suddenly drums began playing loudly; at some spots along the lane groups of men started flocking and then chanting 'ya Hussein' (oh Hussein). Immediately, people moved away from those spots and a set of bubbles appeared in the crowd. The combination of drumming and chanting signalled that these men were going to flog. Flagellants were barefoot, holding *zanjir*, and had taken off their shirts. There were scars all over the backs of many of them, showing that they had been practising *zanjir-matam* over the years. After chanting 'ya Hussein' for a while and reaching an emotional moment, they started lashing their backs with *zanjir*. After a few lashes, the backs of the flagellants were cut and began bleeding. They became

very emotional and lashed faster and harder, while chanting 'Hussein, Hussein, Hussein'. Every few minutes, I had to clean my glasses and camera lens from all the blood that was spread around by the *zanjir* of the flagellants.

The sound of chains and blades that hit the men's bodies, the chanting of 'Hussein, Hussein, Hussein', and loud drums made a unique emotional atmosphere, imitating the mythical battle of Karbala. The battle of Karbala is not over; it is an on-going battle between right and wrong. As Habib explained, flagellants want to prove that if they were in Karbala, they would devote their life to Imam Hussein. Although I am not a religious person, like other spectators I experienced illusory moments by witnessing such a deceptive performance/ritual. But it was not like a play that fools spectators towards an imaginary/virtual reality; it was too real. You could feel warm blood constantly splash on your skin and face.

The spots where flagellation was practised were surrounded by the crowd and respected as a sacred space, a manifestation of the mythical battlefield and the martyrdom-place of Hussein. The practising of flagellation creates a sacred space, a performed space that mediates the possibility of being-in or witnessing the mythical battle of Karbala. This reflects Eliade's idea that 'every religious festival, any liturgical, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past' (Eliade 1959, 69). I characterise the space as *performed*, since it manifests through the performance of flagellation. The sacred space manifests in Spencer Lane, but the manifestation and perception of that space have nothing to do with the lane itself. The sacred space manifests through the performance of a set of ritual techniques, including the crowd, sound-scape, and crucially the performance of flagellation.

The crowd creates an arena, a stage on which the ritual is performed; the arena is a territory where from everyday activities are forcibly removed. The drums and chanting not only stimulate an emotional moment, but also create



Figure 6: One of the places where flagellation was practised at Spencer Lane; Mumbai, December 2009.



Figure 7: Flagellation practised at Spencer Lane; Mumbai, December 2009.



Figure 8: The playing of drums during the flagellation ritual. A flagellant who was no longer able to participate in flagellation plays drums to sustain the emotion of the ritual. Mumbai, December 2009.

a soundscape in which the everyday noise of the city does not distract the flagellants' emotional moment. These sets of repertoire create a stage on which the sacred space is manifested through flagellation. The depth of experiencing such a space depends on the level of engagement individuals have with the ritual. Spectators are witnessing

the manifestation of 'sacred performed space'; they are allowed to enter the territory of such a space, but only if they are barefoot. However, the only way to being-in this sacred space, aka the mythical sacred space of Karbala, is to practise flagellation. Here, the flagellation is not only a way to actualise the sacred past and manifest a performed sacred space; it is also the means to enter into such space.

The sacred space that is manifested through the flagellation performance is a *relative space*, a space that coexists through other things (e.g. see Russell 1999, 87; Harvey 1973, 13). A relative space is created in different ways; for example, a built public space (e.g. a square) is formed by the arrangement of buildings in a certain configuration. While such a space coexists with the buildings, its existence is independent from those buildings. I would like to extend this idea and argue that space exists not only through other objects (buildings), but as shown, it can manifest and exist through a ritual performance. Therefore I call such a space a 'performed space', a space that coexists with ritual, but it is not a ritual; it is a 'ritual space'. Here, there is a discursive relation between 'ritual' and 'ritual space'. I will articulate this subject further in the next observation.

Secundo: Amin Imambarā

As mentioned, flagellants may perform the ritual in different ways. Some cut their foreheads with knives and others beat their backs with swords. I also witnessed a group of youth practising chest-beating while they held a shaving blade between their fingers. I had not read about or heard of such a method of flagellation before. Presumably, it is a very new method of flagellation. I twice observed this ritual on the morning of Ashura day at Amin Imambarā in December 2009 and 2010,²⁰ which is the subject of the second observation.

Amin Imambarā is where the procession of Shab-i Ashur terminates. The *imambarā* was established by and named after an Iranian merchant of Bombay, Haji Zeinal Abedin Shirazi in 1872. This *imambarā* is often known as Amin Imambarā, since its founder was also known as Amin ut-Tojjar. A document, in English, registered in 1877 shows that in 1872, Hajee Zenal Aboodin²¹ dedicated a building situated in Comercarry Road for the *imambarā*.²² The document also details other *wakf* properties that he dedicated to his charity that was active not only in Bombay but also in Shiraz. The income of the charity was dedicated to sponsoring the commemoration of the Ashura tragedy and other religious ceremonies in Bombay, Shiraz (in Iran), and Karbala (in Iraq). The

imambara also provides education services. Amin Imambara was one of the significant places that kept alive the commemoration of Muharram after 1912; therefore, it became a prime Shi'i place in Dongri.

When I arrived at Amin Imambara on the morning of Ashura day, the building and courtyard of the *imambara* were packed, and a group of youth were doing chest-beating in the courtyard. The young flagellants were standing in lines in the middle of the courtyard, taking off their shirts and doing chest-beating while a singer sung a dirge. Obviously, it was not a normal chest-beating since they were holding a shaving blade between their fingers. They were beating their chests to the rhythm of the dirge, beating faster and harder during the more emotional parts of the dirge. The shaving blade made a tiny cut each time they beat their bodies; it is imaginable what their bodies looked like after a few minutes of chest-beating. I have to admit that it was frightening to observe such a ritual. Gradually, blood shed not only over the flagellants' bodies, but the courtyard of the *imambara* was also blood-filled. This scene recalls what S. Safar-Ali Husseini narrated about Iranians practising flagellation in the very same place during the colonial period.

Although the courtyard was crowded, the middle of the courtyard where flagellants were standing was fully respected and no one approached this space without being barefoot. Here again, a sacred space manifested within the crowd of spectators, a space that Habib called '*matam*'. This is a kind of controlled space, delineated from the rest of the *imambara*, as passing from the *imambara* into the *matam* has to be done through the 'territorial rite' of being barefoot.

The *matam* as a space, or the *ritual space*, is an ephemeral space that manifests and exists through the performance of ritual. When the flagellation was over, the sacred space that manifested within the courtyard no longer existed. People walked carelessly around with no respect for the blood-filled courtyard. There was nothing to be respected anymore. The ritual space was non-existent when the flagellation was over; what was respected was not the blood of flagellators shed over the courtyard, but the ritual space that coexisted with the ritual.

The Shi'i flagellation is the most spectacular part of Muharram observances in Mumbai and is practised almost everywhere associated with Shi'i communities, but not at mosques. For example, although Moghul Masjid is known as the most important Shi'i place for Ashura rituals in Mumbai, flagellation is not practised at the mosque. This is because flagellation involves bleeding and blood is *najes*, which literally means 'unclean'. *Najes* has a certain definition in Islamic *figheh* (jurisprudence).



Figures 9 and 10: Flagellation at the courtyard of Amin Imambara, Mumbai; December 2010.

Najes refers to anything that breaches cleanliness in the religious sense; blood is one of ten things known as *najes* in the Shi'i *figheh*. As the place of *namaz* (prayer) and the body of prayer have to be religiously clean, practising flagellation is strictly not allowed at mosques. On the one hand, flagellation is a religious ritual that grants Hussein's intercession and alters a normal location into a sacred space. On the other hand, it makes places *najes*,²³ a condition that excludes mosques as places where the ritual can be practised.

The ritual is associated with bleeding, since bleeding is a natural consequence of flagellation and it visually traces the manifestation of the ritual space of *matam* (or spatio-*matam*, aka *matam* as a space). However, blood has nothing to do with spatio-*matam*. As just mentioned, nobody respected the blood-filled courtyard of the *imambara* when the ritual ended. Nevertheless, as bleeding is a materialistic consequence of flagellation, it creates a contradiction between 'ritual space' (spatio-*matam*) and 'built space' (e.g. mosque). This particularly reveals that while religious places are intrinsically associated with their material aspects, 'ritual space' is solely manifested through the performance of ritual.

Tertia: Streamed ritual space

My final observation is of flagellation during the *julus* (procession) on Ashura afternoon. The procession is called Jolus-i Sham-i Gariban which is the most important Shi'i procession in Mumbai. It is rather difficult to note when this procession first began, however interviewees commonly stated that it was Abbass Rizvi who initiated the procession during the 1970s. He was originally from Lucknow and one of the most influential Shi'i figures in Mumbai during the 1970s. The procession became the main Shi'i procession since the 1980s and grows larger every year. Participants from all around greater Mumbai come to southern Mumbai to carry the procession from Dongri towards Rahmatabad Cemetery in Mazgan.

The procession of Ashura afternoon is mainly a symbolic funeral. The 19th century inter-religious procession of Mumbai terminated at the Moody Bay, where *taboots* were immersed,²⁴ showing that this Shi'i ritual was localised in a Hindu-dominated context. The procession was interrupted during the late colonial period for a few decades; then as discussed, it was revived as a solely Shi'i ritual in Mumbai. Although the Ashura procession terminated at seafronts in many Indian cities, the Mumbai procession is towards the Shi'i cemetery of Rahmatabad instead of a waterfront. As already mentioned, there was little of the lamentation aspect in the Ashura procession in Mumbai during the 19th century; however the revived procession is essentially a symbolic funeral through which participants express their grief over the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions. Therefore, while the 19th century procession even incorporated dancing, the current procession is essentially based on *matam*, the bodily expression of grief.

I joined the procession route of Ashura afternoon in JJ Hospital Road²⁵ where numerous banners and flags



Figure 11: Chest-beating throughout the procession of Ashura afternoon, JJ Hospital Rd, Mumbai, December 2009.

were hung throughout the road, including a very large banner on which the *fatwa*²⁶ of *maraje*²⁷ on flagellation were printed. The banner referred to the most influential *maraje*, mainly from Iran. I assumed that the banner was part of the campaign against flagellation. However after a closer look at the banner, I realised that it was about supporting flagellation and not an objection to the ritual. The banner referred to Aytollah²⁸ Sheikh Karim Haeri, Aytollah S. Mohammad Shirazi, Aytollah Mirza Javad Tabrizi, Aytollah Safi Golpayegani, Aytollah Mohammad Sadiq Rohani, Aytollah S. Sadiq Shirazi, Aytollah Langerodi, and Aytollah Vahid Kurasai. Generally, they support flagellation as a ritual to commemorate the passion of Hussein and his companions in the battle of Karbala. These *maraje* generally described flagellation as a *mosta'hab* (desirable) religious practice, unless it leads to death. Namely, the popularity of flagellation cannot only be seen as a controversial folk practice in India; it is backed with *fatwa*(s) as well.

I joined people who watched the procession. Groups of participants in the procession, known as *anjuman*,²⁹ were passing by and marching towards Rahmatabad Kibrestan (cemetery). They mostly engaged in emotional chest-beating and chanted short dirges to express their sorrow over the tragedy of Karbala. After a few minutes, I felt a hot pulse approached the place where I was standing; people who were watching the *julos* became quiet. An *anjuman* made up solely of flagellants was approaching. They held their knives and swords up and were chanting 'ya Hussein' (oh Hussein); they all wore *Bagdadi Kafan*. *Kafan* is a shroud or burial garment, and the *Bagdadi kafan*—shroud from Baghdad—is a simple white cotton dress that is draped over the shoulders. The wearing of *kafan* symbolically means that they are ready to die, signifying that if they were in Karbala, they would give their lives for Imam Hussein. As the group of flagellants came to a stop the drums played louder, their chanting increased, and then they began beating their foreheads with knives and swords. Their faces and *kafans* that had been covered with dried blood became covered with the fresh blood. The expressions on the faces of the flagellants were emotional, passionate, and sad; some shown even aggressive faces; but I did not see a painful face.

I followed one of the flagellant groups. The places where flagellants flock and parade together were highly respected as a sacred space. As usual, anyone who was not barefoot was not allowed access to the *matam* (ritual space). Curiously, people were very protective and controlling of the ritual space, and did not tolerate breaching the respect for the space, even in an extremely



Figure 12: A group of flagellants throughout the procession of Ashura afternoon, Mumbai, December 2009.



Figure 13: A flagellant wearing a *Bagdadi kafan* during the procession of Ashura afternoon, Mumbai, December 2009.



Figure 14: The demarcation of the flagellation space throughout the procession of Ashura afternoon, Mumbai, December 2009.

crowded situation. When Habib Nasser said that people controlled the *matam* (ritual space), I assumed that it was just a statement and that such control could not be practised in such a crowded and messy situation throughout the procession. However, this actually is the case and controlling the ritual space is taken very seri-

ously. Everyone respects and helps control the ritual space of the *matam*, sometimes even in an aggressive manner. I have to admit that the few times I tried to get into the ritual space without being barefoot, I was pushed out in a very aggressive manner. Some of the flagellant groups were surrounded by another group that acted like bodyguards around the flagellants, demarcating a space that had to be respected. They controlled everyone who wanted to get inside of the ritual space by making sure that they were barefoot.

As flagellation was practised throughout the procession, the *matam* as a sacred space was not manifested at a single place, but it streamed throughout the procession route. In other described cases, the ritual space manifested at a location, whether in a street or *imambara*. Here, however, flagellation is a part of the procession—therefore the manifested ritual space is not grounded at any one location. The ritual space manifests as a tributary space that streams along the procession route.

Conclusion

The discussion of this paper focuses on exploring the sacred space manifested through the ritual of flagellation. The main approach is based on a shift of focus from 'the place of ritual' to 'ritual space', distinguishing 'ritual space' from the built space. I argue that ritual space is a *performed* space and that its manifestation is not contingent on the built environment, including built sacred spaces, but entwined with performing flagellation. The ritual space is not a virtual space since its existence is intertwined with an actual matter: practicing ritual.

It has been explained that the *najes*-ness of blood creates a contradiction between flagellation and sacred built space (mosque). However, blood has nothing to do with generating or overcoming the sacred ritual space. In other words, physical matter (blood) contradicts built space; however it has nothing to do with ritual space. This idea should not be taken to mean that bleeding is not important for the ritual of flagellation. Indeed shedding blood is an essential part of *matam* as a ritual; nevertheless it is not important in defining *matam* as a ritual space. This particularly elaborates that *matam* as a space and *matam* as a ritual are not one or the same thing, but they are entwined. Therefore, the idea of *matam* not only shows that ritual is an intrinsically spatial phenomenon, but also reveals the discursive relation between ritual and space.

Notes

1. In the context of New Guinea, Rappaport has explained that ritual has been used 'to maintain environment, limit fighting, adjust the person-land ratio, and facilitate trade and the distribution of surplus pork (Rappaport 1979, 41; Bell 1992, 126-127).
2. The division of Muslims into Shi'i and Sunni sects initially emerged based on the dispute over the legitimate successor to the prophet prior to the tragedy of Ashura in the late 7th century. However it was only in the 8th century when a distinctive Imami Shi'i discourse began to emerge (Haider 2011; Newman 2012, 195).
3. The Shi'i faith has a background in the Deccan of India prior to the establishment of the Safavids of Iran (see Matthee 2006). Nonetheless as Howarth (2005) notes, the Safavids not only initiated the most flourishing Shi'i cultural era in Iran but were also one of the primary forces in spreading the Shi'i faith to India.
4. Bombay was officially renamed Mumbai in 1992.
5. Also see Kidambi (2007).
6. Also see Bosworth et al (1983), Calmard (1996), and Hussain (2005).
7. For example, Nakash explains that breast-beating and face-slapping were among the 'traditional form of mourning for the dead among the Arabs even before the appearance of Islam' (1993, 196).
8. For more see Subramanyam (1996) who discusses *rudaali* by addressing a Bollywood movie titled *Rudaali* (1993).
9. For example, see Ende (1978) about controversy over the Shi'i flagellation during the early 20th century in Lebanon and Syria.
10. Translated by Pinault from Hussein Waeiz al-Kashifi, *Rawdat al-Shuhada* (1979, 12).
11. For more about differentiating documented history and oral history see Thompson (1978; 1998).
12. *Imambara* (also written as *imambareh* and *imamawada*) is known as *Husseinyeh* in Iran and Iraq; it is a religious/community place dedicated to the commemoration of Muharram. In India, *imambara* is also called *Ashur-khaneh*.
13. On 'performance as contingent process' see Schieffelin (1998, 196-98).
14. Shab-i Ashur is the beginning of Ashura day, since a

- day-calendar in the Muslim lunar calendar starts in the evening, not morning; therefore Ashura day starts the evening of (for example) Monday and ends on the afternoon of Tuesday.
15. The observation was repeated in December 2010 as well.
16. *Mahfil* in Urdu is synonymous with *anjuman*, and also means the place of gathering.
17. Dawodi Bohras are Shi'i Isma'ili and follow the Mosta'ali school of Isma'ilism.
18. The road is the most important thoroughfare that connects southern Mumbai (the centre of the city) to the north of city.
19. Ganpati is the Hindu Festival of celebrating Ganesh or Ganpati, the elephant-headed deity, who is known as the remover of obstacles and the god of auspiciousness. The festival is currently the most important festival in Mumbai. The modern history of the Ganpati festival dates back to 1893, when Tilak gave the festival a distinctly political face. For more about Ganpati see Edwardes (1923, 104-105), Krishnaswamy (1966, 214) and Hansen (2001, 29).
20. In both years, all participants were teenagers.
21. His name is also transliterated as Haji Zainal Abedeen Shiraazi and Haji Zeinal Abedin in various reports published by TOI.
22. Aga Ali Namazi, the manager of Mogul Masjid, kindly gave me a copy of the document.
23. *Najes* is also the condition of not being religiously clean.
24. According to police and *Times of India* (TOI) reports during the late 19th century, the Ashura procession ended at the Moody Bunder (bay), where *taboots* were immersed (e.g. TOI, October 11, 1886, p.3). However, Birdwood (1915) has mentioned that the procession ended at Back Bay during the late 19th century.
25. The official name of the road is Ramchandra Bhatt Marg.
26. Religious decree.
27. *Maraje* (plural form of *maraja*) means references; *maraje* are high ranked clergies and Shi'i-Muslims follow their opinion on religious practices.
28. *Ayatollah* is the title of the highest rank of Shi'i clergy.
29. *Anjuman* means association or union; in Lucknow the group of participants is known as *gorhan*.

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Reza Masoudi Nejad is a native south-western Iranian who lives in London. As an urbanist, his work addresses the geography of crowds and protests, urban violence, urban transformation, and the process of cosmopolitanism. He has extensively studied religious rituals in public spaces in Iran and India. He has been a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity (MPI-MMG), Göttingen (2009–2011) and an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at Zentrum

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