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Three Shi'a Poets
Sect-Related Themes in Pre-Modern Urdu Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which sectarian differences were approached by three major Urdu poets: Sauda, Mir and Ghalib. These poets evoked, acknowledged, played upon, and even enjoyed Sunni-Shiʿa differences without the situation always reaching some kind of instantaneous flashpoint of sectarian "tension". Contrary to recent arguments that sectarian affiliation can be discerned through evidence of ritual practice of pilgrimage and paying respect to the shrines of certain historical personages of spiritual importance, in the Indian environment, as no doubt elsewhere also, it appears difficult to pin down sectarian affiliation from rituals and expressions of respect and devotion to the Prophet's household.

Keywords

Introduction

Three of the most prominent pre-modern, and perhaps the three greatest, poets of the Urdu language – Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib[1] – appear to have deep associations with the Shiʻi sect of Islam. This fact does not attract attention in general. Indeed, it may be argued that the typical reader would not be aware of these particular eighteenth and nineteenth-century poets' sectarian identities, despite their great fame and popularity. One reason for this, it may also be argued, is that sectarian affiliation hardly figured prominently in the poetry of these poets. While this might be true for the major part of their verse, a survey of the *kullīyāt* (complete works) of Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib, yields a number of interesting poems where sectarian themes appear to be directly evoked or addressed, either through laying out a claim for one's own self, or by refuting the claim of another.

While in no instance can engagement with sectarian themes in these poets' published verse be said to venture into the territory of *tabarrā* (ritual cursing of one's enemies), some of the writing may be seen to be reflective of the practice of *barā'at* (expressing dissociation from one's enemies).[2] What's more, one of the most intriguing aspects of these writings, given historical and persisting ideas of sectarian "tensions" in diverse and multi-sect Muslim settings, is that the poets sometimes introduce potentially controversial sectarian references in an almost humorous, light-hearted vein.

This paper explores instances in the poetry of Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib conveying specifically sectarian connotations, and attempts to analyse the implications of such verses in the social and literary milieu in which the three poets were writing. What, for example, did it mean to highlight one's own or some contemporary's sectarian affiliation in the context of a poem? What, if any, were the social implications for the literary evocation of sectarian themes that might be considered 'sensitive' in many modern contexts? And finally, can such poetry and contextual material from the lives of these poets tell us anything about the way in which sectarian relations played out between Sunnis and Shiʻas at particular pre-modern moments in the Hindustani[3] context?

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[1] I have followed a scheme of transliteration largely based on John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: Low, Marston, 1895), http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/platts/

[2] I am grateful to Professor C. M. Naim for clarifying this distinction for me. Amir-Moezzi translates the concepts of *walāyah /tawallā* and *barā'ah /tabarrā* among the Shiʻa as "sacred love" and "sacred hatred" respectively. See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi,. "An Absence Filled with Presences: Shaykhiyya Hermeneutics of the Occultation," in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political History* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 49. For an extended discussion of *barā'at*, see Elan Kohlberg, "Bara'a in Shi'i Doctrine," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 139-75.

[3] i.e. North Indian

A note on Shi'ism in the Indian environment

With the coming of colonial modernity, India for the first time went through the experience of a census wherein British administrators attempted to classify the population into distinct and internally homogenous religious categories, with some groups and subgroups emerging as 'minorities' and others as 'majorities'. This politics of enumeration ultimately played an important role in India's political destiny (and continues to exercise considerable influence on present-day politics in the modern Indian nation-state), since the world's largest population of Muslims now came to constitute a minority in a colonial state where the diverse religious customs of the majority of the population were classified as Hindu. What it also meant was that a vast Shi'i population, comparable in number only to Qājār Iran, was now perceived as forming a minority subgroup within the minority Muslim population of British India. The upsurge of violence against Pakistani Shi'a in recent years and consequent local and international activism calling for the protection of a vulnerable "minority community" has done much to solidify this perceptual *minoritisation* of the Shi'a in a (seemingly paradoxical) context where the movement to found a separate state for all the Muslims of British India was led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, an individual who clearly belonged to a Shi'i family.

From a historical perspective, however, it would perhaps be a mistake to view the Shi'a as a minority community in India, firstly since the concept of minoritisation does not apply in the proper sense in a pre-nineteenth century context where a formal census had not yet taken place, and secondly because of the influential and powerful position of Shi'i individuals and families not only as members of the Mughal court, but also as ruling dynasties in their own right – such as the Bahmanīs (1347-1527), and the Nawwābs of Awadh (1724-1856) – in different regions of India in various time periods since the advent of Muslim-ruled kingdoms in India. Although the Mughals, the major ruling dynasty of India (1526-1857), are known as a Sunni dynasty, studies of South Asian Islam have often seen the preponderantly high representation of Shi'a among the Muslim elite, and their historic associations with ruling dynasties as being instrumental in Shi'ism's great "influence" over Indian Muslim culture in general. All this serves to limit the relevance of colonial statistics such as those determining the Shi'a as forming about three per cent of the Muslim population in most districts in British India.[4]

While Shi'ism in South Asia certainly enjoyed a visibility and prominence above and beyond statistical calculations of its actual formal adherents, the question of "influence" is much harder to address. Understandings of potential influence seem largely to be based on the prevalence of *'azādārī* rites among not just Shi'a but also Sunnis in the month of Muḥarram. When scholars attribute the participation of Hindu groups in

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[4] Justin Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community, and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12-13.

Muḥarram celebrations to a hegemonic Muslim presence in India, the logic is perfectly clear. However, in the predominant attribution of South Asian Sunnis' historically popular participation in Muḥarram rituals to Shi'ism's considerable political and cultural power in India's specific environment, scholars might be operating under the mistaken assumption that with respect to shared Shi'i-Sunni participation in Muḥarram rites, the case of South Asia is a unique example of inter-sect harmony and cooperation, and that Sunnis elsewhere in the world do not perform (or have historically not performed) mourning rituals of various kinds during the month of Muḥarram.[5] A second assumption is that Muḥarram celebrations basically were and are initiated and organised by Shi'is, and that Sunnis (like the Hindus) merely *joined in*. If this were taken to be true, how then would we account for the fact that the biggest *ta'ziyahs*[6] in South Asia were historically almost all built by Sunnis,[7] and till this day largely continue to be so?

One theory that is commonly proposed for this perceived convergence in Shi'i and Sunni Muḥarram observances is the influence of Sufi orders and their traditional devotion to the Prophet's household in creating "certain synergies" between normative Sunni practice and Shi'ism.[8] The argument is also made that there was less strife between Shi'a and Sunnis prior to the modern period because a majority of Sunnis were apparently under the influence of Sufis who were "not averse to the observance of certain Shi'a practices".[9] Interestingly, the point about Sufi orders as serving to influence Sunnis to show devotion to the Prophet's family members[10] is made in a way that seems to assume, firstly, that there is some clear and discernible separation between Sufism and Sunnism, and, secondly, that devotion to the Prophet's household could not originate from within the tenets of any Sunni

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[5] Karrar Ḥusain notes that "unlike other centres in the Muslim world, Muharram celebrations in South Asia are not exclusively the concern of the Shi'a. The initiative did come from the Shi'a, but the Sunni and even the Hindus take part in the Muharram celebrations. The *ta'zīyahs* are almost all built by the Sunni, and the *marthīya majlis* is not only attended by many Sunni and Hindus, but many Sunni and non-Muslim poets have cultivated this form with high artistic skill and deep devotion." See Karrar Husain, "The Significance of the Urdu Marthīya," in *Papers from the Imam Husayn Conference, London, July 1984* (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1986).

[6] "The Iranian form of the *ta'zīya*, as a kind of drama or Passion Play, did not become popular as a practice in South Asia. The graphical representation of the *Ahl-i Bait* also did not find currency. Here the *ta'zīyah* developed a form that quite different from that in Iran. See Ḥusain, "The Significance," 265.

[7] For the famous Urdu poet Jaun Elia's (1931-2002) humorous take on the shaping of Muḥarram rituals in South Asia, see http://www.kidvai.com/windmills/Media/JoT.mp3

[8] Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 5.

[9] Madhu Trivedi, *The Making of the Awadh Culture* (Delhi: Primus, 2010), 16-18.

[10] Historian Azfar Moin also cautions against the tendency to attribute any element of commonality between Shi'a and Sunnis, or between the Safavid and Mughal dynasties, to the "mystical" practices of Sufism. See Azfar A. Moin. *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 7.

school or be native to it. It is difficult to understand what could be behind such an assumption unless one sees it as a result of an unconscious privileging of the viewpoints of certain modern and early modern "reformist" scholars who emerged from within Sunni communities and described many Muḥarram-associated rituals as being alien to the spirit of "Islam". What is more, the privileging of the historical role of mystical or "Sufi" practice in promoting more peaceable relations between the Shi'i and Sunni sects through emphasising devotion to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Prophet's family also ignores the fact that in the modern era, those Sunni groups who are the most ardent supporters of mystical practices and Muḥarram celebrations have often shown themselves to be at the forefront of anti-Shi'a polemic.[11]

Hence, while recognising that many aspects of Shi'i and Sunni practice shared great similarity in the pre-modern era (as well as today) in South Asia as well as other parts of the world, it is also important to recognise that this does not mean that Shi'i-Sunni interactions in South Asia were entirely free of conflict before the dawn of the modern era, an era which has seen several civil disturbances of a sectarian nature and unprecedented scale in both pre- and post-Partition India,[12] as well as recurrent and brutal incidents of targeted sectarian violence by militant groups in Pakistan.[13] The sharpening of sectarian divisions in the modern period have often led commentators to depict the pre-modern past as a halcyon period of Sunni-Shi'a relations. The essayist and historian of Lucknow, 'Abd ul-Ḥalīm Sharar, writes about Awadh's Nawwābī period[14] as one in which no one "knew" who was a Muslim and who was not.[15] While this is quite unlikely to be literally true as we shall soon see in the case of Ghālib, what Sharar probably means to imply is that sectarian affiliation did not matter at all in day-to-day interactions. This retrospective description of Sharar's was penned in the early twentieth century while comparing his present to the situation before the middle of the nineteenth century, before a full and formal colonial takeover had taken places in India. However, interestingly enough, the very same words as Sharar's are today

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[11] Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 57.

[12] There were a number of civil agitations relating to the public recitation of *tabarrā* in the early twentieth century.

[13] See Justin Jones for a study of the sharpening sectarian lines between Shi'a and Sunnis in colonial India. Jones privileges the colonial period for the growth of ideas of religious community quite new to Shi'ism in India. He credits the formalisation of a systematic Shi'a religion to wider engagement with "local, regional and transnational religious publics" as a result of "new technologies of travel, communication and public organization", Orientalist influence in implanting a new sense of internal homogeneity within religious communities and "expansion of religious knowledge and doctrinal systematization of religious difference". His theory is that "it was in the language of *qaum*, generated by the communications of the modern public sphere, that this separateness was mostly manufactured." See Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 18-19, 143-144.

[14] The situation of Mughal Delhi is unlikely to have been very different from Awadh despite the fact that Nawwabs of Awadhs were Shi'a unlike the Mughals.

[15] Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 14.

used by South Asians to describe the situation prior to the 1970s and '80s. It is thus clearly a romanticised view of sectarian relations.

Evidence shows that in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century – the period when our three poets were living and writing in North Indian cities like Agra, Delhi, Lucknow, and Rampur – a great quantity of polemical treatises were written in India both in Arabic and Persian as a result of Sunni-Shi'i ideological confrontations, perhaps the most famous of these treatises being Shah 'Abdul Aziz's *Tuḥfah-i Iṣnā 'Ashariyyah*.[16] In 1758-9, a Sunni *'ālim*, Maulāna 'Abdul Aziz Baḥr ul-'ulūm, was forced to move away from Lucknow following an incident of violence during a Muḥarram procession when he was perceived to show disrespect to a *ta'ziyah*. Some years later, there was an incident of bloody rioting between the Sunni Rohillāhs of Najīb ud-Daulah and the Shi'a soldiers of Shujā' ud-Daulah's army during a campaign of the Mughal emperor Shāh 'Ālam.[17] During the reign of Ghāzīuddīn Ḥaidar in Awadh (1814-19), an incident of rioting was averted when the Shi'a of Nasīrābād decided to recite *tabarrā* publicly in Muḥarram, causing the Shi'a king to forbid this practice in response to the complaints of Sunni subjects. During this general period, campaigns to ban *ta'ziyah* processions were also led by groups that scholars today characterise as 'revivalist', although they do not appear to have enjoyed wide success.[18]

Hence, we can see that Saudā, Mir, and Ghālib's Hindustan was by no means devoid of sectarian "tensions". While recognising this fact, we should also note that there appears to be a significant practice of inter-sect Shi'a-Sunni marriage during this period (resulting in a situation where members of the same household were often affiliated to different sects), Sunni jurists continued to be employed by the Awadh Nawwābs, Sunnis and Shi'as studied together at the theological seminary of Farangī Maḥal,[19] and it was also not a rare thing to see Sunnis serving as guardians of Shi'a *waqfs* and *imambāṛās*.[20] It was not till much later that a separate theological seminary was established for Shi'a *'ulamā*, and appeals were made to remove Shi'i *waqfs* from Sunni guardianship, and not until 1871 that separate Shi'i and Sunni graveyards were established in a city like Lucknow.[21]

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[16] Trivedi, *The Making of the Awadh Culture*, 93-95. Jones appears to credit the development of a "culture of debate and antagonism between various Muslim schools" as one of the major transformative effects of modernity. See Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 52. However, while the intensity might have been different, pre-modern India was by no means unacquainted with such a culture.

[17] C. M. Naim, "The Second Tyranny of Religious Majorities." *Ambiguities of Heritage.* 1999, 96. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/naim/ambiguities/16secon dtyranny.html#nstar

[18] Trivedi, *The Making of the Awadh Culture*, 16-18.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 14-15.

[21] Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 114.

One thing that emerges clearly from this complex mix of trends and events is that although it should not be discounted that some Shi'a in certain social contexts and locations in a region as large and diverse as North India might have felt tempted to or obliged to practice *taqīyah*, it does appear that numerous individuals and groups were prominently and openly known to belong to the Shi'i persuasion despite living in the mainstream of what remained predominantly Sunni urban and rural settings.[22] This open recognition of sectarian difference in everyday contexts makes it especially interesting to explore the meaning behind poetic acts highlighting this difference and the way these poetic acts were received at the social and political level.

Perhaps the challenge of probing sectarian relations in Mughal India's cosmopolitan context is best captured in Juan Cole's expression of bafflement at finding education in eighteenth-century Awadh remaining "strangely" ecumenical despite powerful forces of communal strife and separation.[23] It appears that the seemingly contradictory trends of ideological antagonism, and extensive and largely seamless everyday dealings is the characteristic feature of Shi'a-Sunni relations in Mughal India, as will be borne out in the analysis of sectarian themes emerging in poetry in this paper.

Saudā, the merciless lampooner

Although the poetry of Mirzā Muḥammad Rafī' 'Saudā' (1713-81) comprises very fine verse in a wide variety of classical forms, in the world of Urdu literature his name has most famously come to be associated with his *hajws*[24] and *qaṣīdahs* at which he is really said to have excelled. Saudā's ancestors are

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[22] This ability of Mughal India to successfully "assimilate" and "accommodate" peoples of openly diverse sectarian and religious persuasions and largely maintain the peace between them has often been celebrated by modern scholars. Although one must beware of modern nationalist tendencies in what is often a self-congratulatory analysis, there does appear to be some difference in the way that Shi'a-Sunni relations appeared to operate in India on the one hand and in the Safavid Empire or the Ottoman Empire on the other, where there appears to have been greater need to hide, or at least be much more discreet about, a "minority" sectarian affiliation. See Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson, "The Tabarra'iyan and the Early Safavids." *Iranian Studies* 37.1 (2004): 47-71; and Rula J. Abisaab, "The Shi'ite 'ulama', the Madrasas, and Educational Reform in the Late Ottoman Period." *Osmanli Araştırmaları* 36 (2010): 155-8.

[23] Juan R. Cole, "Imami Shi'ism from Iran to North India, 1722-1856: State, Society and Clerical Ideology in Awadh." Unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, 1984, 49.

[24] "...a *hajv* is a poem ridiculing someone or something. A *hajv* is a poem with a specific target, its purpose is to ridicule the target, never mind what you say about the target is based on facts or not. The more scurrilous the terms of ridicule, the better the *hajv*. True, very often the *hajv* makes the reader laugh. But this is because human beings always tend to laugh at another's discomfort." Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, "The Satires of Sauda (1706-1781)." Sept. 2010, 7,
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/srf/srf_sauda_2010.pdf

thought to be *mirzās* of Mughal descent.[25] He spent the earlier part of his career at the Delhi court of the Mughals, while later years were spent at the Awadh court. There appears to be no dispute about his affiliation to the Shi'a sect of Islam. According to one account, both the maternal and paternal sides of his family belonged to the *imāmiyah* sect (or school, depending on how it is looked at), and while his maternal grandfather Ně'mat Ḵẖān 'Ālī was a laid-back, jocular sort of person, he was fervent to the extreme on sectarian points. Because of his ancestry, Saudā is generally accepted to be a Shi'i.[26]

Saudā has a whole separate *dīwān* of *marṣīyahs*, so many did he say.[27] He has also expressed his devotion to the Prophet's household in other genres beside the traditional *marṣīyah* and *qaṣīdah*.

He also wrote verses in praise of 'Alī's *āstānah* (threshold of tomb) and the *mazārs* (graves) of other spiritual personages, such as Ḥusain ibn 'Alī and Mūsā Raẓā.[28] There are twelve *salāms* in his collected works.[29] He has also written a *maṣnawī* critiquing the art of *marṣīyah* and *salām* styles of a writer named Taqī and implied that poets of mediocre calibre win easy praise by composing *marāṣī* which, however low their quality, will be lauded by the common herd because of their religious nature.[30]

As far as his many *hajws* are concerned, only three are said to relate directly to religious or sectarian matters. Two are directed at a certain hapless Sunni, Maulawī Sājid, who appears to have earned Saudā's ire by declaring that the crow is *ḥalāl* to eat. Initially, Saudā composed a poem lampooning him for being a buffoon and a clown for going against all the books of *fiqh* to issue such a ridiculous pronouncement (*ik masḵẖarāh yih kahta hai kawwā ḥalāl hai*), for then the next step would be an eagle being *ḥalāl*, and then why should the owl be excluded? Sājid's *fatwā* invites on him the wrath and ridicule of the whole world, and even his own servant refuses to sample the crow he has cooked for him claiming it to be unlawful fare (*kis mujtahid ke fatwe par oska chakhoon main ḵẖūn?*).

Modern discussion of Saudā continues to be characterised by anxiety about his civility or lack thereof, and his sectarian "narrow-mindedness". The last seems largely to be on account of another religious *hajw* of Saudā's. In the

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[25] There appears to be some dispute about where exactly they hailed from. S. R. Faruqi thinks that they were probably from Kashmir. See Faruqi, *The Satires*, 9-11. Shaikh Chand says that they were soldiers from Kabul. See Shaikh Chānd, *Saudā Mirzā Muḥammad Rafī'* (Aurangābād: Anjuman-i taraqqī-yi urdū, 1930), 35. Anjum disputes this, and quotes Naqsh 'Alī, who knew Saudā personally, stating that Saudā's ancestors had come from Buḵẖārā. He claims that there is also evidence in Saudā's *kalām* of his Buḵẖāran ancestry and that he looked down on the *mirzās* of Kābul. See Khaliq Anjum, *Mirzā Muḥammad Rafī' Saudā* ('Alīgaṛh: Anjuman-i taraqqī-yi urdū (Hind), 1966), 55-56.

[26] Ḥusain Qulī Ḵẖān 'Āshiqī and 'Alī Luṭf write that Saudā was buried in Imām Bāṛā Bāqir. See Anjum, *Mirzā Muḥammad Rafī' Saudā*, 132.

[27] Chānd, *Saudā*, 282.

[28] Chānd, *Saudā*, 202-210.

[29] Chānd, *Saudā*, 311.

[30] Chānd, *Saudā*, 287.

published *kullīyāt* of Saudā, it has been printed under the title "*Qaṣīdah dar hajw-i shakhse kih mutaʿaṣṣib būd*", that is, "An Ode Lampooning a Fellow Who Was a Bigot". However, in many manuscripts, the subject of the poem is identified by name as the famous Naqshbandī mystic and scholar Shāh Walīullah (d. 1762).

This *hajw* of Shāh Walīullah has certainly caused a negative impression of Saudā in certain minds as a 'narrow-minded', intolerant individual who goes off on a foul-mouthed, abusive tirade over the most minor of sectarian differences, therefore being worse than the most bigoted of petty preachers [*khunuk-dil wāʿiz aur mazhab parast maulawī*] who can't live with an opinion opposed to his own.However, there is other evidence from Saudā's verse [31] and life showing that categorisations like liberal-minded [*wasīʿ mashrab*] or narrow-minded [*tang naẓar*] would reflect rather too neat an approach in dealing with a poet like Saudā. Notwithstanding his criticism of Shāh Walīullah in this poem, Saudā appears to have been on very good terms with two other individuals who were Sunni and Naqshbandī like Shāh Walīullah – the poets Mīr Dard (d. 1785) and Mirzā Maẓhar Jān-i Jānān[32] (d. 1781).

Yet it is important to point out that the greatest victim of Saudā's *hajw-goyī* was Mīr Ghulām Ḥusain Ẓāḥik (d. 1782), a poet of Shiʿa Sayyid lineage (that is, from the Prophet's line), who apparently loved to write *hajws* of

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[31] Chānd, *Saudā*, 85-87. Faruqi is surprised to find Saudā writing a hajw of Shāh Walīullah at all: "The third hajv is, most unexpectedly, against the great sufi and scholar Shah Valiullah who is universally respected as perhaps the greatest Muslim reformer, religious leader and intellectual sufi of the eighteenth century. Shah Valiullah is reported to have viewed with some favour the shiʿa practice of honouring and weeping for Imam Ḥusain's martyrdom at Karbala. Yet he also held that the Caliphate of Ali (the first and greatest shiʾi Imam and the Prophet's son in law) wasn't really established technically because a section of Muslims didn't swear the oath of allegiance to him. This seems to have caused Saudā's outburst against Shah Valiullah." See Faruqi, "The Satires," 10. However, in much modern scholarly and polemical discussion, Shāh Walīullah is held to have fanned criticism of practices associated with the Shiʿa sect, and his son, the author of the polemical treatise *Tuḥfah-i Iṣnā ʿAsharīyyah*, is said to have discouraged Sunnis from associating with Shiʿas, "whether through marriage or by eating animals slaughtered by them". See Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.

[32] This friendship is especially interesting in the light of Schimmel's claim that Maẓhar even composed a defense of Muʿāwīyah, desiring that this "just and successful" ruler should be treated like any companion of the Prophet. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-century Muslim India* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 18.

others. Ẓāḥik is in some places mocked from being a shameless glutton,[33] and in other places being an insult to the name of his holy progenitors, since writing such foul-mouthed *hajws* of other people was hardly the mark of a Sayyid.[34]

In analyzing Saudā's *hajws*, perhaps we should keep in mind that he would marshal whatever real or false information he could against his subject in order to ridicule them. Perhaps, despite Saudā's biographers' shame and horror at some of what he had written, it is precisely because of a larger part of his words were widely understood during his time to be completely without weight that we seldom hear about his subjects confronting him for casting aspersions on the honour of their household, especially their women. His *hajws* of Mīr Ẓāḥik do not seem to have prevented the latter's son, the renowned poet Mīr Ḥasan, from becoming Saudā's student.[35] Saudā ridiculed Mīr Taqī Mīr for being a fake Sayyid as well as for presuming to make corrections in other people's poetry, but Mīr praised Saudā highly in his *taẕkirah* of Urdu poets, *Nikāt ush-Shu'arā*.[36]

We thus find interesting examples of several kinds of religious themes in Saudā's poetry: laudatory verse for sacred figures, mockery of doctrinal interpretations he disagrees with, scorn towards non-Shi'i versions of Islamic political history, and ridiculing the lineage or character of fellow Shi'a figures. Despite achieving tremendous fame as a poet during his lifetime, there does not appear to be evidence of any significant reaction at the social level during his day to the verses that so many editors find so contentious and prefer to omit from published editions of his work in today's modern era where expanded networks of communication also bring the potential of amplifying controversy through the mass media. These points can be illustrated with a famous anecdote from Saudā life.

Saudā's patron Āṣaf ud-Daulah had gone hunting one day, and when the news of his successfully killing a lion reached Saudā, he promptly composed the verse:

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[33]   Let there be anywhere even a whiff of something eatable, he'll concentrate all his senses there,
And like a fly, he'll pound his head with both hands.
If someone's house is on fire, and there's just a trace of smoke,
While people go rushing to put out the fire,
He dashes forth, plate in hand
Hoping for food.
(Faruqi's translation.) See Faruqi, "The Satires," 14.

[34] Mirzā M. R, Saudā and Muḥammad Ḥasan. *Kullīyāt-i Saudā* (Dihlī: Pāpūlar buks pablīkeshan, 1966), 332-341.

[35] Anjum thinks Saudā just wrote his *hajw* just to punish Ẓāḥik a little for writing *hajws* of many people he knew. See Anjum, *Mirzā Muḥammad Rafī' Saudā*, 313-316.

[36] Ibid., 293.

یارو یہ ابنِ ملجم پیدا ہوا دوبارہ
شیرِ خدا کو جس نے بھیلوں کے بن میں مارا

Friends, this Ibn-i Muljam[37] has been born again
Who has killed the lion of God[38] in the forest of the Bhīls[39]

Upon hearing it, the Nawwāb, a fellow Shi'i, laughingly remonstrated with Saudā about turning him into the murderer of the Lion of God, that is 'Alī. Saudā's reply was that the lion he had killed was surely God's alone, and belonged neither to the Nawwāb nor to Saudā.[40] This eighteenth-century incident became a humorous anecdote. In modern times, the employment of the same phrase, '*sher-i khudā*', in a children's poem by prominent Pakistani social worker Akhtar Hameed Khān, was used to file a court case against him in the early 1990s for insulting the fourth Caliph of Islam under his country's colonial-era blasphemy law which makes it a crime to defile the religious sentiments of any community.[41]

Mīr, the Sayyid

Mīr Taqī "Mīr" (d. 1810), although most famous for the sublime mastery he displayed in the art of *ghazal-goyi*, also wrote many beautiful elegies for members of the Prophet's household. There appears to be little doubt about his affiliation to the Shi'i sect,[42] which is considered to be hereditary. Although there appears to be evidence that his father's line may not have been Shi'a, his mother is thought to be from a family of Shi'a Sayyids.[43]

Mir's elegies are extremely solemn, and can perhaps be said to surpass even Mīr Anīs' magnificent, pathos-filled eloquence in the sheer anguish they tend to produce without allowing catharsis of any kind. His poetic references to the Karbala event and the politics of succession to the Caliphate generally do not show signs of the kind of satirical elements that can be discerned in Saudā or Ghālib's writings. However, his prose work *Zikr-i Mīr,* in which he

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[37] The Kharijite who killed 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib

[38] *Sher-i khudā* or Aṣadullah is a popular epithet for 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.

[39] The Bhīls are a race of people who live in a number of mountainous and forested regions of India.

[40] Muḥammad H, Āzād, Frances W. Pritchett, and Shamsur Raḥmān Fārūqī, *Āb-e Hayāt: Shaping the Canon of Urdu Poetry* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 161.

[41] Eqbal Ahmad, "Law against Justice." *Dawn*, 4 Oct. 1992, http://secularpakistan.wordpress.com/2009/07/12/law-against-justice/ C. M. Naim has also noted this irony in his 1999 essay "The Second Tyranny of Religious Majorities" http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/naim/ambiguities/16secon dtyranny.html#n02

[42] The scholar C M Naim also reads the fact that Mīr, in the introduction to one of his prose works, praises the Prophet's descendants as Imams, without seeking blessings upon his closest Companions also, as proof that Mir considered himself a staunch Shi'i. Naim, "The Second Tyranny," 26.

[43] Ibid., 11-12.

narrates hagiographic, political, and humorous anecdotes through a pseudo-historical and pseudo-autobiographical framework, there appear to be several instances where he takes sharp digs at elements of Sunni belief or behaviour. In the following anecdote, he gives a very good picture of what inter-sectarian interaction can be like in a prominently multi-sectarian setting like Hindustan:

> I heard high praise of a scholar ['ālim] and went to see him. He turned out to be a mindless mulla, who could never grasp anything subtle. No sooner had I arrived than he said—stupid that he was—'Many young men these days have become Shi'ah and leave no falsehood unsaid concerning the blessed elders. This rosary that you carry—made of the 'dust of the Imam'—causes a pure-minded person like me to be perturbed, for it strongly suggests that you might be so inclined too. If that is indeed the case, please leave me alone.' I replied, ' I too had my doubts. Thank God that you turned out to be a Sunni.' That ass of a man did not get the point, and became very happy. [Thinking] that I was like him, he went on spouting more rubbish. I grew even more disgusted, and got up and left.[44]

Ghālib, master of ambiguity

Mirzā Aṣadullah K̲h̲ān "Ghālib" (1797-1869) is another poet whose fame rests predominantly on the incredibly rich and complex verses he wrote in the *ghazal* genre. Although he remains very much a classical poet in terms of his art, his life span can be said to mark the transition from the pre-modern to modern period in India, and we have access to much more detailed biographical records for him than for the earlier poets. Having moved from Agra to Delhi upon marriage at an early age, towards the end of his life he witnessed the formal colonial takeover and downfall of the Mughal dynasty at close quarters as a member of the Delhi court. Although he clearly came from Sunni stock, many of his contemporaries appear to think that he became Shiʻi at some stage of his life.[45] While this never became fully clear, as we shall see in the emerging discussion, Ghālib appears to have revelled in going out of his way to stake his allegiance to ʻAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, with several examples like the one below appearing in both his Persian and Urdu *ghazals*:

غالب نام آورم نام و نشانم مپرس
ہم اسداللّٰہم و ہم اسداللّٰہیم

> I am the famous Ghālib, ask not my name and address
> I am Aṣadullah, and also Aṣadullah's slave[46]

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[44] Ibid., 96.

[45] Ralph Russell, Khurshidul Islam, and Mirza A. Ghalib. *Ghalib, 1797-1869: Volume I: Life and Letters* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 35.

[46] There is a play here on the word Asadullah, meaning Lion of God – an epithet of ʻAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Ghālib's own name was also Aṣadullah, and he used both Ghālib and Aṣad as his *tak̲h̲alluṣ*.

<div dir="rtl">
غالب ندیمِ دوست سے آتی ہے بوئے دوست
مشغولِ حق ہوں بندگیِ بو تراب میں
</div>

> Ghālib, from the friend of the Friend, we gain the fragrance of
> the Friend
> In the servitude of Bū Turāb,[47] I am absorbed in the Real

Interestingly, such expressions of devotion to 'Alī appear to be a more common feature in the work of this nineteenth-century poet of ambiguous sectarian affiliation than in that of most of his other prominent contemporaries, even those who are unambiguously Shi'a. Perhaps it is precisely the ambiguity concerning his sectarian identity that makes pointed reverence to 'Alī such an attractive theme for Ghālib. Of course, he never fails to bring his love for 'Alī into humorous service for justifying his own love of wine-drinking. He has said several *shě'rs* on this theme, and in a letter extolling the effect of wine on his creative temperament and bemoaning his inability to purchase wine because of his financial distress,[48] he exclaims:[49] "Oh a slave of the Saqi of Kausar, and with parched lips! What an injustice! What an outrage!"[50]

Notwithstanding his repeated claims of being 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib's passionate devotee, we do not find a record of any instance where he expressly declared himself to be Shi'i. There are a number of places where he claimed to be Sunni, however, though these claims really cannot be interpreted in a straightforward manner. Ghālib's biographer Ḥālī narrates an incident where the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah "Ẓafar" (d.1862) once remarked in court that he had heard that Asadullah Khān Ghālib is *shī'ī ul-maẕhab*. When Ghālib heard this, he composed a few *rubā'īs* to recite to the king and dissociate himself from the charge of *tashaiyǒ'* and *rifẕ*.

On another occasion, Ghālib straight out refers to himself as a Sunni, but in a way which is actually mocking of Sunni practice:

> It was the month of Ramaẕān. A Sunni *maulawī* came to visit Ghālib. It was the time of the *'aṣr* prayer, and Ghālib asked his servant for water. The *maulawī* remarked with astonishment, "Is his excellency not fasting?" Ghālib replied, "I'm a Sunni

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[47] Bū Tūrāb, meaning Father of the Dust, was an epithet of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. There is a play on the word *bū* here which means 'fragrance' in Persian, and is also short for *abū* which means 'father' in Arabic.

[48] in the period immediately after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 when his state pension had been stopped.

[49] Khvājah A.H. Ḥālī, *Yādgār-i Ghālib* (Lāhaur: Shaikh Mubārak 'Alī, 1930), 92.

[50] Khvājah A. H. Ḥālī, *Yadgar-e Ghalib: A Biography of Ghalib* (trans. K.H. Qadiri) (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1990), 89. *Sāqī-i Kauṣar*, i.e. Cupbearer of Kausar, is an epithet of 'Alī.

Muslim. I break my fast while four *gharīs* of the day [several hours of daylight] still remain."[51]

Since Ghālib's purpose here is to take a jibe at Sunni practice, the anecdote paradoxically gives greater credence to the notion of Ghālib's being Shi'i rather than Sunni. Expressing his viewpoint through means of subtle hints is actually very much Ghālib's way, and his poetic style has come to be associated with high degrees of ambiguity in terms of meaning. Perhaps this is the reason that despite his obvious attachment to 'Alī and his progeny, he hardly wrote any *marsīyahs*, an art that can be said to delight more in the wringing of pathos than in subtlety of wordplay. He is reported to have said that there was no *marsīyah* writer like Anīs (d. 1874) or Dabīr (d. 1875) in India, nor would there ever be, and that he himself has no affinity for the art (*main is maidān ka mard nahīn hūn*).[52] With respect to gauging Ghālib's religious or sectarian views and attitudes, we are in a position where we do not have to rely solely on his poetry. The following excerpt from a letter he wrote may give us as clear a view of his religious beliefs as any we might be able to get from any of his poetic writings.

Once, overburdened by expenses and feeling the need to economise, he cut down on many items of expenditure, even to the extent of leaving off drinking. His relative, Nawwāb 'Alā ud-Dīn K̲h̲ān, on his father Nawwāb Amīn ud-Dīn K̲h̲ān's direction, wrote to discover the reason, including in his letter a *shě'r* that Maulawī Hamzah K̲h̲ān had requested him to send to Ghālib by way of advice: "Ḥāfiz̤, as you have become old, leave the wine-tavern… The lasciviousness goes well with the prime of youth." [53] In reply, Ghālib outlined the state of his finances, and the reason for his abandonment of wine, which was only because of a lack of money, since a windfall from a patron from time to time would lead to a resumption of availing himself of these delights at his usual set times of the day. He directed 'Alā ud-Dīn K̲h̲ān to show this letter to his father, who had asked about the reason for the discontinuation (*mauqūfī*) and resumption (*bahālī*) of Ghālib's wine-drinking. He also instructed him to give his salutations and prayers to Hamzah K̲h̲ān (who had sent him the verse by Ḥāfiz̤):

> O you who are ignorant of the pleasures of our constant drinking [*ay be-k̲h̲abar ze laẕẕat-i shurb-i madām-i mā*] – well you see, this is how He gives us the drink. It is one thing to get a name as a *maulawī* by merely giving tuitions to the lads of petty shopkeepers [*banyās*] living in Darība [an old neighbourhood of Delhi] and perusing the treatises of Abū Ḥanīfāh and dipping into the problems of menses and lochia [*ḥaiẕ o nifās*], and quite

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[51] Ḥālī, *Yādgār-i G̲h̲ālib*, 96-97. Shi'i law generally determines the breaking of the fast to be ten minutes or so after the Sunnis, not hours as Ghālib humorously implies to tease the Sunni *maulawī*.

[52] Ibid., 113-114.

[53] چوں پیر شدی حافظ از میکده بیرون شو…

a different thing it is to implant in one's mind the real Truth [*ḥaqīqat-i haqqā*] and *waḥdat ul-wujūd* by studying the writings of the gnostics [*'urafā*]!

The polytheist pagans [*mushrik*] are those who consider that existence is shared by the Necessary [*wājib*] and the Possible [*mumkin*]. The infidels [*mushrik*] are those who consider Musaylimah as a partner in prophethood with the Last of the Prophets [*k͟hātim ul-mursalīn*]. The infidels [*mushrik*] are those who consider the new Muslims equal to the Father of the Imams ['Alī]. Hell is for them. I am a perfect believer in the Oneness of God [*muwaḥḥid-i k͟hāliṣ*] and am a complete believer [*momin-i kāmil*]. With my tongue, I say, "There is no god but God" and in my heart I firmly believe "There exists nothing but God, and nothing is effective in existence but God". All the prophets are revered [*wājib ul-tā'zīm*] and in their own times obedience was due to them [*mutafarriq ul-iṭā'at*]. The prophethood ended with Muhammad, Peace be Upon Him. He is the Seal of the Prophets [*k͟hatm ul-mursalīn*] and a Blessing for the Worlds [*raḥmat ul-lil-'ālamīn*]. The end of the prophethood is the beginning of the Imamate [*maqta'-i nubūwat ka matla' imāmat*], and Imamate is ordained by God not by the consensus of public opinion [*nah ijmā'ī balkih min allāh*]. And the Imam ordained by God is 'Alī, Peace Be Upon Him, then [*ṣumma*] Ḥasan, then Ḥusain, and so on till the time of Mahdī, Peace Be Upon Him. I live by this faith and will die by it [*barīn zīstam ham barīn biguzaram*].

But there is just one thing more, and that is this: I consider *ibāḥat*[54] [to disregard the religious tenets of what is permissible and forbidden and to make no distinction between them, literally 'giving liberty'] and *zindiqah* [heresy, atheism] as cursed and rejected [*mardūd*], and wine as forbidden [*sharāb ko harām*], and myself as a sinner [*'āsī*]. If I am put into hell, it will not be so much to burn me as to add fuel to the fire of hell to make it fiercer, so that the refuters of the Prophethood of the Choicest of the Prophets and the Imamate of the Most Approved One ['Alī] [*mushrikīn-i nubūwat-i muṣṭafawī wa imāmat-i murtazawī*] may burn in it.

Well, listen, Maulawī Ṣāḥib! After going without food for several days [*kayi fāqon men* – implying after a lot of hard work], you learn one couplet of Ḥāfiz, 'O Ḥāfiz, as you become old, leave the tavern' and then you recite it before a man [i.e. Ghālib] whose collection of verse, not to mention prose, is double and treble the *Dīwān-i Ḥāfiz*; and you have not the sense to realise that this is just one *shě'r* of Ḥāfiz, and there are a thousand other couplets [by him] which quite contradict it.[55]

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54 In Hali's original Urdu text, the word is given as *ibā'at*, rather than *ibāḥat*, which would make the phrase *ibā'at-i zindiqah*. See Ḥālī, *Yādgār-i G͟hālib*, 215.

55 I have followed K. H. Qadiri's wonderfully nuanced and idiomatic translation almost verbatim here, with some changes as well as parenthetical insertions of the original Urdu

It is a wonder that Ghālib's sectarian affiliation still remains a subject of doubt and speculation even after such declarations were put down by him on paper. One would imagine that his views on the Imamate would take him beyond merely Tafzili Sunni[56] territory right into Shi'i territory, but apparently not all scholars find this to be a sufficiently convincing point of view. The Italian scholar Bausani, for instance, sees the ideas expressed in this letter as a 'blend' of Shi'i and Sufi ideas, which is an approach typical of much Western scholarship. Moreover, he considers these ideas to be representative not so much of early Shi'ism as of late post-Safavid Iranian Shi'ism.[57] Certainly, when a person is as negligent of observing the usual religious rituals, such as fasting and praying, as Ghālib was, it is difficult to gain any indication from that whether he performed these according to Shi'a or Sunni law. Even Hali, Ghālib's biographer and close confidant, who, being a Sunni himself, favoured the view that Ghālib was a Shi'i, tended to stop short of any absolute statement regarding Ghālib's sectarian affiliation, conceding that he could also be a Tafzili.[58] Furthermore, one of the chief obstacles to Ghālib being a confirmed Shi'i appears to be his being a spiritual disciple of the family of Maulana Fakhr ud-Dīn, a Sunni mystic. This relationship is cited as one of the chief reasons why Ghālib's burial took place according to Sunni custom.[59]

Conclusion
With the onset of colonial modernity, a number of trends and movements emerged in Muslim societies which have now come to be identified by the term "reformist". Many Muslim "reformists" and "modernisers" appear to have

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as presented in Hali. See Ḥālī, *Yadgar-e Ghalib* (trans. Qadiri), 220-221; Ḥālī, *Yādgār-i Ghālib*, 213-215.

[56] According to Mahdjoub, there were Sunni factions known as the Sunni-i Tafzili (Preferentialist Sunnis) and Sunni-i Duwāzdah ImāmI (Twelver Sunnis) during the 8-10th centuries. The former accepted the legitimacy of the three Caliphs before 'Alī, but considered him superior to them, while the "Twelvers" accepted 'Ali's twelve descendants as successors to the Caliphate after him, regarding the Umayyads and 'Abbasids both as usurpers." See Mohammad D. Mahdjoub, "The Evolution of Popular Eulogy of the Imams among the Shi'a" (trans. John R. Perry), in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 66. Some Zaidī leaders also propounded the doctrine of the *imāmat-i mafẓūl* which allowed "for a man of lesser excellence to be appointed Imam during the lifetime of a man of greater excellence." This served to justify the Caliphates of Abū Bakr and 'Umar as a point of expediency even though 'Ali was possessed of greater excellence. See Moojan Momen. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). 49. However, it is difficult to see Ghālib's declared beliefs fitting in too perfectly in any of these categories.

[57] A. Bausani. "Ghalib's Persian Poetry," in Ralph Russell (ed.). *Ghalib: The Poet and His Age; Papers Read at the Centenary Celebrations, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972). 77.

[58] Ḥālī, *Yādgār-i Ghālib*, 96.

[59] Sa'īduddīn Aḥmad, *Sharḥ Dīvān-I Ghālib (Urdū)* (New Delhi: Ghalib Academy, 2007; 1926), 17.

absorbed colonial notions and attitudes about their own cultures at the conscious or unconscious level. The notion of "sectarianism" appears to be one of them. The discourse of many modernist reformers came to reflect colonial perceptions of sectarianism as a "negative, out-dated discourse through which the masses were controlled by fanatical divines and priests", a discourse that was moreover conducive to prejudice, violence, and "extremism". Of chief concern to a new generation of native intellectuals was the perceived role of sectarianism in the decline of their religion and civilisation in the modern period, and in being a very real obstacle to Muslim progress. It is against the background of such a discourse and such perceptions that the nineteenth-century Indian educationist Sayyid Aḥmad Khān banned the discussion of sectarian differences among Shi'a and Sunni students at his newly established Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Aligarh 1875.[60] If Muslim youth were to progress, they had to rise above the curse of these petty differences. More than a century later, the same sentiments and notions can be discerned behind the secularising urge evident in much political activism in nation-states like India and Pakistan, for a "neutral" environment is not only thought to be the only kind that can ensure smooth and conflict-free interaction among the citizenry, but is also considered to be an attainable object.

The discussion of Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib's literary acts takes place in a world where notions such as the ones above, if they existed, did not exist in these particular forms. We see sectarian differences being evoked, acknowledged, played upon, and even enjoyed without the situation always reaching some kind of instantaneous flashpoint of sectarian "tension". While it would be incorrect to say, as is often done, that one's sect *did not matter at all* in the pre-modern period, inter-sectarian relations, the daily negotiation of sectarian identity, and sectarian identity itself during this time are issues which do not respond well to simplistic or singular characterisations. Although sectarian violence is often spoken of as being a modern phenomenon, it would not do to sketch too benign a picture of the past either. It is important, though, to emphasise that sectarian leanings were not, and are not, the most vital or defining factor in determining the nature of everyday interaction. Also, while there is always the possibility of tension, differences in historical and theological perspectives between Sunnis and Shi'a were not always such taboo subjects as they are frequently portrayed to be, and it is not only in a "secular space" that "civilised" and peaceable interactions can be seen to have taken place.

The evocation of sectarian "difference" in the samples of pre-modern Persian and Urdu poetry and other works analysed in this paper might also help us think more deeply about the concept of "difference" itself. Contrary to some recent arguments that sectarian affiliation can be discerned through evidence of the ritual practice of pilgrimage and paying one's respects at the shrines of certain historical personages of spiritual importance, rather than

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[60] Jones, *Shi'a Islam*, 24-26.

through theological beliefs,[61] in the Indian environment, as no doubt also elsewhere in the Indian Ocean World and beyond, it appears difficult to pin down sectarian affiliation from rituals and expressions of respect and devotion to the Prophet's household, as we can see in the writings and practice of a figure like Mirzā Aṣadullah Ḵẖān Ghālib.

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[61] Najam Haider gives the example of the scholar ibn Barniyyah (d. early 11th c.) who appears to have been considered an Imāmī even though he believed in thirteen Imams rather than twelve (a belief which fell outside the purview of Imāmī doctrine). He argues that ibn Barniyyah was accepted as a Shiʻi because he had participated in many pilgrimages that Imāmīs typically participated in. Haider's view is that an observable proto-Imāmī identity crystallised in early 8th c. Kufa in an urban environment marked by a growing correlation between communal identity and ritual practice, and that with the passage of time participating in large processions to certain holy sites became an indicator or a "clear public declaration" of communal identity. Najam Haider. "Prayer, Mosque, and Pilgrimage: Mapping Shīʻī Sectarian Identity in 2nd/8th Century Kūfa." *Islamic Law and Society* 16.2 (2009): 151-71. Rula J. Abisaab critiques Haider's approach of taking such ritual practice as "useful shorthand in ascertaining an individual's communal self-identification" by citing theologically distinct communities' sharing of supposedly proto-Imāmī ritual practices of pilgrimage and mourning rights through to the modern era (class lecture at McGill University, 2014).

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