

CHAPTER FIVE

TOOLS OF AUTHORISATION

In this chapter I will discuss how ritualised activities in the mosque contribute to sustain authority in the community of my focus. I will argue that the ritual program in general and the official lectures and lamentations in particular contribute to the maintenance of unity and sense of continuity in the community in focus. By doing this I will show how ritual contributes to the construction of authority. The central concept of this chapter, then, is authorisation, i.e. a process through which authority is established and maintained.

Before going on to a more precise definition of what I mean by this concept, it may be appropriate to say something introductory concerning the specific characteristics of Shi'ite religious authority. It can be argued that its hierarchical structure is one of the main distinctive features that differentiate the religious practice of Twelvers' from that of other Muslim denominations. It could be argued, then, that Shi'ism is more hierarchical in structure than orthodox Sunni Islam.¹ Because of its belief in intercession between human beings and God through the Imams, and the occultation of the present Imam, a significant hierarchy has arisen within Twelver Shi'ism. Stretching from the ordinary believer on one end, through the various stages of religious learning, to the absent Imam on the other, this hierarchy constitutes a significant feature of the tradition. According to present-day Twelver historiography, the twelfth Imam appointed a number of representatives, known as *novāb* (deputies, sing. *nāyeb*), through which he communicated with his followers. After the death

¹ The various and widespread Sufi orders of Sunni Islam, within which similar ideas of intercession are not uncommon, are an exception to this. Besides being an expression of emphasis on scholarly learning, the hierarchal structure of Shi'ism can be seen as an expression of the central position that mysticism always has had in this religious tradition. The clearly defined hierarchies within the Sufi orders are, arguably, possible consequences of a neo-Platonic cosmology where the task of humans is to return to their divine origin through a long journey of gradual spiritual refinement. If such gradual refinement of human beings is accepted, a hierarchy in accordance to the various levels of refinement is an inevitable consequence.

of the last of these representatives, the religious leadership of the Shi'ite community was taken over by the most learned jurists of the community whose duty it now became to interpret the religious documents and to function as spiritual guides for the community until the return of the Imam.² The authority of the Imam's teaching, *ta'lim*, and hence that of the jurists, derives from the Imam's divine knowledge, *'ilm ol-ladonni* which is believed to be given to the Imam directly from God.

There are several titles that mark the different levels in the hierarchy of religious scholars. Some of these have appeared as late as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and seem to be examples of a constant desire to invent new titles of authority as old ones lose their originality. In the contemporary context of the present study, the religious leaders are generally known as *'ulamā* (sing. *'ālem*) meaning learned. A common honorary title for ordinary *'ulamā* is *hojjat ol-eslām*, proof of Islam. This title was originally adopted to mark *mojtaheds* of special importance or following but is not used in that way in the community in focus here. *Ayatollāh*, sign of God, was invented as an honorary epithet in the beginning of the twentieth century and was at that time associated with a handful of religious scholars.³ Since then, however, the number of *Ayatollāhs* has grown and today there are hundreds of them in Iran only. Colloquially the term now denotes any scholar who has reached the level of *mojtahed*. The title *marja'-e taqlid*, reference of emulation, is currently used to denote the highest level of authority and refers to a person whose *ejtehād* any Shi'ite can trust and follow with confidence. Since before the revolution, Khomeyni was considered the most highly ranked of all, and was referred to as *Imam*. Lately some groups have also started referring to the present supreme leader, usually known as *Ayatollāh Khāmene'i*, by this title as well. This might be the beginning of a more widespread new use of the term in the Iranian Shi'ite community.

² What character and how much influence the jurists ought to have upon society is and has been a highly disputed question among Twelver Shi'ites. The Iranian situation, that is discussed in this book, is an expression of a rather extreme policy that has become dominant due to various historical reasons, such as the heritage of a strong priestly class in pre-Islamic Iran, the conflict between the two theological schools *Akhbārī* and *Osulī* in the 18th century and the activist interpretation of Shi'ism put forth by Khomeyni and others at the time of the revolution. These historical reasons will, however, not be further dealt with here.

³ Glassé 1989: 59.

During my field work I have often been struck by the duplicity that characterises authority structures in the mosque. There is a clear-cut, well-defined and often declared religious hierarchy among confessors in the community. The most substantial example of how this classification is expressed is the fact that any assertion concerning *feqh* that is given by an *'ālem* can always be overridden by any other *'ālem* who is hierarchically superior. The whole *mojtahed-moqalled* system⁴ is, furthermore, based on this well-defined ranking of authority. At the same time there are aspects of this system, which blur the image of a direct chain of command. Therefore, it seems that a more nuanced understanding of Shi'ite authority structure is needed in order to give a just picture of the community. To begin with, the mentioned titles are not exclusively given to a person by those superior to him in the religious hierarchy. Certainly, there is such a side to it. A student, *tāleḥ*, who is considered to have reached the appropriate level of knowledge will be given permission by his superior, *ejāze*, which certifies his ability to exercise *ejteḥād*. However, this official distinction is not enough. To get the title of *Ayatollāh*, for instance, an *'ālem* with *ejāze* also needs to gain the respect and popularity of ordinary people. In this sense, the hierarchy which appears so obvious is to some extent built from below.⁵

Authority structures in the mosque shed light upon the duplicity of Shi'ite hierarchy. Although the *Ayatollāh* and other *'olamā* who lecture, relate lamentations or lead prayers are highly revered and respected, they do not have the final executive power in the community. Instead, the final word on issues that concern administration, activities and even choice of lecturer is always given by the administration assembly, *hey'at-e modīre*, which consists of a few wealthy bazaar merchants. During my stay at the mosque a few minor disputes occurred between the *Ayatollāh* and the administration. On these occasions the *Ayatollāh* had to yield to the opinion of the administrators.⁶ It is significant that these are the same administrators

⁴ A *moqalled* is a follower of a *mojtahed*. The organisation of religious authority in these roles came about in the early 19th century as a result of the triumph of the *Osulī* school of thought over the *Akbārī*. Momen 1985: 204.

⁵ Momen 1985: 202.

⁶ One such dispute concerned whether the mosque was to be lent to the *basij* organisation for their *'āshurā* ceremonies or not. The politically oriented *Ayatollāh*, in contradiction to the administrators, thought it should, but eventually it did not.

who, at the time of the evening prayer, stand up to manifest their respect and subordination to the elderly Ayatollāh.

Thus it has become clear to me that the authority structures of the chosen mosque cannot be understood as a one-way chain of command in which the religious authorities exercise their power by controlling those hierarchically inferior. Instead, I have concluded that authority needs to be approached, in all its complexity, as a project in which all community members take part in varying degrees according to the status and influence of each individual member, not only those who, at first glance, appear to be the authorities. This conclusion is compatible with the understanding of authority and power that has been presented by certain poststructuralist scholars during recent decades. My own interpretation of this particular community is partly indebted to these scholars, and in my analysis I have found much guidance in their writings.

In this chapter, I will begin with some general notions concerning the concept of authorisation. Having done this, I will go on to show how the lectures and lamentations are parts of an authorisation process in the chosen community.

AUTHORISATION

Power is a social reality in all societies. Relations between members of a social group, it seems, always turn out to be somewhat unequal in the sense that some people have (or assume) the right to decide for others. Whether we construe this inequality as just (as we might with the power-disparity between a mother and her child) or unjust (as we may consider the unequal relation between a harassed boy and the mob that bullies him), the inequality is a prerequisite for what will here be referred to as authorisation. This inequality can be described as a social asymmetry that exists in relations between people in any given society.⁷

Power, Authority and Authorisation

A phenomenon which often appears in societies where social asymmetry is prominent is that the hierarchically inferior heed, respect,

⁷ This understanding has been developed in sociological exchange theory. See, for instance, Cook 1987.

trust and obey their superiors.⁸ People often approve of their political leaders; school children frequently respect their teachers and so on. This phenomenon is authority. Max Weber has described it as a quality that is attributed to hierarchically superior persons or institutions whose superiority is experienced as legitimate by those hierarchically inferior. As I have seen it, authority in the present community is created through a process which, following Bruce Lincoln, I have chosen to call *authorisation*. In this section I will present some scholars whose understanding of this concept have been useful to me and I will introduce the way in which I have chosen to apply the concept in relation to the material of the present study.

Scholars have used the concepts of power and authority in different ways. Sometimes the concepts overlap so that a clear distinction between the two is difficult to perceive. Some scholars have chosen to utilise only one of the concepts or to use them as synonyms.⁹ I have chosen to keep both concepts, although my focus remains primarily on authorisation. I see this as a process in a much wider drama, which the concept of power denotes. If power is a broad notion concerning social asymmetries in general and the various forms and effects these may have, authorisation is one of the processes that maintain these effects specifically.

Authorisation, Force and Persuasion

There are many forms of power: fathers have power over their sons; torturers have power over their victims; politicians over those who have elected them; religious leaders over those who respect them; and institutions over those who belong to them. If we define it as hierarchy, power indeed seems to be an inescapable component of all human relations. Authority, however, as I use the term, is more specific. It is the form of structural power which s/he wields who is perceived and treated as hierarchically superior by others without having had to prove this position through argument or force. Authorisation is the social process that creates such power. Hence I define authorisation as a form of power implementation which needs neither persuasion nor force to uphold hierarchy. Instead, authorisation

⁸ Lincoln 1994: 4.

⁹ Repstad 2002: 35.

is a part of the socialisation processes through which human beings receive many of their views, values and manner of conduct in a society. It is preferably a subconscious social process in which certain thoughts and actions are affirmed whereas others are rejected.

Arguably, authorisation is a very efficient way through which power may be exercised. But it is not the only one. It borders on other means such as force and persuasion. Even if these two may function as complimentary to authorisation, they are different from authorisation because of how they relate to the subject of power. Force is implementation of the will of a hierarchically superior agent by means of coercion. Whether it is social pressure, physical or psychological violence or more or less subtle threats, it is an act that goes against the will of its object. Because of this it is not authorisation although it clearly borders on it and may sometimes be confused with it.¹⁰

Persuasion, is not authorisation either. If one follows Max Weber's categorisations, persuasion could be considered an aspect of what he calls rational and legal authority.¹¹ However, as I have chosen to use the concept it is essential that authorisation does not need arguments to maintain the position of those in power. In this understanding I follow Bruce Lincoln, who stresses that there is often a discrepancy between what really maintains authority and what the subjects of such a situation believe upholds it. Lincoln argues that subjects of authorisation often believe that the reasons for their subordination are logical and based on reason and that if they only took the time to find out they would find that this is the case.¹² This belief, however, is not necessarily true. On the contrary, the fact that the subjects believe their inferiority is based on reason but never

¹⁰ Lincoln 1994: 4.

¹¹ Max Weber distinguishes between traditional, charismatic and rational/legal authority. Traditional authority is based on convention, charismatic on the charisma of the leader, and rational authority on expertise, democracy or officialism. Weber 1972: 130–147.

¹² It is important to make clear that I consider *reason* to differ significantly from *rationality*. Reason denotes the certain category of thought that in a western academic context may be categorised as logic. Rationality, on the other hand, is connected to the specific cultural context. To behave rationally, then, is to behave in accordance with one's cultural situation in which emotions and other things may exist as integrated parts. For a philosophical discussion on this matter see Stenmark 1995: 1–17.

bother to find out indicates that authority is constructed through much more subtle processes of socialisation rather than through logical argumentation.¹³

Perhaps this notion can be illustrated by my own, and presumably many others', relation to medical doctors who can be seen as holding positions of authority in my cultural context. If I go to see a medical doctor, provided nothing particularly spectacular happens, I will trust entirely in the advice s/he will give me. I will be certain that the advice is based on thoroughly tested clinical experience and that I would find out that this is the case if I only had the strength to investigate the matter. However, I will never do this because I trust that my confidence is well founded. It is reasonable to argue that the trust I experience in this matter is not based on logic and reason, but rather on the socialisation through which I have acquired feelings of reliance towards western health care. Further and particularly significant evidence for this notion is the fact that my trust is not primarily triggered by the content of the remedies which the doctors recommend (remedies that I in the first place am unable to assess) but rather on the attributes that surround these remedies, such as the white coats, the scent of disinfectants and the assuring tone of the doctor's voice. Whether the remedies are based on reason or not is not relevant for this discussion. It is enough to say that my conviction that they are does not have such a basis. In my case this shows that they are accepted through a means of authorisation.

It is significant that all community members whom I have had the opportunity to discuss religious matters with, claim to be convinced that the superiority of Twelver Shi'ism over all other religious traditions can be proved through arguments which any logical person can be convinced by if s/he took the time to think them through. A necessary prerequisite for such an opinion is that reason is hailed as a preferable means by which to reach knowledge. The Shi'ite school of thought has nourished such an idea, as has Western sciences. Not least because of their Mo'tazelite heritage, Shi'ite scholars have often presupposed that humans have a universal ability to reach knowledge through reason.¹⁴ The vitality of this tradition

¹³ Lincoln 1994: 5.

¹⁴ Martin, Woodward and Atmaja 1997: 10.

becomes apparent in the lectures of the community, which involve a great deal of logical argumentation. Here it is especially interesting to note that the notion of the *'olamā's* authority is supported by arguments based on reason. The lecturers apply classical *feqh* argumentation when discussing this matter. Such argumentation consists of finding and comparing evidence (or counter-evidence) for a given opinion in the Koran or Sunna. However, there are arguments that refer to more definite everyday life situations that lack reference to the classical sources or Islamic jurisprudence. Claims that the *'olamā's* authority promotes political stability, that it creates psychological well-being and that it enhances moral behaviour are examples of these.¹⁵

Force, persuasion and authorisation are three means of power implementation which may exist parallel and supplementary to one another in an asymmetric social situation. In the Iranian community focused on here it is clear that all three exist. Persuasion exists in the reasoning that has already been mentioned. And force, although it may not be observed in the limited context of the chosen mosque, becomes, as I will show in the next chapter, apparent as soon as anyone ventures to raise a critical opinion or in other way display doubt concerning the authorities. Force is also obviously important as a means of maintaining the political system in the Islamic Republic as a whole.

It is important to clarify that authorisation, being a part of socialisation, is the most cost-efficient way for a society to maintain its power structures. Ideally, a community whose world view and power structures are totally internalised will never need neither coercion nor persuasive arguments to be maintained. A methodological consequence of such a conclusion is that a society can be said to lack authority to the same extent that the means of power implementation are prominent. Hence, the success of the authorisation process in a given society can be measured by looking at the extent of perceivable repression and force.

For me the reason to treat these categories separately is that such a distinction may clarify the lines of thought in my analysis. My main focus, as will become apparent, is on authorisation. The informants have strong incitements for their religious activity and belief

¹⁵ Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.

that are not based on reason or force. And it is my supposition that the concept of authorisation, as I have defined it here, is the most suitable in an analysis on this matter, not least because it focuses less upon those in authority and more upon those hierarchically inferior, like my informants. Before moving on to the analysis of their particular situation it is necessary to make a few more thorough remarks concerning my view of authorisation.

Discursive Authorisation

When people like my informants obey an authority because they deem it legitimate and trustworthy, the authority can be said to fit into a shared perception of reality. It belongs to a shared field of reference in the given social community. In other words, it is a part of a discourse.¹⁶ Authorisation, therefore, can be labelled as discursive.¹⁷

In the 1960's and 70's, scholars who were concerned with power studies usually defined power as the ability of a person (or an institution) to work his/her (or its) will in a social relation even against the consent of the other.¹⁸ According to the understanding of Max Weber, society was perceived as being permeated with more or less subtle struggles between persons and institutions. Power, could be upheld by means of economy, coercion, knowledge, control over the means of production and so forth.¹⁹ Yet, no matter how it was upheld, it was generally seen as carried out by one agent against another. Studies on power, hence, were greatly concerned with locating these agents and thereby revealing structures of power in society.²⁰

Later scholars have broadened this notion of power and completed the understanding discussed during the 1970's. Power, they have argued, is not necessarily the result of identifiable intentions of clearly definable agents. Instead, they have proposed, it may be built into the very structure of society. This notion is not entirely new. Both Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim discussed structural power as early

¹⁶ For further discussion on this concept, see, for instance, Jan Assman 1984: 192; 2001: 163–168.

¹⁷ A variety of terms have been used to denote this structural power, or certain aspects of it. Normative power, legitimating power, symbolic power and discursive power are some examples. Repstad 2002: 18. Here I will call it discursive.

¹⁸ Repstad 2002: 12.

¹⁹ Coser 1976.

²⁰ Repstad 2002: 17.

as in the 19th century. But post-modern scholars from the 1980's and onwards can be said to have developed this notion further.

The concept of power that these scholars have defined is more inclusive than the previously presented one. Here, power becomes invisible to a certain extent. Structures of power define peoples' thoughts, their perception of reality, their morality and aesthetic preferences, even their own identity. The person or institution which can control others' thoughts in these fields wields power. But personal agents do not necessarily have to exist for the power structures to remain and this is crucial. Normality, as understood by Michel Foucault,²¹ or patriarchy, as comprehended by certain feminist scholars,²² may serve as good examples of societal power structures which to a certain extent may lack definable agents.²³ Foucault, for instance, argues that human beings in modern society have internalised a way of behaving and thinking that can be labelled normal. Previously this needed to be enforced by law or coercion. However, in modernity, Foucault argues, people discipline themselves and, more importantly, they themselves choose to do so.

I have chosen to follow this perspective in my understanding of authorisation. I find the notion of internalised power structures to be very elucidating when it comes to describing my informants' relation to their superiors. Authorisation, then, is a discursive implementation of power.

Authorisation concerns the legitimisation and preservation of the community. It is a process through which the social reality of the community is constructed and maintained. It is necessary to emphasise that although authorisation serves to maintain the specific mosque community, the same religious authorities contribute to the breaking up or at least to the changing of the religious Islamic community on a national level.²⁴

Attribution

As may already have become apparent, I do not consider authorisation to be static. Rather, I see it as an ongoing process of power

²¹ Sandmo 1999: 86.

²² See, for instance, Walby 1990: 19–21.

²³ Repstad 2002: 24–25.

²⁴ For further discussion on the fluctuating societal roles of religion, see Lincoln 1989: 3–11.

implementation. In this understanding I am inspired by Foucault and Lincoln who both emphasise the dynamics of the authorisation.²⁵ Michel Foucault argues that authority is constantly produced and reproduced in social interaction. He argues that authority cannot be detached from the society to which it belongs and that it cannot be studied as a separate entity or institution. Since it is not a quality or a characteristic which particular individuals may possess, it is best seen as a continuous and mutual process within the community.²⁶ This is also the reason why *authorisation* is a more appropriate term than authority.²⁷

The term authorisation refers to a general process through which the community is recreated and legitimised. Most social actions contribute more or less to this process. By behaving towards or speaking about persons or institutions in certain ways it is possible to authorise these. In other words, it can be said that different parts of life in and about the mosque may be attributed with authority. Through verbal and bodily actions that communicate reverence and respect places, occasions and societal roles and offices can be authorised.²⁸

Since these attributions do not last forever authorisation needs to be repeated continuously. Because the attributes are not permanent, and positions of authority can change, a constant effort to uphold and confirm the prevalent structures is needed. Consequently, authorities continuously need to be socially reminded of their dominion by the community and those lacking authority of their impotence. At the same time, however, authorisation within the community is maintained by itself to a certain degree. Once something is authorised and therefore associated with power and treated with due respect, this attitude will in itself call for further authorisation. The respectful attitude towards the Ayatollāh, for instance, socially forces newcomers like myself to treat him in a similar way and thus to continue to authorise his person. In this way, I suggest, authority is partly upheld by its own authority.

I have defined authorisation as a form of power implementation that makes the members of the community accept the given situation

²⁵ Lincoln 1994: 11.

²⁶ Foucault 1980b: 93.

²⁷ Lincoln 1994: 7.

²⁸ Lincoln 1994: 7.

as legitimate and good without investigating the reasons for it. It is part of the social process of defining reality that the community goes through in order to be recreated. It is a continuous and joint venture, which takes place among all members of the community through acts of speech and body, which communicate reverence and respect for persons, places, occasions and offices of significant symbolic importance to the community. It can be described as discursive.

Because it takes place on all social levels in the community and, as a last resort, is dependant on the trust and opinion of the hierarchically inferior,²⁹ knowledge of authorisation need not be sought primarily among those in power but rather among ordinary people and in everyday life.³⁰ Hence this theoretical approach is particularly suitable for a study like this.

TOOLS OF AUTHORISATION IN THE RITUALS OF THE MOSQUE

Before going on to the actual argumentation about the tools of authorisation in the chosen community, I deem it necessary to make a few statements concerning the applicability of my explanatory model and the theoretical concept I have chosen. I want to emphasise that my ambitions concerning the exhaustiveness of my analysis are modest. By proposing that the lectures and lamentations function as tools of authorisation, I do not propose that this is the only function that they have. I have chosen to focus on this aspect of the material because I am interested in authority. I believe that an analysis of authority can be helpful when it comes to describing, analysing and understanding the ritual situations and development of my informants. This appears to be the case because the society, in which the lectures and lamentations take place is characterised by a conflict of authority in which the position of the conservative flank and the *ʿulamā* is threatened. Activities at the mosque are especially connected to this conflict because of the explicitly conservative profile of the community. To visit this mosque is, in itself, a political act and standpoint on the domestic conflict between reformists and conservatives.

²⁹ Lincoln 1994: 8.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu has discussed the importance of everyday language for the maintenance of power structures. See, for instance, Bourdieu 1991: 46–49.

Therefore, the activities in the mosque can be seen as tools of an authorisation process in the conservative community that challenge other currents in Iranian society.

In the following, I suggest that ritualised activities in general and the lectures and lamentations in particular contribute to the construction of authority in the chosen community. They can be seen as important tools of authorisation. It is my ambition to clarify how this is done by pinpointing four different aspects of this process. The aspects are: (1) the explicit verbal attribution of authority to different parts of the community found in the lectures and lamentations; (2) the emotional identification with *Ahl-e beyt* creates among the community members through lectures; (3) the sensation of continuity which they propose and encourage; and (4) the ritualised context in which the lectures and lamentations are presented.

Explicit Attribution of Authority

The most obvious example of the authorisation aspect of the lectures and lamentations is their frequent and explicit praise of religious authorities and their call for obedience to these. Authority is, no doubt, a central theme in both the lectures and the lamentations. This is expressed in many different ways. The *‘olamā* and their followers: the *basij*, *tollāb* and the martyrs, are presented as defenders of Islamic virtue under the absent leadership of the Imam. It is stated that the position of late *‘olamā* in heaven is high, and that people are requested to say *salawāt* for the benefit of *marjaʿs*, *‘olamā*, *basij* and martyrs. In a lecture the Ayatollāh claims that:

[If] these theological schools (*howze-ye ‘elmiye*) didn't exist . . . then religion wouldn't exist, the Koran wouldn't exist, the progeny wouldn't exist. If the progeny are still alive it is because of *‘olamā*. If the Koran is alive among people it is due to *‘olamā*'s effort and the theological schools.³¹

The repeated praise of these groups and the importance ascribed to their activity can be understood as a rather explicit part of authorisation in the present community. When the listeners are urged to respect the authorities, they are simultaneously driven to respect and thereby recreate the community, which these authorities represent.

³¹ Lecture, August 26th, 1999.

In that sense the praise of authorities constitutes an evident part of the authorisation process, as I have chosen to define it.

Besides the frequent praise and the ascription of importance, there is another repeated exhortation in the lectures which is worth bringing up in this context, namely the request that people obey the *‘olamā* and the Islamic regulations conveyed without questioning. On several occasions, the lecturers beseech the listeners not to challenge the revealed law just because they do not understand its meaning. On one occasion, the Ayatollāh spoke about this in the following words:

Every rule in Islam has its reason and its documents, but we are not supposed to evaluate its reason /.../ and sometimes there is no way to find reason. The Morning Prayer has two *rak‘at*,³² nobody knows why. We are supposed to read it aloud. Why? Nobody knows! The noon and evening prayers have eight *rak‘at*. Why? These are the rules! It is possible to say them together but in that case one should read *hamd* and sura *towhid* silently just as the 3rd and 4th *‘sobhān Allāh!*’ should be said slowly and silently. Other parts can be said either silently or loudly but not this one. Why? We do not know! The *marja‘* himself doesn’t know either! But the *marja‘* knows that there is a reason because it has been given by divine inspiration.³³

Here the alleged unquestionable authority of Islamic law, consequently, strengthens the authority of the *‘olamā* since they are the ones who declare what the law says. Both the lectures and the informants sometimes compare the expertise of the *‘olamā* to that of medical doctors. The Ayatollāh compares the questioning of their decrees with attempts to argue about a medical diagnosis:

You go to a doctor and he prescribes a drug for you. You are asked to take a pill every six hours, a spoon of syrup every twelve hours and an injection every other day. All of these doses have a reason but would you ask why? He would laugh at you and ask you to look for documents instead of reasons. If you accept me as a doctor I tell you to do this and you just obey because you know I will tell you the right thing, it is scientific. It is not random. When it comes to following Islamic decrees it must be like that, like with a doctor. Worshipping is like this.³⁴

³² *Rak‘at* is a series of genuflections.

³³ Lecture, August 5th, 1999.

³⁴ Lecture, August 5th, 1999.

It is interesting to note that the polemics in the lectures which are directed at those who question the authority of the *‘olamā* does not deal with their critique as such but with the very fact that they are questioning the present authorities.

Identification with Ahl-e beyt

Explicit appeals for obedience to the religious authorities are one way through which the lectures and lamentations function as tools of authorisation. Their call and support for the listeners' identification with *Ahl-e beyt* is another. It is likely that if people identify emotionally with the progeny of the Prophet and their legendary followers, then such identification will create an emotional bond with these characters. This bond will increase loyalty to these people and an eagerness to maintain the life style and the regulations which they have founded. In this manner emotional identification legitimises the present community, i.e. becomes a tool of authorisation. My hypothesis is that this is what happens at the mosque. I now intend to show how.

To begin with, I define identity as the reflexive venture through which an individual or a group strive to uphold a sensation of unity and continuity. Social identification denoting human recognition of others as belonging to the same group as themselves constitutes an important part of that process. Hence, it can be said that a person identifies with another living person, a historical or a mythological figure when s/he explicitly claims to belong to the same group as that person or when s/he shares the feelings and the emotional state of that person. For instance, s/he is happy when the other person is happy, feels sad when the other person suffers et cetera. Another criterion which shows if a person identifies with another would be if s/he structures everyday life in accordance with a social identity defined by the relation to that person. This would be the case if, for instance, a person's daily ritual routines consist of practices directly ordained by the object of his or her identification.

In the lectures and lamentations, people are called to identify with the *Ahl-e beyt* and their legendary followers. There are several statements in the lectures and lamentations which substantiate this assumption. Firstly, the listeners are called to identify with *Ahl-e beyt* by being semantically identified with them. The lecturers and prayer leaders use the same terminology to denote the illustrious offspring

of the Prophet and their followers as to describe the community members of the present mosque. Thus, for instance, the word *Shi'e* or *Tashayyo'*, which is used in the lectures as an epithet for the listeners, refers to the group following Imam Hoseyn into martyrdom at Karbalā in the lamentations.³⁵ Likewise, on other occasions the term *velāyat* (leadership), which sometimes denotes Imam 'Ali or some other Imam, refers to the contemporary Supreme leader of the Islamic Republic or today's conservative *'olamā* in general.³⁶ It is also common that the lecturers refer to members of *Ahl-e beyt* as mothers, aunts or fathers, and thereby additionally stress their immediate connection to the gathered assembly.³⁷ In this manner the listeners are called to identify with *Ahl-e beyt* by being semantically identified with these.

Secondly, it can be said that the general exhortation that the listeners should organise their lives in accordance with Islamic regulations, which are transmitted and taught by the *Ahl-e beyt*, in itself calls for an identification with these. The whole legal aspect of Islamic tradition as it is lived in the chosen community strengthens the believers' identification with their absent leaders.

A third and final way through which the listeners are called to identify with *Ahl-e beyt* is the overriding emphasis which is put on their tragic destinies in the lamentations. The continuous and repeated rendering of these tragedies and the strong focus on the suffering of the holy family, obviously gives rise to feelings of empathy towards these renowned leaders. Arguably, this also reinforces identification with them, especially since the stories—often in a very tangible way—deal with sorrows that frequently resemble the personal sufferings of the listeners. Many people who attend the gatherings in the mosque, including the informants of the present study, can relate on a personal level to stories about lost parents, children killed in battle, loneliness, being childless, fear of death and other themes that are

³⁵ Compare, for instance, *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, August 26th, 1999, with the lecture of April 26th, 2000.

³⁶ See, for instance, the lecture of August 5th, 1999, where the term is used in both ways.

³⁷ When asked about this, the informants have emphasised that these epithets primarily concern the Seyyeds among the listeners. However, there are rarely indications of such specifications when they are used in the lectures and lamentations. See, for instance, the lecture of April 20th, 2000.

prominent in the tragedies of the *Ahl-e beyt*. When the listeners are assured of the value of their tears and urged to cry for the suffering of the *Ahl-e beyt*, they are given opportunity to establish emotional bonds with the *Ahl-e beyt* that connect to their personal situations in life and help them to deal with these. Since it is more difficult to question or change a belief system in which one is emotionally and personally involved, or in which one finds consolation, it can be argued that identification with *Ahl-e beyt* constitutes a crucial part of the authorisation process in the community.

Perceived Continuity

Identification is closely connected to a perceived continuity, that is, the perception among members of the group that their community is essentially the same as some historical group with which they identify. The idea that members of the community constitute the legitimate followers of the hidden Imam, which is conveyed through lectures and lamentations, may create such a sense of continuity. It is my argument that this sense of continuity is a tool of authorisation in the chosen community since it associates the community and its leadership with the *Ahl-e beyt* and thus strengthens its members' eagerness to respect and preserve the community in its present form. In other words, if the loyalty which the identification creates for the *Ahl-e beyt* is transferred to the contemporary leadership and the values cherished in the community, this is a tool of authorisation. I propose that, to a certain extent, this is what happens in the chosen community.

The lecturers and prayer leaders reinforce the continuity between historical and contemporary leadership when they mix allusions to the historical Imams or Imam Mahdi with references to the Supreme leader of the revolution, 'Ali Khāmene'i. This happens regularly but is perhaps most apparent in the invocations that usually conclude the prayer sessions:

God! Let us have a life and death like him [Hoseyn]. Make Imam Zamān appear soon. Make him satisfied with us. Let us be his followers and friends. God! Protect the leader ['Ali Khāmene'i], who is the son of Fāteme and 'Ali. Until the appearance of Mahdi, let us be the best followers of Seyyed 'Ali [Khāmene'i]. O God! Remove the leader's enemies!³⁸

³⁸ *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, April 20th, 2000.

It appears that the sense of continuity is established mainly in the lectures and lamentations through the identification that I have discussed so far. However, there are other means as well. One of these is the Twelver Shi'ite historiography and the analogy it proposes between canonised leaders of the past and present authority. This historiography, which is expressed in the material, clearly connects the *Ahl-e beyt* and their historical followers to present-day Shi'ites in Iran and to the constitution of *velāyat-e faqih*. I have already mentioned that it is believed that Imam al-Mahdi transferred his *velāyat* to the jurists before his greater occultation and thereby ordained these to rule as his representatives until his return.³⁹ Since the present community is characterised by its emphasised loyalty to this belief, and since its loyalty is encouraged in the lectures and lamentations, this historiography, arguably, contributes to the sense of continuity among the members of the present community. This also includes the *'ulamā* who are supposedly strengthened to see themselves as representatives of the absent leadership of the Imams.

Through such analogy a story about Imam Hoseyn's call for unconditional obedience from his followers⁴⁰ can become a request for the listeners' complete acceptance of *velāyat-e faqih*. In this manner the lectures and lamentations are tools of authorisation through the sense of continuity which they propose and encourage.

Ritualised Context

The words of the lectures and lamentations authorise by calling for obedience, identification and continuity. They are acts of speech which communicate reverence and respect for objects of significant symbolic importance to the community. However, there is a physical side of the authorisation process as well. Verbal authorisation is dependent on the fact that the persons who speak, as well as the place and time in which they speak, are themselves highly ritualised and thus charged with the status that follows from ritual otherness. That is, if the *manbar* was not recognised by the community as the

³⁹ This idea, known as *nā'eb ol-'āmm*, has roots in the 16th century but got its present formulation through Ayatollāh Khomeyni in the late 20th century. It is posulated in the constitution of the Islamic Republic. For more thorough information, see, for instance, Momen 1985: 195–196 or Arjomand 1988: 371–382.

⁴⁰ Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.

chair of truth speakers, if the turban was not seen as an attribute of authority, or if Thursday nights were not believed to be religiously especially favourable, the lectures and lamentations would not have the status they now have. By mentioning this, I want to emphasise that the ritualised context in which the lectures and lamentations are performed need to be examined if one wants to comprehend the spoken words and the way they contribute to the authorisation of the community.

The over all context, then, is ritualised. The lectures and lamentations are tools of authorisation also because of the ritualised framework in which they are presented. As has previously been discussed, ritual may be defined as a mode of activity which is different from other kinds of human practice because of the way in which it is carried out. It is primarily expressive and not necessarily instrumental⁴¹ and it can be described as essentially focused upon supernatural matters, or as addressed to the sacred.⁴² In the Islamic context, ritual activities are seen as based on revelation, which is the core of Muslim belief. They are seen as representations of a divine enactment with eternal validity. Such a position creates a strong connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the Islamic tradition⁴³ and this is particularly important for the understanding of how a ritualised context contributes to authorisation. Since the ritualised activities are experienced as unchangeable and absolute, they are difficult to criticise and therefore prevent change. This is also the reason why it can be said that the ritualised framework authorises the community. However, rituals also get their authorising capacity through the multitude of self-referential meanings which they may have. Ritualised acts may have several meanings at the same time and may be construed differently by different persons. Because of this flexibility, rituals may be perceived as uniting and authorising even if the individuals who are united have different understandings of what it is that unites them.⁴⁴

As I have mentioned earlier, authorisation can be described as acts of speech and body which communicate reverence and respect

⁴¹ The definition is borrowed from Catherine Bell. Bell 1992: 70–71.

⁴² Bell 1992: 91.

⁴³ Bell 1997: 196.

⁴⁴ Hylland Eriksen 2000: 240.

to objects of significant symbolic importance in the community. In other words, one could say that the authorisation (and for that matter the ritualisation) happens through talking and moving: through the way people speak to each other; through the pitch of their voices; the words they choose to say and when; through the way people move; the hastiness of their movement; their facial expressions; special series of movement such as *namāz* and so forth. For instance, there is a general wish, sometimes strengthened by a religious decree, at all Islamic congregational prayers that the believers should pray side by side and go through the movements of the prayer simultaneously. In order to fulfil this desire it is common that believers who arrive late for the prayers try to catch up with the others and pray separately before they join the group of people saying their prayers simultaneously, thus being able to participate in the peace greeting that ends every prayer session. Acts such as these further elucidate the aspects of community construction in the ritual context.

Through acts of speech and of the body, the environment in which the lectures and lamentations take place is authorised. To begin with, the time in which they take place is sanctified. The lectures are given after the evening prayer. They take place after the setting of the sun, which is clearly recognised by anyone sitting under the sky in the open mosque. They are also given on Thursday night, which is the most spiritually beneficial evening of the week in the Shi'ite tradition, or in connection with especially revered months of the Islamic calendar such as Moharram, Safar or Ramazān. Thus, the time on which the lectures are given is special and it is obvious to anyone brought up in an Iranian Islamic environment that this is the case. Moreover, the locality of the lectures and lamentations, that is the mosque in general and the *manbar* or the *mehrāb* in particular, are authorised. Their orientation towards *qeble*, for one thing, connects with a global Islamic geography. Their calligraphic ornamentation with quotations from the Koran connects to the revelation according to which it is believed that human beings and the universe is, or ultimately will be ruled.

Visitors to the mosque contribute to the authorisation by acting in a way which is different from the way one acts in more profane circumstances. While entering the mosque it is customary to say *Yā Allāh!*⁴⁵ in order to mark one's presence. When people move around

⁴⁵ This expression, meaning "O God!", is in itself common also in other circumstances.

in the mosque, they do so with a certain composure. It is common to greet each other with an Arabic-sounding *salām* ‘*aleykom* and the atmosphere is appreciably friendly. However, it is the ritual ablutions that most noticeably mark the special status of the mosque. The *vozu*, which precedes the prayer and constitutes the first thing all visitors do, marks the place one has now entered as something significantly other than that which is outside.

A tangible example of authorisation could be the way the Ayatollāh is treated in this community. Whenever he enters the mosque all conversations stop entirely or are subdued. Those who first notice his arrival will whisper to their friends that *Hājjī āqā*⁴⁶ has arrived and many will stand up solemnly to manifest their reverence for the *Sheykh*. Some people, usually young *tollāb* and *basj*, will also solemnly touch or kiss his cloak in order to show their reverence and get some of his *barakat*.

Through all its components (temporal and local position, voices, words and the bodily movements) the ritualised framework in which the lectures and lamentations take place contribute to the authorisation of the chosen community, because these components attribute status and communicate reverence to the framework of the lectures and lamentations.

The Takbīr

An elucidating example of authorisation through the ritualisation in the community could be the prayer slogan known as *takbīr*. In the mosque, *takbīr* is a one-minute prayer slogan that defines the enemies and heroes of the Islamic Republic and calls upon God’s curse and blessing respectively. At the end of every evening prayer all the members of the community recite it jointly. The rhyme can vaguely be divided into two separate parts of which the former is more politically charged and the latter is more prayer-like and pronounced with hands raised as in prayer. In full, the *takbīr* reads as follows:

*Allāho akbar, Allāho akbar, Allāho akbar, Khāmene’i rahbar,
marg bar zedd-e velāyat-e faqih, dorud bar razmandegān-e eslām, salām bar
shahidān,
marg bar Āmrikā, bar Englis, bar monāfeqin-o Saddām, marg bar Esrā’il.*

⁴⁶ *Hājjī āqā* is a respectful epithet used for ‘*olamā* in general.

*Khodāyā, khodāyā, tā engelāb-e Mahdī az nahzat-e Khomeyni mohāfezat befarmā.
Khāmeneʿi rahbar, be loṭf-e khod negahdār, be āberu-ye Mahdī,
āmin, yâ Rabb ol-ʿālamîn.*

God is greater! God is greater! God is greater! Khāmeneʿi is the leader
Death to the enemies of the government of the jurisprudent!
Greetings to the fighters of Islam! Peace upon the martyrs!
Death to America! Death to England!
Death to the hypocrites⁴⁷ and Saddām! Death to Israel!

O God! O God! Until the revolution of Mahdī, protect the movement
of Khomeyni. Khāmeneʿi is the leader, keep him in your mercy.
For the sake of the honour of Mahdī.
Amen, O God of the worlds.

The *takbīr* becomes a tool of authorisation according to the above stipulated means: it hails the community's heroes and leaders, it connects these to the *Ahl-e beyt*, and it is said in a ritual context. A fruitful way to approach the *takbīr* is to see it as an addition to the Islamic creed, which adds the canonical religious and political viewpoints of the Khomeynist republic. This definition becomes possible since the rhyme fulfils several criteria of a creed.⁴⁸ I will now elaborate somewhat on this approach.

To begin with, a creed is a concise definition and confession of faith that does not explain the reasons for the given dogmas. Through the *takbīr* the members of the congregation confess, without explaining, the basic dogmas of the Khomeynist ideology in addition to the definition of the most fundamental Shiʿite doctrines given in the *Shahādat*⁴⁹ and recited in the prayers. The central and supreme position of God and the constitutionally stipulated Mahdī expectation are established. The principle of governance by the jurisprudent is established and the leadership of Khomeyni and Khāmeneʿi is confirmed, the institution of martyrdom is emphasised and the enemies of the Islamic Republic are defined.

⁴⁷ In the present context "the hypocrites" refer to those persons and groups that sided with Khomeyni in the revolution but later dissociated themselves from him and his political construction, the Islamic Republic. Ex-president Bani Sadr and the political organisation Mojāhedīn-e Khalq are examples of a person and an organisation, respectively, considered to belong to this group.

⁴⁸ The criteria are vaguely based upon argument put forth by Martin Speight. Speight 1987.

⁴⁹ I confess that there is no other god than God, I confess that Mohammad is God's messenger, I confess that 'Ali is God's friend.

Creeds can be said to describe the viewpoint of a certain group in polemical relation to that of other groups. Thus, for example, the “We believe in . . . One Lord Jesus Christ . . . God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the father . . .”⁵⁰ of the Nicean creed, is obviously formulated in opposition to Arian theology, just as the “*lam yalid wa lam yûlad wa lam yakun lahu kufuan ahadun*” (he [i.e. God] begetteth not, nor is he begotten and there is none like unto him)⁵¹ of Sura Eklās (No 112), which is constantly repeated in *namāz*, uses polemics against the Christian contemporaries of Mohammad. The *takbir* is somewhat more obvious in its polemics as it defines the community in contrast to international enemies as well as the Iranian dissidents referred to as the hypocrites. Furthermore, the *takbir* vaguely states its support for the conservative line of policy in the domestic political conflict, through the omission of Khātami’s name and the repeated mentioning of Khāmene’i’s.

Furthermore, a creed is socially uniting since it is regularly repeated under ritual circumstances as a sign of the homogeneity of the community. Christian creeds are always recited in services, as is the Jewish declaration of monotheism—the *shema*, and the Islamic *shahādat*, which is repeated in daily calls to prayer. The ritual repetition of *takbir* thus works as a united confession of the faith of the community, marking the unity of its members and manifesting their loyalty to the proclaimed ideology.

Dogmas confessed in creeds tend to be considered unquestionable. This unquestionable character is strengthened by the fact that the creeds are pronounced in ritual circumstances that charge them with the authority of religious truth. For the same reason, creeds rarely or never include any motives for the confessed doctrines. In the context of *namāz*, no questioning statements are uttered. The prayers recited are divinely revealed or authorised through the approbation of the Prophet or the Imams. *Namāz* is no forum for discussion or analysis but a secluded institution of emotion, surrender and worship where decrees given by God are attested.⁵² For this reason the

⁵⁰ Quoted translation from Tanner 1990.

⁵¹ Quoted translation from Yousuf ‘Ali 1975.

⁵² In his lecture on August 6th, 1999, the grand Ayatollāh also emphasised the importance of not questioning the words or the ritual performances of the *namāz*.

inclusion of the seemingly politically controversial *takbir* is especially remarkable and can be seen as way of manifesting conceived unquestionable character of the canonical viewpoints of the congregation. The Friday sermon is different since it is explicitly defined as a discussion of religious and political matters, given by religious leaders whose authority anyone is free to accept or defy. Thus, political slogans shouted in connection with Friday prayers cannot be understood as sanctified political manifestos in the same way as the ones constantly pronounced at evening prayers.

Finally, a creed is often in some way an expression of anxiety and of a feeling that it is necessary to definitely decide what the viewpoints of a religious movement are. Such a feeling is very unlikely to appear as long as the founder of the movement is still alive since he or she is always there to assist or restructure the dogmas in times of doubt or conflict. Rather, a creed is what followers construct to secure the survival of a movement and uphold its unity once the founding authority is gone. Thus it is finally worth noticing that the present *takbir*, viewed as the religious and political creed of modern Iran, would also fit with this criterion since it in this version allegedly came into existence after the death of Khomeyni.

By approaching the *takbir* as the creed of conservative ideology embraced in the mosque it becomes clear that it contributes to creating ideological borders around the community. Thus it can be seen as a tool of authorisation.

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed how the ritualised activities of the community contribute to the creation of authority. I have done so by utilising the concept of authorisation. I have defined this as the continuous social process through which the community is recreated and legitimised. It is a process which is generated through acts of speech and body that communicate reverence and respect to persons, times and places of significant symbolic importance to the community. I have suggested that the lectures and lamentations contribute to the authorisation in four ways. (1) Explicit appeals for obedience and respect of the religious authorities are the first. By ascribing importance to the religious leadership and by advising people not to question their decrees, such appeals contribute to the authorisation of the community. (2) The lectures and lamentations create and

encourage emotional identification with *Ahl-e beyt* among the community members. By being semantically identified with these, by being called to organise their lives in accordance with their rules and by being offered opportunity for emotional relief in listening to their tragedies, the listeners are called to develop emotional bonds to the *Ahl-e beyt*, which strengthens their loyalty. (3) The lectures and lamentations propose and encourage a sense of continuity. By identification with *Ahl-e beyt* and a Shi'ite historiography in which contemporary *'olamā* are perceived as legitimate heirs of the Imam's authority, a feeling of being essentially the same as revered Shi'ites in history arises. This perception of self promotes loyalty to the heritage that springs from these historical Shi'ites. (4) The lectures and lamentations are presented in a ritualised framework. Because the persons who deliver the lectures and lamentations as well as the time and place in which they are delivered are ritualised, greater respect will be paid to their decrees.

I ended the discussion with an analysis of how the prayer slogan known as *takbir* can be seen as an expression of the rituals' contribution to the authorisation process in the community. Thus, I have argued that the speeches the informants' listen to when going to the mosque, in many ways urge them to preserve the rules and manners of their community. By doing this, they contribute to the authorisation process as I have come to understand and define it. In the following chapter I will discuss how the informants adhere to this call and thereby elucidate the efficiency of the ongoing authorisation in their community.