CHAPTER 4

Materializing Cultural Memory

From Wartime Eulogies to Panegyric Pop in Contemporary Iran

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> They just chant 'Hossein, Hossein'[1] for hours. They take off their shirts and expose themselves to the whole world. Some authorities might consider that unproblematic, but from the perspective of propaganda, ritual practice, and metaphorical representation of our Shiʿi culture, these activities are not to be welcomed. Another issue is that actually, the preacher should be the basis and the *maddāḥ*[2] (eulogy reciter) an addition to him. But now, we are witnessing a contrary practice. That is a very dangerous development.
>
> SADEQ AHANGARAN (Apparat 2018)

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This chapter is dedicated to the study of the materiality of contemporary Iranian eulogy and elegy rituals (*maddāḥi*). As commemorative singing rituals in honor of Ahl al-Bayt, *maddāḥi* (pl. *maddāḥīhā*) has been an integral part of most Shiʿi festivities, especially during Muharram, as well as of individual obsequies. The material dimension of those commemorative rituals, however, has changed significantly since the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88. Starting with the eulogist as the mediator of Shiʿi cultural memory, as Aleida Assmann frames the function of a professionalized ritual cast (A. Assmann 2006, 45), the ritual performances in praise and remembrance of Ahl al-Bayt became a means to mobilize citizens of the newly founded Islamic Republic and invite them to answer its call of duty. Hereby, the audience acted in two functions: first, in

1 This chapter uses 'Hossein' as an Anglicized version of the name as close to the Persian pronunciation as possible. Unless otherwise stated, non-English terms presented in this chapter are romanizations from Persian as used in the Iranian context.

2 The Arabic word for to praise, *madḥ*, is in Persian used for the text genre of panegyric poetry, whereas the performance of singing, reciting this poetry is called *maddāḥī*. The performer, panegyrist or eulogist, is called *maddāḥ*.

its role as a choir accompanying the *maddāḥ* (pl. *maddāḥān*) and second, in their capacity as resonating bodies, through the ritualized self-punishment of *sīneh-zanī* (chest-beating). Mixed together with morale-boosting melodies and pugnacious lyrics, they produced a completely new soundscape and materiality of Shiʿi commemoration culture. Against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq War, a new set of values of the warfront developed: solidarity, piety, and asceticism. Largely out of fashion during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, the Culture of the Sacred Defense was revived shortly after the first electoral victory of Mahmud Ahmadinejad. New spaces for performances – such as the Jamkarān Mosque and countless makeshift tents on the streets of Iranian cities – were explored and established in order to contribute significantly to the formally dusted materiality of volunteer fighters (*basījī*) that were the idealized citizens of the war and their subsequent veteran-culture.

This chapter aims to dissect the components of this new materiality of Shiʿi soundscapes in order to show how bodily actions, pop cultural quotations, and material spaces created a new base for a youth clientele loyal to the Islamic Republic. To achieve this, the lyrics and recorded performances of *maddāḥān* Sadeq Ahangaran and Hamid Alimi are analyzed and references to non-religious pop singers as Haydeh[3] are highlighted. This new material dimension of Shiʿi cultural memory – as this article will conclude – does not only give way to a hybridization of religious material culture, it also contributes to a popularization of Shiʿi cultural memory in general.

The towering figure of Iranian Shiʿi eulogy performance is Sadeq Ahangaran (b. 1957 in Ahvaz, southwestern Iran). During the Iran-Iraq War, the eulogist himself was arguably one of the most effective weapons mobilized by the Islamic Republic on the frontlines. Ahangaran, whom the Iraqi media dubbed the 'Nightingale of the Imam' [Khomeini], sang and recruited for the war effort; more specifically, for the volunteer brigades. The songs he sang, their materiality, and aesthetic surroundings are the subject of this research. These wartime eulogies (*noḥeh-hā-ye zāman-e jang*) became a significant part of the material culture of everyday life in wartime Iran and the soundscapes they created reflected the State's propagation of the Culture of Sacred Defense (*farhang-e defāʿ-e moqaddas*)[4] that included a material world of asceticism and piety. The term 'Sacred Defense' was coined to emphasize the defensive character that

3 Ma'soumeh Dadehbala (b. 1942 in Tehran; d. 1990 in San Fransisco, CA), known professionally as Haydeh, was an Iranian contralto singer. Her career spanned over two decades and she is described as one of the most popular and influencial musicians of Iran.

4 The Persian term *moqaddas* (مقدس) can be translated as both, 'holy' and 'sacred,' as it describes saints or any action dedicated to a religious purpose or god (in English usually characterized as 'holy'), as well as events of solemn religious ceremony or things of religious

the war had from the Iranian State's perspective (since it was Saddam Hussein who started the war). Within Iran, the war was named the 'Imposed War.' The term 'Sacred Defense' also condensed the Islamic Republic's ideology of fighting the battle of Islam against the infidel atheist and Western-backed Saddam Hussein.[5]

Since the declaration of Twelver Shiʿism as the official religion of Safavid Iran (1501–1722), the performances of *noḥeh khānī* (today usually referred to as *madḥ*/*maddāḥī*; the genres of eulogy and elegy respectively their performance) have been important pillars of Shiʿi ritual practice. The poetic text genre of *madḥ* developed from the panegyric court poetry form of the *qaṣīda-yeh madīḥā* (Clinton 1986, 956–7). Commemorative rituals during Muharram for Imam Hossein and his descendants spread all over Iranian territories when Hossein b. Ali Waeẓ Kashefi's (d. 1504–5) opus magnum *Rowẓat al-shohadā'* (*The Garden of the Martyrs* composed in Persian, 1502–1503) was distributed by the new rulers. Its simple, compelling narratives of Imam Hossein's tragic death in the Battle of Karbala was performed and moved people throughout Safavid Iran.

Since the so-called 'Karbala Paradigm' is of high significance for understanding this text, a very condensed version of what is remembered by Shiʿis to have happened on the Tenth of Muharram in 61 AH (680 CE) near Karbala in today's Iraq summarizes the events: Imam Hossein, the third imam of Shiʿis, was called to aid by the citizens of Kufa who were not willing to swear their oath of allegiance to the Umayyad Khalif Yazid. Neglected by the Shiʿis of Kufa, Imam Hossein and his following of 72 men, among them Imam Hossein's younger brother Abbas ibn Ali, were cornered and cut off from water access of the Euphrates by a superior number of Yazid's army. Attempts of the Umayyad general Omar ibn Saad to force Imam Hossein to surrender remain unsuccessful and so, Hossein releases his men from their oath of fidelity, knowing that death in battle is inevitable. All men stay at his side and together they die on the Tenth of Muharram (the tenth in Arabic being Ashura [*'āshūrā'*]). Imam Hossein's death is remembered as particularly violent – his head is sent to Damascus and displayed publicly, his torso is trodden down by battle horses and later buried by Bedouins from the area.

The martyrdom of Imam Hossein who, according to common Shiʿi believe, knew that he would die and went to fight the usurper of Islamic power and principles notwithstanding became the most defining moment of Shiʿi

use (referred to as 'sacred'). Based on this, the author of this chapter prefers to translate the Persian expression *Defā'-e Moqaddas* as "Sacred Defense" and not "Holy Defense."

5 For further reading see Afshon Ostovar (2018, 62–101).

identity. The straightforward and emotional narrative of Kashefi's epos was instrumental to the myth formation of Imam Hossein's martyrdom at Karbala. The *Rowẓat's* popularity contributed to the spread of Shi'ism on Iranian territories and the recitation rituals derived from its text became to be known as 'reciting the *Rowẓat*' (*rowẓeh khānī*). Combined with panegyric poetry that had taken a turn to the spiritual, the glorification of the twelve imams, *rowẓeh khānī* developed into a variety of ritual sub-categories that are not always clearly distinguishable from one another: from panegyric poetry the ritual of *maddāḥī* emanated, originally as an introduction to the *rowẓeh khānī*, as Peter Chelkowski explains (2009). *Noḥe khānī*, the category under which all of Sadeq Ahangaran's wartime performances were labelled back then, names actually only the performance of the very last congregational dirge/ elegy of a mourning ceremony (Chelkowski 2009). As Chelkowski (2009) describes the categorization of mourning ceremonies, the *maddāḥ* is only responsible for panegyric chants at the beginning while the *rouẓe khān* is the 'master storyteller' performing the main part, including the *noḥe*. This categorization has changed during the last decades: strictly speaking all panegyrical performances are labelled *maddāḥī* today, whereas performances of elegies/ dirges are summarized under *marẓīyeh khānī* (of which *noḥe khānī* should be a subcategory). In practice, especially when it comes to the labelling of video clips of recorded performances posted on social media platforms, the implementation of this categorization is rarely clear-cut. Oftentimes, during the war years as today, also panegyrics are labelled *noḥe khānī* or vice versa. The same ambiguities apply to the naming of the singer. While Sadeq Ahangaran used to be labelled as *noḥe khān* only, for instance, all ritual singers tend to be called *maddāḥ* today. Since one singer is not limited to perform one category of ritual only, a certain fluidity of labelling seems more logical here than in the case of the actual performance.

1 *Maddāḥī* and Cultural Memory

In his seminal work *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, cultural theorist and archaeologist Jan Assmann (2012, 30) notes: "[T]he passing of memory to history is not always just a matter of time. Some events never cease to be 'figures of memory' for a specific group such as, 680 CE (the Battle of Karbala) for [Shiis] (…)." As natural as it might be for scholars outside the study of Shi'ism to refer to the Karbala Paradigm as the most significant aspect of Shi'i cultural memory, as important it is to assert that the lives and legends of all members of

Ahl al-Bayt function as those 'figures of memory' in Shi'i culture, not only the ones of Imam Hossein and his family.

Cultural memory, as it is understood in the context of this chapter, refers to the rituals, texts, archeological artifacts, and stories that are foundational for a community's identity. In their further development of Maurice Halbwachs' (1877–1945) concept of collective memory, Aleida and Jan Assmann think about communicative memory as the passing on of experiences and stories, family history, etc. from one generation to the next (J. Assmann 2012, 36). Communicative memory, therefore, is considered by A. and J. Assmann to exist within the time span of two generations (eighty years), whereas cultural memory can be thought of as the long-term memory of a group. Important events and personalities that lie in a historical past, as the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hossein for Shi'is, will still be remembered by a community, and the way they are remembered in the present is formative for their identity, the collective 'we' of a group. Cultural memory is typically shared in institutionalized form – in rituals and festivals – and the knowledge about this mythological past is preserved and transmitted mostly by a professionalized cast (J. Assmann 2012, 37–44). In Iranian Shi'ism it is preserved and transmitted by theologians as well as by eulogists.

This chapter aims to shed light on the materiality of *maddāḥī* as one of the most important rituals for mediating the legends of the imams' lives and sufferings, especially among young urban Shi'is today. Still being an under researched field in general, few works comment upon the materiality of the *maddāḥī* scene which evolved and grew immensely in the early 2000s.[6] The imperative in this text is to trace the material dimension of those affect-driven cultural performances from the *noḥeh khānī* of the war years (1980–1988) that aimed first and foremost at mobilizing for the war effort and establishing the concept of an 'Islamic Iran' (*Irān-e eslāmī*), to the '*pop maddāḥī*' of today. While an increasing number of research is being produced on various aspects of the Iran-Iraq War and Iranian musicology alike, an in-depth study of war time *noḥehhā* particularly on Sadeq Ahangaran's body of work is still missing. This article therefore contributes to a field that offers a vast range of material yet to be studied.[7] The same applies to the study of contemporary mourning rituals in Iran. Although selective research in English and Persian has been published recently, the field in general, and the study of its material culture in particular,

6 For a discussion of the existing literature see next paragraph.

7 A more fundamental and in-depth study of Ahangaran's war time eulogies and their political function than possible in the context of this chapter will be provided in the author's doctoral dissertation.

needs further effort in order to provide a more complete picture of this part of Iranian religious culture. This chapter represents a first point of reference in its attempt to analyze pop cultural influences and bodily performances of Iranian Shiʿi mourning rituals. In its final step, this chapter contextualizes these new kinds of performances to their suppositional (traditional) function in the cultivation of Shiʿi cultural memory.

Interestingly, the existing literature on Iranian eulogy and elegy rituals centers almost exclusively around Shiʿi commemoration of Ashura, even when discussed not merely in terms of promoting state power or political dissent. This is the case, for instance, in Aghaie's otherwise comprehensive study of Shiʿi symbols and rituals in modern Iran, *The Martyrs of Karbala* (Aghaie 2004). In her widely read study of the visual culture of post-revolutionary Iran, Roxanne Varzi (2006) dedicates a chapter to the filmmaking of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* (*Revāyat-e Fatḥ*, chapter three, *Shooting Soldiers, Shooting Film*) and cites the lyrics of Ahangaran's performance that was used as an opening-sequence for multiple *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* episodes (Varzi 2006, 91), but misplaces Ahangaran as a 'well known rowzeh khan from Shiraz' (Ahangaran is from Ahvaz) (2006, 238). In her monograph, *A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Co-option Under the Islamic Republic*, literary scholar Fatemeh Shams examines, among others, the lyrics of Ahanagaran's poems (Shams 2020).

Sarah Walker (Walker 2016) gives a very interesting account of her attendance of a *maddāḥī* held by eulogist Abdolreza Helali in Tehran and the visual culture used to promote this *maddāḥ* in her book chapter entitled *'Under the Bruised Sky': Music and Mourning in Postrevolutionary Iran*.

In her fundamental study on modern Iranian musicology, entitled *Soundtrack of the Revolution – The Politics of Music in Iran*, Nahid Siamdoust also briefly discusses the music of wartime Iran and Ahangaran's eulogies (Siamdoust 2017, 94–97).

In both her English language and Persian publications, Soudeh Ghaffari examines eulogy performances through Critical Discourse Analysis and hence offers important insight into the various and changing discourses prevalent within the '*maddāḥī*-scene' (Ghaffari 2010, 2011, and 2018). The aspects of Shiʿi eulogies that scholars based in Iran engage with generally reflect the discourses in Iranian media and politics, for example on the social strata of eulogy audiences (as in Fayaz and Rahmani 2006/1384) or on innovations in performance styles and lyrics that are considered problematic by religious authorities or a development of desacralization, as in Akbar Talebpour (2015).

Overall, the Karbala Paradigm continues to be the dominant lens of looking at commemorative rituals in Iran. Considering the vast range of eulogies for the Prophet and his descendants, this proves to be a gap in the research

on Shi'i commemoration culture at present. Especially material culture of the war years is usually discussed against the backdrop of the Karbala Paradigm. Poetry, slogans, or images, all make analogical use of 'going to Karbala' like Hossein and his disciples against the 'infidel Yazid.' As omnipresent as this rhetoric might have been indeed, as rich is the use of Shi'i eschatology in wartime culture (poetry and songs referring to the return of the Twelfth Imam and his rule on Earth) or, for instance, the praise of the Prophet's daughter Fatemeh Zahra as a model for mothers and wives of soldiers. As the mother of Imam Hossein, she was thought of as 'mother of all martyrs,' and in her patience, piety, and obedience she was considered the ideal daughter, wife, and mother.[8] An ample example of the variety of wartime eulogies is showcased in Sadeq Ahangaran's (2012) book *Memories and Eulogies of Hajj Sadeq Ahangaran* (*Khāterat va Noḥeh-hā ye Hajj Ṣādeq Āhangarān*). This collection lists 627 songs of which 295 cover personalities and topoi beyond Karbala – as for example Ayatollah Khomeini, Imam Ali, Fatemeh Zahra, or Ali ibn Husain Zain al-Abidin, the fourth imam of Shi'is, called Imam Sajjad.

In some cases, however, a clear distinction of the songs' subjects is difficult to draw, as my later discussion of the most iconic tune of wartime Iran, *Ey Lashkar-e Ṣāheb-e Zamān, āmādeh bāsh* ('Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, Get Ready'), will show.

2 Materiality of the War

The material culture of wartime Iran was one in transition. Revolutionary zeal and its visual representations, as painted slogans or wall newspapers still lingered on, while the new state was in the making. Then the war struck. In the beginning of the war, the makeshift materiality of revolutionary mobilization continued under different circumstances. Once more, the public sphere became fueled by revolutionary zeal and a massive mobilization of its citizens that were called to the streets to protest Saddam Hussein's attack and its Western involvement. Men of all ages were called to join the volunteer troops at the warfront, the *basījī*.[9] Visually, the already existing murals of Khomeini, Motahhari, and other clerical spearheads became accompanied by depictions of war scenes, new martyrs, and morale-boosting war slogans on hand painted banners. In her study on the visual culture of post-revolution Iran, Roxanne

8 For further reading and a discussion about the different modes of idealization of Fatemeh and Zaynab see Friedl (1997).

9 For more context see Ostovar (2018).

Varzi (2006) describes the early Islamic Republic as an "image regime" (2006, 63) that was – due to the absence of foreign press – in complete control over the production of images and visual culture in general. She claims that the ubiquitous images of martyrs in murals, on billboards, and memorabilia throughout urban Iran constructed the Islamic Republic visually as a nation. Khomeini, Varzi writes, painted wartime Iran as a nation of martyrs (2006, 62): "[T]he space of death needs two things in wartime Iran: a martyr and a photograph. Martyrdom is meaningless without memorialization, and memorialization is not possible without a photograph." As valid as this observation may be for the visual culture that confines the surface of the public space, it leaves aside the strong oral tradition within Iranian culture – which is, of course, not the focus of Varzi's study. The argument she brings forward, however, is almost to its last point conferrable to the materiality of sound during the war years. The unique characteristic that sets orality aside from visuality in Iranian culture is its interconnectedness with literature. On the one hand, oral culture is the precursor of written literature and the form of mnemotechnic (the practice of aiding the memory, as rhyme and meter which facilitate the memorization of poetry) (J. Assmann 2012, 72). On the other hand, it continues to be literature's complementary materialization in forms of poetry recitals or book readings that occupy an important space in Iranian high culture as well as in everyday life. Their equivalent in religious material culture are *rouẓeh* or *maddāḥī* performances. Not without reason, the lyrics of the *madḥ* genre (or any non-prosaic lyrics) are colloquially called *shʿer* (poem, poetry) and the activity of singing is also referred to as *shʿer goftan* (literally 'saying/ reciting poetry'). Its textuality is only one component of the ritual performances, the other two being its musical and performative dimensions.

The function of *maddāḥī* performances in Shiʿi culture, however, is to incorporate a mythological past into the present in order to create a community through identification with this past. According to Jan Assmann (2012, 2–3), repetitive-narrative rituals

> link yesterday with today by giving form and presence to influential experiences and memories, incorporating images and tales from another time into the background of the onward moving present, and bringing with it hope and continuity. This connective structure is the aspect of culture that underlies myths and histories. Both the normative and the narrative elements of these – mixing instruction with storytelling – create a basis of belonging, of identity, so that the individual can then talk of "we." What binds him to this plural is the connective structure of common

> knowledge and characteristics – first through adherence to the same laws and values, and second through the memory of a shared past.

During the war, and especially at the frontlines, the creation of a 'we' and the idea to become part of a 'shared history' were important means to build a new collective of an 'Islamic Iran' (*Irān-e Eslāmī*) and to keep up the fighting morale of the soldiers. The eulogies Sadeq Ahangaran recorded and performed at the warfront were custom-made to fulfil these needs, to create a collective 'we' that stressed the shared past of Shi'i suffering and resistance against their oppressors. In a civilian context, they created the soundscape of the 'imposed war' (*jang-e taḥmīlī*) and at the frontlines, they provided the ideological purpose to fight, boosted fighters' morale, and created a collective of potential martyrs – primarily among the volunteer fighters. The medial link that connected those two worlds was a series of war documentaries called *Narratives of Triumph* (*Revāyat-e Fatḥ*). From 1986 until the end of the war, a new episode was broadcast every Friday on state television, weaving the films into the fabric of every free day families spent together at home. *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* not only brought the war and the mentality of the frontlines into the private spaces of civilians, it also gave an account of the spiritual journey that this war was supposed to be for those who fought it. At the same time, it appealed to yet more young men to go to war, to more parents to send their sons to the warfront. Sadeq Ahangaran's voice and recordings of the rituals he performed at the frontlines played a substantial part in each episode and became part of the cities' soundscapes via radio broadcasting and playing of cassettes. Therefore, the materiality of his eulogies itself created a shared space for civil society and soldiers alike.

3 Ahangaran as Public Figure

Sadeq Ahangaran himself was born in Ahvaz (1957/1336), Khuzestan, a fact that had a strong influence on his life as well as on his music. Being an early disciple of Khomeini, he joined the local *Komīteh* which later dissolved into the Revolutionary Guards of Ahvaz (*Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Ahvāz*). Due to the geographical proximity to the Iraqi border, they became involved in warfare actions even before Iraq's full-scale invasion of Iranian territories on September 22, 1980. Ahangaran served in diverse capacities within the *Sepāh*; most of them related to his unique singing voice, recruiting for combat and morale boosting (Siamdoust 2017, 95). Although the singing of elegies during Muharram and at obsequies had always been one of the genres he mastered,

his favorite singing style had been a more cheerful one. In early 1981, however, he sang a *noḥeh*, entitled *Ey shahīdān-e be khūn ghaltan-e Khūzestān dorūd* ('Oh martyrs, hail to the shed blood of Khuzestan'), praising the martyrs of the events of war in Khuzestan province in Khomeini's home in Jamarān (Siamdoust 2017, 95).[10] The performance was broadcasted on national television and put him in the public's eye as well as in Khomeini's who encouraged him to continue singing elegiac *noḥehhā* in praise of the brave soldiers at the frontlines. The author of this *noḥeh* was Habibollah Moallemi, the father of one of Ahangaran's friends from Ahvaz. Moallemi is also the author of *Ey lashkar-e Ṣāheb-e Zamān, āmādeh bāsh* (English 'Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready'), a song that became one of the most characteristic tunes of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ*.[11]

4 Ahangaran and Avini

Revāyat-e Fatḥ was produced by a film unit called *Jahād TV* that was sponsored by Iranian National TV (*Sedā va Sīmā*, English abbreviation IRIB) and Construction Jihad (*Jahād-e Sāzandegī*). The mastermind behind *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* and *Jahād TV* was Morteza Avini, an intellectual from Tehran with a degree in architecture (Khosronejad 2012, 9). Not particularly religious before the revolution, he became a spiritual follower of Ayatollah Khomeini and his push towards a religiously determined state and culture. He developed a cinematographic concept which he called *sīnamāī-ye eshrāqī* ('illuminationist cinema'), presumably derived from the Philosophy of Illuminationism (*falsafe-ye eshrāq*) founded by Shahab ad-Din Yahya ibn Habash Sohravardi (d. 1191). Sohravardi's epistemological understanding was that true knowledge could only be reached through envisioning of a thing as a whole, through immediate illumination (Ziai 2012). Consequently, Avini wanted his films to speak directly to the hearts and senses of his audience, without analytical dissection of the content (hawzah.net 2008).

Avini was not interested in showing actual warfare or the tactics, machinery, and combat activities it entails. He was apprehensive of the war propaganda national television produced as "reaction propaganda" (*tabliqāt-e vakoneshī*) and considered it of artificial atmosphere and so badly made that it turned out to be anti-war propaganda at the end (Khosronejad 2012, 13). Avini's method,

10 The *noḥeh* was written by Moallemi before the 'Operation Hoveyzeh' on January 5–7, 1981, see azadeganiran khabar.ir/115072.

11 See azadeganirankhabar.ir/94125.

Pedram Khosronejad (2012) notes, was to show the mystical and divine nature of the war, the very characteristics that made this war unique for him: "*Revāyat-e Fatḥ* presents the differences between our sacred war, our warfronts and all other wars in the world. We will present the theosophical musings [*ab'ād-e 'erfānī*] of war, and we believe that the roots of our victory lie precisely here."[12]

He succeeded in creating the most effective propaganda for the cause of the Islamic Republic, clearly distinguishing his films from state propaganda and focusing on the volunteer fighters and their ideological mindset instead of the regular army. He achieved this through an approach that today would be called holistic, the work of a true believer. As Hamid Naficy (2012, 13–17) points out, Avini aimed for himself and his team to become one with the volunteer fighters, unlearning their individuality and striving towards a sacred collective identity. He wanted his team members to become soldiers with a camera (2012, 10).

At the editing table he realized that he had reached a new interaction with these young fighters (hawzah.net 2008).[13] 'Who are you? Where are you from? How long have you been to the frontlines? What was your occupation at home? What is your motivation to be here? How are you feeling about being at the warfront?' These were questions Avini and his team asked countless fighters in front of their cameras. The answers they received (or at least the ones they chose to show) reflected not only an unconditional devotion to Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideology, but also an almost nonchalant readiness to die. Most of them were of humble backgrounds, but even those who were not testified to the values of the warfront (*arzeshhā-ye jebhe*) – solidarity, piety, and asceticism. In this way, he wanted to breathe new life into classical cinema, portraying the faith and the conviction of the *basījī* fighters. He created a special "sacred cinematic recitation" (*bayān-e sīnamāīy-e moqaddas*) (Khosronejad 2012, 15) on the one hand and a holistic composition of picture, sound, music, and narration on the other. For a cinematographic concept like this, the collaboration with a eulogist like Ahangaran was extremely fruitful.

5 *Madḥ* and Music

The music present in *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* falls generally in one of the following categories: it is either a) *maddaḥī* sung by a singer on or off screen, b) the

12 Avini (2005, as quoted in Khosronejad 2012, 14).

13 All translations and transcripts, except for the quotation by Khosronejad, are made by the author.

chanting of paroles or sometimes *maddāḥī*-lyrics by a one or more soldiers, or c) Western style military marches or purist drums with clash cymbals. On few occasions there is also d) electrically produced music in the background. Reza Soltanzadeh, the composer Avini worked with, is quoted by Hawzah.Net (2008) saying: "[C]onsidering usual standards of harmony in film music, the level of the music in *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* was zero. Surprisingly, when the images and the music came together, the effect was stunning. This feeling came from *Shahīd* Avini. He was very well educated in music."

What Avini did very frequently was blending *madḥ* and music into his over-voice narration and with the pictures on screen. Sometimes the *maddāḥ* is on screen and part of the 'plot,' singing for the troops before an operation, in the field, or in a camp. In many cases, the voices of Ahangaran or another singer stays longer than the actual sermon in the frame, until the next scene or the one after that. Sometimes the source of singing is not to be seen.

This method, as Soltanzadeh explains, followed the principles of Avini's illuminationist cinema in which music played a special role (hawazah.net 2008):

> The music appeals directly to the senses of the spectator and is mediated to the soul. That means, the music is absorbed before all other components of the film that are processed intellectually. So, it's the music that makes the film original. But still, for Avini it had to be complementary to the ensemble.

The sound of the drums and the cymbals opens a mental space that is already filled with associations of *taʿziye*, the Shiʿi passion play depicting the death of Imam Hossein, and of heroism and battles. Avini was well aware of the epic nature of their sound and used them accordingly. "Drums already had this epic function in the battles of early Islam," he explained (hawzah.net 2008).

When it comes to the selection of *madḥ*, there is a full range of different styles. However, the *noḥeh* (elegy) is the most frequently used, which is mostly sung by Ahangaran. Many episodes of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* were opened by his singing, his portrait with a bandana around his head framed by a luminous yellow circle, like a *basīǰī* poster boy. The two songs that became most commonly connected with *Revāyat-e Fatḥ*, nevertheless, were eulogies that had an inciting sound, pugnacious, and cheerful. The first one, as already mentioned, was *Ey lashkar-e Sāheb-Zamān* (1982, English 'Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!'), written by Habibollah Moallemi and performed by Ahangaran. The second one was written by Atiq Behbahani and sung by Akbar Shariat, a *maddāḥ* who did not record many other successful songs beside *Karbalā', Karbalā', mā dārīm mīāyīm* (1984, English 'Karbala, Karbala, we are coming'),

which he performed at least once at the frontlines. The performance was filmed and Avini used it multiple times as the closing sequence of various *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* episodes.

6 'Oh, Battalion of the Master of [Our] Time, Get Ready!' (*Ey Lashkar-e Ṣāḥeb-Zamān, āmādeh bāsh*)

The eulogy serves as a sound frame, as an 'intro' and 'outro' for a number of episodes of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ*, for instance for the second film of season three which deals with the fighting of an operation in Salmancheh during winter 1987, called 'Operation Karbala Five' (Khosronejad 2012, 185). The episode, entitled *The Road* (*Jādeh*), starts with this eulogy as an acoustic background for troops in the desert running towards a landing Iranian helicopter. Ahangaran's voice begins with the refrain and jumps directly to the third stanza, describing the factual preparations for battle in a poetic fashion: "[…] for pride tie the band of courage around my head." As soon as the sound of the helicopter disappears, the rhythmic sound of chest-beating on the recording becomes audible. A choir of men joins in the last *āmādeh bash* ('be ready') of each stanza, singing the first line of the refrain without Ahangaran. On the screen, soldiers drink from a water tank and perform their prayers. Lyrics and images are now synchronized almost to the second: soldiers shouldering their backpacks ('Tie your backpack'), wrapping cartridge-belts around their comrades, and fixing their boot's laces ('Tie bayonets and cartridge-belts tight to the back/ Tie your shoelaces with the speed of male lions'). They kiss and embrace ('For the final farewell kiss each other'). For a few seconds, the camera rests on the maimed leg of one man in khakis who bids the others farewell.

The song returns for the last five minutes of the film, during a battle scene. It is arranged overlying to the noise of gunfire and starts with the refrain, followed by the more spiritual (compared to the opening of the film) first stanza. After one minute, the scene changes from the daytime battle to fighters marching in front of a sunset. The camera zooms closer to the black contours of the men against the orange-red. During the last seconds Ahangaran sings the refrain once more while trucks and tanks drive by, a soldier is standing on top of a tanker and is raising his hands in the air.

> Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready![14]
> For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

14 Non-poeticized translation by the author.

You warriors who have taken your lives into your own hands, the day of courage has come
Oh, army of the Spirit of God,[15] the time of bravery has come
Oh, power of Islamists until eternity be ready
To defy the enemies, get ready, get ready

Through the zeal of meeting Hossein, everybody's hearts have become frenzied with love
By the lovers of Karbala this desert is crowded
In the hearts of these warriors, enthusiasm has risen anew
Like a determined powerful mountain, get ready

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!
For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

For pride tie the band of courage around my head
For the godly audience do perfume my body
Tie your backpack, my fellow combatant in the trenches
Test-fire your weapon, get ready

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!
For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

Tie bayonets and cartridge-belts tight to the back
Tie your shoelaces with the speed of male lions
For the final farewell kiss, each other
Say to your fellow trench men get ready, get ready!

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!
For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready!

Grab the banners all you manly standard-bearers
With order and method bring the battle to the street
From the right wing and the left, attack from all directions
Gallop like a young lion, get ready, get ready!

15 A reference to Khomeini's first name, *Rūḥollāh*.

Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!
For a battle without mercy, get ready, get ready! Be mutually united, assistants and disciples of Hossein
Go to Karbala's soil (the battleground), be pilgrims of Hossein
You all are wishful to see Hossein
Oh seekers, oh lovers, get ready, get ready!
Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready!

متن ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

رزمندگان جان به کف روز شجاعت آماده
ای لشکر روح خدا گاه شهامت
ای نیروی اسلامیان تا بینهایت
از بهر دشمنان آماده باش آماده باش

از شوق دیدار حسین، دل ها همه شیدا شده
از عاشقان کربلا پوشیده این صحرا شده
در قلب این جنگ آوران شوری ز نو بر پا شده
چون کوه راسخ پرتوان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

بهر سرافرازی ببند بند شجاعت بر سرم
بهر ملاقات خدا بنما معطر پیکرم
بر بند کوله پشتي رزمنده ی هم سنگرم
بنما سلاحت امتحان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

سرنیزه ها، فانسخه ها بندید محکم بر کمر
بندید بند کفش ها با سرعت شیران نر
بهر وداع آخرین بوسید روی یک دیگر
گویید با هم سنگران آماده باش آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

گیرید علم داران همه مردانه بیرق ها به کف
با نظم و ترتیب آورید رو سوی میدان نبرد
از ممینه وز میسره حمله کنید از هر
تازید چون شیر ژیان آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

باشید با هم متحد یاران و انصار حسین
رو سوی ارض کربلا آرید زوار حسین
هستید جمله آرزومندان دیدار حسین
ای عارفان وی عاشقان آماده باش آماده باش

ای لشکر صاحب زمان آماده باش
بهر نبردی بی امان آماده باش آماده باش

As Hamid Naficy notes in his *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, the inner structure of the episode follows a sermon-like order, demonstrating how Shi'i performance traditions have influenced the episodes of *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* (2012, 17). Consequently, the film starts and ends with Ahangaran's eulogy. The opening scenes show the preparations for battle: getting the combat gear ready, performing the last prayers in the open, and tying their shoelaces. The lyrics reflect these cheerful anticipations. The end closes after a (supposedly) successful day of fighting, the sunset representing the circle of nature and the contours of the soldiers walking home the minor position of mankind in this divine creation.

As untypical of *Revayat-e Fath* as this enticing tune may be, it impressively showcases the propagandistic talent of Avini. In fact, these specific sequences that show the very practical preparations for battle paired with the performance of prayers and Ahangaran's cheerful voice, have become both, soundtrack and music video of the war. Even today, this very sequence is shown again and again as an aesthetic warm-up or historical mood-setting when the war is referenced in Persian-language media.

While the song alludes mostly to Shi'i eschatology, the merging with the tropes of martyrdom and the Karbala Paradigm is characteristic for this kind of wartime *maddāḥī*. Oftentimes, *madḥ* that is dedicated to the Twelfth Imam or to Ayatollah Khomeini also contains invocations to Imam Hossein. Considering the obvious analogy of the contemporary war with the myth of

Karbala regarding the shared geography – the soil that is today's Iraq – and an enemy that is perceived to be the wrongful ruler of this sacred soil, this combination of invocations does not come as a surprise. Once again, it bears witness to the power that figures of memory and places of memory (*Erinnerungsorte*) can hold over the human psyche. "Places [of memory] are able to preserve and to certify cultural memory even over periods of oblivion," as Aleida Assmann notes (2006, 21). Similar to the human body, places can also act as container of cultural memory, as Karbala does for Shi'is. The evocation of or the physical visit/ proximity to places of memory combined with other 'storage media' (as texts as well as music, rituals, or visuals) leads to a 'reanimation' of the memory represented by this very place (2006, 21). These multiple entanglements of memory, metaphor, and embodiment account for the effectiveness of those 'memory technologies,' the various ways in which 'going to Karbala' was referenced in material culture, literature, and media during the Iran-Iraq War.[16]

The concept of *Erinnerungsorte*, 'places of memory,' as applied here according to Aleida Assmann, is derived from Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* ('sites of memory'), which refers to spaces, objects, or events that contain meaning and enable identification for the collective memory of a group (Nora 1989). Apart from the spacial dimension of this concept as already discussed above, Karbala served as a site of memory in multiple ways during the war. The re-enactment of the event of the Karbala narrative – the 'David against Goliath' like fight of Imam Hossein and his disciples against the Umayyad's troops – carried on throughout the war years. To picture every single fighter who went to the frontline as 'lover of Karbala' and 'pilgrim of Hossein' as done in the lyrics of 'Oh, Battalion of the Master of Time, get ready,' served the purpose to certify and reanimate Shi'i cultural memory as the initiation moment of the Islamic Republic. Already prior to and during the revolution, Khomeini had used the fight against the 'Yazid of [our] time' (namely then the Shah) as a site of memory in Nora's sense. From 1980 until 1988, this usage of the Karbala narrative was instrumental to create and certify the nation's identity as a collective of Hossein-like warriors fighting a just war against the usurper of the sacred soil.

16 The extensive study of poster art from the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War by Chelkowski and Dabashi is an ample example of those technologies (see Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999).

7 Pop *Maddāḥī* and the Hybridization of Shi'i Cultural Memory

> Close up inside the adjoining prayer hall in Jamkaran [Mosque], for those who believe, the devotion is real. Tears streamed down the cheeks of two thousand Iranian men ripe for the return of the Mahdi [...], many wept as they awaited their Messiah. These Shiites are led by a religious storyteller, whose lyrical songs speak of tragedy on the path to salvation, prompting cries of anguish and joy. For two hours, the bearded Mahdi Salahshur relentlessly rallied his listeners around the belief in the all-powerful Twelfth Imam. He sat in the only chair, ten rows back amid that sea of red-eyed sweating supplicants, kneeling and brought by his words to ecstasy and agony in turns. "Don't let the wish stay in your hearts! Come on, come on! I have a fear of not seeing you!" Salahshur told the crowd in a poetic, longing voice. "Everybody wants to see the Lord and Master of the Age! Mourn, raise your hands." People chanted. Men cried, wedged shoulder to shoulder. Sweat began to pour. "Those who sinned, cry more!" came the order. "Don't let me down in front of the martyrs ..."! (Peterson 2010, 299–300)

After the period of societal and cultural secularization that came with the Islamic reformist's movement and their electoral victory that led to the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), the popularity of *maddāḥī* peaked again after Mahmud Ahmadinejad's first electoral victory in 2005. A certain group of singers, colloquially called *maddāḥān-e sīyāsī* (English 'political eulogists'), reached national stardom and transformed the image, the social ranking and the humble position that *maddāḥān* used to occupy within Shi'i clerical hierarchy. Since the intellectual discourses seemed to be dominated by Shi'i reformist thinkers like Abdolkarim Sorush, the reactionary move by the power center of Ali Khamenei's bureau was not one to win over minds, but bodies. This strategy aimed at a different cultural level that was – once again as during the war – designed to transmit its message to the youth from lower-income families through the language of music and ritual. The performance Scott Peterson witnessed in 2005 in Jamkaran Mosque belongs to an early stage of this development, when there were sermons held with people sitting or kneeling. Although some of those details might have changed over the decade to come, the principle at the core of the ritual of *maddāḥī* as such is embodiment, as scholars of material culture frame it: "All of these aesthetic frameworks [that] structure a people's time, space, sense of purpose, and collective identity" (David Morgan 2010, 18). We have already encountered this concept from cultural theory, but what J. Assmann calls a 'connective structure' focuses

more on the two levels of the temporal and the social (J. Assmann 2012, 2–3). Since, however, the ritual practice of *rouẓeh khānī*, *noḥe khānī*, or *marẓīyeh khānī* (what came to be summarized under the term of *maddāḥī*) can be seen as primarily bodies (re) acting, it makes sense to reconceptualize the practice of *maddāḥī* within the study of material culture:

> The power of material culture resides in its ability to make physically present what is otherwise distant or absent or insensate, to embody the inchoate feelings, dim presentiments, the distant past, the deceased leader or saint, the religious community, the intangible or transcendent reality, and to discipline and enlist the body in acts of shared imagination. All of these aesthetic frameworks structure a people's time, space, sense of purpose, and collective identity. The study of material culture is not limited to the artefacts and spaces of human life, but also includes the concepts, aesthetic paradigms, emotional patterns, and many practices that make things and spaces apprehensible and valuable. Material culture gives form and place to such intangible structures as feelings, presentiments of ages past or future, the nation, or the personhood of ancestors and saints, investing them with a concrete presence in daily life (Morgan 2010, 18–19)

The audiences of performances as described by Peterson (2010) above seemed to have longed for Imam Hossein or Imam Mahdi having a 'concrete presence' in their daily life. The collective celebrations of their very timely feelings for those mythological figures and places of memory contextualize their lives within the Shiʿi community and history making thereby the sacred tangible. After the war-weariness of the 1990s seemed forgotten and a large number of supporters of the secularization movement retired into their private realms, the public space was recharged as a religious stage of "sense of purpose and collective identity," as David Morgan (2010, 18) puts it. The Jamkaran Mosque, for example, was turned into an impressive shrine complex with funds from the Ahmadinejad government, attracting masses of young audiences for *maddāḥī* sermons dedicated to the Twelfth Imam (Calmard 2011). Although the legend of the apparition of the Hidden Imam in the village near Qom in 984/373 has been doubted by many, including Ayatollah Khomeini himself; it nevertheless became a new center for millennialist rituals praising and actively promoting the return of the Mahdi. As Peterson explains: The main characteristic of Mehdi Salahshur's sermon at Jamkarān is the collective state of ecstasy and of embodying the Shiʿi (millennialist) anticipation (*enteẓār*) of the Hidden Imam.

The mass sermons and the architectural grandeur of the five-dome complex, however, are only one side of the distinct religious materiality in Iran since 2005. A renewed audiovisual presence of *maddāḥī* culture in the urban landscape represents the other side. "[*Maddāḥī*] seemed to be everywhere," Davud, an interviewee and eyewitness from Tehran who wished to remain anonymous, recalls: from humble to huge makeshift tents, sermon advertisements on posters and banners, and the playing, display and selling of recorded music carriers. As Davud explained: "When you want to set up a *maddāḥī* in your neighborhood, you just go to the district authorities and, without any difficulties, you would get enough money to lease a tent, audio equipment and a *maddāḥ* for the night. Especially between 2005 and 2009, there was always a *maddāḥī* going on."[17] Davud worked as a medical professional in a state hospital during those years and remembers that his hospital used to treat many young-to-middle-aged men who said they were *maddāḥān* and came to treat vocal cord problems caused by their lengthy performances, as they reported.

In those years, also an institutionalization of the profession of the *maddāḥān* was executed. Specialized organizations like the *Khāne-ye Maddāḥān-e Keshvar* (English 'The House of the Nation's *Maddāḥān*') or the *Sāzemān-e Basīj-e Maddāḥān* (the volunteer militia's *Maddāḥān* organization, established in 2008, see Golkar 2013, 5) were founded. Out of a vast mass of singers (also trained by these organizations themselves, see Golkar 2013, 5) emerged a handful of them who were prominent and outspoken for Head of State Ali Khamenei – state-sponsored religious pop stars and also innovators of their craft. Over the years, performers like Helali or Hamid Alimi developed a repertoire of not just traditional *rouẓeh*, *noḥeh*, and *madḥ* that were written and performed within the modes of the Iranian music system, the *dastgāh*, but adapted singing styles that resembled classical Iranian vocal music (*āvāz*), patriotic folk ballads (*tasnīf*), Iranian pop ballads by exiled singers based in Los Angeles (generally labelled *losanjelesī*), or even rap-like spoken word performances.

During many rituals, attendees take off their shirts, so the sounds of chest-beating on bare chests produce a strepitous soundscape that is very sensual and creates an atmosphere of close, raw physicality that is homoerotically charged. To follow this path in research is, especially for female scientists, not easy to execute. Countless video clips on *YouTube* or *Apparat* give a graphic account of sceneries where the collective performance of *maddāḥī* is fully acted out by the eulogist on the stage and his audience. In many clips, the naked torsos of the men in the audience are pixelated. In this context, homoeroticism of Sufi poetry comes to mind: the common ground to long for the beauty of or

17 Author's interview with "Davud" (Cologne, Germany, August 2017).

proximity to God or a beautiful witness of His.[18] In *maddāḥi* lyrics, especially in those written for Ashura performances, mostly seeing and reaching Imam Hossein is invoked. Another approach that leans more towards the material, towards the body, is suggested by research about homoeroticism and military/ fraternity culture. In Iranian culture, there is an interesting intersection with the homosocial world of 'traditional' male sports clubs, the *zūr-khāneh* ('house of strength') which Houchang E. Chehabi explores in his very illuminating article *Gender Anxieties in the Iranian Zūrkhānah* (Chehabi, 2019).

In most of the ritual performances by today's popular *maddāḥān as* Mahmud Karimi, Said Haddadian, Abdolreza Helali, or Mehdi Salahshur, this practice of chest-beating – sometimes accompanied by rhythmic jumping – is acted out, regardless of the song's nature. That means that it is also performed during eulogies and not exclusively during the singing of elegies. Generally, chest-beating is regarded as a form of repentance that is meant to absolve the pious ones from the sin of the Shi'is of Kufa who did not come to aid Imam Hossein in the Battle of Karbala. It is in part understood as a ritualized form of self-punishment in Shi'i culture for this reason. In different social and religious *maddāḥī* settings however, as the more 'traditional' guilds of the City of Yazd, for example, communities practice elaborate and artful chest-beating performances together with a eulogist several weeks before staging them on important holidays performances.

The aforementioned new linguistic blurriness that allows all kinds of elegies and eulogies to be summarized under the term of *maddāḥī* therefore signifies not only a linguistic/ formal shifting of ritual genre differentiation, but also brings forth a material dimension that changes the nature of the ritual fundamentally (or vice versa): as mentioned in the initial quote by Ahangaran, the "ritual practice and the metaphorical representation" of *noḥeh khānī* and *maddāḥī* (as generic terms) are altered in a fashion that empties the ritual of its "metaphorical representation." For the materiality of the ritual, this means that the principle of embodiment is no longer acted upon. In David Morgan's words (2010, 18): "[E]mbody[ing] the inchoate feelings, dim presentiments, the distant past, the deceased leader or saint, the religious community, the intangible or transcendent reality, and to discipline and enlist the body in acts of shared imagination" is not fulfilled once ritual acts of praise and absolution become conflicted or even erotically loaded. One can argue that regardless of the song's nature, the attendees will feel closer to the imams by performing this collective state of ecstasy. The principle of embodiment of a community of sinners or celebrators, however, no longer applies. The ritual becomes a

18 For a discussion of homoeroticism in Sufi poetry and eulogy lyrics see below.

'meaningless' performance of "flight from the selfhood" (Baumeister 1991, as quoted in Koster, 211–248).

'Meaningless' and 'meaningful' refer in this context to the semantic and pragmatic understanding of lyrics and their synchronicity with established bodily performances. As Koster (2003, 6) elucidates, the chanting of a semantical 'meaningless' mantra composed of repetitive syllables as in Vedic rituals can serve the purpose of a ritual as well as semantically 'meaningful' religious slogans. 'Meaningless' and 'meaningful' are, therefore, no categories of scientific or moral evaluation.

The escape from the self is one central goal of ritual performances, according to Koster (2003, 6). 'Meaningful' and 'meaningless' rituals thereby only differ in their effectiveness of self-escape. Interestingly, meaningless rituals seem more efficient (2003, 7): "[I]t can be said that some absorbing, monotonous activity is more effective in stripping the outer semantic layers of one's identity the more meaningless it is. Far from being without purpose, the meaninglessness of ritual acts and chants is highly functional as an ego-reducing technique." Taken up on the word's original meaning, the rituals become popularized. They are not, as Koster points out, without purpose. Also, Assmann remarks (2012, 3): "The basic principle behind all connective structures is repetition."

Another material dimension of popularization is the incorporation of pop music into *maddāḥī*. *Maddāḥān* are very creative in doing so, and they use musical influences from various genres. I would like to showcase the usage of a very popular song by the *losanjelesī* singer Haydeh, *Salām-e man bā to, yāre qadīmī* ('Hail to you, old friend') by *maddāḥ* Hamid Alimi. Recordings of the cover version by Alimi appeared online in 2014 on the Iranian platform Apparat.com, before a number of Instagram accounts such as @maddahi_tweet and YouTube channels reposted the audio recording and its original as late as in 2018. As often the case with video clips and recordings in cyberspace, the audio file then appeared on multiple outlets, embellished with or without the original text or appreciative or ironic comments. On the recording itself, Alimi sings the original lyrics as sung by Haydeh, unchanged, which is curious regarding the content – an invocation by the lyrical narrator (singer) to Sāqī, a mythical cupbearer. In Iranian mystical poetry, the cupbearer – renderer of wine and often also musician – is either a beautiful young woman or an (equally beautiful) young man. Especially in Sufi poetry, Saqi is often embellished with sexual connotations. The practice of gazing (*nazar*) at a beautiful adolescent male to see the beauty of God in him and to take his earthly beauty as a testimony for godly beauty was called *shāhedbāzī* ('play with the witness'), "[f]alling in love hopelessly and selflessly with such a figure became a familiar trope of Sufi tales," as Afsaneh Najmabadi notes (2005, 17).

And even if all covers of well-known and cherished songs of *maddāḥān* play with this familiarity amongst Iranian audiences, the choice of song is an especially curious one. First, it could come to mind that the state of drunkenness itself is forbidden, even the metaphorical one, and its mentioning usually subject to censorship, but also the invocation of the mythical wine bearer seems out of place for any context a *maddāḥ* could possibly perform in. The metaphorical use of wine and the cupbearer in mystical Persian poetry, on the other hand, has come to reach beyond orthodox readings of homoerotic practices, of what is allowed and forbidden. As Annemarie Schimmel writes in her study of the imagery of Persian poetry (1992, 35–36; 116), wine and cupbearer are "time-honored concepts" that hint to leaving behind a piousness of law towards a religion of transcendental love. Especially interesting as a continuation of the tradition of war poetry is here, that pleasant motifs as drinking wine, were "used to distract readers from the actual brutality of war," as Fatemeh Shams explains (2016, 26). References to *may* (English 'wine') were used by religious poets to suggest the pleasant state of martyrdom (Shams 2016, 26). The content and imagery of Haydeh's song, therefore, are not necessarily inappropriate to serve as *madḥ*-lyrics.

Unfortunately, time and place of the recorded performance are not stated on any of the websites/ platforms that feature the recording. The lyrics Alimi sings go as the following (as the original text written by Farid Zoland):

سلام من به تو یار قدیمی
منم همون هوادار قدیمی
هنوز همون خراباتی و مستم
ولی بی تو سبوی می شکستم
همه تشنه لبیم ساقی کجایی
گرفتار شبیم ساقی کجایی

Hail to you, old friend
I am the same old supporter
I am the same tippler and drunk
But without you I broke the wine jug
We are all thirsty, Saqi, where are you?
We are captives of the night, Saqi where are you?

As in most *maddāḥī*, Alimi uses an echo mode in his microphone. He sings the lyrics in a weeping voice, with sobbing sounds at the end of each line. Apparently, judging from his singing style, he has turned the popular ballade into an elegy. In between the second and the third line, he calls upon the

eighth imam, Reza. Later in the recording, the voices of a seemingly large audience join in for two stanzas. Here, Alimi plays on the general familiarity of the pop song to create a moment of communion and a collective 'we.' This seems all the more curious considering the official status of vocalist Haydeh, and *losanjelesī* singers in general, as 'idolaters' within the official state narrative. Head of State Khamenei is quoted by Aftab News (2014) saying: "[M]elodies by singers from Los Angeles that alter the religious nature of the *madḥ* genre are to be avoided. They are immoral and have been arranged to promote sexual lust." This quote from 2007/1386 by Khamenei shows, however, that the boundaries of popularization have been pushed further instead of retreating to the realm of 'traditional' *madḥ*, as Khamenei demanded.

8 Conclusion

The materiality of Shi'i cultural memory as it is performed in contemporary *maddāḥī* rituals has changed significantly since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), it was mainly through the voice of Sadeq Ahangaran and his *noḥeh*s, that the 'Culture of the Frontlines' (*farhang-e jebhe*) was brought to Iranian cities. Although the sound of wartime Iran remained traditional in its aesthetics and the poetry of Habibollah Moallemi who wrote Ahangaran's lyrics was as artful as the poems by older masters, the propagandistic effect of those wartime *noḥehhā* was powerful. As images of leaders of the revolution and martyrs in murals and on billboards constructed the Islamic Republic visually as a nation, Ahangaran's voice defined the soundscape of Khomeini's 'Islamic Iran.' His ubiquitous presence was facilitated by IRIB in general, and by the war documentaries *Revāyat-e Fatḥ*, directed and narrated by Morteza Avini, in particular. Every Friday from 1986 onwards, *Revāyat-e Fatḥ* created a shared space between the soldiers at the warfront and civilian families in front of their television screens. The films not only brought Ahangaran's voice and sermons from the warfront into the living rooms, but also – through its sermon-like structure – provided a communion for the nation of potential martyrs and their families.

While Ahangaran mobilized for warfare by declaring *basījī* fighters as 'troops of the Master of Time,' post-revolutionary *maddāḥān* use different means to establish a fan base that complies to the red lines of religious culture set by the state: they celebrate *maddāḥī* rituals like ecstatic concerts. The transmission of cultural memory through the voice of the mediator and the bodies of the audiences becomes a side effect; the main purpose of the performance of *maddāḥī-ye pāp* is collective ecstasy, the flight from selfhood, as Jan Koster

puts it. Even if this is a purpose that ritual performances of most religions and cultures in fact share, it is a significant derivation from what official religious discourse claims the sermons to be, as articulated by Ahangaran himself in the opening quote. This derivation of the proclaimed function (cherishing the imams and their family, remembering and transmitting knowledge about their martyrdom and begging for absolution for the sin of the early Shiʿi community) takes shape in the content of the songs (their lyrics) and their form (their melodies) and the way, the *maddāḥ* and the audience perform them together. The adaptation of pop music into the *madḥ* genre therefore popularizes the Shiʿi ritual in a fashion that goes far beyond the ideological use of the wartime sermons: Although the connective structure it seeks to establish is still the one of a community of Shiʿis, its means have been stripped of most pre-existing conventions, as the general solemnity of the ritual, the semantics of chest-beating and, oftentimes, the transmission of religious knowledge. The meaninglessness brings forth a renunciation of the divine. *Maddāḥī-ye pāp* is a 'secularized' ritual in which the affects that usually in religious rituals intensify the bodily memory that is established by habitualization (A. Assmann 2006, 20–22) become the main purpose for the audience.

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