PART ONE

SUSTAINED SAINTHOOD

CONTESTING FRAGILE SAINTLY TRADITIONS: MIRACULOUS HEALING AMONG TWELVER SHIʿIS IN CONTEMPORARY SYRIA

Edith Szanto

Introduction: Zaynab's Fragile Authenticity

"I doubt Zaynab is really buried here in Syria!" Um Ahmad, an Iraqi widow in her early forties, thought of herself as a devout Shiʿi, and she regularly visited the shrine, but she questioned whether or not Zaynab's tomb held the saint's remains.[1] Um Ahmad fled Baghdad and came to Syria after her husband died in an explosion in 2006.[2] Without stopping anywhere else, she moved directly to the Syrian shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab, around ten kilometers south of Damascus, where thousands of other Iraqis sought asylum from the violence back home.[3] Um Ahmad was not the only Shiʿi I encountered during my fieldwork in Syria who did not believe in the authenticity of the shrine. Like many other Iraqi Shiʿi women I interviewed, she felt physically ill and spiritually exhausted. Besides becoming a widow, she had developed cancer. Yet in spite of her doubts, she visited the shrine and hoped to obtain miraculous healing and restoration from the saint.[4]

---

[1] Sayyida Zaynab was the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad and she is revered by both Sunni and Shiʿi Muslims, though her Syrian shrine receives by far more Shiʿi than Sunni visitors.

Fieldnotes, Monday, 14 July 2008.

[2] Note: All the names of interlocutors have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

[3] Since I left the field in 2010, the Arab Spring occurred and changed everything. Iranian pilgrims to Sayyida Zaynab's shrine have been repeatedly kidnapped and Iraqis are returning to Iraq en masse because they have been threatened. The Shiʿi community of the shrine-town and their practices, probably no longer exist the way I describe them here. However, because there are still Twelver Shiʿis in the Syrian shrine-town, I employ the present tense when describing piety there.

[4] Shrines in Arabic can be called either *qabr* or *maqām*. While *qabr* refers to a grave or tomb, *maqām* is more ambiguous. The latter term derives from a verb meaning "to stand" and as such, it can refer to a location, which houses a saint's remains or a place at which a saint spent time. Notable, the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab is colloquially referred to as both *qabr* and *maqām*.

Authenticity is not irrelevant for Twelver Shiʿis visiting the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, however, for many the shrine's reputation as a place of miraculous healing is more important than its authenticity. While stories of healing cannot verify the shrine, they do legitimate it. There are Shiʿis for whom the question of historical authenticity is essential. For example, the 'modern pious Shiʿis' in neighboring Lebanon, which anthropologist Lara Deeb describes, are very much concerned with authenticity and accept only authenticated rituals and narratives (Deeb 2006). For these Lebanese Shiʿis, many of whom follow Ayatollahs Fadhlallah or Khamenei as their *marjaʿ al-taqlīd* (lit., source of emulation),[5] Twelver Shiʿis in Syria are 'traditional', and lack 'rationality' because they value the miraculous over the rational. More specifically, Lebanese 'modern pious Shiʿis' consider Shiʿis in Syria irrational because many of them participate in hematic forms of self-flagellation (such as *tatbīr* wherein Shiʿis hit and cut the skin on their heads with swords) on ʿAshura, the tenth day of Muharram.[6] This difference in attitudes towards self-flagellation, rationalism, and the miraculous is not a nationalist or ethnic one, but rather a question of which *marājaʿ al-taqlīd* (pl. of *marjaʿ al-taqlīd*) are most influential in a particular area and what views they hold. In Syria, there are two dominant scholarly opinions on ritual self-flagellation, which rest on different understandings of health and healing, and which form the topic of the first part of this chapter. The second examines miracle stories and ritual practices, which are both symbolic and productive of healing and sustain the legitimacy of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab.

Health and restoration are especially important in Sayyida Zaynab because many Shiʿis living there are impoverished foreigners and refugees. Twelver Shiʿis constitute only around three percent of the Syrian population. In Sayyida Zaynab, Shiʿis are socially heterogeneous; they include not only Syrians, but also Afghan, African, and South Asian seminary students, as well as long-term and short-terms residents from Iran and the Eastern Arabian Gulf. Over the last two decades (though this has changed with the 2011 uprising), a large number of Shiʿis who have come to stay in Sayyida Zaynab have been Shiʿi asylum seekers from Iraq.[7] Having fled a war-zone,

---

[5] Lay Shiʿis are supposed to follow a living *mujtahid* (a jurist) who can answer his follower's legal questions. The highest ranking religious jurists claim the title *marjaʿ al-taqlīd* (or point or source of emulation).

[6] The practice is also popular in some parts of Southern Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and India. (For a brilliant history of the debate over *tatbīr* see Ende 1978: 19–36.)

[7] Following the 1979 revolution in Iran, Saddam Hussein exiled 40,000 Iraqis suspected of having Iranian affiliations. While many of these Iraqis left for Iran, there was also a

these Shiʿis seek physical, psychological, and interpersonal healing. They seek healing through Sayyida Zaynab, as well as the Prophet and his *ahl al-bayt* (his family and descendents) by emulating Zaynab, dreaming of her, and visiting her. Similar to Sayyida Zaynab's debated presence, the healing practices which surround and invoke her are contested by Shiʿis in Syria and elsewhere. The most controversial of these practices is commemorative self-flagellation, which according to its proponents, Zaynab first performed following the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, wherein her brother Imam al-Husayn was killed. Moreover, many Shiʿis in Syria relate and discuss narratives of miracles that occur in and around the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab and dreams wherein Sayyida Zaynab appears. In these stories, Sayyida Zaynab functions as a role-model for pious behavior, as well as a patron saint who heals the sick and restores relationships.

This chapter looks at how Twelver Shiʿis in Syria prior to the Arab Spring responded to the ambiguities surrounding the female Shiʿi saint Sayyida Zaynab. Zaynab's sainthood is marked by questions regarding the authenticity of her shrine, her moral authority, and her miraculous powers. Besides skeptics, however, there are also many Shiʿis, in particular the sympathizers and followers of Ayatollah Shirazi, who sustain her fragile sainthood by visiting the shrine, by enacting her ritual precedent through self-flagellation, and by retelling stories about Sayyida Zaynab's miraculous healing powers. These practices create and strengthen bonds between the saint and her followers and thereby counter the ambiguities that designate Sayyida Zaynab's sainthood as fragile.

Part I: Debating Islamic Healing Practices

In his book, *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault explains that in nineteenth century Europe medical doctors came to be perceived as sages, who were expected to be able to rid mankind of its afflictions eventually. In a sense, modern medical doctors filled the void left by discredited,

---

large number that came to Syria (Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett 1987: 258). After 2003, another wave of Iraqis left Iraq for Syria. According to official estimates by UNHCR, at least 1.2 million Iraqis entered Syria between 2003 and 2007 (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, "World Refugee Survey 2009—Syria" [17 June 2009], http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a40d2b3a.html [accessed 28 December 2011]). Besides Iraqi nationals, there are also Iranian and Afghan Shiʿis who have come to Syria from Iraq. They were forced to leave the Iraqi shrine-cities of Najaf and Karbala following clashes there between the government and Shiʿis in the 1970s (cf. Louër 2008: 196). The situation has changed drastically since 2011 and thousands of Iraqis have returned from Syria.

medieval clergymen. Unlike Christian clergymen, however, doctors healed and saved material bodies, rather than immortal souls.[8] Since its emergence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern medicine has extended beyond Europe and North America via missionary clinics, aid organizations, and governmental health initiatives. While Western medicine has not replaced other forms of medicine, it has marginalized local medical practices, creating parallel systems of medicine that accord Western medicine social, economic, and political superiority.

In the Muslim world today, Western medicine has become the choice of the wealthy and the educated. It has by and large led to 'traditional' forms of medicine becoming associated with poor, uneducated, and rural populations. Concurrently, the relative inaccessibility of modern Western medical healthcare has contributed to a revival of 'Prophetic medicine' (*tibb al-nabawi*), medical therapies based on the practices of Prophet Muhammad. Unlike the medical doctors Foucault describes, practitioners of Islamic or Prophetic medicine claim to heal both the body and the soul by combining religion and medicine. Renowned Muslim polymaths such as Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina addressed and expounded upon 'Islamic medicine', which for them included cupping (or *hujāmah*), herbal remedies, as well as the recitation of specific prayers against the evil eye. While Muslims generally accept the permissibility of Prophetic medicine, Twelver Shi'is in Sayyida Zaynab continue to disagree as to whether or not self-flagellation (especially *tatbīr*) constitutes cupping. Proponents of self-flagellation draw on 'traditional' medicine and argue that self-flagellation derives from cupping and constitutes a miraculous healing practice. In contrast, opponents of self-flagellation draw on 'modern Western' notions of medicine and decry self-flagellation in the name of hygiene and public health, and representation, fearing that self-flagellation portrays a negative image of Twelver Shi'ism.

Hujāmah as Prophetic Medicine

Cupping is one of the most well-known and widespread therapies of Islamic medicine.[9] Cupping is praised in both Sunni and Shi'i hadith collections.

---

[8] In "Birth of the Clinic," Foucault (1973) examines the emergence of medical institutions around the time of the French Revolution. He shows how the patient's body became objectified under the medical gaze, which has just adopted scientific procedures for examining symptoms as the basis for making diagnoses. Concurrently, patients' illness narratives became disregarded.

[9] As a side note, cupping was also widespread in France until at least the 1920s (cf. Gubb 1923: 639).

Books such as Andrew Newman's edited collection entitled *Islamic Medical Wisdom: The Tibb al-A'imma* lists sayings by Prophet Muhammad as well as the twelve Shiʿi Imams in favor of cupping. For example, (and I will omit the *isnād* or "chain of transmission" here) "Abu ʿAbd Allah, peace be upon him, said: 'The best ways in which you treat yourselves are through cupping, inhaling medications, steam baths, and clysters [or enemas].' " (Newman 2007: 63)

In the Syrian shrine-town, cupping is performed by both doctors trained in modern Western medicine and by practitioners of *tibb ʿarabi* (literally, "Arabic medicine"). While neither of the two hospitals in the shrine-town offer cupping services, there are dozens of independent doctors, at least three of whom perform cupping on patients. The healer with whom I spoke said that his patients include both Sunnis and Shiʿis, occasionally Christians, men, and women. However, there is a definite age-bias in that patients are typically adults or elderly.[10] Cupping is often done as a prophylactic or preventative measure, but it can also be used to treat headaches, back-pains, general fatigue, and pneumonia (Gubb 1923: 639).

Cupping is usually performed on a patient's upper back or on the nape, though it can also be done on the back or the top of head and on the lower back (Newman 2007: 67). After the skin is bared, the cups are applied. At the time of my fieldwork from 2007 to 2010, all of the traditional doctors I interviewed in the shrine-town had acquired Chinese plastic cups with suction handles. These cups can be applied directly to the skin of the patient and by lifting the suction handles flesh is drawn into the cups. Without these suction handles, pieces of cotton have to be lit on fire and placed into small glass cups. The cotton burns immediately. By burning the trapped oxygen, low pressure is created, and flesh is pulled into the cups (Glubb 1923: 639). After a few moments, bruises appear, and the cups are released. At this point, in the case of wet cupping (which is the most widespread form of cupping in Sayyida Zaynab), the doctor makes small incisions into the bruised skin and reapplies the cups. Small amounts of blood trickle into the cups and clot. The patient is then shown the 'bad blood' (or *dam fāsid*). According to Newton's volume, the Prophet recommended that patients look at the 'bad blood' before it is discarded (Newman 2007: 68). Seeing the clotted blood reassures the patient that 'bad

[10] Fieldnotes, Spring 2009.

blood' has indeed been removed from his or her body and thereby aids the process of healing.[11]

Contesting Tatbīr

According to Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi, whose brother Hasan Shirazi founded the oldest and one of the largest seminary in the Syrian shrine-town, the sanguinary form of self-flagellation known as *tatbīr* derives from cupping and can therefore bring about healing.[12] As *tatbīr* draws blood from the head, Ayatollah Shirazi likens it to *hujāmat al-ras* (cupping on the head), which is one of the body-parts recommended by the Prophet for cupping. Besides comparing self-flagellation to cupping, the Shirazis[13] claim that *tatbīr* can bring about miraculous healing because it imitates Sayyida Zaynab, who was the first to perform bloody forms of self-flagellation out of grief over losing her brother Husayn. After the Battle of Karbala, Sayyida Zaynab and the other women and children were taken captive, and were brought to the court of the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus. On the way, the Shirazis insist, Zaynab was forced to walk behind soldiers carrying her brother's severed head on a spear. Seeing this caused her to hit her forehead against another spear, until blood appeared (cf. al-Bahrani 2010: 238–241). Hence, to follow and relate to Zaynab physically, emotionally, and ritually, some Shi'is perform bloody forms of self-flagellation on 'Ashura. In Syria in particular, men participate in public *tatbīr* processions, wherein they rhythmically march, chant, and cut the top-center of their forehead with a sword. In return, Zaynab may be more inclined to hear their requests for intercession and for healing.

Beyond imitating Sayyida Zaynab, proponents as well as opponents of practices such as cupping or *tatbīr* draw on a variety of notions regarding piety, health, healing, hygiene, and ritual cleanliness. As David Kinsley explains, traditional religious healing practices often invoke a standard set of themes, among which he counts confession, transference, objectification,

---

[11] Bloodletting (or *fasd*) is sometimes mentioned in medical texts alongside cupping. However, I have not encountered any practitioners of bloodletting or any patients who had it performed in Sayyida Zaynab, though it persists in other parts of the Middle East.

[12] The Shirazis are a family of scholars, which was based in the Iraqi shrine-town of Karbala, until they were exiled by Saddam Hussein in the 1970s and 80s (for a more detailed discussion on the background of the Shirazis, see Louër 2008: 177–219; Szanto 2012: 287–291).

[13] 'Shirazis' is the English adaptation of the name *Shiraziyyin*, which designates a network of scholars and students who follow Ayatollah as their *marja' al-taqlīd* (cf. Louër 2008: 90).

and the assignment of meaning (Kinsley 1996). While Twelver Shiʿis in Syria do not generally assign moral failure to those suffering from illness, pious conceptions of healing do connote moral reformation or reconstitution (or *shifāʾ*). In other words, while sickness does not necessarily result from moral shortcomings, religious practice and virtuous improvement can nevertheless bring about both physical and spiritual healing.

For many Shiʿis in Sayyida Zaynab, especially those who follow Ayatollah Shirazi, moral refinement for the sake of healing does not imply rationalist or disciplined self-cultivation.[14] Rather, it connotes a cleansing. Modern reformers have often equated hygiene (or *nadhāfa*) with ritual cleanliness (*tahāra*). Yet, for understanding Shiʿi attitudes regarding cupping and self-flagellation during the Islamic month of Muharram, it is important to insist on an analytical difference between hygiene and ritual cleanliness. Generic dirt does not invalidate prayer, but ritual uncleanliness (or the lack of *tahāra*, caused, for example, by flatulence or drinking wine) does invalidate prayer. To posit a difference between *tahāra* and *nadhāfa* opens up spaces for thinking about healing beyond the Western medical model and for focusing on Islamic notions of healing.

According to Anisa ʿAliya, a young and unmarried female teacher at the Shirazi seminary in Syria, *tatbīr* and cupping resemble each other. Both reenact saintly precedents and affect miraculous healing. In both practices 'bad blood' is released from the body, which purifies and heals the body (Shirazi 1998: 146; al-Bahrani 2010: 105). During Muharram in 2009, ʿAliya explained that *tatbīr* itself constitutes a miracle because it does not cause any long-term damage to the men who perform it. Despite their loss of blood, the *mutatbīrīn*'s (or flagellants') continued ability to function normally is a 'miracle.' In contrast to other wounds that require medical attention, the wound caused by *tatbīr* does not need to be treated. ʿAliya emphasized: "Thus, there is no *dharar*, no harm." She reasoned that the human body is able to produce more blood. Therefore, the loss of blood in itself is not a reason for why it should constitute harm or danger, which is forbidden in Islamic Law.[15] Beyond purifying the body, the Shirazis hold that *tatbīr* is a productive pious practice. It produces personal, physical,

[14] Saba Mahmood (2005: 25–28) writes that the concern for the self in 'traditional' Islamic piety resembles Aristotelian notions of self-cultivation, which she contrasts with Kantian ethics. My Shiʿi example adds another dimension to her dichotomy by highlighting the difference between hygiene (*nadhāfa*) with ritual cleanliness (*tahāra*).

[15] Fieldnotes, Sunday, 4 January 2009.

and emotional relationships with Zaynab and Imam al-Husayn, which in turn yield intercession (*shafa'a*) and healing (*shifā'*).

Opponents of *tatbīr*, such as the Iranian Ayatollah Khamana'i and the late Lebanese Ayatollah Fadhlallah, argue against the practice of *tatbīr* by referencing hygiene and public representation. While neither Fadhlallah, nor Khamenei reside in the Syrian shrine-town, they influence local religious discourses by operating offices, seminaries, and *husayniyyat* (halls dedicated to ritual mourning gatherings). In December 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei's office distributed a pamphlet, in which the author, Wathiq al-Shammari, critiques the comparison between cupping and *tatbīr*. Al-Shammari underlines their differences: First, *tatbīr* does not use glasses to extract 'bad blood.' Second, the practice of *tatbīr* is unhygienic and therefore cannot possibly contribute to bodily healing. Al-Shammanri asserts that it can even cause illness if the blades used for cutting are not properly cleaned. Third, he argues that bloody forms of self-flagellation make Shi'ism look irrational and backward to non-Shi'is. Though al-Shammari is willing to accommodate cupping as a potentially effective treatment, he unequivocally decries *tatbīr*.

Similarly to al-Shammari, Lebanese Shi'is (particularly members and sympathizers of Hezbollah) denounce bloody forms of flagellation. They advocate that Shi'is should not participate in the 'useless' spilling of blood, but should rather donate their blood (Deeb 2006: 135–137). As Lara Deeb explains, Hezbollah organizes blood donation centers, which open during Muharram in Lebanon's Shi'i areas. Hezbollah assumes that *tatbīr* wastes blood and that the blood from self-flagellation is always at least potentially healthy and life saving. It can give life to the community of other Shi'is. In contrast, Ayatollah Shirazi and his Syrian followers do *not* view the blood spilled in the course of flagellation as wasted. They disagree with the idea that Muharram rituals can be reinterpreted as blood donations. For them, the ritual spilling of 'bad blood' is in itself a therapeutic and miraculous act, as it reproduces Zaynab's precedent (al-Bahrani 2010: 104–108). Donating blood creates bonds between Shi'is, but neglects the ritual bond between Shi'is and Zaynab and Husayn. It focuses on the community—not on individual devotees and the question of sainthood.

From the 1990s onwards, the largest Shi'i group residing in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab has been Iraqi Shi'is, who were forced to leave their homes due to first oppression and then to continuing violence in central and southern Iraq. Impoverished, exiled, and disenfranchised, these Shi'is are not primarily concerned with the welfare of the Shi'i community at-large. Nor do nationalist feelings tie them to the other Shi'is

in the shrine-town, which include South Asian and African students, as well as Shiʿi visitors from Iran and the Eastern Arabian Gulf. The Shiʿi pilgrims who visit Sayyida Zaynab are different from the shrine-town's long-term inhabitants: many of them have money[16] and many of them oppose *tatbīr*. Iranian and Lebanese pilgrims, in particular, often oppose *tatbīr* because they follow Ayatollahs Fadhlallah or Khamenei. The Shirazis attract mainly long-term residents, including Iraqis, Afghans, and South Asians, who tend to belong to the working class. The two groups interact on the streets and in the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, but neither must take the other seriously.[17]

In short, Shiʿi authorities in Sayyida Zaynab espouse two different conceptions of health and healing, which inform Shiʿi views of Muharram self-flagellation practices such as *tatbīr*. On the one hand, Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi and his followers conceive of physical and spiritual health as the result of ritual cleanliness. They categorize blood as either pure (*tāhir*) or impure (corrupt or *fāsid*) and argue that the ritual extraction of 'bad blood' not only heals Shiʿi bodies, but also links individual Shiʿis to Sayyida Zaynab and her brother Husayn. This connection in turn ensures intercession and healing both in this world and in the next. By self-flagellating, devotees inscribe their loyalty to Husayn and his family on their bodies and thereby, legitimate the saints. *Tatbīr*, according to the Shirazis, may be an act of violence towards oneself, however it concurrently produces healing. On the other hand, sympathizers of Hezbollah, as well as the followers of Ayatollahs Khamenei and Fadhlallah,[18] conceive of the healthy body in terms much closer to those of 'modern Western' medicine. They focus on hygiene, utility, and the community, rather than saintly or miraculous healing. Though they are not secular, they echo Foucauldian bio-politics in their concern for disciplining Muslim bodies.[19] For them, Shiʿi lay bodies are in need of disciplinary guidance in order

---

[16] Pilgrims from the Arabian Gulf are usually wealthier than Iranian pilgrims who come to Syria. Nevertheless, both come and spend money in the shrine-town. The market just south of the shrine is even called the market of the Iranians (*sūq al-Iraniyīn*).

[17] Each Muharram I visited the shrine-town, I found increasing numbers of posters advertising blood donation centers in Sayyida Zaynab. Significantly, I also noticed that these posters were usually torn down within hours. Pro-*tatbīr* Shiʿis thereby visibly exerted their influence in public.

Fieldnotes, Wednesday, 7 January 2009 and Friday, 25 December 2009.

[18] Ayatollah Fadhlallah passed away in 2010, but his network of offices, seminaries, and *husayniyyat* continues to function throughout the world.

[19] Foucault (1997: 239–263) writes that in contrast to ancient empires and medieval kingdoms, the modern nation-state is dedicated to managing and disciplining populations

to achieve a pious and rational state, which includes donating blood for the good of the community. Unlike the act of flagellation, however, giving blood does not connect devotees to saints through the ritual transfer of fluids, nor does it seek to sustain Sayyida Zaynab's contested sainthood.

Part II: Miraculous Healing

One day, in the fall of 2009, after I had just renewed my visa for Syria, I walked by the nearby Iranian Cultural Centre. I thought to myself that I should go and look at their library and see what books they had on commemorative Muharram mourning flagellation. As I entered the building, Imam Khomeini stared down on me from a portrait—I could not tell if Khomeini was looking at me with approval or reproach. I was informed that the library was in the basement, and made my way down there. The library consisted of a large room lined with shelves and a desk in the middle. Behind the desk sat Samir al-Husayni, a Syrian convert from Sunnism to Shiʿism, who had obtained his PhD in Comparative Religion in France. He asked me what I was searching for, and I told him I wanted to see what books they had on Shiʿi mourning rituals. He said they did not have much, and suggested that I might have more luck at the Asad library. "But why are you interested in the topic?" Samir asked. I explained that my research topics are Shiʿi mourning rituals, sainthood, and notions of healing and that I was studying at various seminaries. He stiffened when I admitted to him that I regularly attended Ayatollah Shirazi's seminary. "They are populist and do not care about proper scholarship. Also, their conceptions of self-flagellation are all wrong." Then he proceeded to recount his personal miracle story.

The miracle happened in 1998, as he was about to present his first conference paper in Iran. Suddenly, Samir felt sharp pain in his throat. He felt as if his vocal cords had been cut. He wrote "please take me home" on a piece of paper and passed it to his colleague, the organizer. The colleague was bewildered, but when he saw that Samir could not speak, he escorted Samir home. Samir then visited the best doctors in Iran. All of them were pessimistic: "We are sorry, but you will never speak again." These medical doctors gave him painkillers but could do no more than that. Samir's wife cried, of course. He was supposed to come to Syria a week later and

---

in order to maximize economic growth. The nation-state controls and directs populations by prescribing and enforcing a norm in terms of health.

he still could not utter a single word. When he and his wife arrived at the airport in Damascus, a friend was waiting for them in the arrivals area. The friend saw Samir's wife crying and thought she was crying out of happiness to be back in Damascus. Then the wife spoke up instead of her husband: "Samir cannot speak anymore!" The friend had organized for Samir to give a lecture the next day at 7 pm. Samir had not known about this and his friend had invited some forty professors and doctors. His friend was upset when he realized his plans would not work out. The next day, the friend took him to a well-known (and, Samir noted, coincidentally Shiʿi) doctor in Damascus who was an ear-nose-throat specialist. Again he was told that he would never speak again. Around 5 pm, Samir wrote to his friend: "Take me to Sayyida Zaynab." Once they had reached the doors of the shrine, Samir sent his friend away in order to pray alone. His companion sat down in the courtyard where he read the *ziyāra* (ritual visitation prayer), while Samir went straight to the center of the shrine, where Zaynab's tomb stands. There, he hung to the grid and prayed in his heart: "*Yā Sayyida Zaynab* (oh Sayyida Zaynab), there is an important talk tonight. If my words have any importance to you, let me speak. Otherwise, let me remain silent." Then he heard himself praying louder and louder: "*Allahuma salli ʿala Muhammad w-āli Muhammad! Allahuma salli ʿala Muhammad w-āli Muhammad! Allahuma salli ʿala Muhammad w-āli Muhammad!*"[20] Feeling blessed, Samir found his friend and said: "We can go!" His friend was astounded. That evening, Samir lectured for two hours. His friend sat across from him to make sure everything was fine because he could not believe it. Samir had no more pain and could speak without any difficulties. When Samir returned to Iran, his medical doctors asked him: "The doctors in Syria must be better than in Iran! Who was it?" And Samir answered: "It was a *tabība* (a female doctor)." They inquired: "Where did she study? In America, in Europe?" Samir astonished them: "No! It was Sayyida Zaynab! *Allahuma salli ʿala Muhammad w-āli Muhammad!*"[21]

In his healing story, Samir highlighted the place and the mediator of the miracle. Though he opposed the Shirazis' interpretation and propagation of self-flagellation, he did not doubt the healing powers of Sayyida Zaynab. By emphasizing that the miracle occurred at the Syrian shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, he affirmed Zaynab's legitimacy and power. His narrative began with a conference at which he intended to speak. Notably, it was

[20] "Oh God, send prayers upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad!"
[21] Fieldnotes, Thursday, 1 October 2009.

his first conference. He had not yet, but was about to begin his career as a scholar-activist in service of the *ahl al-bayt*, the Prophet's family. It was at this point that his voice, which he had hereto taken for granted, failed him. He was no longer in control of his own body. Next, he visited and submitted to the authority of medical doctors, which demonstrates his unquestioning acceptance of modern Western medicine. Even after various medical doctors failed to cure him, he did not immediately turn towards Shi'i saints. It was only when Samir's friend organized a lecture that Samir suggested visiting Sayyida Zaynab in order to ask her for miraculous healing. This time, unlike at the first conference, he asked the Shi'i saint to let him speak only if she found his message to be worthy. Her approval left traces on his body. His health became a boon of mercy. Zaynab legitimated Samir's speech through healing him and his recovery authenticated her sainthood miraculously, if not rationally. As a convert from Sunnism to Shi'ism (in a Sunni majority country), Zaynab's approval was symbolic of his acceptance at home. His PhD from Paris legitimated him academically and abroad, Zaynab's blessing sanctioned his speech as worthy religiously. It underscored his authority among religious scholars in Syria, where his extended Sunni family lent him no religious support.[22] It made him feel authoritative as he spoke on *Ahlulbayt*, an Iranian satellite television station dedicated to propagating Shi'ism in Arabic. Samir's narrative about Sayyida Zaynab's healing power highlights her religious prominence, establishing her sainthood as beneficent and effective. Samir otherwise insisted on rationalism and authentication, as he did when discussing self-flagellation and the Shirazis. However, when it comes to Zaynab's sainthood, it is her benevolence in granting miraculous healing that matters. The miracle, inscribed on the devotee's body, becomes part of the on-going relationship between a devotee and his saint (Betteridge 1985: 190–202).

Healing Women

Healing dreams follow a similar narrative structure when compared with Samir's miracle story. They begin with an illness, which the devotee

[22] Under Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad, there were some Sunnis and 'Alawis who converted to Twelver Shi'ism. Khalid Sindawi (2009: 82–107) even describes this as a 'trend.' Though nothing can be said for certain, these converts will probably suffer greatly following the 2011 uprising, because they are seen by average Syrian Sunnis as collaborators of the Ba'ath state.

intends to treat with normative modern Western medicine. The difference between such dreams and Samir's narrative is that Western medicine does not necessarily have to fail before miraculous healing occurs. Shiʿi women would recount such stories before and after ritual mourning gatherings. One Muharram evening, at the Husayniyya al-Wilaya just south of the shrine, the *mullaya* (a female leader of *majālis ʿazā'* or ritual mourning gatherings) related the following dream, which I heard several times elsewhere with only slight variations:

The *mullaya*'s elderly mother needed surgery on her leg. However, being afraid of doctors, the mother had delayed it as long as possible. The night before she had an appointment at the hospital for the operation, she dreamt that she found herself at the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab. There, a completely veiled woman came up to her with a glass of water in her hand. The mysterious figure instructed the dreamer to drink the glass of water, after which the former recited a prayer for the latter's leg. When the narrator's mother went to the doctor the next morning, the doctor informed her that there was nothing wrong with her leg and that she no longer required surgery.[23] In her dream, as in the case of Samir's miracle narrative, visiting the shrine was a prerequisite for healing. And though only the *mullaya*'s mother 'saw' Sayyida Zaynab both identified the saint as the source of their miraculous healing.

Dreams can both accompany and foreshadow healing and restoration for Shiʿi devotees and their loved ones. After a Muharram mourning gathering at an independent *husayniyya* in the Syrian shrine-town, Salma, an elderly Iraqi woman, raised her voice and recounted a dream wherein she saw Fatima al-Zahra, the mother of Zaynab. Salma knew that it was Fatima, because her face consisted of bright light. Salma's son had just been imprisoned and she had been very worried about him. In Salma's dream, she encountered both her son and Fatima Zahra. Fatima offered Salma a glass of water, which Salma gave to her son. The next day, Salma's son was released from prison.[24] Like in the afore-mentioned dream narrative, the transference of a pure substance (i.e. water) from a saint to a devotee creates a gifting relationship which enables healing and, in this case, release from prison. As anthropologist Amira Mittermaier brilliantly writes, "dreams-stories can open up critical spaces and possibilities" (2011: 2).

[23] Fieldnotes, Friday, 9 January 2009.
[24] Ibid.

Especially in times of crisis and war, Mittermaier explains that dreams matter, "*not* because they provide dreamers with a protective blanket of false consciousness of hallucinatory wish fulfillment, but because they insert the dreamer into a wider network of symbolic debts, relationships, and meanings" (2–3). It is in the context of these relationships, that healing occurs and Zaynab's contested sainthood is sustained.

The transactional aspect of the relationship between saints and Shiʿis is highlighted in the ritual of *nidhr* (making religious vows) and in the sponsorship of *majālis ʿazā'*. When Shiʿi women take an oath, they often promise Zaynab to visit her and/or distribute sweets at her shrine if they are healed. If healing does not take place, devotees are not obliged to hold up their end of the bargain (Betteridge 1985: 190–202). Shiʿi women I interviewed at the shrine reported coming to Sayyida Zaynab to obtain healing from diseases such as breast-cancer.[25] They would visit medical doctors, too. They pointed out that even expensive medical doctors could not guarantee complete recovery. The order of the *nidhr* is reversed when sponsoring mourning gatherings. In hosting *majālis ʿazā'*, women initiate an interaction, thereby pressuring saints to grant their devotees' requests.

Um Hasan, an *ʿalawiyya* in her mid-thirties from Basra with seven children, performed numerous private mourning gatherings at women's private homes in the shrine-town during Muharram and at the private Husayniyya Abu Fadhl throughout the rest of the year. She said she assists women in finding spouses and conceiving children by performing *majālis ʿazā'*. Once she helped a young Iraqi woman who did not receive any desirable suitors by performing a mourning gathering in the name of Qasim ibn al-Hasan, Zaynab's nephew who died at the Battle of Karbala while engaged to his cousin, Fatima, a daughter of Husayn. Though the wedding never actually happened, its reenactment fulfills the wishes of Qasim's mother, which makes the saints more inclined to heal and to intercede.[26] Um Hasan instructed the young woman to "wear the dress of the wedding of Qasim" (*labasat libās ʿurs Qasim*), to wear a black *abaya* (or outer garment) and a green cloth as a face-veil in order to ritually relate to and performatively become Fatima. The young woman played Fatima by carrying a tray with candles and henna paste, which symbolize weddings,

[25] For example, Sabrina Mervin (2009) writes that in 1950 a Pakistani businessman, following the healing of his prodigious son, donated money for decorating the tomb.

[26] Fieldnotes, Monday, 5 January 2009.

and by offering these to the participants of the mourning gathering (cf. Ruffle 2009). Within two weeks, the girl was engaged.[27]

If a woman has difficulty conceiving, she may sponsor a mourning gathering in remembrance of ʿAli Asghar (or Tifl Radiyʿ, an infant who was killed by an arrow at the Battle of Karbala). Alternately, a woman may make a religious oath (or *nidhr*), wherein she promises to either sponsor a mourning gathering or contribute milk to be distributed at a public mourning gathering if she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child. In Sayyida Zaynab, Shiʿis mourn the death of ʿAli Asghar on the fourth of Muharram. On the fourth of Muharram in 2009, cradles symbolizing ʿAli Asghar were placed near pulpits in public *husayniyyat*, such as the Husayniyya al-Wilaya. After the *majālis ʿazā'*, some women rocked the cradle a little, others pinned money to it, and again others tied knots in the green cloth that veiled the cradle. Inside, there was a baby-size doll swaddled in green cloth, with an arrow stuck to the neck, which was painted red. There were also three Barbie-like dolls. I was told that the three smaller dolls were for Ruqayya, who was another child of Husayn present at the Battle of Karbala. When I asked about the cradle, an *ʿalawiyya* (a female descendant of Imam ʿAli and Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad) took the green cloth off the cradle and began wrapping it around the waist and stomach of a young woman. The *ʿalawiyya* began reciting prayers in order to help the young woman conceive. The *ʿalawiyya* made the young woman promise that she would have to name her son Haydar or ʿAli in recognition of ʿAli Asghar, whose blanket she had wrapped around the young woman.[28] By enveloping the young woman physically with the symbolic blanket of ʿAli Asghar, the *ʿalawiyya* bound the devotee to the saints. This binding allowed blessing to be transferred from the sacred item[29] to the woman. As with miraculous healing, the Shiʿi practices of *nidhr* and sponsoring ritual gatherings require, create, and maintain relationships between saints and their followers, which in turn sustain the legitimacy of sainthood in Shiʿism (Betteridge 1985).

Divine Proof

Along with miraculous healing narratives, Shiʿi women I met in seminaries in the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab recounted dreams and visions,

[27] Fieldnotes, Saturday, 7 November 2009.
[28] Fieldnotes, Monday, 21 December 2009.
[29] It was sacred, because it belonged to the *ahl al-bayt*.

which did not necessarily bring about healing. Rather, they strengthened the faith and re-enchanted the lives of devotees. They added substance to the relationship between a devotee and a saint generally, and substantiated Sayyida Zaynab's contested sainthood specifically. During breaks between classes at the Shirazi seminary one morning, I asked my classmates about miracle stories they had personally witnessed. My classmates were all long-term foreign residents in Syria. Most of them had originally come from Iraq, fleeing violence and persecution. One of the women, Um Mustafa, an early-thirties mother of three boys from Baghdad, said that during Ramadan in 2007, she witnessed a vision at the shrine. She explained that it was during one of the *layali al-qadr* ('nights of power', for Shi'is, *laylat al-qadr* is not specified but occurs in the last ten days of Ramadan).[30] Perhaps it had been between the injury and death of Imam 'Ali (from Ramadan 19 to 21). She and her husband, her sister-in-law, and her brother had been at the shrine and had prayed *fajr* (the dawn prayer) there. As Um Mustafa came out from the prayer hall, she noticed a beam of light in the sky which turned into a rider on a horse, whom she identified with Imam Ali. Then the image doubled and continued to multiply until it filled the sky, and under each figure there was a beam of light. Her sister-in-law wanted to leave, but Um Mustafa insisted on staying until the figures faded away with the light of day. A classmate cut in: "Those lights you saw were just reflections of the shrine's lamps in the atmosphere." While her classmate voiced skepticism, Um Mustafa remained firm: "No! I saw it with my own eyes!"[31]

Before she had children and came to Syria, Um Mustafa had been an English teacher. She had studied at the University of Baghdad and had met her husband, who was also a teacher, at her first job. She was one of the most educated female students at the Shirazi seminary. Um Mustafa liked talking about history, especially colonialism. Though she cared about the question of authenticity, but she also believed in miracles and sought them out.[32] During Muharram in 2009, Um Mustafa brought a 'miracle' with her to the Shirazis' seminary: an off-white sandwich box that held a piece of Syrian *khubz* or thin, flat, round bread. As flat bread is made in stone ovens heated by uneven flames, there are often discol-

[30] The night of power refers to the night during which Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation.

[31] Fieldnotes, Sunday, 1 November 2009.

[32] Um Mustafa also participated in private women-only performances of *tatbīr*. Fieldnotes, Sunday, 27 December 2009.

orations and even burn-marks on the bread. The burn-mark on this particular piece of bread spelled out "Allah" (God in Arabic). Less clearly, a smaller burn-mark on the side, spelled out "Muhammad." As Um Mustafa let all the women at the seminary see the bread, she said her husband had promised he would have the miracle authenticated (*muhaqaq*) by a high-ranking male scholar.[33] What does authentication mean in this case? Through seeking clerical approval and by showing it to others, Um Mustafa wanted to hold on to a miracle, which similarly to other miracles was fragile because dreams and visions pass and bread becomes moldy and rots. Her desire to prove saintly beneficence reverberates with many Shiʿis in Syria who seek to authenticate Sayyida Zaynab's sainthood by drawing attention to fragile miracles.

Faddak, a young *mullaya* from Basra, explained that Muharram and other religious holidays are often marked by visions. Faddak was in her mid-thirties and married to a retired high-ranking officer who was much older than her. She had no children and admitted that she had had a lot of 'empty time' (*waqt fādi*) before she became a *mullaya*. She was not yet an independent *mullaya* and usually performed with another, more experienced *mullaya*. Faddak's mother had been a *mullaya*, but had been unable to practice her craft under Saddam Hussein. By noting that her mother had been a *mullaya*, Faddak claimed legitimacy as a 'servant of the *ahl al-bayt*.'[34] She told me she became religious in her late teens, before she got married, when she first started seeing Imam ʿAli in her dreams. She recommended that I should say a short prayer, which she wrote down for me, so that I too would dream of Shiʿi saints. During one of the first days of Muharram 2009, I met Faddak at the shrine, wherefrom she wanted to take me to the *husayniyya* she was going to perform at that evening. She told me that just a couple of days earlier she had witnessed a miraculous vision at the shrine. It was late at night when out of nowhere a column of light descended upon the tomb. The shrine was packed, but even more people tried to enter as they too noticed the *muʿjiza* (or miracle). According to Faddak, the column of light was none other than Imam 'Ali coming to visit his daughter Zaynab.[35] In both Faddak and Um Mustafa's visions,

[33] Fieldnotes, Saturday, 26 December 2009.

[34] In Shiʿism, religious positions often 'run in the family', which has produced elite families of religious learning and authority. For example, the sons of famous *marājaʿ al-taqlīd* often study at their fathers' seminaries and eventually join their families' network of institutions as *mujtahidīn* (jurists capable of independent judgment).

[35] Fieldnotes, Sunday, 8 February 2009.

they identified the appearance of lights with saints. More specifically, the fact that they both insisted it was Imam ʿAli, the first infallible Shiʿi Imam and Zaynab's father, whose 'visit' implies that ʿAli himself legitimizes Sayyida Zaynab's sainthood and her shrine.

Conclusion

Michelle Zimney writes that the question of whether Sayyida Zaynab is really buried in the Syrian shrine-town named after her has been subject to debate since the ninth century (2007: 698). Moreover, she underlines that the shrine-town only became popular in the twentieth century. Zimney and Paulo Pinto (2007) have both offered convincing reasons for this rise in the shrine's popularity. Zimney credits the conscious efforts of Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (d. 1952) who called for donations to extend the shrine, as well as the presence of other Shiʿi sites in the area (2007: 699–701). Pinto highlights political relationships and thriving markets around the shrine. I contribute to the scholarship on Sayyida Zaynab by drawing attention to the discourses on miraculous healing and how they legitimate Zaynab's contested sainthood. Shiʿis are engaged in two processes, which legitimize the fragile sainthood of Sayyida Zaynab: first, by performing bloody forms of self-flagellation and secondly, by eagerly listening to, empathizing with, and recounting narratives of miracles. Proponents and practitioners of self-flagellation, as well as narrators of miracle stories, stress that devotion to Zaynab (as well as other saints) can heal Shiʿi bodies. Even among those who doubt the authenticity of the shrine, there are many who participate in healing practices, which stress Sayyida Zaynab's healing powers.

Since the Syrian uprising began in 2011, everything has changed. Thousands of Iraqi Shiʿis who have lived in Syria for years, if not decades, have left. Ethnic and sectarian violence has swept over the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab. As both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad derived their legitimacy as Muslims from Twelver Shiʿi religious scholars, Twelver Shiʿis in Syria have often been regarded as cronies of the government.[36] Now, Sunnis are

[36] In 1973, Hafiz al-Asad asked the Lebanese Twelver Shiʿi cleric Musa al-Sadr for a *fatwa* (or religious ruling) declaring ʿAlawis part of Shiʿi Islam. Al-Asad needed the *fatwa* in order to justify his rule, because the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood did not consider ʿAlawis Muslims and believed that only a Muslim can legitimately govern Syria (Seal 1995: 173).

taking their revenge on Shiʿis.[37] Though Twelver Shiʿis were seldom part of the government (because many of them were not Syrian citizens), the state allowed them a great degree of religious freedom. They were allowed to practice *tatbīr* while it was banned by Hezbollah in Lebanon and by Khamenei in Iran (Norton 2005: 147). Should Bashar al-Asad's regime fall, Twelver Shiʿis and the shrine-town of Sayyida Zaynab will need a miracle to survive and continue.

References

al-Bahrani, A. (2010) *Li-mātha al-tatbīr? (Why tatbīr?)* Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Balagha.

Betteridge, A.H. (1992) 'Specialists in Miraculous Action: Some Shrines in Shiraz,' in A. Morinis (ed.): *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; pp. 189–210.

———. (1985) 'Gift Exchange in Iran: The Locus of Self-Identity in Social Interaction,' Theme issue, 'Self & Society in the Middle East,' *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 58(4): 190–202.

———. (1980) 'The Controversial Vows of Urban Muslim Women in Iran,' in N.A. Falk & R.M. Gross (eds.): *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers; pp. 141–155.

Deeb, L. (2006) *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ende, W. (1978) 'The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shiʿite Ulama,' *Der Islam*, vol. 55(1): 19–36.

Foucault, M. (1997) *Society Must Be Defended*. Translated by D. Macey. New York: Picador.

———. (1973) *Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. London: Tavistock.

Gubb, A.S. (1923) 'Cupping, Dry and Wet,' *The British Medical Journal*, vol. 1(3250): 639.

Hollywood, A. (2006) 'Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,' in E. Armour and S. St. Ville (eds.): *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*. New York: Columbia University Press; pp. 252–275.

Kinsley, D. (1996) *Health, Healing, and Religion: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lock, M. (1993) 'Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge,' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 22: 133–155.

Louër, L. (2008) *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.

MacIntyre, A. (1984) *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Mahmood, S. (2005) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mervin, S. (2007) 'Ashura': Some Remarks on Ritual Practices in Different Shiite Communities (Lebanon and Syria),' in A. Monsutti, S. Naef and F. Sabahi (eds.): *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia*. Berlin: Peter Lang; pp. 137–147.

[37] Since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, dozens of Iranian pilgrims have been kidnapped, Iraqis have been threatened, and one of the scholars working for the Shirazi seminary has been shot.

——. (2009) 'Sayyida Zaynab, Banlieue de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?' *Cahiers d'Etudes sur la Mediterranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien: Arabes et Iraniens* 22 (1996): 149–162. Electronic document, http://cemoti.revues.org/document138.html, accessed 23 March 2009.

Mittermaier, A. (2011) *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Newman, A. (2007) *Islamic Medical Wisdom: The Tibb al-A'imma*. Translated by Batool Ispahany. Qum: Ansaryan Publications.

Norton, A.R. (2005) 'Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon,' *The Drama Review*, vol. 49(4): 140–155.

Pinault, D. (1999) 'Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession: Two Cases from Modern India,' *History of Religions*, vol. 38(3): 285–305.

Pinto, P.G. (2007) 'Pilgrimage, Commodities, and Religious Objectification: The Making of Transnational Shiism between Iran and Syria,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 27(1): 109–125.

Ruffle, K. (2009) 'Who Could Marry at a Time Like This? Debating the Mehendi ki Majis in Hyderabad,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. 29(3): 502–514.

Seale, P. (1995) *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shirazi, M. (1998) *Al-Sha'a'ir al-Husayniyya (Husayni Affects)*. Beirut: Dar al-Sadiq.

Sindawi, K. (2009) 'The Shiite Turn in Syria,' *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 8: 82–107.

——. (2009) 'The Zaynabiyya Hawza in Damascus and its Role in Shīʿite Religious Instruction,' *Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 45(6): 859–879.

Szanto, E. (2012) 'Sayyida Zaynab in the State of Exception: Shi'i Sainthood as 'Qualified Life' in Contemporary Syria,' *International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 44(2): 285–299.

Zimney, M. (2007) 'History in the Making: The Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in Damascus,' *ARAM*, vol. 19: 695–703.