

VOICES OF SORROW AND JOY: Cultivating Relations with the Unseen in Muslim Devotion

STEFAN WILLIAMSON FA

Lund University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7476-3356>

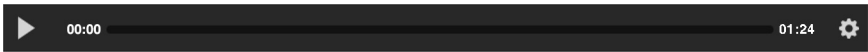
“You felt it last night, didn’t you?” Vedat asked me as we packed away the makeshift sound system set up for the celebration the previous night. “There was a real festive atmosphere in the room. When we were chanting together, I felt it . . . I really did. As if he was there with us . . . listening”

The previous evening I had joined a cramped gathering in a room at the back of an apartment block in eastern Turkey.¹ Around forty men had met to celebrate the birthday of Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the first imam for Shi’i Muslims. The atmosphere was unmistakably festive, the attendees filled with enthusiasm and excitement as they dispersed into the town’s dimly lit streets at the end of the night. Yet Vedat was referring to something less evident for the unattuned: the unseen presence of another member of the Prophet’s family, Imam Mahdi, the “living Imam,” said to be concealed by God on earth only to return before Judgment Day. For Vedat, the Prophet and his family are not mere historical or symbolic figures or moral exemplars for a pious life; he feels them viscerally and relates to them as co-present in this world.

Two community leaders started off the evening with long speeches recounting the life of Imam Ali. Vedat then took the microphone. He had collected and rehearsed verses of praise poetry to recite for the occasion. Although not consid-

ered to have the best voice in town, he was an enthusiastic reciter with a huge repertoire drawn from the latest recordings of Azeri-Turkish devotional poetry from neighboring Iran and Azerbaijan. He chose a popular poem called “I am Haydari.” Haydari, meaning a devotee of Haydar, an epithet for Ali. Vedat began with a verse praising Ali, invoking devotion and loyalty to him in a self-effacing tone.

<i>Kimilər Əliyə ziddi səvab dəftəri olmaz</i>	Whoever opposes Ali will receive no divine reward
<i>Vallah Əli bir zətdir onun bənzəri olmaz</i>	By God, Ali is a person with no com- parison
<i>Dünya deyilən evdə ona müştəri olmaz</i>	Whoever calls this world their home will not be his customer
<i>Məndən Əlinin nökrinin nökrü olmaz</i>	I am not worthy to be the servant of the servant of Ali
<i>Kimilər Əlini zikr eliyər nökrəiyəm men</i>	I am the servant of whoever praises Ali
<i>And olsun Əlinin canına Heydəriyəm men</i>	I swear on Ali’s soul, I am Haydari



Audio 1. The source of Vedat’s recitation. “Heydəriyəm” performed at a birthday celebration for Imam Ali in Azerbaijan by the author of the poem Elşan Xəzər.

As Vedat reached the chorus, he encouraged those present to chant the refrain, “Oh, Ali, oh, Ali, oh, dearest Ali.” Visibly uplifted, the previously subdued listeners began waving their hands in the air, clapping gently, and chanting in unison. Some even rose to their feet. The atmosphere resembled that of a birthday party: the room was decorated with colorful balloons and banners, and small tables with plates of dried fruits and nuts were scattered around to accompany the sweet black tea served by the young boys of the house. As the guests sang the last chorus, an oversized birthday cake, iced with “Happy Birthday, Imam Ali,” was brought in. The cake cutting was accompanied by a loud communal chant of the *salavat*—the Arabic formula intoned regularly as a salutation on the Prophet and his family. After eating the cake, the men rose to their feet again to recite the final supplications of the evening.

Vedat clearly felt overjoyed by the success of the occasion. He was pleased with the response to his recitation, but, more important, he felt profoundly that we had been in the presence of the Family of the Prophet, that Imam Mahdi had

been there, listening with us. “May he accept our efforts, *inshallah* [God willing],” he uttered to me. “May we never be separated from the Family of the Prophet.”

The presence of beings like Imam Mahdi at a birthday party held for another member of the Family of the Prophet appears out of step with anthropological accounts of Islam. Savoring cake, reciting praise poetry, and feeling the co-presence of an invisible imam all point toward a different modality of Muslim religiosity concerned with the realm of the unseen, one hitherto marginalized in accounts that present Islam as a religion “categorically averse to immanence” (Mittermaier 2019, 7). Despite the centrality of God and other supernatural figures like the Prophet and his family in Islam, their active presence in the lives of Muslims has been backgrounded in much ethnographic writing. While earlier anthropological and Orientalist studies often documented beliefs and practices such as saint veneration and spirit possession, these were presented as unorthodox, “local folk” Islam, in contrast with the sober orthodoxy of the scholarly Islam of literate clerics (McLoughlin 2007). Anthropologists have since moved away from this dichotomous view of Islam, but the more recent debate that has dominated the subfield—concerning ethics, piety, and the “everyday” (Fadil and Fernando 2015; Schielke 2010)—has overly focused on “this-worldly-oriented forms of religiosity” (Mittermaier 2012, 249), sidelining the kinds of encounters and relations with more-than-human beings that prove central to the experience of Vedat and other Muslims.

In this essay, I argue for a relational understanding of Islam that pays attention to the ways individuals and communities live alongside, and cultivate relations with, immaterial more-than-human beings. Muslim lives, like all others, exist in “networks of relationships” (Orsi 2013). This comprises both horizontal interhuman relations and vertical ones, which include not only a powerful monotheistic God (Schielke 2019) but other immaterial beings as well, such as the imams who are taken to be literally present in the everyday circumstances of believers’ lives. For my interlocutors, forming relations with the Prophet and his family proved essential to Muslim life.

Like other religious practitioners, Shi‘i Muslims do not just “believe” in the imams from a distance but deeply feel and sense them in ways that challenge modernist sensory modes and capacities. While the critique of “belief” as the primary religious experience is long-standing (Lopez 1998; Asad 1993), the alternative prioritizing of the body and disciplinary practices have inadvertently perpetuated an individualist notion of the religious subject by focusing on disciplinary practices and discursive control (Furey 2012). Bringing relationality into play in the anthropology of Islam by attending to Muslim relationships with more-than-human be-

ings allows us to move beyond accounts of ethical self-cultivation and everyday ambiguity to understand how Muslim subjectivity is constituted relationally, how the religious subject is always also a relational subject.

However, understanding the ways in which the lives of religious practitioners are intimately bound up with the immaterial more-than-human presents significant challenges for an anthropological engagement with religion. Supernatural figures have been neglected in the anthropology of religion, where they have appeared as mere symbols or “social facts,” rather than as actors alongside humans (Chakrabarty 2008, 11), symptomatic of Euro-American scholarship’s prioritizing of “absence” over “presence” (Orsi 2016). Multispecies ethnographers have shown how human social worlds are always more-than-human social worlds composed of “relations between humans, non-human life, and lively materials which shape, and are shaped by, political, economic, and cultural forces” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 545). Yet they have mostly stopped short of considering the ways in which human lives are also entangled with supernatural beings and forces. Mayanthi Fernando (2017, 111) sees this omission as the result of secular-modern attachments to the “material and visible as the site of the real.” The materialist epistemology assumed by “post-humanist” scholars, propped up by the modern ocularcentric reorganization of the senses, makes it difficult to account for the presence of invisible beings. Fernando pushes us to think about a “true post-humanism” that entails the possibility of modes of existence not immediately accessible, or even completely inaccessible, to our common sensory perception. Engaging ethnographically with relations with such immaterial beings—including but not limited to jinni, saints, and God (El-Aswad 2010; Mittermaier 2010, 2019; Suhr 2015; Taneja 2017; Bubandt, Rytter, and Suhr 2019; Schielke 2019)—is not only essential to understanding diverse modes of Muslim religiosity but further “destabilizes the distinction between the material and immaterial, natural and supernatural” (Bubandt 2018, 7–8) that underlies much anthropological scholarship. Doing so pushes the study of human–non-human entanglements beyond its materialist biases (Fernando 2017) to consider the possibilities of extra-secular “becomings” (Haraway 2008), ways of becoming attuned, encountering, and living in a relational context with immaterial as well as material beings.

The cultivation of intimacy—relations of closeness, familiarity, and love—with the Family of the Prophet proves central to Shi‘i Muslim religiosity. For Shi‘a, like Vedat, these figures are present and felt and are not purely historical or transcendent—distant, abstract, or unknowable. However, intimacy requires “persistent activity” (Berlant 1998, 282). Like human relations, these relationships

are cultivated over time through practice, including sharing birthday cake and vocal recitation, which enables, generates, and sustains a sense of closeness and affinity. The recitation of praise poetry and laments constitutes a particularly powerful practice for cultivating intimate relations. The combination of sonic, discursive, affective, material, and semiotic qualities in the recitation holds important affordances that draw listeners and reciters into closer relation to the Family of the Prophet as co-listeners, co-present in the moment of recitation. Listening to the sonic and intimate contours of these recitations transcends ocularcentric ideas of knowing and being in this world (Hirschkind 2006; Jay 1991; Tyler 1987). This understanding builds on ethnomusicological and anthropological explorations of sound and music's abilities to encapsulate and engender different forms of intersubjectivity, intimacy, and social relations (Dueck 2013; Stokes 2010; DeNora 2000; James 2020; LaBelle 2018), including with non-human species and environments (Feld 1990; Pettman 2017). In the present context, however, the relational qualities of vocal recitation are shown to surpass the material, suggesting ways of living with the immaterial more-than-human.

I begin by outlining the centrality of love and devotion to the Family of the Prophet in Shi'ism and show how this must be understood in terms of relations of intimacy, relations with the more-than-human enabled and sustained through practice. Using as an example the recitation of *mersiye*, a genre of melodized narrative lament, I demonstrate how vocal recitation, through its sonic and discursive elements not only expresses love and devotion for these figures but, more important, affords the cultivation of close relations with them. The embedding of audio examples of vocal recitation in the essay serves to illustrate my analysis as well as to allow listeners to follow the sonic and affective contours of the lament beyond textual description to gain a better sense of how sound is enlisted in the cultivation of relations of intimacy.

LOVERS OF THE FAMILY OF THE PROPHET

The Family of the Prophet, *Ehl-i Beyt* in Turkish, is revered and respected by both Shi'a and Sunni across Turkey. However, who exactly constitutes the family, and their position and status in cosmology and as figures of devotion, differ greatly across Islamic thought and practice. For Twelver Shi'a, the *Ehl-i Beyt*—the Prophet Mohammed, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law and cousin Imam Ali, and the eleven imams descended from these two—lie at the center of devotional and ritual life. In Twelver Shi'ism, the term *imam* encompasses the twelve male members of the *Ehl-i Beyt* recognized as the rightful successors to the Prophet.

According to Shi‘i hagiography, each of the imams was persecuted by the political rulers of the time, deprived of his rightful worldly rank, and eventually martyred, except for the Twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, who is of particular significance to Shi‘i cosmology and millenarianism. Al-Mahdi is said to have been taken into occultation by God in 941 CE and divinely concealed only to return before Judgement Day to eliminate injustice on earth. True worldly authority continues to rest with al-Mahdi, whose title is also *Sâhib-ü Zamân*, the Master of the Era. As exemplary humans with divinely ordained qualities, the imams act as mediators of love between humans and God (Amir-Moezzi and Jambet 2018, 75) and, despite their physical and historical deaths, continue to have the power to intercede in this life and the next (Nasr, Dabashi, and Nasr 1989, 103). As immaterial yet immanent beings imbued with agency and the ability to witness and intercede in this life, the Family of the Prophet are seen by Shi‘i Muslims as actors in their lives with whom they seek to forge relations.

Anthropological accounts of Shi‘i Islam have mostly presented the imams as “social facts,” emphasizing their symbolic and political potential, all the while sidelining the intense relationships individuals build with them. In his analysis of Shi‘ism, Michael Gilenan (1982, 55) presents the martyrdom of the third Shi‘i imam, al-Husayn, as a “theodicy of suffering,” “largely determined by social factors.” He contrasts the ways Shi‘i mourning rituals and narratives of Husayn’s suffering served to actively challenge the state in nineteenth-century Iran and acted as a passive force in Lebanon in the twentieth century to reinforce social and political hierarchies. Gilenan argues that the different meanings given to the same set of core symbols demonstrate the social production of this cultural tradition. This presentation of Imam Husayn as a symbol with fluctuating meanings in different social political contexts is fairly representative of accounts, especially those following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which present the suffering of the Family of the Prophet as a revolutionary paradigm (Fischer 2003), and Shi‘ism as a “religion of protest” (Dabashi 2011).

In contrast to accounts that reduce these figures to social and political symbols, Saba Mahmood (2009) provides a more nuanced view, more approximate to how Muslims understand and relate to the Prophet. Mahmood advocates for the need to understand Muslims’ relation to Muhammad as assimilative with the words and deeds of the Prophet, understood “not so much as commandments but as ways of inhabiting the world, bodily and ethically” (Mahmood 2009, 847). Mimesis is seen as central to this relationship, as the Prophet models the virtues to emulate if one wishes to acquire a devoted and pious disposition. This “relation

of similitude” resonates with aspects of how Shi‘i Muslims relate to the Prophet and his family as figures to emulate or embody (Deeb 2009). Their lives and sayings proffer guidelines for ethical and moral action. Yet this similitude does not constitute the entirety of the relationship between the faithful and these figures. The forms and experiences of love and devotion for the Prophet and his family are suggestive of relations of intimacy, rather than “relations of similitude.” Understanding these relations as intimate points toward the emotional, affective, and social closeness of these figures in terms of intersubjective relatedness. This is not a case of mimicking passive moral exemplars.

Along with the recognition of the authority and divine institution of the imams, worshippers repeatedly professed love of the *Ehl-i Beyt* as an essential condition for becoming a faithful Muslim (*gerçek mümin*). *Tevella*, love, and *teberra*, disassociation, constitute fundamental principles of Shi‘i Islam and refer to the love of the Prophet, his family, and their followers, and dissociation from their enemies. Apart from emulating their exemplary virtues, loving these figures also entails “remaining always in their proximity” (Subhānī 2001, 168), and therefore living a life in relation to them. The faithful constantly proclaim their love for the *Ehl-i Beyt* in both formal and everyday settings. In sermons, announcements, and social media posts, Shi‘i Muslims in Turkey often use the phrase *Ehl-i Beyt Aşıkları* (Lovers of the *Ehl-i Beyt*) as a form of communal self-designation. This highlights the significance of emotional attachment and affinity to these figures in communal and social formations and imaginaries.

Hasan, a grocer in his mid-fifties who dropped in and out of the local Shi‘i religious association’s events, expressed this to me in the following way: “For us Shi‘a, our love for the imams is greater even than the love for our fathers, mothers, or children, whom we love so much. For us, Allah is the most important, followed by the Prophet and then his *Ehl-i Beyt*.” This may sound simply like a declaration of doctrine, but the way love for these figures is compared with that for human kin situates the Prophet and *Ehl-i Beyt* in a larger network of fictive kin relations (Ruffle 2011, 160).

Social bonds with these immaterial figures, as with all social and kin relations (Carsten 2019), are not static, but rather complex, ambiguous, and changeable throughout one’s life. These relations are made and may endure or dissolve through time, with different members of the *Ehl-i Beyt* holding greater significance at different stages of a devotee’s life (Ruffle 2018). The intimacy sought with the *Ehl-i Beyt* brings devotees into kin-like relations, participating “intrinsically in each other’s existence” and sharing a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013, ix). These

figures' unique positions as immaterial mediators between humans and the divine, however, distinguish these relations from interhuman ones. The faithful often affirm that, despite their earthly martyrdom or occultation, the imams remain able to witness, hear, and communicate with people. Hasan continued:

When we say, "Peace be upon thee, Oh, Husayn," Husayn hears us and responds with "Peace be upon you." When we say, "Oh, Ali help us!" Ali hears us and can come and offer us help on behalf of God. Some of our Sunni brothers call this *şirk* [polytheism], but we are not worshipping them, we are calling on them, as God has granted them certain privileges to do this. Of course, we can ask God directly, but we love the *Ehl-i Beyt* and they are familiar, close, and knowable to us. They are the family of Allah's chosen Prophet, that is why we love them so.

This proximity Hasan asserts, and the idea that the *Ehl-i Beyt* are agents who can witness and respond to ordinary humans, point toward both intimacy and co-presence. Occasions when the presence of the imams is felt and when requests, petitions, or vows are answered are not rare. Accounts of indirect experiences of the family's co-presence, like Vedat's at the celebration above, are bolstered by detailed reports of more direct encounters in dreams, visions, and miracles, which are not uncommon either (Al-Hudaid 2020). To categorize the Prophet or his family as paradigmatic, symbolic, or exemplary figures for ethical, social, or political action alone therefore oversimplifies the ways in which individuals relate to them and live their lives alongside them. These figures, to extend the example of human-animal co-sociality, are not just "good to think with" but entities and agents "to live with" (Haraway 2003, 5). They must be treated as "*parts of human society rather than just symbols of it*" (Knight 2005, 1; emphasis in original).

Relations, however, cannot be assumed or taken for granted. Loving the Family of the Prophet, as my interlocutors often pointed out to me, requires work. It is only through active devotion and attention to these figures that a relationship of love can be cultivated. Accounts of interhuman relations have long shown how relatedness and intimacy are dynamic and processual, involving "a continuous process of becoming connected to people" (Carsten 2000, 16), one constantly produced through everyday acts that "enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other" (Jamieson 2011, 1). Relations are never a given or emerge out of nowhere: they must be forged, performed, announced, enacted, and shaped by encounters. Vocal recitation and other devo-

tional acts make for practices of intimacy that situate Shi‘i Muslims in webs of relations with the *Ehl-i Beyt* by recognizing and feeling their co-presence. It is not only through meditation on their qualities or incorporeal prayer that one comes to love these beings but rather through daily acts and annual cycles of remembrance and commemoration.

CULTIVATING INTIMACY THROUGH SOUND

On the birth and death anniversaries of the figures of the Family of the Prophet Shi‘i Muslims in Turkey and across the world come together, pooling a substantial amount of time and resources, to organize *meclis*, gatherings of celebration or mourning.² These events are extremely well attended compared with daily and weekly prayers or regular religious jurisprudence classes and lectures held at mosques and religious associations. Birthday commemorations, like those for Imam Ali, are joyous celebrations, with the recitation of praise poetry at their center. Somber mourning gatherings, *eza meclisi*, are held at mosques and at homes to mark the death and martyrdom anniversaries. The Islamic months of Muharram and Safar are particularly important for the commemoration of the tragic martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the Prophet’s grandson and third imam, killed in 680 CE in Karbala, in present-day Iraq. During this period of mourning, it is customary not only to attend evening gatherings at mosques but also to host *meclis* at homes. The former are large-scale public affairs attended by women, children, and men of all ages, whereas those at home are smaller gatherings, resembling a family wake, with the hosts bearing the costs of providing food and tea for the attendees.

There are diverse reasons for hosting a *meclis* and distributing food—it is seen as *savap*, a deed with divine reward, and may be done in fulfillment of a specific vow, in gratitude for a successful undertaking, to ask for a blessing, or as a request for favor and grace from God through the intercession of the *Ehl-i Beyt*. Shortly before his family was to hold a *meclis*, Murat, a middle-aged grocer, explained the importance of hosting to me:

When the month of Muharram comes, we all do as much as we can to serve Imam Husayn. We say, “Let me also be in service.” Everyone has expectations from Husayn on the Day of Judgement. We have expectations for the other world. We love Husayn. But we also have expectations in this world . . . for example, we may ask Allah to bring *bereket* [blessings] to our household for serving our imam. Our illnesses may pass by serving Husayn. For these reasons, everyone wants to have *mersiye* recited at their house.

My interlocutors and Shi‘a elsewhere (El-Aswad 2010, 65; D’Souza 2014, 166; Gehad Marei 2020, 134; Shanneik 2022) consider the *Ehl-i Beyt* present at these events, able to witness the grief and be consoled by it. Weeping for the imam is therefore deemed a meritorious act, with Shi‘i sources speaking of the reward of holding mourning *meclis* and weeping for the sufferings and afflictions of the Family of the Prophet (Ayoub 1978).

Weeping is stimulated by the material, sensorial, and atmospheric dimensions of the *meclis*. Black mourning banners cover the walls of the rooms and attendees dress in black. During the recitation of *mersiye*, the lights are often dimmed or turned off completely to allow for deep listening. Food associated with funerals is served immediately after the recitation. These material and sensorial elements all prove essential to create the somberness of mourning, *eza havası*, desired by the hosts and participants—an inversion of the festive atmosphere, *bayram havası*, of the celebrations seen in the introduction. These elements prove indispensable for successful communal mourning. Weeping and feeling sorrow for the *Ehl-i Beyt* come from a deeply held inner belief, but they are also induced by the words recited, the quality of voice, and the other material and sensory features of the event—the power, hum, and reverb of the amplifier, light and darkness, the fragrance of rice and cooked meat, the sniffing and the rustling of tissues, the shaking of bodies. Through the organization of bodies, objects, food, and voice, people actively shape experiences and moods in themselves and others which are oriented toward an ideal feeling of mourning, generally referred to as grief (*eza*) or sorrow (*hüzün*). These feelings unfold as a continuous process of reaching intensity and are not simply achieved as an instrumental end of the *meclis*.

The recitation of *mersiye*, long, semi-improvised melodized elegies that narrate the tragic earthly demise of the Family of the Prophet, lies at the heart of the *meclis*. In fact, no *meclis* exists without recitation. In Turkey, *mersiye* are primarily recited by male *hocas*, prayer leaders, or *seyids*, individuals who claim direct descent from the Prophet and the *Ehl-i Beyt*, whereas in neighboring Iran and Azerbaijan, specialized reciters called *meddah* recite for those gathered. The recitation of *mersiye* aims to move listeners to tears through the power of voice. The main vocal element of the *meclis* can be broken up into two sections: *vaaz*, an oration, and *mersiye*, the narrated, melodized lament. Each section is sonically and discursively marked by the distinct use of voice: the *vaaz* will occur in a spoken voice, though changing in quality, while the *mersiye* is always melodized and intoned. In some cases, a *meclis* may go from opening prayers straight into the recitation of *mersiye*;

this is rare, however, as a key purpose of the *vaaz* is to set the scene and context for the ensuing lamentation.

The combination of sonic and discursive features makes forms of vocal recitation, like *mersiye*, particularly important practices for cultivating intimacy and seeking intercession. Examples of vocalized poetry in honor of the Prophet, his family, and saints, are present in Muslim communities from West Africa to South-east Asia.³ The recitation of devotional poetry often acts as a form of supplication, to ask for grace, intercession, forgiveness, healing, and salvation (Ogunnaike 2020, 25). Oludamini Ogunnaike asserts in relation to West African *madih* poetry that such poems constitute more than mere aesthetic exercises of linguistic or vocal virtuosity. Rather, “composing, reciting and listening to them is understood to be [an act] of devotion that brings one closer to the Prophetic ideal” (Ogunnaike 2020, 11). The act of praising or remembering through reciting and listening is said to develop and define a relationship between the praiser and the praised. In Turkey, the recitation of devotional poetry and lament not only marks the climax of *meclis* in honor of the *Ehl-i Beyt* but, with the rise of recording technology and various media forms, has also become part of everyday listening practices beyond the ritual context (Williamson Fa 2019). These practices mobilize the senses, language, materiality, aesthetics, and media to cultivate relations with these more-than-human beings. The example of vocal recitation proves particularly powerful in demonstrating the ways intersubjective relations are enacted beyond the visible. Vocal recitation not only serves as a means of communication with these figures but also as a way of embodying relatedness and feeling their co-presence.

Sound, music, and voice engender and sustain diverse relations—from romantic relationships between individuals (DeNora 2000) to larger social, communal, and national formations (Dueck 2013; Stokes 2010) in ways that challenge ocularcentric understandings of the social. Sonic and musical atmospheres (Eisenlohr 2018; Riedel and Torvinen 2019) are also intrinsically *relational*, emerging from assemblages of human and non-human beings, things and materialities, which create a shared sense of affective intensity that enables and produces new forms of belonging through a “felt-reality of relation” (Massumi 2002, 16). In his concept of acoustemology, for example, Steven Feld (2015, 15) demonstrates how sound connects actors (human and otherwise) into sonic relations through “modes of acoustic attending, of ways of listening for and resounding to presences.” Feld draws on the ideas of “relational ontology,” which point to relatedness as a condition of and for being, to argue that sonic knowledge, or acoustemology, is emergent and contingent, unfolding through interplay between humans and their wider social ecology.

Feld (2017, 93) adopts the concept of acoustemology to ask “what’s to be learned from taking seriously the sonic relationality of human voices to the sounding otherness of presences and subjectivities like water, birds, and insects. . . . It asks if what are more typically theorized as subject-object relations are in fact more deeply known, experienced, imagined, enacted, and embodied as subject-subject relations.” Fernando’s (2017) critique of materialist post-humanism suggests that the notion of acoustemology can be expanded to understand how intersubjective relations with immaterial beings may be enacted through sound. Vocal recitation relies on sonic relationality to cultivate relations of intimacy between Muslims and the *Ehl-i beyt* without reliance on the visible. The example of vocal recitation as a form of sonic relationality offers humans the possibility of cultivating intimate relations with invisible more-than-human beings, as the visible is not essential to the process of establishing intersubjective relations because sociality, collectivity, and co-presence can be experienced through sound.

FATIMA’S LAMENT

After parking the car outside Murat’s apartment block, I helped the *seyid* invited to recite the *mersiye* at a *meclis* that evening carry the heavy portable amplifier up several flights of stairs and set it up at the front of the living room where the men had already gathered. We waited another ten minutes for latecomers to slip in before beginning. The *meclis* was offered in honor of a group soon to embark on an overland pilgrimage to Imam Husayn’s tomb in Karbala, Iraq. The *seyid*’s oration, *vaaz*, focused on the merits, meanings, and challenges of such a pilgrimage, and on the way a pilgrim should feel and act in Karbala. He described each of the places the pilgrims would see, relating them back to the tragedy that took place there. As the tragic incidents were recalled, the emotional intensity of the speech mounted, leading some of the men present to begin to weep aloud.

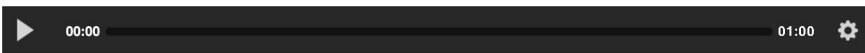
The *seyid*’s voice begins to tremble and break up with a slight intonation at the end of each sentence as the oration reaches its peak and he introduces the topic of the *mersiye*, the demise of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet and mother of Husayn. He speaks directly with Imam Husayn, apologizing for retelling his mother’s suffering:



Audio 2. *Vaaz* oration. Recorded by Stefan Williamson Fa.

*Ahh, so we have come to this point.
 Today the story of her misery and tragedy will be told.
 Oh, master Imam Husayn!
 You know what happened at that house. What happened to your mother?
 How your mother suffered?
 Master, forgive us! Pardon us!
 I don't want to hurt your burning heart again . . .
 But I don't know which door to turn to tonight . . .
 Who is more valuable than your mother, in this world?*

The sobs now fill the room, almost drowning the voice from the amplifier. Although the *meclis* was held during the period of mourning for Imam Husayn, the *seyid* chose to recite about Fatima, his mother, instead. Despite the notes in his hand, he soon closed his eyes and spoke without them. As he describes the last moments of Fatima's life, the *seyid* pauses briefly and breaks into the melodized phrase that marks the start of the recitation of the *mersiye* proper. At the melismatically extended Arabic phrase *as-salāmu 'alayka yā Abā 'Abdillāh* (Peace be upon you, Oh, Husayn),⁴ the lights are turned off. He reverts to Turkish to continue sending greetings to the martyrs of Karbala:



Audio 3. Beginning of *Mersiye*. Recorded by Stefan Williamson Fa.

*Peace be upon those who died of thirst at the water's edge
 Peace be upon the sacrificed infant*

The narrative of Fatima's death continues now in a fully melodized voice. The recitation of the *mersiye* shifts to the local Azeri-Turkish dialect, much of it recited in the first person, adding to the emotional impact of the words.

*It is said that Imam Hasan and Husayn cried
 and threw themselves onto their mother's wounded chest.
 They saw the wounded holy arms of Our Lady reach out
 to embrace her children
 "I miss you too, my children"*

Ali heard a call from heaven
“Oh, Ali! Separate the mother from the children.”
Ali wants to carry Our Lady at night to bury her
He takes the coffin from the house
He heard footsteps behind the coffin
When he looked, he saw Our Lady’s sweet, little daughter, Zaynab,
Following her mother’s coffin
She says:
“My mother is modest
She is the beauty of Medina
Place her in her grave slowly
Because her back is broken and she is injured”

The words called out by Zaynab in the *mersiye* are a well-known rhyme, allowing the men to join in collectively alongside the reciter, a feature in several forms of Shi‘i devotional recitation (Gehad Marei and Shanneik 2021, 61). As seen in the text, several discursive features act as powerful affective cues. Reported speech is used as a way of introducing the first-person voices of the protagonists of the tragedy and decenter the reciter from the narration. By quoting the voices of others, the reciter moves between multiple voices—past, present, and future—to weave together the *mersiye*’s narrative. The use of vernacular phrases in the first-person, quoted reported speech indexes relations of familiarity and proximity. The switch from the more standard Turkish in the *vaaz* section to the local dialect and the use of colloquial terms of endearment, such as *balam* (my child), usually reserved for one’s own child or loved one, brings the listener and reciter discursively into the most intimate forms of relation to the subjects of the lament. Onomatopoeic phrases, such as *lay lay*, used by mothers and grandmothers in lullabies, blur the lines between the sonic and discursive, creating a relation of shared pain and suffering with the *Ehl-i Beyt* as intimate loved ones.

However, the discursive alone is not enough. It must be combined with the semiotic, affective, and material features of the voice to bring about the desired feelings of intimacy. In this instant, the raspy, creaky, melismatic voice, distorted at a high volume through the small amplifier, is not intended to be aesthetically pleasing but to induce an embodied response from the listeners, one that positions them in relation to the *Ehl-i Beyt*. The vocal melodization of the *mersiye* is quite free and relies on limited pitch movement within a small range, following the melodic contours of most lamentation in the region (De La Bretèque 2012). Each

phrase begins at a higher pitch and slowly descends, melismatically ending on a lower tone until the voice breaks into a sobbing sound. There are several other “icons of crying,” including “cry breaks”—sonically realized as a diaphragm pulse accompanied by friction, voiced inhalation, and creaky voice (Urban 1988, 389). These “icons” are clearly audible in the inhalation and disjointed sounds between recited lines, which become amplified and distorted through the microphone. Toward the beginning of the *mersiye*, the *seyid* also pauses briefly between lines to extend his sobbing into the microphone. These pauses also allow for the communal sobbing of the attendees to be clearly heard over the buzz of the amplifier.

Despite the monologic form of the recitation, the listeners constitute part of the performance, with the sound of their sobbing and calling out entering a feedback loop with the reciter. As the sobbing of the mourners increases, the reciter intensifies his recitation. There is a strong dialogic component to the performatives enacted in the *mersiye*, central to its emotional impact. Auditors somatically respond to the call of weeping by engaging in mourning and weeping themselves or by calling out phrases. The sound of the mourners’ weeping, sniffing, or interjections is as important as the recitation of the *mersiye* itself. The sonic features of *mersiye*, such as its characteristic intonational contour and crying voice, are significant in setting the genre apart from other forms of speech and sound. As a distinct genre only heard at mourning gatherings like these and at funerals for loved ones, the recitation of *mersiye* is tied to the specific contexts of intimate mourning.

Sound amplification has the practical function of allowing women in a separate room to listen to the *mersiye*, but the manipulation of sound also has important and desired affective qualities. Despite the confined homes in which most private *meclis* are held, the amplifier is almost always set to its highest setting. At such a high volume, the sound of the voice modifies the felt space of the room, at times creating a physical sensation of vibration in one’s body. The intensity of the volume is inescapable, and the listener becomes consumed by the recitation, as all other sounds are smothered by the reciter’s voice.

Around fifty minutes in from the start, the *mersiye* reaches its climax as the *seyid* recounts the burial of Fatima. At this stage, the amplifier’s volume is distorting his voice and the apartment is filled with the shrieks and sobbing of the men and women in separate rooms.



Audio 4. *Mersiye* climax. Recorded by Stefan Williamson Fa.

[Ali] *buried Our Lady*

He heard her voice at midnight saying

“Cousin, Oh, Ali,

Get up and go home

the children have woken up and are crying.”

Salman says: “When Ali arrived I saw

the children of Our Lady had woken up

each cried out with their own tongue and wept

but there was a voice among them

which set the world on fire

I looked and saw Our Lady’s sweet, little daughter, Zaynab

With all her brothers around her

They recited a mersiye for her mother, wept and set the world on fire.

She says:

“Mother I didn’t know that

You would set like the sun in the evening

I didn’t know, mother, that

You would ignore me

I didn’t know, mother,

You would lie down in the grave without me

Oh, my wounded Mother, woe

Oh, my mother who went to the grave with the night, woe”

With the recitation of this short verse in Zaynab’s voice, the *seyid* pauses before switching back to his own spoken voice in a hushed tone.



Audio 5. Final supplications. Recorded by Stefan Williamson Fa.

Let us invite our imam [al-Mahdi] with these tears.

Let us pray for him

Oh, he, who filled the world

With his justice

Come for the sake of your mother [Fatima] Zahra

The blood of Husayn remained on earth unavenged

Come he who would take the blood back

Come for the sake of your mother [Fatima] Zahra

*Oh, Allah! Peace be upon Fatima and her father and Ali and her innocent sons,
And upon our Imam, Oh, Allah!*

The *meclis* finishes with the recitation of the *salavat* and a short Arabic supplication attributed to Imam al-Mahdi. This is followed by the implorations of the *seyid* on behalf of the hosts and attendees, wishing them good health, safe travels on their pilgrimage, and the forgiveness of their sins. After each request, the listeners repeat the phrase *Amin* in unison, and, with one last *salavat*, the microphone is lowered and the recitation ends.

The recitation of the *mersiye* and the shedding of tears are dedicated to the Twelfth Imam to please him and hasten his physical reappearance. In addressing him directly the *seyid* seeks to communicate with the living imam and offer the *meclis* to him. He makes it clear that the audience of the recitation does not just comprise the people in the room but, more important, the living divine guide, Imam al-Mahdi. The volume of the amplifier targets a more-than-human audience to receive their favor and intercession.

The lights come back on. Many of the men are still wiping the tears from their eyes and sniffing. Some thank the *seyid* as he sips his tea, others utter “Allah kabul etsin”—“May God accept [your mourning]”—to which the men reply “Inşallah.” The younger boys rush out of the room to bring in the yoghurt soup from the kitchen and place a bowl for each person on the small tables in front of the seats. Once this is consumed, the rice and meat are brought out and served. The meal is taken in near silence. Compared with the celebratory gatherings in which the men joyfully eat cake laughing and joking around, the *meclis* meal always remains subdued, with the solemnity of the *mersiye* still pervasive. Occasionally, someone may break the silence to ask the *seyid* a question. When the meal is, over the guests politely ask for permission to leave. I waited to help the *seyid* pack up the amplifier and carry it down to the car. The next night there would be another *meclis* at someone else’s house, and he would call me to join again.

SOUNDING RELATIONS BEYOND MEDIATION

Shi’i listeners and reciters of *mersiye* understand recitation as a way of cultivating intimacy with the *Ehl-i Beyt*. But how exactly? As an affective genre, the *mersiye* aims to move listeners emotionally and elicit weeping for the suffering and death of the *Ehl-i Beyt*. As with Quranic recitation, the experience of *mersiye* is never merely a matter of the cognitive apprehension of text and meaning alone; rather, it is “pre-eminently emotional” (Frishkopf 2009, 82). The successful recita-

tion of *mersiye*, in this instance, does not rely on the clarity of voice or the quality of the lyrics, but on the overall affective and emotional impact of the melodized narrative, which draws on both sonic and discursive features.

After the main period of Muharram mourning ended, I met up again with the *seyid* to discuss the features of *mersiye* recitation at length. “Both *ses* [sound] and *söz* [words] are important,” he explained. “The words are important, but these words must be recited with a beautiful voice. If the words are beautiful and the *avaz* [melody] is terrible, they will go nowhere! If the sound is beautiful and the words are terrible, then it will not be successful either. Both aspects are important. The words have to be beautiful and so does the voice!” Discussions with other reciters and listeners similarly emphasized the importance of both text and voice and their different ideal qualities. Successful recitation was said to be a balancing act, avoiding “exaggeration” in both lyrical content and vocal performance. When pressed on what exactly constitutes a “beautiful voice,” the *seyid* explained how the reciter should be able to control their voice, to keep the pattern of melodization. While melodization is important, the lament should not be overly performative or showy—as this would cross the line between appropriate recitation and secular singing.

Although different styles of recitation and listener preferences exist, listeners emphasized the authenticity of the text and the sincerity of the reciter, along with the poetic and vocal qualities of the recitation. In eastern Turkey, this meant that *mersiye* recitation by male *seyids* was particularly valued, as they not only had a “beautiful voice” but had studied at the seminary in Iran, giving them the religious knowledge to authenticate the words recited. In addition, they descended directly from the imams. For listeners, this genealogical connection to the *Ehl-i Beyt* meant the *seyid*'s recitation was unparalleled due to his emotional bonds and intimate connection to these figures.

Getting people to talk about the moving and affective quality of sound and voice always proves a challenge. In my regular discussions with reciters and listeners, they always struggled to articulate why they felt sound was so important to relations with the Family of the Prophet. In one interview Hasan, a regular reciter of praise poetry at events in the town, tried to help me understand the emotional impact of recitation better:

OK, let me give you an example like this In your own language there are songs, right? Love songs, yes? Here in Turkey, these songs are important for young people When someone is in love with a girl, they

cannot express their feelings . . . instead they use songs A boy may send a song to a girl. The girl listens to the song and the lyrics These words can't be said, but the song communicates a feeling. Sometimes we cannot explain our feelings entirely, but in the form of a song, a hymn, a poem we try to communicate these feelings to people. If you pay attention, you will see that the Holy Quran is written in a poetic form. This has a big impact on people; the form of recitation affects people. Have you never felt emotional when listening to a song? If you allow yourself, you can become emotional . . . and if you understand what the person is trying to communicate, it can affect you. We use our voice as a method to explain the tragedy of Karbala. But never in a way that is needlessly emotional. Just reading about these incidents will begin to make you emotional For example . . . you start to think, what if my brother had been lost like that? What would I have felt? Look, Husayn is separated from his brother. . . this immediately makes you emotional.

Thus, according to Hasan, recitations, like love songs, express, communicate, and cultivate feelings of emotional attachment and relations. The sonic and discursive qualities of vocal recitation appear especially conducive to this reaction, not only because poetry is the discourse of intimacy in many West Asian settings—where “reciting poems to particular individuals communicates, and even creates, closeness” (Abu-Lughod 1986, 241)—but also because of the particular affordances of sound and voice. As the sonic is simultaneously affective and signifying, both sign systems and the materially experienced precognitive elements of sound and voice combine to provoke strong feelings of intimacy.

In his work on the recitation of *na't*—Urdu-language poetry in honor of the Prophet Muhammad—among Mauritian Muslims, Patrick Eisenlohr (2018) advances a pioneering theory of sonic atmospheres that analyzes the material qualities of sound and their impact beyond the faculty of hearing on the entire body. He claims that sonic atmospheres are “events emerging and exuding from persons and objects” (Eisenlohr 2018, 83) that blur the boundaries between humans and non-human environments and objects, creating emotions and “the experience of the divine” (Eisenlohr 2018, 13). According to Eisenlohr, moments of sonic intensity related to acoustic dimensions—volume, fundamental frequency, timber, pitch, and reverberation—lead participants to report strong effects on their felt-bodies, which they describe in emotional and religious terms. Centering the materiality of sound in this way provides an innovative approach to understanding how the tan-

gible and powerful effects of sound are mobilized in ritual and devotional contexts like the *meclis*. Amplification in the *meclis* is clearly employed to physically move the bodies of listeners in ways that further convey affect and meaning, shaping experience beyond the discursive and rendering interior processes of relating to the *Ehl-i Beyt* corporal. While the volume and distortion of the amplified recitation provoke a visceral effect on the listener, the materiality of sound is not mistaken for the presence of the more-than-human. The recitation is not intended for the benefit of the human listeners alone, but for the unseen audience too, as the lines directly communicating with the imam show. Therefore, not only does the sonic blur the boundaries between humans and objects but it positions listeners in atmospheric relations with the *Ehl-i Beyt* as co-listeners in the *meclis*. Rather than seeing the power of vocal recitation to develop relations of intimacy as a clear linear cause and effect between material elements and individual listeners, intimacy is nurtured through a complex and imprecise entanglement of sound, discourse, material, aesthetics, poetry, and bodies within the context of the *meclis*. Recitation does not mediate between this world and another. Rather, it allows for listeners to cultivate relations of intimacy with the *Ehl-i Beyt* in ways not dissimilar to the ones in which sound and poetry act to create relations between humans.

Within the anthropology of religion, the so-called media turn (Engelke 2010) has successfully highlighted the centrality of sensory-aesthetics forms, media, and materiality in religious life. The concept of mediation is used to argue that religion is inextricably tied to media forms that mediate between humans and the transcendent. According to Birgit Meyer (2020, 2), religion is “a set of human ideas and practices with regard to another, non-empirical sphere—a beyond—which can only be rendered tangible through mediation, and thus requires some sort of media.” Religious practitioners are ultimately concerned with the bridging of the distance between the immanent and the transcendent through the use of media employed for the purpose of making connections between the “here and now” and a “beyond” (Meyer 2020, 23).

While the concept of mediation has been extremely productive and can account for aspects of the practices discussed here, applying the same conceptual framework to all religious practice and experience can act as a universalizing force that runs the risk of contracting diverse forms and practices of religious life and modes of relating to the supernatural. Applying the concept of religion-as-mediation in all settings digresses, as Meyer (2020, 9) herself has acknowledged, from religious practitioners’ own understandings of the use of media and notions of

immanence and transcendence (Hirschkind 2011; Reinhardt 2016; Robbins 2017; Hovland 2018).

Rather than apply a single concept to understand all religion, it is important to engage ethnographically with other ontological formulations and modes and relations with the immaterial more-than-human. In her work on Santería, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús (2014, 2015) has criticized the concept of mediation for simplifying transcendence into a dualistic division between self/earth and Other/heaven. She adopts instead the concept of “co-presences” to describe how practitioners of Santería “walk through the world negotiating with and being closely related to various spiritual assemblages” (Beliso-De Jesús 2014, 518). Co-presences are intimately sensed as beings, treated *as a person*, fed and paid honors, and they offer advice, perceive, and provide evidence of their existence in ways that resonate with Shi‘i relations with the *Ehl-i Beyt*.

While the imams are seen as mediators between humans and God, there appears to be less of a gap between humans and these figures than the concept of mediation would suggest. For Shi‘a, sensory-aesthetic devotional practices do not mediate between this world and an otherwise imperceptible or unknowable Other. Rather, they constitute practices of acknowledging, relating to, and living life alongside these beings in this world, as co-presences. Intimacy with these beings is achieved through the same means as in human kin or other relationships (Carsten 2019): dedicated quality time together, celebrations of joy, and shared suffering. The immateriality of the *Ehl-i Beyt* does not mean they are any more reliant on mediation and media than human relations are. Emphasizing mediation in religion therefore runs the risk of marking relations with immaterial beings as fundamentally different from all other types of relations, thereby creating a sense of distance between the human and the divine, which cannot always fully capture the ways religious practitioners experience their lives. Devotional recitation does not make these figures present from a distinct invisible realm but allows for the cultivation of intimacy with figures already understood as present, witnessing, responsive, and super-conscious in this world. These are practices understood by Shi‘a as constituting ways of *being* in this world with the more-than-human, ways of becoming attuned to a multiplicity of beings through encounter and connectivity.

CONCLUSION

The forms of vocal recitation listened to here are central to how Shi‘i Muslims cultivate relations of intimacy with the Family of the Prophet. Empathy, familiarity, and feelings of emotional attachment are nourished by celebrating their

lives and mourning their earthly deaths, by sharing cake with them as one does with friends and loved ones and shedding tears for them as one does for friends and loved ones. Vocal recitation is not just a superficial addition to these gatherings but lies at the very center of the cultivation of intimacy. This is not only because of the discursive and poetic forms recited but also because of their sonic and material qualities, which index and produce intimacy and directly position the *Ehl-i Beyt* and faithful into proximity as co-listeners. The object of recitation is not to reproduce the narratives of the lives of historical figures, as moral ideals to be simulated, embodied, or emulated, but rather to deepen relations and emotional bonds with these more-than-human beings—to cultivate a life alongside them. To ignore this and interpret such practices through the lens of psychological catharsis, political action, or social fact means to erase the relational motivations and experiences that lie within them. That is not to deny that such figures have multiple meanings and effects, including to inspire social and political action (Gehad Marei 2020; Deeb 2011); but they do not exist merely as virtuous exemplars, symbols, or social constructions.

For Shi'i Muslims in Turkey, relatedness exceeds the human and the material realm in everyday doings, as relations involve a range of immaterial more-than-human beings. Living life as a Muslim is not just a case of understanding and following moral principles for ethical self-formation; it also involves the cultivation of the self in relation to these beings. A relational account of religious life moves away from an atomistic individualist self as an ethical deliberator and agent and points instead toward the self-in-relation, paying attention to the ways the self is embedded in a network of relationships with others, both human and more-than-human. An expanded ethnographic scope that includes these more-than-human beings as actors proves essential to fully understand the complex significance of these voices of sorrow and joy. To gain a deeper understanding of religion as it is experienced and lived by many, we must consider relations with immaterial beings—whether gods, saints, spirits, or others. This assertion holds not only in terms of veneration but also in terms of living with, alongside, and being co-present with these beings—and loving in the sense of seeking proximity and intimacy.

ABSTRACT

The Family of the Prophet Muhammad holds a central position in Shi'i Muslim religiosity. As immaterial beings able to intercede in this world, they are said to be witnessing and co-present in the lives of Muslims. Anthropology has neglected relations with immaterial more-than-human beings like these. Instead of regarding

them merely as symbols or moral exemplars, this essay focuses on the cultivation of relations of intimacy with them through the devotional practice of vocal recitation. In eastern Turkey, gatherings of celebration and mourning are held throughout the year to commemorate the earthly deaths and birthdays of these figures. The climax of such occasions is marked by the recitation of various genres of lament or praise. This essay uses audio examples and focuses on these recitations to demonstrate how their vocal and discursive features offer ways for Muslims to cultivate love and intimacy to live life alongside these immaterial more-than-human beings. [sound; voice; Shi'a; Islam; Turkey; Middle East; religion; more-than-human]

ÖZET

Hazreti Muhammed'in ailesi (Ehl-i Beyt), Şii mezhebi inancında merkezi bir konuma sahiptir. Bu dünyada şefaat edebilecek gayri maddi varlıklar olarak, Müslümanların hayatlarına tanık oldukları ve onlarla birlikte buldukları söylenir. Ne yazık ki antropolojide, bu gibi gayri maddi ve insan-ötesi varlıklarla ilişkiler ihmal edilmektedir. Bu makale, insan-ötesi varlıkları sadece birer simge veya ahlâki model olarak görmek yerine, onlarla ilahi ve mersiye okumanın aracılığıyla kurulan yakınlık ilişkilerine odaklanmaktadır. Türkiye'nin Doğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nde, Ehl-i Beyt İmamların şehadet ve doğum günlerini anmak için yıl boyunca kutlama ve eza meclisleri düzenlenmektedir. Bu tarz merasimlerin zirvesi ise çeşitli ağıt veya ilahi türlerinin okunmasıyla gerçekleşir. Bu makalede sesli örnekler kullanılmaktadır ve kayıtlara odaklanılmıştır. Bunların yanı sıra mersiyelelerin ses ve söylemsel özelliklerinin, Müslümanların Ehl-i Beytin yanında yaşamak, onlarla sevgi ve yakınlık ilişkileri geliştirmek için ne tarz yollar açtığı tartışılmaktadır. [ses; Şiilik; İslam; Türkiye; Orta Doğu; din; insan-ötesi]

NOTES

Acknowledgments I thank, first and foremost, my generous friends and interlocutors in Turkey without whom this work would not exist. This essay benefited at various stages from the comments and input of numerous colleagues and friends. I thank Oliver Scharbrodt, Charles Hirschkind, Ruth Mandel, and Martin Stokes for offering their time to read through and discuss both early iterations and later drafts of this work. In London: Aida Balafkan, Rik Adriaans, and Aeron O'Connor. In Birmingham and Lund: Pooya Razavian, Fouad Gehad Marei, Nada Al-Hudaïd, Oula Kadhum, and Yousif Al-Hilli. Finally, I thank the editorial collaborative at *Cultural Anthropology*, particularly Brad Weiss, and the anonymous reviewers for their detailed and insightful comments and useful suggestions.

All audio recordings (except for Audio 1) were recorded by the author in Turkey, in November 2015. The reciter chose to be anonymous in the publication.

Fieldwork was made possible through doctoral research funding from the Gibraltar Department of Education. Writing up at the University of Birmingham and Lund University has been supported by funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 724557).

1. This essay draws on fieldwork in eastern Turkey carried out between 2015 and 2016. I use pseudonyms for all interlocutors who requested confidentiality. Twelver Shi'i Muslims make up around 5 percent of Turkey's majority-Sunni population. Shi'i Muslims in

- Turkey are predominantly Azeris, Turkic-speakers with historical, cultural, and linguistic ties to the Caucasus and northwestern Iran.
2. Other examples of ritual gatherings, which also include both distinct and cognate forms of vocal recitation, are practiced by other religious practitioners across Turkey. Most Sufi groups hold regular *zikr* sessions in which devotional poetry plays a prominent role (Raudvere 2002). The practice of *mevlid*, the recitation of Ottoman poetry in praise of the Prophet and in celebration of his birth, is widespread among Sunni Muslims in the country (Tapper and Tapper 1987).
 3. Scholars of literature and arts in Islamic contexts have long shown how poetry and other aesthetic forms are integral to Islam in practical and theoretical terms (Schimmel 1982). The development of philosophical theories of aesthetics, poetry, and music across Islamic worlds often emphasized different characteristics of these art forms and practices, which had implications for their moral and ethical potential (Behrens-Abouseif 1999).
 4. The Arabic *AbūʿAbd Allāh* is a tekonym (*kunya*) commonly used by Shiʿa for Imam Husayn. Teknyoms are used by Arabic speakers to denote both familiarity and respect.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Lughod, Lila
 1986 *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Al-Hudaid, Nada
 2020 “Karamah [‘Marvel’]: An Exploration of the Literal and Ethnographic Meaning of Miracles among Shiʿa Female Artists in Kuwait.” *World Art* 10, no. 1: 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2020.1735502>
- Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali, and Christian Jambet
 2018 *What Is Shiʿi Islam? An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Asad, Talal
 1993 *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ayoub, Mahmoud
 1978 *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shiʿism*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.
- Behrens-Abouseif, Doris
 1999 *Beauty in Arabic Culture*. Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers.
- Beliso-De Jesús, Aisha
 2014 “Santería Copresence and the Making of African Diaspora Bodies.” *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 3: 503–26. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.3.04>
 2015 *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren
 1998 “Intimacy: A Special Issue.” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2: 281–88. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448875>
- Bubandt, Nils
 2018 “Anthropocene Uncanny: Nonsecular Approaches to Environmental Change.” In *A Non-Secular Anthropocene: Spirits, Specters, and Other Nonhumans in a Time of Environmental Change*, edited by Nils Bubandt, 2–18. Aarhus, Denmark: School of Culture and Society, Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University. https://anthropocene.au.dk/fileadmin/Anthropocene/MORE_THAN_HUMAN_vol.3.pdf
- Bubandt, Nils, Mikkel Rytter, and Christian Suhr
 2019 “A Second Look at Invisibility: Al-Ghayb, Islam, Ethnography.” *Contemporary Islam* 13, no. 1: 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-017-0395-5>

- Carsten, Janet
 2000 *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 2019 "The Stuff of Kinship." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Kinship*, edited by Sandra Bamford, 133–50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh
 2008 *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Dabashi, Hamid
 2011 *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Deeb, Lara
 2009 "Emulating and/or Embodying the Ideal: The Gendering of Temporal Frameworks and Islamic Role Models in Shi'i Lebanon." *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 2: 242–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2009.01133.x>
 2011 *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- De La Bretèque, Estelle Amy
 2012 "Voices of Sorrow: Melodized Speech, Laments, and Heroic Narratives among the Yezidis of Armenia." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 44: 129–48. <https://doi.org/10.5921/yeartradmusi.44.0129>
- DeNora, Tia
 2000 *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- D'Souza, Diane
 2014 *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Dueck, Byron
 2013 *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries: Aboriginal Music and Dance in Public Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eisenlohr, Patrick
 2018 *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmosphere in an Indian Ocean World*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- El-Aswad, El-Sayed
 2010 "The Perceptibility of the Invisible Cosmology: Religious Rituals and Embodied Spirituality among the Bahraini Shi'a." *Anthropology of the Middle East* 5, no. 2: 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2010.050205>
- Engelke, Matthew
 2010 "Religion and the Media Turn: A Review Essay." *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 2: 371–79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01261.x>
- Fadil, Nadia, and Mayanthi Fernando
 2015 "Rediscovering the 'Everyday' Muslim: Notes on an Anthropological Divide." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2: 59–88. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.2.005>
- Feld, Steven
 1990 *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
 2015 "Acoustemology." In *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 12–21. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
 2017 "On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives: Acoustemology." In *Perspectives on a Twenty-first Century Comparative Musicology: Ethnomusicology or Transcultural Musicology?*, edited by Francesco Giannattasio and Giovanni Giuriati, 82–98. Udine, Italy: Nota.
- Fernando, Mayanthi
 2017 "Flora, Fauna . . . and the Fabulous? 'Supernatural' Hauntings in a Nature-Culture World." In *A Non-Secular Anthropocene: Spirits, Specters, and Other Nonhumans in a Time of Environmental Change*, edited by Nils Bubandt, 107–23. Aarhus, Denmark:

School of Culture and Society, Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University.
https://anthropocene.au.dk/fileadmin/Anthropocene/MORE_THAN_HUMAN_vol.3.pdf

- Fischer, Michael M. J.
 2003 *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Frishkopf, Michael
 2009 "Mediated Qur'anic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt." In *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia*, edited by Laudan Nooshin, 75–114. Burlington, U.K.: Ashgate.
- Furey, Constance M.
 2012 "Body, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1: 7–33. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfr088>
- Gehad Marei, Fouad
 2020 "From the Throes of Anguished Mourning: Shi'i Ritual Lamentation and the Pious Publics of Lebanon." *Religion and Society* 11, no. 1: 133–47. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2020.110110>
- Gehad Marei, Fouad, and Yafa Shanneik
 2021 "Lamenting Karbala in Europe: Husayni Liturgy and Discourses of Dissent amongst Diasporic Bahraini and Lebanese Shiis." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 32, no. 1: 53–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1827341>
- Gilsenan, Michael
 1982 *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Haraway, Donna
 2003 *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
 2008 *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hirschkind, Charles
 2006 *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
 2011 "Media, Mediation, Religion." *Social Anthropology* 19, no. 1: 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00140_1.x
- Hovland, Ingie
 2018 "Beyond Mediation: An Anthropological Understanding of the Relationship between Humans, Materiality, and Transcendence in Protestant Christianity." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 2: 425–53. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfx054>
- James, Malcolm
 2020 *Sonic Intimacy: Reggae Sound Systems, Jungle Pirate Radio, and Grime YouTube Music Videos*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Jamieson, Lynn
 2011 "Intimacy as a Concept: Explaining Social Change in the Context of Globalisation or Another Form of Ethnocentrism?" *Sociological Research Online* 16, no. 4: 151–63. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2497>
- Jay, Martin
 1991 "The Disenchantment of the Eye: Surrealism and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism." *Visual Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1: 15–38. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1991.7.1.15>
- Kirksey, S. Eben, and Stefan Helmreich
 2010 "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography." *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4: 545–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01069.x>
- Knight, John
 2005 *Animals in Person: Cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Intimacies*. New York: Routledge.
- LaBelle, Brandon
 2018 *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. London: Goldsmiths Press.

- Lopez, Donald
 1998 "Belief." In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, 21–35. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mahmood, Saba
 2009 "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4: 836–62. <https://doi.org/10.1086/599592>
- Massumi, Brian
 2002 *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- McLoughlin, Sean
 2007 "Islam(s) in Context: Orientalism and the Anthropology of Muslim Societies and Cultures." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28, no. 3: 273–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617670701712539>
- Meyer, Birgit
 2020 "Religion as Mediation." *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 3: n.p. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.11.2020.8444>
- Mittermaier, Amira
 2010 *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
 2012 "Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim Subjectivities beyond the Trope of Self-Cultivation." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. 2: 247–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01742.x>
 2019 *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr
 1989 *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.
- Ogunnaike, Oludamini
 2020 *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection: A Study of West African Arabic Madīḥ Poetry and its Precedents*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.
- Orsi, Robert A.
 2013 *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
 2016 *History and Presence*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Pettman, Dominic
 2017 *Sonic Intimacy: Voice, Species, Technics (or, How to Listen to the World)*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Raudvere, Catharina
 2002 *The Book and the Roses: Sufi Women, Visibility, and Zikir in Contemporary Istanbul*. Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute.
- Reinhardt, Bruno
 2016 "'Don't Make It a Doctrine': Material Religion, Transcendence, Critique." *Anthropological Theory* 16, no. 1: 75–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499615625012>
- Riedel, Friedlind, and Juha Torvinen
 2019 *Music as Atmosphere: Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds*. New York: Routledge.
- Robbins, Joel
 2017 "Keeping God's Distance: Sacrifice, Possession, and the Problem of Religious Mediation." *American Ethnologist* 44, no. 3: 464–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12522>
- Ruffle, Karen G.
 2011 *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
 2018 "Islam: Saints and Sacred Geographies; South Asia." In *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, edited by Suad Joseph. Leiden: Brill.
- Sahlins, Marshall
 2013 *What Kinship Is—and Is Not*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Schielke, Samuli
 2010 "Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam; or, How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life." Working Paper, Social Science Open Access Repository. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssaoar-322336>
- 2019 "The Power of God: Four Proposals for an Anthropological Engagement." *Zentrum Moderner Orient Programmatic Texts* 13: 1–20. Working paper.
- Schimmel, Annemarie
 1982 *As through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shanneik, Yafa
 2022 "Fatima's Apparition." In *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*, 153–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stokes, Martin
 2010 *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Subhānī, Ayatollah Ja'far
 2001 *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam: A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices*. Edited and translated by Reza Shah-Kazemi. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Suhr, Christian
 2015 "The Failed Image and the Possessed: Examples of Invisibility in Visual Anthropology and Islam." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, S1: 96–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12168>
- Taneja, Anand Vivek
 2017 *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Tapper, Nancy, and Richard Tapper
 1987 "The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam." *Man* 22, no. 1: 69–92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2802964>
- Tyler, Stephen A.
 1987 *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Urban, Greg.
 1988 "Ritual Wailing in Amerindian Brazil." *American Anthropologist* 90, no. 2: 385–400. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/677959>
- Williamson Fa, Stefan
 2019 "'Hüseyn'm Vay!': Voice and Recitation in Contemporary Turkish Shi'ism." In *Diversity and Contact among Singer-Poet Traditions in Eastern Anatolia*, edited by Ulaş Özdemir, Wendelmoet Hamelink, and Martin Greve, 209–24. Baden-Baden, Germany: Ergon Verlag.