Pilgrimage, Commodities, and Religious Objectification: The Making of Transnational Shiism between Iran and Syria

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A ny visitor to the pilgrimage sites of Lourdes in France, Mashhad in Iran, or Varanasi in India is surely impressed by the crowd of pilgrims coming from various places in order to express their devotion and be in close, intimate contact with a source of sacred power. The same visitor is also sure to be overwhelmed by the market activities that take place near or sometimes inside the sacred shrines. Religious commodities of all sorts are sold in shops and bought by the pilgrims, who are usually avid consumers of religious memorabilia. Notwithstanding the fact that the commoditization of the religious tradition periodically attracts the wrath and condemnation of religious reformers, it is a constant feature of the pilgrimage systems that mobilize massive numbers of pilgrims through vast territories. Pilgrimages are a major feature of world religions, for they connect the local and the global—the particular and the universal—in a complex system of practices and beliefs, which allows them to create shared identities in a multiplicity of social and cultural contexts.

This article explores the links among pilgrimage, devotional practices, and the consumption of religious commodities in the production and organization of transnational forms of Shi'i Islam in the pilgrimage shrines in Syria. The general argument is that a connection exists between pilgrimage processes and the emergence of religious markets, meaning arenas of exchange where religious commodities are produced, sold, and consumed. The consumption of religious commodities structures channels of participation and articulates local identities in the translocal religious community created by pilgrimage.[1]

Pilgrimage is a central religious practice in the production of "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy" in Islam, for it brings together members of different Muslim communities, who might be separated by language, culture, political boundaries, and geographic distance, and mobilizes them into one large ritual and devotional activity.[2] The engagement of each pilgrim in the performance of the collective ritual practices that constitute pilgrimage produces the experience of what Victor Turner defines as *communitas*, meaning a diffuse solidarity that transcends social and cultural differences.[3] However, beyond the creation of a shared sense of belonging to the *communitas*, the gathering of Muslims of different social and cultural backgrounds in the activities that constitute pilgrimage also reveals the doctrinal or ritual differ-

1. Victor Turner pointed to the links between pilgrimage and market systems, but he did not develop this idea further. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 182–83, 222–23.

2. The pan-Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) is paralleled by other pilgrimages with more regional or sectarian character, such as the Shi'i pilgrimages to Karbala, Mashhad, or Damascus.

3. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 166–71.

ences that exist throughout the Muslim world. The consciousness of the local variation of the religious tradition entices among some Muslims the need to find the "pure" or "original" form of their religious tradition in order to restore the Islamic *communitas*, the *umma*.

The continuous re-creation of the religious tradition is done through the detachment of symbols, practices, and doctrines from their cultural context and their articulation as abstract systems that can be consciously presented as doctrinal and ritual models. This process was labeled by Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori as "religious objectification," for it allows religion to become "a self-contained system that its believers can describe, characterize, and distinguish from other beliefs systems."[4] Pilgrims are constantly exposed to objectified forms of the religious tradition through sermons, images, and texts, which constitute the discursive and iconic universe of pilgrimage. They carry these codifications of the religious tradition back to their communities of origin as authoritative discourses and practices loaded with the holiness of the pilgrimage site.

Also, in the case of the Shi'i pilgrimage shrines in Syria, the process of the objectification of local religious traditions attracts the attention of political regimes, in particular those that incorporate religion into their system of governance or that have it as a domain to be controlled, such as Iran and Syria. The Syrian and Iranian states also aim to manipulate the process of religious objectification linked to mass pilgrimage in order to make it a channel for the diffusion of official constructions of orthodoxy. In this sense, the process of religious objectification unleashed by mass pilgrimage is invested by secular and religious states in order to create both the governance of religion and the mechanisms of governance through religion.

This analysis of the pilgrimage shrines in Syria reveals the complex web of discursive, iconic, and experiential elements that constitute transnational forms of religious solidarity and

identities in Shi'i Islam in the Middle East. The experiential character of pilgrimage entices the demand for objects and images that can embody the memory of the emotions and sensations produced by the physical and symbolic activities connected to pilgrimage, such as traveling, performing rituals, and being in contact with sacred objects and beings. The production of such objects and images leads to the commoditization of the religious tradition, enhancing the circulation and diffusion of the symbols, practices, and even doctrines thus objectified. Particular religious symbols and images may be commodified because of their appeal to particular forms of identity, devotion, and taste rather than their conformity to an abstract and coherent organizing principle. For example, the mass production and consumption of a Shi'i iconography of Ali and Husayn and its adoption among Sunni Sufis in Syria can only be explained by the evocative capacity of these images in conveying the emotional and existential quality of the devotion to the family of the Prophet present in both Shi'i and Sufi piety.[5]

The ethnographic data analyzed in this article were collected during several visits to Shi'i pilgrimage sites in Syria, such as the shrines of Sayda Zaynab and Sayda Ruqaya, the shrine of Husayn's head in the Umayad Mosque in Damascus, the Mashhad al-Husayn in Aleppo, and the mausoleums of 'Ammar bin Yasir, Uways al-Qarani, and Ubay bin Ka'b in Raqqa. Most of these visits took place during my fieldwork in Syria among the Sufi communities in Damascus and Aleppo from 1999 to 2001. Many of these visits were made as part of my ethnography of Sufi—Qadiri, Rifa'i, and Shadhili—pilgrimages and visitations (*ziyarat*) to these shrines. In May 2002 and June 2006, I gathered more ethnographic data about the religious activities at the shrine of Sayda Zaynab.

Whenever I went to these pilgrimage sites in Syria, I took part in the rituals and religious activities in the shrines. I also visited and spent

4. Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 38.

5. For the devotional attachment of Sufis to the family of the Prophet in contemporary Egypt, see Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, "Devotion to the Prophet and His Family in Egyptian Sufism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24 (1992): 615–37. For contemporary Syria, see Paulo G. Pinto, "Mystical Bodies: Ritual, Experience, and the Embodiment of Sufism in Syria" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2002).

time observing the activities that took place in the market institutions, such as the shops, restaurants, bookstores, hotels, and street stalls that are linked to these holy sites. I also engaged in open interviews and informal conversations with religious leaders, pilgrims, regular visitors, local devotees, merchants, travel agents, and other social actors linked to the pilgrimage sites. My universe of informants was almost entirely constituted by Arabic-speaking pilgrims, visitors, merchants, or religious authorities, both Sunni and Shi'i. As most of the data analyzed here were collected in the context of my fieldwork among the Sufi communities in Syria, the issues raised in this article should be seen as exploratory ethnographic and theoretical guidelines rather than taken together as a finished analysis.

Devotion to the Prophet and His Family in Shi'i and Sunni Islam

The two main religious traditions in Islam, Sunnism and Shiism, have a long tradition of debate about the spiritual nature of the Prophet and his family (*ahl al-bayt*). The various doctrinal views and ritual practices organized around this issue create both boundaries and points of contact between Shi'i and Sunni Islam. The dominant opinion among Shi'i Muslims considers Prophet Muhammad to be more than a simple man, as his prophecy gave him a holy character that was inherited by his descendants. Shi'i theology considers Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, to be the holder and transmitter of revealed esoteric knowledge. The Shi'i tradition also claims that Ali's role as the source of esoteric knowledge and his family ties to the Prophet made him the only legitimate successor of Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim community.[6]

Sunni Muslims also have a special devotion to the Prophet, who they consider to be "the perfect man" (*al-insan al-kamil*). The members of the *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet) are also objects of veneration, being considered as examples of moral values and virtues. Furthermore, the mystical traditions within the Sunni community, which are collectively known as Sufism, do have many points in common with Shiism in their devotion to the Prophet and the *ahl al-bayt*. The Sufis consider Muhammad to be the holder of the divine "light" (*nur*), which was passed to his descendants. The Sufis also consider Ali to be the transmitter of the esoteric truths that constitute the Sufi path (*tariqa*).[7]

The episode that symbolically marked the sectarian split between Shi'is and Sunnis was the killing of Husayn, son of Ali and grandson of Muhammad, and his companions at the battle of Karbala in present-day Iraq.[8] The origins of this event go back to the troubled caliphate of Ali, which ended in AD 661 with his murder by one of his followers, who felt betrayed by the fact that Ali accepted external mediation to his dispute with Mu'awiya, the rebellious governor of Syria. Mu'awiya took power, becoming the first caliph of the Umayad dynasty. After the death of the caliph, Husayn claimed power against Mu'awiya's son, Yazid. Then Husayn marched to Kufa, in Iraq, with his followers and family in order to lead the rebellious troops against Yazid.

However, at the plains of Karbala, Husayn and his followers were surrounded by Yazid's forces, which prevented them from reaching the waters of the Euphrates river. After ten days of siege a battle took place, and Husayn and his companions were massacred by the forces of Yazid. Husayn was decapitated, and his head was taken to Damascus to be shown to Yazid. The women of Husayn's family, such as his sister Zaynab and his daughter Ruqaya, were also taken as captives to Damascus, where they died.

6. Yann Richard, *Shi'ite Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 15–22.

7. Hoffman-Ladd, "Devotion to the Prophet," 618–29; Pinto, "Mystical Bodies," 101–9.

8. The battle of Karbala, which happened in AD 680, is a symbolic marker rather than a historical date of the religious divide between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. The Shi'is fully emerge as a sectarian community within Islam only in the ninth century and are divided into two branches: the "Seveners," who accept the line of succession of descendants of the Prophet until the sixth imam and are separated into several esoteric sects, such as the Isma'ilis, the Druzes, and the 'Alawis; and the "Twelvers," who accept the line of succession until the twelveth imam and have a main branch, known as Ja'fari, which developed a written tradition of theology and jurisprudence. The Ja'faris constitute the majority of the Shi'is in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Indian subcontinent. See Marshall Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75 (1955): 1–13; Richard, *Shi'ite Islam*, 1–14; Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 27–32.

This drama happened in AD 680 during the first ten days of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar. It was incorporated as part of the Shi'i religious calendar with the name of 'Ashura. The major rituals of Shiism, such as the ritual lamentations (*rauza*), flagellation (*latam/tatbir*), and passion plays (*ta'ziyat*), were developed in order to keep alive the memory of this episode, which acquired paradigmatic dimensions.[9] The drama of Karbala and its main characters, such as Husayn and Zaynab, condensate and fuse hope and despair, grief and resilience, courage and sorrow, struggle and defeat, functioning as dominant symbols in Shi'i Islam.[10] The importance of the paradigm of Karbala can be seen in the central role that the pilgrimage to the tombs of its martyrs had for the historical development and organization of Shiism. Also, most Shi'i institutions of religious education were concentrated in cities with pilgrimage shrines, such as Najaf, Karbala, and Qom.[11]

Shrines, Religious Imagination, and State Policies: The Organization of Shi'i Pilgrimage in Syria

The Shi'i shrines in Syria became the main destination for Shi'i pilgrims outside Iran in the 1980s, as the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala became out of limits as a result of the continuing conflicts in Iraq, such as the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988, the first Gulf war in 1991, the international sanctions against Iraq between 1992 and 2003, and the Anglo-American war and occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the upsurge of violence and conflicts that followed

the invasion and continue to plague Iraq. These shrines became the target of a joint political, economic, and symbolic investment of the Syrian and Iranian regimes, which, despite having very different approaches to religious identities and practices, had an interest in promoting pilgrimage as a religious dimension of their strategic alliance and their shared hostility toward the Baathist regime in Iraq.[12] The Iranian government is a Shi'i religious government with pan-Islamic ambitions, while the government of the Baath party in Syria created a secular regime with socialist overtones, which has its key positions controlled by members of the 'Alawi sect, who have a strong interest in showing their belonging to Ja'fari Shiism.[13]

The importance of pilgrimage as a religious expression of political alliances in the Middle East was expressed in the aftermath of the deposition of the Baathist regime in Iraq by the Anglo-American invasion, when millions of Iranian and Iraqi pilgrims flooded the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala during the celebrations of 'Ashura, raising the issue of a political and religious alliance between Iran and the Shi'i political forces in Iraq. The role of pilgrimage as an international political and religious arena was also expressed in the announcement by the Syrian government in 2004 of a plan called Mawqib al-Sabaiya, which aims to build new Shi'i shrines in all the places in the Syrian territory where Husayn's head was put down or lost some blood on its way from Karbala to Damascus.[14] This string of shrines is intended to demarcate

9. Richard, *Shi'ite Islam*, 22–48. For the drama of Karbala as a religious and cultural paradigm, see Kamran S. Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 3–14; Fischer, *Iran*, 3–11.

10. Victor Turner highlighted three characteristics of dominant symbols: "(1) condensation; (2) unification of disparate meanings in a single symbolic formation; (3) polarization of meaning." See Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 30.

11. Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (London: Oneworld, 2000), 69–109; Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 238–68.

12. The Baathist regimes of Iraq and Syria were opponents in their dispute over regional power. This political conflict prompted the Syrian regime to side with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, as well as with the American-led coalition against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf war in 1991.

13. The 'Alawis are 15 percent of the Syrian population. They constitute a Shi'i sect that was organized around an esoteric interpretation of the Islamic doctrines and rituals. Since the early twentieth century, members of the 'Alawi religious elite have sought the doctrinal incorporation of their community into mainstream Ja'fari Shiism. This process of doctrinal rapprochement (*taqrib*) between the 'Alawi community and Ja'fari Shiism was fully achieved, at least on the level of public religious discourse, by the end of the twentieth century. Many Sunni Muslims consider the 'Alawis to be heretics, a theme that was politicized by the religious opposition to the Baathist regime in Syria. The inner core of the regime, including the current president of Syria, Bashar al-Asad, is composed of members of the 'Alawi sect. See Alain Chouet, "L'espace tribal des alaouites à l'épreuve du pouvoir: La désintegration par le politique" ("The 'Alawi Tribes Facing Power: Disintegration through Politics"), *Monde Arabe: Maghreb-Machrek* 147 (1995): 93–119; and Sabrina Mervin, "Quelques jalons

pour une histoire du rapprochement (*taqrib*) des alaouites vers le chiisme" ("Some Guidelines for the History of the Approach (*taqrib*) between the 'Alawis and Shiism"), in *Islamstudien ohne Ende, Festschrift fur Werner Ende* (*Islamic Studies without End: Essays in Honor of Werner Ende*), ed. Rainer Brunner, Monika Gronke, Jens Laut and Ulrich Rebstock (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002).

14. Myriam Ababsa, "Significations territoriales et appropriations conflictuelles des mausolées chiites de Raqqa (Syrie)" ("Spatial Meanings and Conflictuous Appropriations of the Shi'i Mausoleums in Raqqa [Syria]"), in *Les pèlerinages au Maghreb et au moyen orient: Espaces publics, espaces du public* (*Pilgrimages in the Maghreb and the Middle East: Public Spaces, Spaces of the Public*), ed. Sylvia Chiffoleau and Anna Madoeuf (Beirut: IFPO, 2005), 116.

a new pilgrimage route linking Iran to Syria through the holy cities in Iraq, giving a religious imprint to potential political alliances. However, the continuing violence in Iraq and the political hostility of the United States against Iran and Syria do not create an environment conducive to the free mobility of large masses of pilgrims between these countries through Iraq.

Despite the importance of Syria as the burial ground for a large number of members of the *ahl al-bayt*, such as the shrine of Husayn's head in the Umayad Mosque, the mausoleums of Sayda Zaynab and Sayda Ruqaya, and the tombs of Muhammad's wives and daughters in the cemetery of Bab al-Saghir in Damascus, only recently have these holy sites become fully integrated in a transnational circuit of Shi'i pilgrimage. These burial sites have always attracted popular piety because of the strong devotion to the family of the Prophet or their companions in both Sunni and Shi'i piety. Since the Mameluk period Shi'i communities settled in Damascus and Aleppo, near the shrines dedicated to the *ahl al-bayt* or the martyrs of Karbala. Mameluk and Ottoman rulers tolerated their presence under the condition that they refrained from expressing their devotion to the *ahl al-bayt* through emotional rituals, which were viewed as blamable innovations by the Sunni religious authorities.[15]

Therefore, most Shi'i holy places in Syria were, until very recently, places with no clear sectarian identity, where Shi'i piety was integrated with or even diluted in Sufi devotional practices. Because of its religious importance, the mausoleum of Sayda Zaynab, Husayn's sister, was rebuilt by the efforts of the Shi'i community in Syria in the 1950s. It is located in a village at the outskirts of Damascus, where today one finds a Palestinian refugee camp and a strong presence of Shi'i refugees from Iraq. The mosque gained silver grilles around the tomb and tile mosaics decorating the minarets, in a process of affirmation of the Shi'i identity of the shrine. This process of giving a clear Shi'i identity to holy places connected to the drama of Karbala is linked to efforts made since the nineteenth century in creating and affirming a public Shi'i identity in Syria.[16] The dynamics of the objectification of Shi'i identities and religious traditions in Syria were changed by the intervention of the Syrian and Iranian states, which amplified the scope and tried to give a political and ideological character to this process.

During the 1980s, the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran gave a political dimension to the creation and/or affirmation of the Shi'i identity of holy places in Syria. Therefore, the Syrian government in partnership with the Islamic Republic of Iran started to appropriate and transform these sites, making them pilgrimage shrines with a clear Shi'i character.[17] The tomb of Sayda Zaynab was the first religious site associated with the Shi'i sacred history in Syria to be appropriated by the state. In 1979, the shrine of Sayda Zaynab and an area of three hundred thousand square meters surrounding it were expropriated by the Syrian state.

The Iranian government sponsored the building of the new mosque-mausoleum complex, which was placed under the administration of a Syrian-Iranian society.[18] The mosque-mausoleum of Sayda Zaynab became part of a vast religious complex built in Persian neo-Safavid architecture.[19] The mosque received a

15. Irene Calzoni, "Shiite Mausoleums in Syria with Particular Reference to Sayyida Zaynab's Mausoleum," in *La Shi'a nell'impero ottomano* (*The Shi'is in the Ottoman Empire*), ed. Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti (Rome: Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1993), 199–201; Eric Geoffroy, *Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: Orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels* (*Sufism in Egypt and Syria under the Late Mameluks and the Early Ottomans: Spiritual Trends and Cultural Dynamics*) (Damascus: IFEAD, 1995), 63–66.

16. Sabrina Mervin, "Sayyida Zaynab: Bainlieu de Damas ou nouvelle ville sainte chiite?" ("Sayyida Zaynab: Suburb of Damascus or New Shi'i Holy City?"), *Cahiers d´etudes sur la Mediterranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien* 22 (1996): 149–62.

17. Myriam Ababsa, "Les mausolées invisibles: Raqqa ville de pèlerinage chiite ou pôle étatique en Jazira syrienne?" ("The Invisible Mausoleums: Raqqa, Shi'i Pilgrimage City or State Center in the Syrian Jazira?"), *Les Annales de Géographie* 622 (2001), 647–63.

18. Ibid., 650. The creation of a foundation for the administration of the mosque-mausoleum of Sayda Zaynab is an innovation in the framework of the religious policies of the Syrian state, as the mosques in Syria are administered by the Ministry of *Awqaf* (pious endowments; sing. *waqf*). See Annabelle Böttcher, "Le ministère des *waqfs*" ("The Ministry of *Waqfs*"), *Monde Arabe: Maghrek-Machrek* 158 (1997): 18–30. This autonomous institution resembles the Astan-e Qods, the religious foundation that administers the property and income of the shrine of Imam

Reza in Mashhad in Iran. See Fariba Adelkhakh, *Being Modern in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 133–34.

19. See Sharika al-Sayda Zaynab lil-Siyaha wa al-Ziyara (The Sayda Zaynab Company for Tourism and Pilgrimage), *Mashru' al-Majma' al-Funduqi* (*Project for the Hotel Complex*) (Damascus: n.p., 1985).

Figure 1. Shrine of Sayda Zaynab at the outskirts of Damascus

golden dome, blue and green tile mosaics on the facade, and mirror mosaics covering the inner ceilings. The pointed arches that framed the courtyard and the flower-buttoned dome made the shrine an obvious sign of the artistic, cultural, and religious presence of Iran.

The same effort in linking Iranian cultural forms with the religious imaginary of transnational Shiism could be seen in the shrine of Sayda Ruqaya, Husayn's daughter, located in the old city of Damascus. This shrine was enlarged and fully rebuilt in Persian style by the Iranian government in 1991. The architectural reform of these shrines was meant to create an aesthetic and symbolic continuity between the Shi'i holy places of Iran and Syria, aesthetically demarcating the sacred geography of transnational Shiism. This path was transformed into a route of

mass pilgrimage through official support from both countries, which included state-sponsored trips for some classes of pilgrims, such as the mothers and widows of those who were "martyred" in the Iran-Iraq war; easier visa requirements for pilgrims; and the official production of images and discourses that incited and legitimized the pilgrims' quest for personal contact with the sacred power embodied in the martyrs of Karbala.[20]

Besides the Persian architectural elements in the shrines of Sayda Zaynab and Sayda Ruqaya, which had the clear aim of creating an identification between Shi'i Islam and Iranian history and culture, there were other elements that showed the desire of fusing Shiism with a pan-Islamic consciousness. One such element located in a courtyard of the religious complex

20. The number of Iranian pilgrims in Syria was estimated at almost 200,000 for 1999 and projected at 216,000 for 2005. See Ababsa, "Significations territoriales," 113. The rise of the mosque-mausoleum of Sayda Zaynab as a center for pilgrimage and religious learning from 1973 to 2003 paralleled the decline of Najaf and Karbala in both domains; see Nakash, *Shi'is*

of Iraq, 247–68; Mervin, "Sayyida Zaynab," 154. After the collapse of the Baathist regime in Iraq, Najaf and Karbala reappeared as major centers for Shi'i pilgrimage and learning, attracting millions of pilgrims and visitors. However, because of the persistence of violence and military conflicts in Iraq, their position as transnational pilgrimage centers is not stable yet.

of Sayda Zaynab was a fountain for ritual ablu-tions in the shape of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. This fountain was itself a copy of an almost identical "Dome of the Rock" fountain in a courtyard at the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Iran. The presence of the Dome of the Rock within these shrine complexes aims to create both a religious link with the third most sacred shrine in Islam and a symbolic connec-tion between an Iranian-styled Shiism and the political struggle of the Palestinians against the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem. This symbolic presence connects visually the under-standing of Islam as both a religious practice and a form of political consciousness, which is fostered by the official ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[21] It also brings the Palestin-ian cause, which is a key theme in the official rhetoric of the Syrian regime, to the center of the Islamic political discourse.

The political aspects of the Dome of the Rock as a symbol of the struggle against impe-rialism and Israeli military occupation of what is defined as Arab/Muslim lands were further emphasized by its visual association with recent historical and political events. For example, in May 2002 the courtyard where the Dome of the Rock fountain in the shrine of Sayda Zaynab is located became the stage of an exhibition called "Glory and Martyrdom" (*al-majd wa al-shahada*), about the resistance led by the Hezbol-lah against the Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon.[22] During the exhibition, the fountain was surrounded by barbed wire, establishing a symbolic link between the Israeli occupations of East Jerusalem and south Lebanon. A flag of the Hezbollah was placed on top of the golden dome of the fountain, equating Islam with the resis-tance against Israeli and American imperialism, which was expressed in painted slogans such as "America, America, you are the great Satan" (*Amerika, Amerika, anti al-shaytan al-akbar*) and in posters stating, "Each American dollar that you use today is a bullet in the heart of an Arab
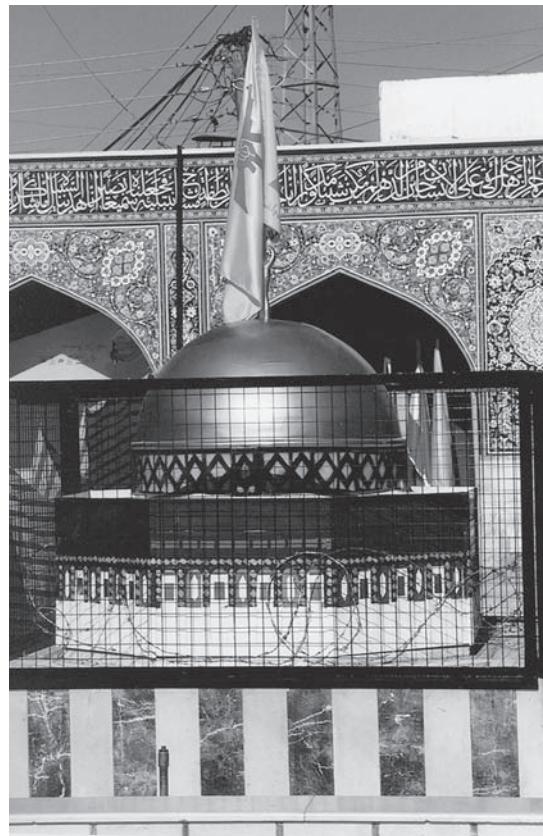

Figure 2. Dome of the Rock fountain surrounded by barbed wire with a Hezbollah flag on its top during the exhibition "Glory and Martyrdom," 2002

citizen tomorrow" (*Kul dullar ameriki tat'amal bihi al-yum hwa rasasa fi qalb mwatan 'arabi ghadan*). The stress on the ideological pole of the various meanings associated with the Dome of the Rock as a symbol gave a less sectarian and more mili-tant character to the religious *communitas* that was being imagined through it. The constitution of this symbolic and political framework creates channels of identification between the refu-gee population settled in the village of Sayda Zaynab, which is composed of Shi'i Iraqis and mainly Sunni Palestinians, and the discourse of political Shiism.[23]

The presence in a Shi'i shrine of a symbol with clear Sunni connections, such as Dome of the Rock, also shows a conscious effort in

21. Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 13–59.

22. Events linking political Shiism and the Palestin-ian resistance to Israeli occupation also took place in the Shii mausoleums in Raqqa. See Ababsa, "Signifi-cations territoriales," 125–26.

23. Political uses of religious symbols and spaces also happen in Nabatiyya during the celebration of 'Ashura. See Augustus Richard Norton, "Ritual, Blood, and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon," *Drama Review* 49 (2005): 140–55.

building a pan-Islamic imaginary beyond sectarian differences. However, the expression of the holiness of this pilgrimage site through the visual language of Persian architecture also aims to create an aesthetic continuity among the Shi'i shrines through their architectural homogenization under the auspices of the Iranian state. The ambitious character of this policy can be seen in the large scale of the investments, which reached even places such as Raqqa, where the vast mausoleums in Persian style stand as incongruous monuments for the Syrian-Iranian religious alliance in a city that never had a Shi'i community or any significant flux of pilgrims.[24] The standardization of the architectural context of the Shi'i shrines also made possible their use as readily identifiable units of a larger pilgrimage route that has its focal point in Iran.

Another important element in the production of mass pilgrimage is the establishment of the "correct" identification of each holy site beyond all ambiguity or contradiction. The certainty of meeting a source of sacred power and blessings that is stronger and purer than others that might be more readily available is a major drive behind the pilgrim's quest. Indeed, an element constant to the process of transformation of holy sites into shrines for mass pilgrimage in Syria was the establishment of stable and clear identities for the holy figures buried there. In some cases, when there was an overlapping of holy figures or a multiplicity of burial sites of the same figure, it was necessary to overcome these logical inconsistencies by identifying the "real" burial site. Many texts that are available to the pilgrims in the form of books, pamphlets, or even Web pages try to determine the "true" identity of the holy figures and their burial sites in Syria.[25] These processes of objectifying the religious identity of the holy sites linked to the pilgrimage route are also heavily invested in by the Syrian and Iranian states, which try to use them

as tools to diffuse state-sponsored constructions of religious orthodoxy.

The process of stabilizing the devotional focus of pilgrimage was achieved in the case of the Syrian shrines by making public the identity of the holy figure and/or consecrating the chosen location of his or her burial site through the construction of a monumental shrine. When such an architectural intervention was not possible, written signs were placed at the site in order to "inform" the pilgrims that they had reached their destiny. For example, in the shrine of the head of Husayn in the Umayad Mosque in Damascus is a plaque, written both in Arabic and Persian, that reads,

> Hada maqam ras al-Husayn bin 'Ali bin Abi Talib, 'aleihum al-salam, aldhi hamala 'ala al-rumh min Karbala' mururan bil-Kufa wa al-Sham ma' sabaiyan ahl al-bayt.

> [This is the burial place of the head of Husayn son of Ali son of Abi Talib, peace be upon them, which was transported on a spear from Karbala through Kufa and Damascus together with the imprisoned relatives of the Prophet, peace be upon them.]

The use of words to decorate or mark tombs and holy places is nothing new in Islamic religious architecture. On the one hand, traditional Islamic inscriptions were written in formulaic or poetic styles that presupposed readers' previous knowledge of a written and/or oral tradition. On the other hand, the direct and descriptive prose of the plaque in Husayn's head shrine intends to create these common understandings in pilgrims who might share very little religious or cultural background, as the bilingual text suggests, allowing their incorporation in a religious *communitas*. It is interesting to note that until 2002 the shrine dedicated to the head of Yahiya (Saint John the Baptist in the Christian tradition) in the main hall of the Umayad Mosque had no text explaining whose tomb it

24. Ababsa, "Les mausolées invisibles."

25. See the Web sites ziaraat.com/Damascus/Bibi-Sakina and ziaraat.com/Damascus/Bab-e-Sagheer/Pictures for discussions about the identity and the "true" burial place of Sayda Ruqaya. For a similar discussion about Sayda Zaynab, see ziaraat.com/Damascus/Zindan-e-Shaam/About and ziaraat.com/Damascus/BibiZainab. These pages are on the Web

site ziaraat.com (accessed 21 January 2007), which is oriented toward the Shi'is in South Asia and in the South Asian diaspora. The texts about the pilgrimage shrines and the identity of the holy figures associated with them are not signed. They were probably written by Syed Rizwan R. Rizvi, the Webmaster and owner of the site.

was and how it happened to be in such a location, for it was embedded in the devotional practices of local religious communities.[26]

The establishment of stable identities and the production of public discourses about the holy places are also important elements in the constitution of the universe of exchanges and the value of the commodities marketed in the pilgrimage shrines.[27] The investment of the sacred places into shrines with unambiguous religious identities also allows for the organization of transnational mass pilgrimage, which entices the development of all kinds of market activities around the shrines. Indeed, in areas near the pilgrimage shrines in Syria, businesses such as hotels, restaurants, shops, travel agencies, and so on had developed. In the case of Sayda Zaynab, this urban transformation was dramatic, for what was a small village at the outskirts of Damascus became a commercial hub with a lively market of goods from Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and, of course, China, Taiwan, and Korea. The area near the shrine has become a major outpost of Iranian goods, where the merchants of Damascus go to buy carpets, *killims*, and pistachios, which are carried and traded by the pilgrims themselves.

The market of religious commodities is in the core of the commercial activity organized in Sayda Zaynab and other pilgrimage sites in Syria. The objects consumed by the pilgrims as religious memorabilia signify and mediate the relation that they establish with the sacred figures and places through pilgrimage.[28] The importance of these elements in the process of structuring Shi'i identities was not overlooked by the state or the religious establishment in Syria or Iran, which try to control the process of religious objectification unleashed by the commoditization of elements of the religious tradition.

The Production of Religious Commodities and the Objectification of Shiism

When approaching the shrine of Sayda Zaynab, one cannot miss the innumerable shops and street stalls packed with all sorts of religiously inspired merchandise, such as prayer beads, mud tablets made with the holy soil of Karbala, miniatures of the Koran, black banners with devotional inscriptions, golden miniatures of the doors of the Ka'ba, keychains in the shape of the sword of Ali, and mosque-shaped alarm clocks. An important part of this market is devoted to religious texts, such as various editions of the Koran, collections of hadith, or religious treatises, as would be expected in a pilgrimage center with institutions for religious learning.

Besides the religious texts, an enormous variety of objects base their market value on their iconic character, such as posters depicting Husayn. The market value of these commodities is linked in their capacity of evoking particular religious experiences through the corporeal and emotional sensations that they induce in the consumers.[29] The Shi'i veneration of the *ahl al-bayt* provides symbols and narratives that can be elaborated as "scenes," "gestures," or, building on a powerful religious concept, visual evocations of their "presence" (*hadra*) in iconic objects, in order to give a Shi'i framework to particular forms of experience.

The most frequently depicted figure in this vast and varied iconographic repertoire is Husayn, which shows the centrality of the paradigm of Karbala in the experience of the pilgrims. Each moment of the battle of Karbala is used as a scenic tool to convey a different aspect of Husayn's persona, as well as distinct values and doctrinal elements of Shiism. A sample of the multiple forms through which this Shi'i commercial iconography can convey values and

26. When I visited the shrine of Yahiya's head in June 2006, I noticed a plaque that stated, "This is the shrine of the head of God's prophet Yahiya, peace be upon him" (*Hada maqam ras nabi Allah Yahiya alaihi al-salam*), which shows how the whole mosque was gradually reshaped as a pilgrimage sanctuary. This plaque, as well as others placed throughout the mosque, was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the number of Shi'i pilgrims performing their devotional rituals in the Umayad Mosque's main hall.

27. The importance of the circulation of knowledge or, in other terms, the political economy of meaning in the production of commodity value in the market is analyzed in Clifford Geertz, "Suq: The Bazaar Economy in Sefrou," in *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society*, ed. Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz, and Lawrence Rosen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 197–212; and Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63.

28. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood show how objects mediate the relations between the individuals and the world and tell something about the social bonds that they materialize. See their *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

29. Christopher Pinney defined this embodied form of evaluation of iconic religious commodities as "corpothetics." See his "Introduction: Public, Popular, and Other Cultures," in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics, and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, ed. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21.

Figure 3. Shop at Sayda Zaynab selling posters of Husayn, Fatimah (as a child), Bashar al-Asad, Sheikh Nasrallah, and Sheikh Fadlallah, as well as various religious memorabilia

experiences can be obtained from an analysis of the religious posters depicting the battle of Karbala or the members of the *ahl al-bayt.* The mass production of these posters gives them a practical and decorative character beyond their immediate religious meaning, allowing their use as pious adornments or devotional objects in both public and private spaces. The process of mass production is a central element in the "cultural biography" of the Shi'i religious imagery, as it objectifies and homogenizes it as a commodity that can be evaluated and exchanged in the transactions of the market.[30]

The commoditization of the symbolic figures of the drama of Karbala "unpacks" their multiple meanings to create a varied repertoire of religious images and objects for the various

consuming publics that compose the religious market. The objectification of the various meanings and values condensed in the dominant symbols of the Shi'i tradition and their codification in images or objects make these meanings and values more explicit and conscious to the faithful. A Shi'i shopkeeper who sold religious souvenirs in Sayda Zaynab told me about the images that he was selling. According to him, a poster with the image of Husayn's bloody decapitated body laying on the plains of Karbala showed the brutality of the "infidels" (*kufar*), while the desolate setting in the sunset evoked the loneliness of the faithful and a deep sense of sorrow about the rule of injustice on earth. Another poster showed Husayn riding his horse while brandishing his double-edged sword, what the storekeeper described as a depiction of his heroic and brave character.

While the objectification of the religious tradition through commoditization makes it more conscious and clearly bounded, it does not follow a linear path. It is the result rather of a gradual and uneven process in which several forces interfere, such as the ideological interests of the state, the imperative of religious orthodoxy, and the necessity of appealing to the consuming public. This is clear in the various posters depicting the same theme, whose images vary depending on the emotional experience evoked and the religious narrative that the artist used as a source of inspiration. For example, the sorrow for the death of the martyrs of Karbala is dramatized in posters that depict Husayn holding in his arms his dead son transpierced by an arrow. When the poster is intended to portray martyrdom as the tragic end of courage and struggle against injustice, Husayn is holding a young man in his arms in a gesture reminiscent of a Christian pietà.[31] However, when the emphasis is on the innocence and the victimization of the martyrs, Husayn is holding in his arms a dead baby with a halo of light around his head.[32]

One should refrain from seeing in the process of commoditization of the religious tradition through mass pilgrimage the effects of an abstract "market rationality" free from other

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30. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 64–91.

31. It is interesting to note how the dramatic character of Christian iconography and its well-succeeded process of commoditization became a model for the creation of this Shi'i iconography, with its strong emotional and commercial appeal.

32. This contrast was called to my attention in a conversation with a disciple of a Shadhili sheikh from Damascus while he was buying religious posters in a shop near the mausoleum of Sayda Zaynab.

Figure 4. A poster stall at
Sayda Zaynab's shrine

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political and cultural forces. These posters are
produced in state graphics in Iran, and their
content reflects particular aspects of the official
religious ideology of the Islamic Republic. For
example, the posters depicting Ali holding and
protecting the weak and the poor, usually repre-
sented as street children, evoke the concern with
the "oppressed" in the Koran, and at the same
time they echo this theme's political reinterpre-
tation by Ali Shariati and Khomeini as portray-
ing those who are economically excluded and
socially weak in modern society.[33]

However, the efforts of the Iranian state
in controlling the production of religious com-
modities and using it as a vehicle for its official
ideology are mitigated and sometimes contra-
dicted by the necessity of appealing to consum-
ers' tastes and interests in a heterogeneous
market. Furthermore, the commoditization of
the religious tradition disrupts the ritualized

aura of sacrality that traditionally defines the
religious objects and incorporates the religious
symbols and messages that they convey as part
of ordinary life.[34]

Indeed, in any shop or street stall near the
shrine of Sayda Zaynab one can find a great va-
riety of commodities that fuse religious imagery
with ordinary objects of practical or decorative
use, such as keychains in the shape of Ali's sword
or with Husayn's portrait; bumper stickers with
Koranic verses; stickers with the face of Ali, Hu-
sayn, or Musa al-Sadr, the founder of the Amal
movement in Lebanon; mosque-shaped alarm
clocks that play the *adhan* (call for prayer); cas-
settes with songs, litanies, or sermons; prayer
beads made with mud from Karbala; miniatures
of the Koran to hang on the car mirror; and
green and black velvet banners with images of
the mosques of Najaf or Karbala accompanied
with texts praising Ali and Husayn. All these

33. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, 26–28; Aghaie, *Mar-
tyrs of Karbala*, 101–5; Fischer, *Iran*, 164–70.

34. Adelkhakh, *Being Modern in Iran*, 106–7; Greg-
ory Starrett, "The Political Economy of Religious
Commodities in Cairo," *American Anthropologist* 97
(1995): 51–68.

objects bring religious symbols into the ordinary activities of everyday life, serving not only as identity markers or amulets but also as tools for the establishment of a personal and intimate relation with the sacred sphere. This process of individual contextualization shows how the meaning of religious commodities is embedded in the practices and discourses that structure the identities of their consumers.

The Consumption of Religious Commodities and the Making of Transnational Shiism

The insertion of the shrines in Syria in the route of Shi'i mass pilgrimage has affected the local religious landscape at various levels. The greater impact has been on the Syrian Shi'i communities, which have been incorporated in the religious framework of transnational Shiism through the constant flux of Shi'i pilgrims from Iran, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Lebanon. The presence of Shi'i clergymen accompanying these pilgrims connects the Shi'i communities in Syria with the major doctrinal and ritual traditions of Shiism. Furthermore, the books sold at the shrines and the preaching activities of Iranian, Iraqi, or Lebanese religious authorities during the main religious celebrations are also mechanisms of doctrinal codification and the discipline of religious identities.[35] For example, during the celebrations of 'Ashura in 2000 at the Mashhad al-Husayn in Aleppo, Syrian Shi'is from different villages near Aleppo would gather to listen to a sermon delivered in Arabic by an Iranian preacher on social justice as the spirit of Husayn's struggle. Framing the pulpit was a black banner on which was written the proverb used by Khomeini to mobilize his followers for political action within a religious framework: "Every day is 'Ashura and every land is Karbala" (*Kul yum 'Ashura wa kul ard Karbala*). This phrase evoked the political meanings attached to the ritual of 'Ashura during the Islamic revolution.[36]

Mass pilgrimage also brought a ritual transformation of the Shi'i communities in Syria. The pilgrimage shrines constitute new Shi'i public spaces where the mourning of the tragedy of Karbala with passion plays (*ta'ziyat*) and ritual self-flagellation (*latam/tatbir*) can be openly performed. The rituals that mark the death of Husayn during 'Ashura are very dramatic, including processions of breast-beating devotees carrying black banners and huge images of Husayn or replicas of his tomb, as well as self-flagellation with chains and sometimes knives, while the sounds of drums and cymbals mix with the incessant weeping and crying of the mourning audience. The performance of these emotional rituals by Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese pilgrims during 'Ashura led to their gradual incorporation into the universe of the religious practices of Syrian Shi'is.[37]

This process of "ritual communication," as Peter Van der Veer defined the symbolic and practical exchanges structured by ritual performances, had its scope and efficacy enhanced by the fact that these rituals were commodified and consumed by the mass media as images that "represent" Shiism.[38] During 'Ashura in Sayda Zaynab it is common to see Iranian, Syrian, and Lebanese television crews as well as professional and amateur photographers pressing against the crowd of pilgrims in order to find the best angle or the most dramatic image of the rituals. These images circulate as photos, postcards, or television documentaries, creating a well-defined international imaginary about Shiism as a ritualistic and emotionally intense form of Islam. The ritual performances of the 'Ashura are also consumed as forms of cultural entertainment by non-Shi'i or even non-Muslim (Christian) Syrians, creating an arena of cultural and aesthetic articulation between transnational Shiism and the larger Syrian society.

The commoditization of the pilgrimage itself creates the need to consume it as a succession of images—photos or films—that convey the individual or collective experience of "being there" in the holy place. The pictorial mementos construct in visual terms the idea of pilgrimage as a succession of unique and personal experi-

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35. The concepts of discipline and disciplinary practices were taken from Talal Asad, who defines them as the mechanisms through which "religious discourses regulate, inform, and construct religious selves" in his *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 125.

36. Aghaie, *Martyrs of Karbala*, 131–53.

37. See Mervin, "Sayyida Zaynab."

38. Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 80–81.
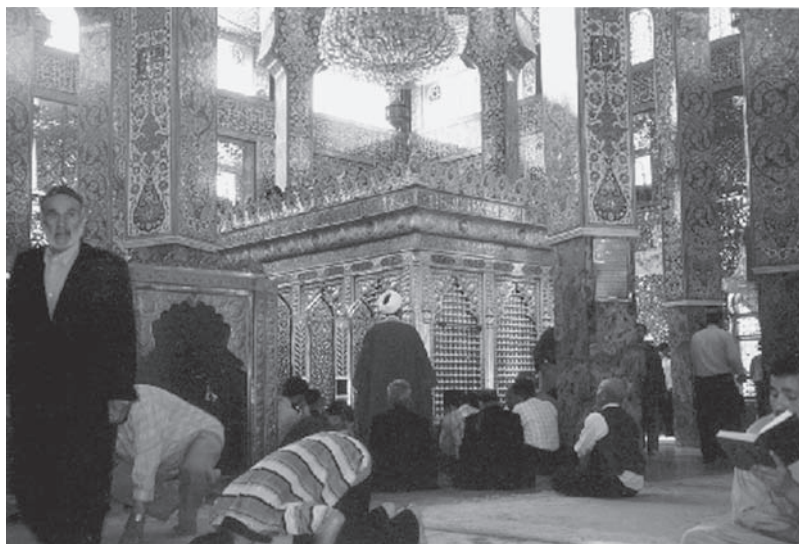
Figure 5. Pilgrims inside the shrine of Sayda Zaynab hearing a recitation of the drama of Karbala by a Shi'i mullah

ences that work as signs of distinction in relation to those who did not or could not share them, in a way similar to the role of travel albums in individualizing travel in the context of mass tourism. The necessity of the pilgrims to record all their "meaningful" moments throughout the journey often clashes with the rules of privacy or the ritual interdictions that structure many forms of social interactions in religious contexts. Therefore, the visual consumption of the personal aspects of pilgrimage creates a strong drive for the individualization and fragmentation of the contexts of interpretation and negotiation of moral rules and religious values.

For example, inside the mosque of Sayda Zaynab, as women were performing the visitation of the tomb ritual, I saw a man filming them by holding his camera on top of the screen that separates men from women in the shrine. Because he was using a digital camera, he was able to see the women on his camera screen while he was filming them, in a clear breach of the religious rule of sexual segregation that aims to protect women from the male gaze. Standing near him was a young Shi'i clergyman reciting the drama of Karbala to a group of pilgrims, who did not seem to be bothered by the scene, which pointed to an implicit or pragmatic acceptance by a religious authority of the necessities of the individualized consumption of religious experiences over the moral imperatives of proper behavior in a sacred place.

The commoditization of iconic elements of the Shi'i tradition gives them a certain au-

tonomy from their original doctrinal and ritual context, as well as from the religious authority of the Shi'i clergy. Therefore, they can circulate more easily beyond the boundaries of the Shi'i religious community. This process of objectifying and universalizing religious symbols, practices, and images is a fundamental step in the integration of the pilgrimage shrines into Syrian society, for it allows a greater participation of Shi'i and non-Shi'i Syrians in the consumption and resignification of the religious commodities offered in their religious markets.

As one would expect, the Shi'i communities in Syria and Lebanon have become major consumers of the religious commodities offered in the religious market of the pilgrimage shrines. Through the consumption and use of these religious commodities the local Shi'i communities connect with the major trends of transnational Shiism. The Syrian Shi'i community has incorporated rituals and doctrines of the larger Ja'fari community through the consumption of texts, images, and performances offered in the pilgrimage shrines. This collective pattern of consumption usually goes together with the acceptance of the religious authority of the Shi'i clergy trained in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Besides the reorganization of the collective framework of symbols, rituals, and power relations of the Shi'i community, the consumption of religious commodities has created new dynamics of identity among the Syrian Shi'is. The possibility of the individual consumption of mass-produced objects with Shi'i symbolic and iconic references

and their use in practices that are not fully defined by the collective rituals of the community have allowed the emergence of less hierarchical and more individualized forms of construction and affirmation of Shi'i identities.[39]

An example of how the consumption of religious commodities allows the emergence of individualized forms of piety and religious identity can be seen in the case of the owner of a barbershop near Bab Tuma, in the old city of Damascus. When entering the shop the visitor can see several posters depicting Ali and Husayn, a large silver sticker in the shape of Ali's sword that frames the mirror in front of the clients' chairs, a calendar with scenes from the battle of Karbala, and black banners embroidered with golden letters proclaiming "ya Husayn" and "ya Ali." An embroidery depicting Ali's two-edged sword hangs on the wall. The owner of the shop is a thirty-nine-year-old Lebanese man raised and educated in Damascus in a secular Shi'i family. According to him, these religious commodities allow him to reclaim and affirm his Shi'i identity. When asked how, he answered: "I used to be quite isolated, to be a Shi'i was to cry and mourn during the 'Ashura and to follow some marja [Shi'i higher religious authority], and I did not like either thing. Now it is different, I can be Shi'i by showing in my life [pointing to the objects] the love that I have in my heart to Imam Ali and Imam Husayn." The religious images and objects displayed in this shop also serve as identity markers, delimiting a space endowed with personal symbolism where Shi'i identity can be expressed, affirmed, and lived in relation to the larger Syrian society.[40]

The centers of mass pilgrimage in Syria also allowed for the establishment of forms of ritual communication between transnational Shiism and the 'Alawi community, whose members can be seen visiting the shrine of Sayda Zaynab. While this ritual communication remains within the traditional framework of 'Alawi tomb visitation, the consumption of religious commodities allows some 'Alawis to construct personal forms of devotion to the holy figures of Shiism without fully adopting the beliefs and behaviors associated with Ja'fari Shiism. This is more evident in the case of 'Alawi women, who are traditionally excluded from acquiring religious knowledge. Some 'Alawi women find a public religious identity by turning to Ja'fari Shiism, despite the fact that they do not accept many of its behavioral and moral rules, such as veiling. For example, a twenty-seven-year-old 'Alawi engineer told me about her visits to Sayda Zaynab: "As a woman the only path open to me is to follow the [Ja'fari] Shi'i school, but . . . I just cannot wear the *hijab*. Why a piece of cloth should be more important than what I have in my heart? I in my house have pictures of Imam Ali and Imam Husayn, which I bought at Sayda Zaynab, so I can meditate on their example and connect with their light [*nur*]."

Some non-Shi'i religious groups, such as the Sufi communities, also developed significant participation in the market of religious communities that emerged around the Shi'i pilgrimage shrines in Syria. The Sufis of Damascus and Aleppo consume avidly the abundant iconography depicting Ali and Husayn, both revered as the first links in the mystical chain (*silsila*) in the transmission of the esoteric knowledge of the Sufi path. It is quite common to see Iranian-made posters with images of Ali and Husayn or Ali's sword or depictions of the drama of Karbala hanging on the wall of Sufi *zawiya*s (ritual lodges) throughout Syria. The consumption by the Sufis of the Shi'i iconography sold at the pilgrimage shrines is done within the framework of their veneration of Ali, Husayn, and other members of the *ahl al-bayt*.

The use of these images by the Sufis is linked to their perception of religious authority as deriving from the esoteric tradition that they attribute to Ali and Husayn. For example, in Aleppo many Sufi *zawiya*s linked to the Qadiriyya, Rifa'iyya, and Shadhiliyya display on their

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39. The objectification of religious symbols in mass-produced images or objects opens the way to individualized forms of sacralization and devotion. See Woodman Taylor, "Agency and Affectivity of Paintings: The Lives of *Chitrajis* in Hindu Ritual Contexts," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 1 (2005): 198–227.

40. Joann D'Alisera shows in her analysis of Sierra Leonean immigrants in the United States how the display of religious commodities produces "qualified identifying statements that aim to locate the individual in both his community and the larger society." See her "I ❤ Islam: Popular Religious Commodities, Sites of Inscription and Transnational Sierra Leonean Identity," *Journal of Material Culture* 6 (2001): 91–110.

walls images of Ali and Husayn together with the photos of their deceased sheikhs. These images visually re-create the mystical connections between the family of the Prophet and the lineage of the present sheikh of the *zawiya*. In a similar way, posters depicting the holy mosques of Najaf and Karbala adorn the walls of the tombs of Sufi sheikhs, such as in the *zawiya* al-Badinjkiyya in Aleppo. These images link the local Sufi-framed cult of saints with the larger Shi'i pilgrimage network of sacred places. Thus the consumption of the religious commodities sold at the pilgrimage shrines form channels of ritual communication between Sufism and Shiism, creating a common religious imaginary for their shared symbols and sacred narratives.

There is also a selective consumption of Shi'i texts by the Sufi community, which focuses on texts dealing with the *ahl al-bayt*. This doctrinal communication between Sufism and Shiism is much less dynamic and consistent than the ritual communication, as most Shi'i texts pose doctrinal challenges to the Sunni identity of the Syrian Sufis. The religious rationale behind the Sufi consumption of Shi'i iconography and texts was summarized by a sheikh of the Rifa'i Sufi order in Aleppo, who in response to my remarks on the presence of Iranian-made posters depicting Ali and Husayn in his *zawiya* said,

> We belong to Sunni Islam [*nahna min ahl al-sunna wa al-jama'*], but we share with the Shi'is our devotion to Ali, Husayn, and all the family of the Prophet. These pictures are only representations of the external reality [*al-haqiqa al-zahiriyya*] of Imam Ali . . . but they help us to feel his spiritual presence with us. In reality the Shi'is understood part of the esoteric truth [*al-haqiqa al-batiniyya*] of the mystical path, which is the ultimate reality of Islam and, beyond the apparent differences between our religious schools [*madhahibu-na*], we are all Muslims.

This symbolic neutrality of religious commodities was highlighted by Gregory Starrett, who remarked that "religious commodities are only religious once they ceased being commodities, once they passed out of the commodity phase to the consumption phase of their social life."[41] One can add to Starrett's statement that the scope

of the resignification of religious commodities by consumption depends on how successful the process of objectification was in erasing the imprint left by the social and cultural context that structured its production, as well as on the degree of consonance that it has with the religious and cultural background of the consumer. For example, non-Sufi Sunni Muslims who visit Sayda Zaynab tend to remain indifferent to the religious iconography sold there because their religious sensibilities do not engender the necessity or desire of consuming religious images.

The ritual and doctrinal forms of communication produced by religious consumption have created new possibilities for the local Sufi communities in Syria to negotiate their presence in the Shi'i pilgrimage shrines. For example, it is common to see in Sayda Zaynab groups of Sufis doing *dhikr* (mystical evocations) inside the courtyard of the shrine or taking part in the celebration of religious rituals such as the 'Ashura. This phenomenon depends on the possibilities of articulation between the various Sufi and Shi'i identities and is not homogeneously distributed across communities and social groups. For example, according to Myriam Ababsa, in Raqqa, intellectual circles linked to the traditional urban notable families resent the appropriation of the tomb of Uways al-Qarani, which they see as a *lieux de mémoire* of Raqqa's urban identity, by the state and by a religious community that they view as "foreign" (the Shi'i).

However, the members of the seminomadic Shawaya tribe, in particular those linked to the Sufi order of the Marindiyya, who consider themselves to be descendants of Husayn, have an approving attitude toward the "beautification" of the mausoleums. They see the new mausoleums as a sign of the recognition of their holy lineage by the Syrian state. Thus the Shawaya signify the Shi'i devotion to Husayn as a form of respect to their genealogical history, in opposition to the contempt that the urban elite of Raqqa have toward their tribal identity. The Shawaya, as well as other residents of Raqqa, continue to make their visitations to the mausoleums within the framework of their Sufi practices and beliefs.[42]

41. Starrett, "Political Economy," 59.

42. Ababsa, "Significations territoriales," 121–24.

Conclusion

This analysis has shown how the constitution of centers of Shi'i mass pilgrimage in Syria have allowed for the emergence of a public sphere structured by the practices involved in the production, marketing, and consumption of religious commodities. The emergence of a market of religious commodities is itself a fundamental element in the social and religious efficacy of pilgrimage as a mechanism of religious discipline and objectification. While the religious markets created by mass pilgrimage in Syria share many characteristics with capitalist markets in general, this does not mean that they are structured by an abstract and universal "market rationality" that acts independently of any social and cultural context. Even markets that are limited to the economic sphere of social life have cultural values and dispositions inscribed in their organization and dynamics.[43]

In the case of religious markets, the normative character of the symbols and practices that define their dynamics reinforces their connection to power relations, institutions, and forms of authority. This is clear in the case of the market of Shi'i religious commodities in Syria, which is the target of a heavily ideological investment by both the Iranian and Syrian states that aims to control and manipulate it as a tool for the implementation of their particular religious and political agendas. This ideological aspect of the Shi'i religious market is evident in the processes of the objectification and commoditization of the religious tradition. Religious and political authorities try to shape religious commodities as iconic forms of codification and communication of their particular definition of the Shi'i tradition.

However, the mass production of religious commodities temporarily desacralizes the religious images, symbols, and messages of the Shi'i tradition by fixing them in material objects whose position vis-à-vis religious practices and discourses becomes defined by their practical use. So a poster with the image of Ali can become a mere marker of identity or a devotional object in various Shi'i and Sufi contexts. This gives a high degree of autonomy to each of the commodified elements of the tradition, undermining the ideological work that tries to connect them to discursive and practical frameworks under the control of the state or the religious authorities.

The fragmentation of the religious tradition by the process of commoditization is intensified by the fact that religious commodities share instrumental uses with nonreligious commodities. Thus, as Gregory Starrett points out, a copy of the Koran and a box of chocolates can both be suitable gifts for a birthday, and only the reinsertion of a religious commodity into the web of social practices and cultural perceptions of the consumers can resignify it as a religious object and distinguish it from other commodities.[44] Therefore the religious market and its effects on religious identities, discourses, and practices cannot be thought of without an analysis of the practices of consumption associated with it.

Notwithstanding its commonsensical representations, consumption is not an act of "shapeless desire" but rather an arena to express identities and social attributes, such as status.[45] Therefore consumption must be understood as a creative interaction between the logic of the production and marketing of commodities and the identities, the social position, and the culturally shaped desires and perceptions of the consumers. The practices of consumption allow the visitors of the pilgrimage shrines to incorporate religious commodities as constitutive elements of the disciplinary practices of religious reflexivity that structure their identities, such as the use of mass-produced religious images in devotional forms of piety. Therefore, the consumption of religious commodities links the processes of the construction and fashioning of religious selves to the larger religious system of transnational Shiism.

Finally, it can be said that while the spheres of the production and marketing of religious commodities in the Shi'i pilgrimage shrines in Syria are clearly marked by power relations and ideological constraints, the sphere of consumption creates channels of individual and

43. Robert Hefner, "Introduction: Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms," in *Market Cultures: Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms*, ed. Robert Hefner (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 3–5.

44. Starrett, "Political Economy," 58–59.

45. Hefner, "Introduction: Society and Morality," 25.

collective participation in the production of the objectified religious system that shapes transnational Shiism. The mechanisms of participation created by consumption can also be used by individuals and groups in order to overcome their social or ideological exclusion, as was the case of the Syrian Sufis who used religious consumption in order to reconnect with the holy sites that had been transformed into Shi'i pilgrimage shrines. Nevertheless, these channels of participation are not evenly distributed or open to all identities, presenting various possible levels of incorporating and excluding individuals and communities according to their insertion into the web of power relations, practices, and discursive traditions that define the limits of the religious market. Therefore, the analysis of religious consumption in the Shi'i shrines in Syria shows how commoditized objects, images, and discourses mediate the articulation of local practices, discourses, and identities with the processes that create transnational religious communities. ⟲